

Life with Althaar

Episode 27: Life Under the Spreading Green

Version 2.2 (Recording Script), 06/12/21 - IWH (v2, BAJ)

[scene 1] The standard LWA opening spaceship whoosh. Dramatic music. The voice of the NARRATOR is once again heard...

NARRATOR

It is the year 2523. Somewhere in the Teegarden's system, a large shabby space station circumscribes its lonely orbit, accompanied by significantly fewer vent-biter corpses, charred escape pod debris, and visiting spacecraft than it was in earlier, happier, explode-ier times. There are few who would wish to visit the Human Exchange Concourse under present conditions, and even fewer who succeed in securing permission to do so. Indeed, at the moment, there is no external activity at all. No indication of life on or around this far-flung oasis in space, but for the voices... the voices that can be heard... within... that call throughout...

The NARRATOR, during the last lines, has faded into rising static as the martial version of the Fugulnari Anthem is heard, rising and interrupting, and then, once the static clears, on top of that, MRS. FRONDRINAX with her "morning" announcement:

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Attention Humans of the Fairgrounds. This is Frondrinax, of the Fugulnari Committee for the Management of Human Affairs, with your top-of-the-cycle friendship bulletin. It is the first cycle of glorious Day 239 of the Fugulnari Ascension! And here is the news for this cycle:

There is food! Of course, there's never been a *shortage* of nourishment available to Humans since adopting the wholly efficient and very sensible policies laid out by the Committee, but we are aware that the *variety* of what you people like to stuff in your noise-holes has been rather curtailed these last few months. We have heard your feelings in the matter, as well as the concerns of some folks at the ICSB Medical Advisory Bureau who must surely have something better to be doing with their time, and we have taken these under consideration. And we are now pleased to announce that League Forces, in conjunction with the Fugulnari Hydrophyte Corps, has been successful in restoring the supply lines endangered by the intractability of certain deeply disturbed elements of the population. So starting next week, we will be increasing the ration of traditional Human foodstuffs issued to eateries and other food vendors on the Fairgrounds by a whopping 11 percent! You're welcome. Although I would like once again to point out that there is a plentiful surplus of our Fugulnari-developed, Human-appropriate food substitute: NutraZoom EnzyBlast Efficiency Shakes! Optimized for high-speed consumption! Which a species hampered with a single dual-purpose respiration and ingestion orifice certainly ought to appreciate! NutraZoom is of course available to all of you completely free of charge, at any official Human Requirement Supply Depot. Remember to pick some up during your next assigned shopping interval!

And speaking of which, if you want a *really* efficient way to perk up your day, the Committee is very pleased to announce the rollout of our brand-new NutraZoom premium *meat* varieties! All the flavor of your fellow members of the Kingdom Animalia, in a convenient recyclable aluminum sucking pouch! Now available in Sorrel-Beef, Liver-Kelp, Burdock-Tripe, and Pastramiranth, at the very reasonable price of 5 credits per dose! Er, meal. Now, that price is for ordinary, everyday Humans, of course—Boosters get access to all these exciting new flavors for free! Just one of the countless perks available to participants in the Efficiency Partnership Booster Program! Isn't it time you got your headband today?

Now, on to today's travel advisories: Please note that Sectors Dalet through Zayin are currently under full lockdown for a standard random cleanliness sweep. That of course applies to all offices, residences, cubicles, closets, cubbyholes, and public areas. All Humans in these sectors, stay right where you are! Our friendly security staff will be coming through to clear you and get you on your way as swiftly and efficiently as possible. Now, your cooperation is essential to making sure this process goes smoothly, so if you end up late to work, well, you can blame your fellow Humans for slowing things down, can't you?

Due to the new regulations regarding unsupervised Human gatherings in groups of five or more, the following recreation locales have been deemed superfluous and will be closed indefinitely: the—

Over this last line, static again, rising to drown MRS. FRONDRINAX out. A different kind of noise—a pirate signal forcing its way into the general Fairgrounds PA system. Sloppy digital and analog fuzzy mung, quickly clearing as the voice of RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS is heard (he is the newsman on the radio in Sammy's from Episode 26, now working for the Resistance). During the whole pirate interruption of MRS. FRONDRINAX's announcement, static continues fading in and out, as if the Fugulnari are trying to regain control of the signal.

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

Fairgrounds! Attention, Fairgrounds!

(aside, confirming with someone off-mic)

We're through?

(having gotten affirmation; the static barely there)

This is Radio Free Fairgrounds with this cycle's *actual* news. Here are the facts.

The Human food shortage is *very* real, no matter what the Committee and their Boosters may say. But the shortage is *not*, as they would have you believe, caused by a lack of *supply*. While cargo shipments to or through the HEC over the last six months have decreased by 38%, food deliveries have only gone down by 12%—5% *less* than the decrease in overall population. So, where is all the food? The Foogs, for reasons of their own, are rationing out only a fraction of what arrives on the Fairgrounds. The rest, the Resistance has learned, is being sent directly to storage, where most of it is simply rotting, uneaten. Which doesn't seem very efficient, unless there's some *other* reason the Committee wants to make sure everyone's drinking that special nutrient goop of theirs.

What could that be? We're not sure yet, but the Resistance has managed to complete our preliminary chemical analysis of the NutraZoom shakes, and we can now tell you with absolute certainty that NutraZoom is made from... No, it's actually *not* people. We know a lot of you were worried about that, and we certainly wouldn't put it past the Committee, but no. On the other hand, the truth is only slightly less disgusting: it's produced from an undifferentiated slurry of... ugh... Fugulnari waste products. Apparently they've been collecting their shed leaves, twigs, needles and other detritus, throwing in a few nutrient additives and artificial flavors, and running the whole mess through an industrial blender before extruding it into those little silver packets. Utterly repulsive, but as far as we can tell, a theoretically adequate source of Human nutrition, assuming you have no other options. But we're sure there must be *some* reason the Committee is so heavily invested in getting everyone on their "efficiency shakes" and off solid foods, so we'd advise you not to touch NutraZoom if at all possible. And if you don't want to take our word for it, you can consult with your taste buds. That stuff is just nasty.

And that's the news. If any of you have any inside information you'd like to share with us here at Radio Free Fairgrounds, our latest HECNET proxy is still functional as of this broadcast, so keep those tips coming. We'd like to close again with another samizdat recording, retrieved from her cell in solitary confinement, where she remains as an uncharged political prisoner: a reading by Delilah Mallory of a poem by 19th-Century Human writer Ella Wheeler Wilcox. And remember: We're all in this together, Fairgrounds.

Sound of a digital recording being started in some manner. DEE's prerecorded voice is heard, as recorded in her jail cell by some strange means, muffled and distorted, but intelligible:

DEE

To sin by silence, when we should protest,
Makes cowards out of men. The human race
Has climbed on protest. Had no voice been raised
Against injustice, ignorance, and lust,
The inquisition yet would serve the law,
And guillotines decide our least disputes.
The few who dare, must speak and speak again
To right the wrongs of many. Speech, thank God,
No vested power in this great day and land
Can gag or throttle. Press and voice may cry
Loud disapproval of existing ills;
May criticize oppression and condemn
The lawlessness of—

Again, a different static that has covered up DEE's reading and, fading out, reveals MRS. FRONDRINAX screaming in anger at an intern.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

—don't care if you're getting faster! It's obviously not fast enough, since they're *still jacking our frosting signal!* You get those meatbags off my airwaves right this second, Rooty, or so help me I will yeet you down a frosting corrid—*what?* Oh. Ahem.

(back to icily “friendly” tone)

Please excuse that *incredibly* rude and ill-informed interruption in your official, authorized, and *accurate* top-of-cycle announcements. I'm sure all of you are far too sensible to pay attention to some insane ramblings full of lies, rumors, and Ganymede grease, yes? But before I go, I'd like to take a moment to remind all of you Humans, *once again*, that the Fugulnari Committee for the Management of Human Affairs enjoys a completely voluntary partnership with the League of Humans Executive Council, and the actions of the Committee have the full weight and backing of League law. It's your own government asking for your coöperation, here. Those of you who are feeling uncoöperative, well, you're free to vote differently in the next election, aren't you? But I think you'll find that most of your fellow Humans appreciate that the Committee is here to look after you, to help you, and most of all, to offer you a better and more efficient way of living. So I would suggest that it would be a better use of your time to work on rectifying whatever psychological flaws have led you to obstruct the sunlight of progress, rather than trying to drag your fellow Humans back down into the compost heap of inefficiency with you. And I think that's all that needs to be said about that. As always, remember where you stand, and await further instructions. Until next cycle, Frondrinax out.

[scene 2] A bleep as the P.A. goes out. Opening credits music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents..!

LIFE! WITH! ALTHAAR! Season Three!

Episode 27... “Life Under the Spreading Green”

[scene 3] Fade to the sound of JOHN's alarm clock. Another day, the wakeup. Sounds from JOHN indicating he's not happy about it as we hear him pull on his WSS coverall. ALTHAAR is heard over the intercom, with slight background noises of his elaborate kitchen preparations:

ALTHAAR

Good morning to you, FriendJohn! Althaar must apologize—he was not expecting you to make such early rise-ment, so he has yet to complete preparation of your matutinal cup of joseph. And several minutes yet remain to the baking of the miniature quiche! Oh! But Althaar should not be speaking when the morning coffee is not yet in FriendJohn. Perhaps FriendJohn could be preceding the break-fast with the hot shower on this day? Then Althaar may have everything in preparation by the time the cleansing is completed!

JOHN

Don't worry about it, Althaar, I'm not... I don't need breakfast today. Just the coffee is fine, I'm going to skip the shower.

ALTHAAR

But— but the coffee is not sufficient for Human nourishment, FriendJohn!

JOHN

Yeah, I know, but there are times when the coffee is all a Human can handle. I'm not going to starve from missing one breakfast. Just the coffee, ok? I'll be right out.

*Bleep as JOHN cuts the intercom off. Sound of **non-verbal muttering** as he finishes getting himself together. The door into the living area whooshes as JOHN comes out. ALTHAAR is setting out breakfast and coffee for him.*

ALTHAAR

Althaar hopes you are not displeased, FriendJohn, but he has made whipping up of a few panned-cakes while we were speaking, in case you may be grasping the handle of these. And there is of course the pot of ja-va on the table for you also!

JOHN

Althaar, I said you didn't have to— Oh, wow, those smell amazing.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, FriendJohn! But if you do not hunger at this time, or you are in a great rushing to commence your work duties, it would be a thing of great simplicity for Althaar to preserve the panned-cakes until you are wishing to consume them! It is only to ask!

JOHN

No, I actually am really hungry, and I don't have any work calls yet today, it's just... I guess I feel kind of guilty about eating all these elaborate breakfasts while most of the other Humans here are sucking down Fugulnari nutrient slurry. Let alone enjoying a nice hot shower while most folks are stuck using sonic scrubbers.

ALTHAAR

But the full water services are included in the rent of FriendJohn! And depriving yourself of the showerings will not make them available to others. So Althaar does not believe this to be a useful sacrificing. Oh! Would FriendJohn wish to offer the showering facilities of Suite C to other Humans? There is of course only the one bathing-room, so a careful scheduling would be required... Althaar could perhaps draw up the rota...

JOHN

That's a nice thought, but I'm not sure how many Humans would be comfortable showering that close to an Iltorian.

ALTHAAR

Ah. You are of course knowing your people best. But... it can not be hurting for Althaar to make announcement on HECNET that the hot water showerings are available, yes? And then those Humans who may desire them can contact Althaar, and he can make assessment of demand. Unless FriendJohn has objection to allowing the strangers to make visit for cleansing purposes?

JOHN

No, that's— you go ahead. You're right, we have the water access, and it all gets recycled anyway, so it's not like we'll run out. We might as well use it to help a few people feel a little better about their lives. I wish we could do the same with the breakfasts.

ALTHAAR

Yes. The supplying of foodstuffs has been of increasing strain on the resources of Althaar, even with the help of his many friends among the vendors and shopkeeps of the Fairgrounds. And if the latest news from the Resistance is to be believed, there is not even any reason for this! It is a vexment. Althaar would very much wish to again enjoy the traditional Human foods he has been missing these past several months.

JOHN

Wait, you haven't been eating any of these breakfasts? You've been giving all of it to me?

ALTHAAR

Yes, FriendJohn! Althaar made decision at the commencement of the rationing that he must cease his own consumings, so that his dear friend John may be able to continue the relishment of traditional Human foods! It is of no great difficulty, as the people of Iltor have a vast assorting of other nutritional options that may be pursued. Although Althaar must admit that he has great desire to once again sample the stack o' wheats...

JOHN

(no chance of enjoying the meal now)

Oh. I'm sorry, buddy, I... I didn't know. I thought you were— I can't really tell what you're eating on the other side of the curtain.

ALTHAAR

This is of certainty, FriendJohn! The shared break-fast time would be impossible otherwise!

JOHN

Right. But, listen, there's no way I can eat this now, so—

ALTHAAR

Oh no! Please do not have concern with the noshing of Althaar, FriendJohn! Althaar is well-supplied with nutrition! And he is desiring very much for you to have enjoyment of the flap-jacks!

JOHN

Well then, here. (*scoots the plate over toward the curtain*) I'll get way more enjoyment out of knowing you're having a good breakfast than I would out of eating it myself.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar is most humbled by the generosity of FriendJohn!

JOHN

Think nothing of it. I was planning on grabbing a NutraZoom for breakfast anyway, so I'm no worse off than I was a few minutes ago. Have you tried any of those things yet? If Iltorians can eat almost anything, maybe they'd actually taste good to you.

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, FriendJohn! The NutraZooms are tasting of wretchedness and despair. Even the most unprejudiced Iltorian taste receptors must be perceiving that!

JOHN

Yeah. Well, wish me luck, friend, because I'm gonna go try out one of that new "premium" line today. I don't know if artificial meat flavor pairs well with wretchedness and despair, but I'm not getting my hopes up.

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes this is most wise.

JOHN

What about you? I hope you've got something more pleasant planned for your day.

ALTHAAR

Well, first Althaar will make enjoyment of the unexpected panned-cakes that he has been gifted by his dear friend and room-mate, while he is reading the great volume of correspondence that was arriving this morning from Iltor—there has been such delay in the shipping and customs, that there is over a week of letters awaiting the consideration of Althaar! And of course Althaar must without doubt be making reply to many of these. And then he will make posting of the announcement at HECNET with regard of the water services, and then perhaps perform the racing of a few small errands, if there is still time before Althaar is dropping on to the Bridge. Commander Torianna has made indication that she would like Althaar to be there presenting himself more often. Although "like" is perhaps a word of too great a strongness. The Commander has many questionings about what is happening outside of Human space, and Althaar is one of the few persons on the Fairgrounds who can make some answering of these. So she is tolerating the presenting of Althaar on the Bridge. But Althaar does not wish to abuse this privilege. It is a great responsibility.

JOHN

Huh. Speaking of responsibilities, I should probably check in on the office sometime today. I've barely set foot in the place since H.F. went underground.

ALTHAAR

Underground! Have the Fugulnari made *interment* of Mr. Fornes for his revolutionary activities?

JOHN

Sorry, metaphor. I just meant he's been in hiding. So, without anyone else to check in with at the office, I've just been relying on the pager to let me know when there's a work call. These days I just swing by to pick up spare parts. But it's been a while, I should probably make sure nothing's growing in the corners. Enjoy your letters and pancakes, I'll see you tonight, ok?

Door out of the apartment as JOHN leaves. Beat. ALTHAAR sighs and opens up some kind of sealed pouch/envelope/container of letters (the Foogs have definitely been reading his mail, but they're at least sharp enough to restore the basic seals afterwards). He finds another pouch within.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar had no expectation of the ICSB diplomatic pouch. And with a fourth-degree Seal of Sequestration! It seems to have performed many shuntings on its way to Althaar. Hmm... (*bleep as he uses some verification tool*) It is appearing that no one has been able to make interference with these seals. A great relief! But who among Althaar's friends is deploying such caution?

He opens up the much-more-seriously-sealed diplomatic pouch. SUSAN TORKAN, JOHN's sister, is heard. ALTHAAR makes a pleased, surprised sound as he recognizes the voice, and continues to react audibly, if non-verbally, under her message.

SUSAN

Hello, Althaar. This is Susan Torkan. John's sister. I hope this letter finds you well. Or, well, I hope this letter finds you at all—I'm going to send it via diplomatic pouch, and that, combined with the high esteem in which most of the Galaxy holds your people, *should* be enough to keep any Fugulnari postal inspectors from breaching the official seals. But, well... a lot of what I thought was solid ground has turned out to be very shaky indeed over the past year or so. Still, I think my chances are pretty good. So, assuming this *has* found you, and you are by some chance listening to it somewhere it might be overheard, I'd ask you to take a moment to relocate. (*beat*)

All right. So, I'm sure you've already guessed that my reason for contacting you has to do with the current... arrangement between the League of Humans and the Fugulnari. I've been relatively fortunate myself—I was shunted off to the Xybidont Empire as a way of limiting my influence back home, but those limitations go both ways. Humans outside League space are still able to go about our lives more or less free from Fugulnari interference. I do get occasional communiques from Lagos with "suggestions" as to how the consular staff could be re-organizing our work schedules, sleeping arrangements, or dietary regimens along more "efficient" lines, which I formally acknowledge before filing them straight into the shredder. I doubt anyone from the Committee is going to travel several thousand light years just to make sure no one here is eating potatoes. Although I've had all decorative plantings removed from the consular grounds just in case. (*cont.*)

I've also had a few requests from Earth Central for updates on the attitude of the Grand Duchess, and the Resplendent Assembly in general, toward the situation back home. I've responded that the Empress seems willing to respect the ICSB's decisions in this matter, and they of course serve at her pleasure. Which is true as far as it goes, but not the whole picture. The fact is, a lot of the aristocracy here is nervous, particularly the minor nobles whose fortunes, and status, are more dependent on trade than the major houses. This entire situation is unprecedented, and while the Fugulnari haven't yet interfered with any established shipping agreements, they also haven't explicitly committed to honoring existing Human contracts, commitments, or codicils. Which means I've gone from being barely tolerated at the occasional Exquisite Carousal to fielding several requests per day for meetings with various Marquesas, Peshwins, and Jonkvrouws (*pron. YOONK-frows*) on the subject of business conditions in the League. And I would love nothing more than to inform these nobles of exactly how badly things are going back home, and how much worse they're likely to go, in the hopes of this information making it all the way up to Her Incalculable Inscrutability the Empress herself. But the problem is... I don't actually know how badly things are going back home. I have some pretty good guesses, and a few scraps of gossip, but it's almost impossible to get any news from Human space other than official, Fugulnari-approved announcements. And I can imagine how accurate those are. I've heard the ICSB may be sending a commission to Human space to investigate conditions on the ground, so that's something, at least, but... (*sigh*) somehow I doubt they'll find out anything the Fugulnari don't want them to.

Anyway, that's why I'm writing to you, Althaar. I think I may be able to exert some influence that could push the Imperium toward taking a more interventionist attitude toward the Fugulnari, but I need accurate information on what's going on back home. Preferably from someone the Xybidonts will trust to take an impartial view of the situation. (*beat*) And I'm sure you'd be more than happy to write a report yourself, and of course there's no one more trusted than an Iltorian, but I'm worried that a sudden increase in correspondence between yourself and Prang might draw more attention to my activities than would be healthy. On the other hand... it did occur to me that there is someone on the Fairgrounds who has a perfectly plausible reason to be writing to Prang, as well as full Imperial privileges that should, in theory, protect his letters from interference. I know he's not exactly the most reliable individual, and his stock around here hasn't been at its highest for some time, but, well... As I said, a lot of the nobles here are *very* nervous. I think it might be worth a shot. So, that's my request, and if you would be willing to pass it on to the party in question, I would very much appreciate it.

As for my brother... You can tell him I wrote you, I guess. Or don't. I haven't heard from him in six months, and I can guess why. The Fugulnari have made a big show of publishing the names of all the Humans who have signed up with this Booster program of theirs, I suppose because it helps them sell the idea that this is a partnership and not an occupation. I don't know John's reasons for signing up, but I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt and assume it's something beyond simple cowardice. That's not the—well, that *is* the John I grew up with, but it's not the John I saw on the Fairgrounds. So I'll trust his judgment, for now. And yours. I think we have a shared understanding of what kind of path Humans, Iltorians, and Xybidonts should be taking together. If we can only find our way there. (*cont.*)

Yours in friendship, Susan Torkan, Human Consul-General to the Grand Duchy of Prang.

A bleep as the message ends. ALTHAAR makes a “thinky” sound.

ALTHAAR

The Xybidont Empire is... nervous...

*[scene 4] Interstitial music, fading to a new kind of location we haven't heard before:
A “checkpoint” set up in a busy corridor; where a FUGULNARI GUARD is
examining everyone passing by, and holding some up to be hassled.*

FUGULNARI GUARD

Alright, people, one more time! All non-Humans, your line is the one against the wall to your right, that's this way, follow my branch, right over there! That's all non-Human aliens and non-staff robots, to the right! Now, this center express lane is for *staff* bots and members of the Efficiency Partnership Booster Program only! I don't want to see you in that lane unless you're a Human with a headband, or a robot with a Human face! Everyone else, i.e. Humans who have a problem with efficiency for some reason, you belong in this long, long line here against the *left* corridor wall, where we will proceed with your full-body scan, introspective self-report questionnaire, and inspection of all bags, packs, sacks, boxes, trunks, and other appurtenances, as quickly as possible. Thank you!

TORIANNA

(a little ways back in the slow line)

Excuse me! Hello! Commander of the station here! I actually need to be on the Bridge to keep this place from disastering, so do you think you could—

FUGULNARI GUARD

Hey! I don't care if you're the Magnosian Mantis! No headband, no robot ID chip, that means you get in line to the left!

TORIANNA

Right, but as I said, I am the Commander of this station, and there is a small but distressingly non-zero chance that something catastrophically lethal could occur on the Bridge at any given moment. So it's really in everyone's interest that I get there as quickly as possible. I'm through here every day, the third cycle guard usually just waves me through.

FUGULNARI GUARD

Is this third cycle? Am I the third cycle guard? No, it is not, and no I am not. Stay in line and wait your turn. Any Human without a headband just another slacker to me, *Commander*.

TORIANNA exhales angrily and steps back to wait her turn. FRALL has been “standing” there as well.

FRALL

So, I suppose we wait.

TORIANNA

I suppose *I* do. There's absolutely no legal or physical reason for you to be stuck in this line. You can just phase yourself down to the Bridge any time you please.

FRALL

Eh. It's more fun to watch them try and scan me.

TORIANNA

Your idea of "fun" becomes less comprehensible to me every day I know you, Frall.

FRALL

Thank you.

TORIANNA

(sigh) And I swear these checkpoints are getting slower every day, too. And more numerous. I have to go through *three* of them now just to get a macchiato from Tixondu's on my way to work!

FRALL

There is a more direct route from your quarters to the Bridge that would only necessitate passing through *one* Fugulnari checkpoint...

TORIANNA

I like to get my own coffee on the way to work.

FRALL

And you do, of course, have the option of dispatching an underling to retrieve coffee for you after your arrival at the Bridge. As you already do on a very regular basis. An average of 1.98 times per day, in fact, over the last six months, down from a high of 5.61 during that period of the unfortunate milk frother dispute with the Robot Union.

TORIANNA

I like to get my own coffee on the way to work.

FRALL

Not to mention that your office is supplied with a top-of-the-line espresso machine and a sizable stock of your preferred blend, as well the Bridge itself sporting an absurdly comfortable and over-engineered executive chair capable of performing the same function, as well as several subordinates who have been extensively briefed on the exact procedure to produce a caffeinated beverage "just how you like it."

TORIANNA

I like. To get. My own coffee. On the way. To work.

FRALL

Mm. Then, given those parameters, I feel I must suggest that it would be worth your while to consider pursuing membership in the Efficiency Partnership Booster Program, if only to secure swift and unimpeded travel through your own station. You would hardly be alone—there are a great many Humans who have joined the Boosters purely for reasons of expediency, rather than loyalty. The headband does have its privileges, after all. Although “not looking like an utter drip” is sadly not among them.

TORIANNA

No, Frall. I could tolerate the stupid headband, I could even force myself to smile politely and pretend to support these stupid “efficiency initiatives”— Hell, I’ve had to maintain a pleasant façade through so many pointless diplomatic formalities by this point that I think I could literally do it in my sleep. But I just can’t sign that damn loyalty oath. I know there are plenty of Boosters who only joined out of convenience, but... no. I just can’t. I may not be the most diligent or by-the-book League officer these days, but stupid though it may be, I did take an oath to defend Humanity back when I graduated from the Academy. And I suppose I still feel like I owe it to the fresh-faced, painfully naive kid who took that oath to try my best to uphold it. To treat it like it means something. I know there are times when self-respect is a luxury no one can afford, but... I’m not there yet. There may come a day when signing on the dotted line is the only way of serving Humanity I have left, and on that day, I will bite my tongue, and sign, and then go have several stiff drinks. But today is not that day.

JOHN

(stopping as he passes by in the middle lane)

Oh, hey, Commander.

TORIANNA

(acting cold, in light of his cover)

Mr. B.

FRALL

John.

TORIANNA

Are you on official business? Someplace you need to get to quickly? Or are you just taking an unimpeded stroll around the Fairgrounds to better appreciate the perks provided by that kicky headband of yours?

JOHN

Oh, uh, no, I was actually just on my way to the office. I don’t have any calls right now. But, you know, I wanted to be ready in case something came up.

TORIANNA

How *efficient* of you.

JOHN

Although I'd guess I'll be seeing you pretty soon. I think that little 18-gauge jumper on the Bridge is overdue to short out and cause another critical failure cascade.

FRALL

It *was* overdue. But as of a few moments ago...

JOHN's pager goes off. ("WSS!")

JOHN

(answering)

Yes?

FRALL

(coming from over the pager, sounds of bridge disaster faint behind them)

...it has come rather spectacularly due.

TORIANNA

Frall! Are you bilocating again?

FRALL

(the in-person one)

Bi-locating? No, sir.

TORIANNA

...Why?

FRALL

I didn't want to leave the Bridge unsupervised, Commander, but at the same time I thought you would prefer not to endure the tedium of the non-priority checkpoint line unaccompanied.

FRALL

(over the pager)

I am also currently engaged in a spirited game of "catch" with Sparky the vent-biter up in the kitchen at Poppy's, but you don't need to concern yourself with that.

JOHN

That's... kinda cool, but also more than a little creepy. Are— are you doing this kind of thing all the time?

Both FRALLs, simultaneously and identically, chuckle, building into a bit of an ominous laugh.

TORIANNA

(stopping the shenanigans)

And that's enough of that. All right, B, it looks like you just got your first job of the day. So I suppose I'll be seeing you on the Bridge *(gradually raising to a yell)* whenever this obstinate shrubbery decides to let the Commander of this station get to her flotting post!

FRALL

(over the pager)

And I'll see you down here as soon as you're done with that other little job, Mr. B.

Bleep as the call is ended.

JOHN

Other little job...?

FUGULNARI GUARD

(calling to JOHN)

Hey! You there! Stop fraternizing with those slackers if you don't wanna get searched on suspicion! Center lane's for Boosters, let's go!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(coming up the fast lane towards them and stopping)

Oh, never mind all that, Ginavriax, these are friends of mine! Hello, everyone! So nice to see you all this morning! Just stopped by for a chat, Johnny? I hope my favorite little Booster is setting a good example for command staff! I know I've said this before, Commander, but you could stand to be a little more pro-active in your support for the Committee.

TORIANNA

Actually, your favorite little Booster was just on his way down to the Bridge on a somewhat urgent repair job, so I certainly don't want to detain him any further.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! That actually reminds me, Johnny. I've had some complaints over the last few days about the water pressure in Gimel 8 hydroponics. We've got people from all kinds of different backgrounds in there, after all, and the individual hydration levels need to be very carefully calibrated! So be a dear and take care of that on your way to the Bridge, would you? It shouldn't take more than a couple of hours.

JOHN

Uh, it's not actually on my way to the Bridge, Mrs. F. And—

TORIANNA

And the Bridge is currently blowing up in slow motion!

JOHN

Right. So I need to get down there right away. But I can head over to Gimel 8 as soon as I'm done with this emergency, no problem—it shouldn't take long, it's just a simple wire splice.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I must say you certainly have a very funny idea of what constitutes an emergency! I'm sure the Bridge crew can work around one little malfunctioning wire until you get there. But Gimel 8 is in absolute chaos! None of the aerophytes are getting misted properly, the trunk stream for the marsh marigolds is running right through the agaves— Why, if this keeps up, we'll have cacti swimming around among the mangroves! And Gimel 8 is a very popular park with Committee members, you know. So it absolutely needs to be kept running smoothly and comfortably! That's far more vital to the efficient operation of the Fairgrounds than some silly little wire on the Bridge. I'm sure a dedicated Booster like yourself understands that instinctively!

JOHN

Right. Of course. I'll... get right on it. (*leaving*) Sorry, Commander, I'll see you on the Bridge as soon as I can.

TORIANNA

Great. Well, here's hoping nothing life- or station-threatening comes up while John is off in Gimel 8 adjusting your precious nozzles. Until he splices that wire, the Bridge is going to be very nearly useless. And periodically on fire.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

My goodness, Mindy! I wasn't aware that the entire *functionality* of this station was resting so heavily on the branches of one underpaid sub-contractor! That's certainly a significant design oversight, isn't it? And just one more example of why you need our help so badly. Perhaps we need to supplement the number of Fugulnari personnel on Bridge supervision duty, if your Human crew are causing so much breakage with their clumsy appendages. (*as she leaves*) I'll be sure to bring that up at the next meeting of the Committee...

Beat.

TORIANNA

Well, that could have gone better.

FRALL

Frondrinax was correct in one regard, sir: John B is now single-handedly responsible for the continued function of several components that are vital to the Fairgrounds' continued operation. And indeed, in several cases, its continued existence.

TORIANNA

I know, I know. But we're not exactly in a position to do anything about that. Unless John can convince his employers to send him some backup, or we can convince the Robot Union to renegotiate their position on windows, drinks machines, or very tiny wires, John is all we have. And I don't need you to look into the future to know that neither of those things is at all likely. So I suppose we'll just have to hope John doesn't crack under the pressure.

FRALL

And he is under considerable pressure at the moment.

TORIANNA

(very slight emphasis on the code word)

Well, then, let's just hope he's resilient enough to justify our confidence in him.

FUGULNARI GUARD

All right, "Commander," next!

TORIANNA

Finally!

(as she is scanned by some wand device or something)

I just hope Tixondu's isn't already out of those scones I like. Well, not *like*. Tolerate.

FUGULNARI GUARD

Tixondu's? I think they're out of everything. They closed down.

TORIANNA

What?

FUGULNARI GUARD

Yeah, I saw it on the way in this morning. Place was shuttered, had a sign on the front. Something about supply chain problems? They're gone, anyway. You're gonna have to find someplace else to get your weird bean broth.

TORIANNA

(all the frustration coming out)

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrggghhhh!

*[scene 5] Interstitial music, fading to the sound of the anteroom outside DEE's prison cell, where XTOPPS is audibly removing his various sashes and jewelry pieces and placing them in bins to be scanned, **muttering angrily to himself** as he does so.*

XTOPPS

I cannot believe my own bad and regal self that you are divesting me of my appurtenances!

FUGULNARI JAILER

I'm not going to explain it again, gesin—there's been movement of contraband materiel through these cells, which means all visitors must now remove any non-organic material from their persons prior to entry. All your... baubles will be waiting right here for you when you're done, I promise.

XTOPPS

I'd be done *already* if it weren't for all you zoods' inclinational rigamarole! Bletch! (*clonk of more jewelry hitting a bin*)

FUGULNARI JAILER

I don't want to hear any more complaints out of you, gesin. You're lucky we're letting you in to see a known agitator in the first place! The Committee's decided to honor your diplomatic status, but everyone knows that status is real shaky. So I'd advise you to show a little more appreciation for their generosity, your "Well Learned Illustrious Lordship."

XTOPPS

My status is of no concernorino to you, driff. My status may be rattlin' an' rollin', even movin' and a-groovin, and you still gotta let me in, mang.

FUGULNARI JAILER

If you say so, "Your Sublimity." Is that all of it?

XTOPPS

All that glitters, you now hold, my snaggy safflower.

FUGULNAIR JAILER

Fine. Step through the scanner, please... (*bleep*) All right, you're cleared—she's in the second cell on the right, no speaking to the other prisoners, stay behind the yellow line, you know the dibbler.

XTOPPS

Flotting vertical.

Door whoosh as XTOPPS enters the hallway, then a second whoosh as he enters the visitors' area of Dee's cell—a large empty 12-foot square room with a clear barrier all the way across it between him and DEE (Hannibal Lecter-style).

XTOPPS

Dee? Hey, Dee? Oop. You asleep there?

DEE

(turning around on her cot, surprised)

Oh, hey, Xtopps. Nah, I was just hanging out. Chillin'.

XTOPPS

Pressed up tight against a cold plasteel wall? I *bet* that's chill, if not downright Gethenian.

DEE

It's not so bad. I was just... listening.

XTOPPS

To the wall? Is this some new auditoid phenomenation of which I am as yet unaware? What's the fad in your ironclad pad?

DEE

It's just vibrations. But that's all music is too, right? Vibrations in space? They won't let me have any music in here, which is the biggest vonch, unless I wanna make it myself. So I sing a lot, but you know, that gets tired after a while. In *every* sense. I guess some of it's getting out of here somehow though, right? Hey, you want me to sing *you* something?

XTOPPS

Hold up there, Dee! I do not *know* how you get your most lovely and appreciated tunalities out of here, and I do not *want* to know. Rules-and-regs say any Exalted Radiancy is fully exempt from the peep-and-pry from all foreign snookeries, but I wouldn't trust these Foogs as far as I could dump a wheelbarrow load. And if these frondy fascists even get the slightest ideé I'm part of however your voice is being effoed over state lines—(*yelling to any Foogs listening*) which I am definitive-ly *not!*—you won't be viddying Xtopps in here without they demand to enact a full cavity search on my most regal personography. And my people come with a *lot* of cavities, you chom me?

DEE

Fair enough. We'll keep it atonal. So... I know the answer probably hasn't changed since every other time I've asked, but... any news from Tammuz Beta?

XTOPPS

Still a no-go on the info, and Xtopps has been keeping his most magnificently-tuned ears—so to speak—to the ground. To *all* grounds, in point of fact. And I connections from Altair to Zosma, but everyone inside Human space has been most dis-ambiguously disconnected, unless they're on the Committee's amy-band. Official sources only, and those sources are drier than Heffy the Clink's reed on the subject of Tammuz. I think Xtopps is well and truly tapped on this one—you got anyone else you can query?

DEE

Mm, no. Besides you, the only visitors I get are Althaar and Frondrinax. And neither of them are what you'd call helpful.

XTOPPS

Althaar's a seriously flush zood, what's not to like?

DEE

Sure, Althaar's a sweetie, and he does his best to cheer me up, but... you may have noticed this giant ultra-crylion wall I'm sitting behind here, yeah? Fully transparent, nothing to hide behind. That's... kind of the point. So when Althaar's here, I have to keep my face pressed into the pillow the whole time, and like, even if I can't see him, I still *know*, you know? So our chats aren't exactly what you'd call stress-reducers, and of course he knows that, so he keeps them short and to the point. Frondrinax, on the other hand...

XTOPPS

Wouldn't think guard duty would be her haver. What brings her coastin' to Cell Block Number 9?

DEE

I have absolutely no flotting clue! But for at least an hour a day, *every* day, she wanders in to talk to me. Well, talk *at* me. She usually starts off with this whole, "Ah, so we meet again!" kinda routine. Then she just starts rambling on in this weird voice about our "special relationship." It's like she thinks she's in some kind of two-character one-act set in an interrogation room, except she never asks me any questions, or even lets me get a word in edgewise. She just gets more and more distracted and goes off on all these tangents, complaining about how no one appreciates her, and she's stuck with a "perky little moron" for an assistant, and how Oodaflonx in Logistics won't stop shedding needles on her. And then at some point she remembers I'm here, gets all dramatic again, and says something like, "I think maybe you appreciate the Plant Way a little better now, don't you?" And she wraps the whole dridge up with what I think is supposed to be an ominous laugh, and vagues out. It was entertaining the first couple times, at least as a break in the routine, but now it's just tedious.

XTOPPS

That void-merchant leans further to the diagonal every day.

DEE

Seriously. But enough about my life of excitement and adventure, how are *you*, Xtopps? How's everyone at the Egg?

XTOPPS

Well, as you may perceive, your keepers have seen fit to reduce me to a state of abject nakedosity.

DEE

I *was* wondering about the distinct lack of sashes and bangles. So that's a new Foog policy? I thought maybe you just got sick of looking like a Jovian birthday dessert.

XTOPPS

Hey, now, for a Xybidont, in particulate one of my inextricably exquisite breeding, I am rather circumspect in my use of the visual additives.

DEE

Yeah, I remember. When your aunt showed up, I didn't know where she stopped and the bangles began. But seriously, mang. Outside. How are you doing?

XTOPPS

(verbal shrug)

Ah, I do what I does. I play. It's not as consistently cautious as with my favorite canary—and I *do* miss your voice, Dee—but I play. As much as I can. Keeps me inertial, keeps the people flush. I play, I keep my dorsal plate down, and I relax on my scene.

DEE

No more than usual, I hope...

XTOPPS

Nah, I'm steady on the 'gume, but with a higher cognizance of parceling the supply out in the most minute haves that is patic. Fortunatatively, our Foogy friends have not engaged in a great deal of jeckery with we remaining non-Human habitués. That said, I'm stocking up. No telling when they'll put the vonch on my leisure consumptions. I've upped my secret stash locations by two-thirds. I am now never more than one level from a healthy source of protein.

DEE

You know, fifty years from now, if the Fairgrounds lasts that long, they're *still* gonna be finding your long-forgotten stashes all over it.

XTOPPS

(like a prophet)

Let them marvel, and be filled with wonderment.

DEE

Well, I'm wondering about the Egg. How's Chip doing? And Sopes? Bubbles? Hell, everybody.

XTOPPS

Thrab, yeah, enough about my own magnificently zootaceous self and delectable habits, lemme give you the rundown and the ring-up on all our clutchers at the Egg...

[scene 6] Interstitial music. Fade in to Hydroponics. JOHN is finishing his repair with an audible wrench-turn, clank, and grunt, as ASHLEE IN HYDROPONICS waits.

JOHN

Annd that should do it. If you get any more complaints, Ashlee, you can adjust the individual flow levels with these valves here, see? I've labeled them all so you know exactly which pipes lead where, in clear defiance of Fairgrounds tradition. You should have no trouble keeping the Committee happy now.

ASHLEE

Oh, thank you, John! Gosh! You're so skilled! And strong! But of course you are! You're a Booster!

JOHN

Sure am.

ASHLEE

You know, John! I like you! I've *always* liked you! I mean, I know we had a little bit of, uh, weirdness before! When that... person-I-won't-be-mentioning tried to set us up!

JOHN

(not comfortable with where this seems to be going)

Yeah, well, that was just a misunderstanding, Amber didn't—

ASHLEE

But now! I mean! Gosh! I didn't really see it before! But now! With that headband! Wow! And it's not just the headband! Becoming a Booster has changed you! And now I can see the real you! And *appreciate* you! Maybe...! Maybe you even appreciate me a little more, too!

JOHN

(now extremely uncomfortable with where this is going)

Sure. You're very... exuberant. And you're a loyal Booster, of course. Which is... important.

ASHLEE

No, John! I mean! I hope you...! *Really* appreciate me! Like! You know! When I see you now! So strong! With your toolbox! And your wrench! And the way you work! Like on that valve! It's very exciting to watch you move! The way you turn it! Using your muscles! Don't get me wrong! You know I love plants more than anything! But you're pretty appealing, too!

JOHN

(he SO does not want to be Mata Hari)

Um, thanks. That's... yeah. I mean... I'm just trying to do my job. With efficiency! You know, like our friends the Fugulnari! We're all good friends, just... being friendly together, right? And co-workers! Friendly co-workers! Just a pair of good, good Booster friends, working away at maximum efficiency, that's what we are.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(approaching)

Oh! Pardon me, you two!

JOHN

(quietly)

Oh, thank Jones.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well! It may be July by *your* calendar, but I'd say Spring is in the air here in Gimel 8!

JOHN

What.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Now don't mind me, I'll let you get on with your little tryst among the euphorbia in a moment! I just wanted to check in about those water distribution nozzles.

JOHN

Oh, it's no problem, Mrs. F, there is definitely no trysting going on here. And I actually just finished up with the hydration system, so I really should head down to the Bridge before they—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, there's no rush, is there? While you're here, you should take a moment to stop and smell the roses! Not literally, of course, the Rosaceae get rather touchy about their personal space, but you know what I mean. And I'm just so glad to see you two getting along so well! You know, we Fugulnari plan to be closely entwined with you Humans for a long time—a very, *very* long time—so we've been giving some thought to which strains of Human we ought to cultivate, as it were. And the offspring of dedicated Boosters such as yourself, and Ashlee here, well! That's the kind of Human we'd definitely like to see more of in the future! The kind who instinctively understands the Fugulnari way!

ASHLEE

And it would be an honor to produce such Humans, most transcendent Frondrinax!

JOHN makes a slightly strangled noise that he attempts to turn into a cheery sound of agreement, with a minimum of success.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That's what I like to hear! Oh! Ashlee, would you mind letting Barkphilerx know that the flow's been fixed? He's been rustling my shoots about it for days.

ASHLEE

At once, Frondrinax! And I hope to see you again soon, John! Very soon! Very much!
(calling as she walks away)

And if you see that former sister of mine on the Bridge, you can tell her I *don't* say hi!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Johnny, isn't our Ashlee just a breath of fresh air? So sweet. So faithful. So *energetic*. And I'm reliably informed she's considered quite attractive among you Humans, though of course that's a rather low bar to clear, isn't it?

JOHN

Yeah, she's great. Really, uh... really great. But you know, I'm still getting over a pretty bad breakup, so I'm not really thinking about—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I know, dearie, I know. It must have been just heart-breaking for you when that woman, well... broke your heart to run off and join those awful malcontents. But sometimes, you just have to accept that your love is gone, and move on. *(sigh)* I know I have.

JOHN

Of course, I know you're right, Mrs. F. But like you said, Stella broke my heart, so I don't think I'm ready to try again with anyone else. I'm sure you unders—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, it's been six whole months, Johnny, get over it! Your ex is an evil horrible terrorist and that's all there is to it! How can you possibly have any lingering feelings for someone like *that*?

JOHN

Yeah... well... you know us Humans, we can be pretty irrational. That's... that's why we need the Committee to look out for us, right?

JOHN's pager goes off ("WSS!") and bleeps as he answers it. A Data Technician, RUFUS, is on the other end.

RUFUS

Hey, is this the WSS guy? *(WSS pager goes off again, live and over itself)* Ah! Thrab it. Sorry, this is Rufus, down in Data Processing Center #5. We got a very big problem with a very small wire.

JOHN

Is it urgent? I've got another couple calls lined up right now.

RUFUS

Uh, nah, we can work around it for a couple hours if we need to.

JOHN

Great. I'll be there as soon as I get these priority calls out of the way.

RUFUS

Copy that, thanks.

Bleep as the call cuts off.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hmmn. Data Processing Center #5? Didn't I just hear something about them? ... Yes, that's it, Bilconderx mentioned something about an unusual spike in the data flow through that node. Nothing illicit, as far as he could tell, but something he thought we should keep our plastoglobuli on.

JOHN

I wouldn't worry about it. I mean, hardly anything in this place is stable, I'm sure the Data Centers get weird spikes all the time.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yeeeeesss... but hearing that name come up twice in one day, it certainly piques the phytochromes, doesn't it? I mean, we don't all go around saying "Data Processing Center #5" all the time, now do we?

JOHN

I've never said it ever. So, did you want me to, like, investigate them, or something? Poke around while I'm making that repair and see if I can spot anything suspicious?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What? Oh, *no*, Johnny! I certainly wouldn't expect you to have the phloem for that kind of undercover work! That's a job for the professionals! And we have plenty of professionals available these days. I'll just make a couple of quick calls, and we'll soon know if there's any disloyalty to be rooted out at Data Processing Center #5! Oh! But don't you worry, if there do turn out to be any seditious elements working there, I'll make sure you get credit for the tipoff! Don't think your loyalty will go unappreciated!

JOHN

Great, thanks.

[scene 7] Interstitial music into a space somewhere in the Fairgrounds "in-betweenes," Some muttering from the group as STELLA brings things to order. Among those there: H.F., DR. MWANGI, and RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS, with MISS SOPHIE (who yips a couple times) and three or four others.

STELLA

Okay, everyone, check-in time: I'd like everybody to give the group a quick update on where they stand.

H.F.

I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to stand. All these constant relocations are hell on my Arcturian Lumbago.

DR. MWANGI

(he very definitely does not have Arcturian Lumbago)

I keep telling you—!

H.F.

(ignoring her)

And as for Miss Sophie, as always, she stands with us, on her four adorable little fluffy legs.

MISS SOPHIE

Yip! Yip!

STELLA

Yes, we all know Miss Sophie is adorable, and we're all sorry about your lumbago (*MWANGI: It's not—!*), but we've been over this already, H.F. Keeping on the move is vital to the safety of everyone in the Resistance. The Foogs still have no idea the In-Betweens exist, and we need to keep it that way. Settling down in one place is the kind of thing that makes people complacent, and complacency will lead to slip-ups we can't afford. Not to mention the risk of getting into some kind of territorial dispute with the weirdos who were already living here.

RUTHIE THE WEIRDO

Hey!

STELLA

I didn't mean you specifically, Ruthie the Weirdo, you've been a rock. All right, moving on. Great work this morning, Radio Free Fairgrounds!

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

(disappointed)

Ahhh. I coulda got through it faster. They shrugged us off before I finished playing Dee's poem.

STELLA

Yeah, that's too bad, but it probably couldn't be helped. And at least all the news got out. Is there anything else we can do to secure the pirate signal. H.F.?

H.F.

I'll do my best, Stell, but I think it's as good as we can get with the materials we got available. I'll admit we maybe could have squeezed a few more seconds out of it this morning, but the Foogs were trying to track the signal. Like you said, the last thing we need is for them to figure out there's a here here. I'd rather be safe than sorry.

STELLA

Understood. So, we just have to keep getting out as much news as we can as quickly as we can. What do we have lined up for the next broadcast?

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

Nothing at the moment, unless we get any new tips before then. I know we said we don't want to skip a broadcast, but is it worth the risk if we don't have anything else to report?

STELLA

(considering)

Maybe not... But at the same time? I want to keep up the pressure on the Foogs, keep them irritated and off balance—that's part of why Dee's work is so valuable. It's inspiring to our supporters, but it also drives the Foogs crazy that we're able to get it out there in the first place. And I think it's important for morale to keep up a regular broadcast schedule—we don't want potential supporters worrying that the authorities have shut us down. If we don't get a tipoff on the proxy site before next cycle, maybe one of my sources will come through with something we can use.

H.F.

You ever going to let us in on these mysterious "sources" of yours? I mean, I'm the de facto IT guy around here, and I know you don't set foot outside of the In-Betweens except for emergencies, so I have no clue where you could be getting all this intel. *(like he's pleasantly frustrated by a magic trick)* I just can't figure it out.

STELLA

Good. Sorry, H.F., but that's on a need-to-know basis, and right now, I'm the only one who needs to know. Don't worry, my contact will be in touch with one of you directly if I'm ever out of the picture. But until then, I have to keep it on the Q.T.

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

Well, if we don't have anything new by top of cycle, I suppose I can put together a quick status update and maybe re-run this morning's poem, see if we can get the whole thing out this time. Or should we go with something else, one of her songs we haven't played in a while?

H.F.

Actually, I was planning to try and record some more material with Dee after we're done here. I could probably have it ready to go out in time.

RUTHIE THE WEIRDO

Mang, if we can get those recordings out, why can't we break *her* out?

H.F.

I mean, we could, maybe. *Maybe*. If we worked fast enough. But what we can't do is get her out *without* leaving a big honkin' hole in the wall leading straight to us. We're just lucky the Foogs haven't hipped to our recording setup before now.

MISS SOPHIE

Ruff!

DR. MWANGI

I'm frankly *stunned* they haven't figured out she can be heard on the other side of the cell walls. It seems like a bizarre oversight. Are we sure they aren't setting some sort of trap?

STELLA

There's never any way to be 100% sure of that, but I think we can safely assume they haven't figured out that the In-Betweens exist. If they had, they'd be in here already, wiping us out.

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

So why *haven't* they figured it out? There must be detailed schematics of the Fairgrounds on file somewhere. And surely one look at those would reveal that there's a lot of space between the officially "occupied" parts of the station.

H.F.

Well, there's a long answer to that, and a three-word answer. The long answer has to do with the Fugulari's lack of lateral thinking skills.

DR. MWANGI

Yes, the Fugulari always follow instructions from their superiors, it wouldn't occur to them to do otherwise. So the idea that people might be living outside the spaces designed for that purpose is not one that would naturally occur to them.

STELLA

But that doesn't mean we can get careless. There's still their Human Boosters to worry about.

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

Right. So what's the three-word answer?

H.F.

"Fairgrounds Design Committee." When you find something around here hooked up in the stupidest way possible, that's gonna be your reason about 97% of the time. So the official schematics for the Fairgrounds are about as legible as a Kakistoine tax return. I've spent a decade poking into peculiar corners around here, and this place still keeps surprising me.

STELLA

Yeah, that brings up another issue we've been getting a little too careless about. H.F. went to the trouble of drawing up detailed maps with all our knowledge of the In-Betweens, and we all need to *use* them. They're not complete, of course, nobody knows everything that's going on back here, but they're a whole hell of a lot better than nothing. And pass that on to everyone else, please. The public safety infrastructure of the Fairgrounds may be woefully inadequate, but back here we don't even have that, so we need to keep our eyes open. I don't want anyone cracking their head open on a low-hanging beam, or breaking a leg tripping over a duct—

H.F.

Or getting a faceful of boiling-hot steam from an emergency exhaust pipe.

STELLA

(a wince—that's happened once already) Right.

DR. MWANGI

And I'd like to ask everyone to use particular caution to the areas of low or non-standard gravity. I've been seeing a lot of broken bones and contusions on patients who suddenly found "down" wasn't where they were expecting it to be.

H.F.

That's all clearly marked on the maps, folks—it's simple gravitational mechanics, it's not rocket science.

MISS SOPHIE

Yip yip!

H.F.

See, even Miss Sophie knows that!

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

Yes, well, cockers are very smart.

STELLA

All right, as long as we're on the subject of injuries: Dr. Mwangi? How's your mobile MedCenter setup doing? Do you need any more supplies?

DR. MWANGI

I think it's as complete and portable as it can be at this point. Of course we're not as well-equipped as a proper surgery, but for a basic field medic setup, what we've got is more than sufficient. We will of course have to rely on manual equipment without access to surgical waldos, but that can't be helped. And the volunteer medic classes have been quite successful, I'd say they're all well-prepared to administer basic first aid.

STELLA

Good to hear, thank you, Doctor.

H.F.

Hey, doc, you finally get your hands on any sand-squid liniment? My Boseman's Simplex is killing me.

DR. MWANGI

No it isn't, and no I haven't. But I am fairly well-supplied with actual medicines and equipment if you should happen to contract a non-imaginary illness at some point. Oh! And speaking of equipment, I've also been able to cobble together a portable darkroom in my spare time, and I've even succeeded in producing a few prints!

(pulling a photo out, audibly)

In fact, I've been able to get some really lovely shots of the Resistance at work. Documentary photography isn't really my forté, but I think I'm taking to it quite well, if I do say so myself. Here's one of Miss Sophie watching H.F.'s squad plant the bomb above the Fugulnari conference room...

ALL EXCEPT STELLA

(it's an adorable picture)

Awwwwww!

STELLA

Ah, yes, that's... that's very nice, you do great work, Doctor, but let's stick to the MedCenter right now?

H.F.

(sotto voce)

Hey, doc? Can I get a copy of that when you get a chance?

DR. MWANGI

(to H.F.)

Yes, of course. *(more general)* I'll be passing around my latest series after the meeting for anyone who wants to check them out.

(back to business)

But yes, MedCenter is as ready as we're going to be if we're needed for any large-scale casualties. Right now most of what we're seeing are twisted ankles, broken toes, and the occasional concussion or minor scalp laceration. So again, I'd like to ask everyone to please watch out for protruding ductwork and gravity fluctuations. Oh! And don't touch any of the residents' artwork without permission, please. Not only is it rude, but quite a lot of the work involves high-voltage current. I've had to perform three resuscitations already.

STELLA

Right, we don't want to irritate the locals. They were here first, for one thing, and we also don't want to give them any reason to hand us over to the Foogs.

RUTHIE THE WEIRDO

Nah, we're not going to narc on you zoods, we moved out here in the first place 'cause we didn't want to get with anyone's program. But yeah, you should definitely check with the artiste before you get handsy with the handiwork. Especially Normal Mikey's stuff, those mobiles can really turn you inside out, and not in the good way.

STELLA

That's... good to know, thanks. All right. So, I think we're up to date on our current status, let's move on to the future. I'd say the biggest obstacle to our progress is still lack of intel. We're getting scraps of information by listening through the walls and ventilation system, but of course the Fugulnari don't always do us the favor of having their important discussions out loud—it seems like they prefer to rely on pheromonal communication for really sensitive subjects.

A RESISTANCE MEMBER

But they still have to give orders to Humans out loud, right? We can hear that just fine.

H.F.

Sure, and if the orders are in writing, we've had pretty good luck with hacking some Boosters' emails, so there's that.

A RESISTANCE MEMBER

Oh, do you have a password-cracking program?

H.F.

Nah, I just try "12345." Works about half the time.

STELLA

So yes, we can get some information that way, but there's a pretty low signal-to-noise ratio when you're just eavesdropping on random conversations and hoping to pick up something we can use. The tips from sympathizers through the HECNET site are usually more likely to provide something actionable, but—

Some kind of alert on H.F.'s device.

H.F.

Annnnd the latest proxy just got shut down. Hang on, I'll have another set up in a minute...

STELLA

So, yeah, there's that. No matter how you look at it, we don't exactly have a reliable or particularly thorough picture of current events on the Fairgrounds, let alone elsewhere in Human space. And that's a serious problem if we want to be able to strike effectively against the Fugulnari and their supporters. We're not going to be able to overwhelm them with numbers, which means we need to outmaneuver them somehow. And that means we need more information. About their strengths, their weaknesses, and what they have planned. So, that's something else we should pass on to everyone—we need to be keeping an eye out for opportunities to improve our reconnaissance work.

H.F.

You know, what we could really use is someone embedded with the Foogs. Not just a Booster, but someone the Foogs really like. Someone they'd consider a friend, even. But then I don't know how *we'd* be able to trust someone like that. Or how they could pass on whatever they found out without blowing their cover. Dumb idea, forget it.

STELLA

(barest hair of an uncomfortable beat)

Yeah, that would be— I can't imagine asking a Human to do that. Not just because of the risk involved, I mean, we're *all* in danger, every second, but... asking someone to play the traitor to their species, hated by everyone but other traitors... That would just be cruel.

DR. MWANGI

In any case, I don't think any Human could be useful in that capacity for very long under our current circumstances. Either their cover would be blown trying to communicate with us, or they'd become dangerously unstable keeping the façade up.

STELLA

(a bit too firmly)

Yes. Which is why we can't do that. Apart from not having any Humans or allies on the outside that we could trust enough with that kind of job.

H.F.

Which reminds me, speaking of "allies," what about those couriers? Have we heard anything back from anyone off-station?

STELLA

Not yet. At this point we're still just putting notes in bottles and throwing them into the sea, in the hope that they manage to reach some Resistance cells elsewhere in Human space. If any exist. I'm sure they do, but— Well, I *hope* they do. They must.

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

That reminds me, I'll be checking in on one drop later. I think there's a department on my rounds that may be sympathetic, but I've been waiting to make contact until I'm sure. It's one of the Data Processing Centers, so I'm guessing they could help us a lot with smuggling a high volume of information off-station.

DR. MWANGI

So in the meantime, while we wait and hope we can hear back from someone out there, what do we do *here*?

ANOTHER RESISTANCE MEMBER

Any thoughts on resuming the bombing campaign? It's been six weeks.

STELLA

(exhales thoughtfully)

Well, I'm not exactly in a position to tell anyone what to do—

EVERYONE PRESENT EXCEPT STELLA

(ad lib, simultaneous)

...yes you are... of course you are... would you stop with that... Yip Yip!... etc. etc...

STELLA

Look, as far as I'm concerned, I'm not the boss of anyone here. But if people are interested in my opinion—

EVERYONE PRESENT EXCEPT STELLA

(again, ad lib, simultaneous sounds of affirmation)

...mmn-hmn... unh-huh... yeah, yeah... Yip Yip!... etc. etc...

STELLA

Well, then... I think we went about as far as we could, for the time being, with the bombs. Blasting Foog targets may be satisfying, but they rebuild so quickly that I don't think it was having any real impact on their operations. And as careful as we are, there's always the risk of civilian casualties, which obviously we want to avoid not just for moral reasons, but because it would give the Foogs an excellent publicity angle.

H.F.

Plus, the first couple of bombings were pretty successful at making the Foogs look vulnerable, but after that, the Committee started putting it out that these explosions were just your average, everyday equipment failures that had gotten a little noisier than usual.

STELLA

Which, on the Fairgrounds, is unfortunately all too plausible...

[scene 8] Interstitial music. Fade in on the Bridge, where the same very small wire that goes bad about every three weeks has done it again. Sounds of sparking, computer panels blowing, and occasional yelps and screams. Door sound as JOHN enters.

JOHN

Hey, everybody. Looks like you've got a little wire problem, huh?

STALIN-BOT

Oh, is that what it looks like to you? You are certain this is not just several independent cases of spontaneous combustion affecting Bridge equipment? Perhaps you would like me to run diagnostic so you can be certain?

JOHN

No, that's—

STALIN-BOT

Because I would be happy to run diagnostic, if only display screen on panel had not been scrolling complete script for Bee Movie for past hour and a half! So maybe sub-contractor can use context cues to figure out problem is most likely tiny wire that does exact same thing every few weeks? Or is Booster headband squeezing your mushy Human brain too tightly for logical analysis?

JOHN

(moving to the floor panel with the wire in it, followed by STALIN-BOT)

Okay, okay. I was just making conversation. Like you do.

STALIN-BOT

Oh, is that what was keeping you too busy for Bridge repair? You have important conversation to make with important friends on Committee?

JOHN

Look, I got here as fast as I could, ok? I'll have you back up and running in just... one...

Sound of extremely quick panel opening, wire fiddling, circuit restoring, and Bridge returning to normal. JOHN does not even get the sparse round of applause he used to for doing this, though. Everyone just goes back to work. A beat.

JOHN

Well, don't everybody thank me at once.

AMBER

I'm sorry? Were you expecting thanks? For doing your job? Hey everybody? Do we think John and his kicky headband deserve our thanks for leaving the Bridge in utter chaos for... one hundred and thirteen minutes?

Desultory sounds, maybe a raspberry from some of the Bridge crew. One crew member does a pitiful but sincere cheer and clap.

AMBER

Oh, shut up, Larry? That goes double for you as long as you're wearing one of those stupid things?

JOHN

It's fine, Amber, I get it. I don't need a cookie. And I am sorry I couldn't get here sooner, I had a rush job up in Hydroponics. Which reminds me, your sister very specifically doesn't say hello.

AMBER

Sister? What sister? I don't have a sister? Maybe Stalin-Bot's right? About that headband cutting off the circulation to your brain? If you're inventing imaginary relatives for me?

STALIN-BOT

Ah, yes, perhaps these Boosters are seeing all kinds of things that are not there! This would be excellent explanation for nonsense coming out of their mouths.

JOHN

Yeah, thanks for the vote of confidence, folks. You think you could give me a break once in a while? You do realize you're going to need me to fix that wire again in another couple of weeks, right?

Sound of FRALL phasing by.

FRALL

Seventeen days.

STALIN-BOT

Oh, you need *break*? Is fixing tiny little wire so exhausting for big, strong Booster? Should StalinBot be getting warm milk and chak-chak ("*shack-shack*") for busy, busy friend of Committee before his naptime?

AMBER

Maybe he'd prefer a spritz of water and some citric acid in the face?

JOHN

All right, all right, streez!

Door to TORIANNA's office opens and she yells from it.

TORIANNA

Hey! B! Stop pestering my officers and get the hell in here! Something's wrong with the dispenser head on this thing again. You think you could squeeze a coffee machine repair into your busy schedule?

JOHN

No problem, Commander. But just for the record, I wasn't pestering your officers, they were heaping abuse on me entirely unprompted.

TORIANNA

Well, I've got plenty more abuse for you in here, so get a move on!

JOHN goes through the door into TORIANNA's office.

TORIANNA

Hit it, Frall.

The sound of FRALL expanding, becoming a privacy bubble around the room.

TORIANNA

Okay, John, what's up?

JOHN

Yeah, uh... Mind if I sit a minute? I'm a little worn out. Didn't sleep well. And, you know, the abuse-heaping doesn't exactly help.

TORIANNA

Of course. And I am sorry, but you know we have to keep appearances up. At least I don't actually mean it.

JOHN

Right, but everyone else does. *(small exhausted noise as he sits)* I can't believe it's still first cycle. I've only had two jobs today and I feel like I've come off a three-day stint scrubbing down the He 20 biodome with nothing but a damp cotton swab.

TORIANNA

While you're recuperating, do you think you could explain something I've always wondered about? How is it that a short in one tiny wire can cause the panels on the Bridge to spark and *explode*? Didn't they invent safeguards to prevent that kind of thing hundreds of years ago?

JOHN

Do you want the long answer or the three-word answer?

TORIANNA

If the three words are "Fairgrounds Design Committee," then don't bother.

JOHN

Got it in one. Okay, so my report: I don't have a lot for you today, but I didn't want to wait another couple of weeks in case this turns out to be important. It's just one little weird thing, really, that came up while I was working in Hydroponics earlier. Well, there was also one *big* weird thing, but I doubt that's of any strategic importance.

TORIANNA

Excuse me? I am the Commander of this station, John. I would definitely like to know about any and all big weird things happening on it.

JOHN

No, but really, it's— *(sigh)* Ok, it's just that Frondrinax came by and was trying way too hard to set me and Ashlee up. Way, *way* too hard. But I'm pretty sure that was just Frondrinax being Frondrinax, unless the Foogs have some kind of top-secret Booster breeding program I don't know about, heh.

FRALL

Laugh if you want, John, but that idea is not as far-fetched as you might suppose.

JOHN

(with bone-deep dread)

Oh no.

FRALL

However, you are correct that a formal structure for such a program has not yet been implemented. At the moment, Mrs. Frondrinax is merely playing the leafy yente of her own accord.

TORIANNA

Yikes. Well, at least it sounds like you're safe from Ashlee's terminally perky clutches for now. So what was it that you did want to report?

JOHN

Oh, right. So, while I was there, I got a work call from Data Processing Center #5. Seemed pretty routine, but Frondrinax got kind of, I dunno, hinky about it? She said she'd already heard some suspicious things about them, their... numbers were too high, or something like that. So I offered to check up on them myself, but she shut that down right away, said she'd be sending a "professional" to take care of it. I'm not sure exactly what profession she had in mind, but it didn't sound good for the folks down at DPC #5. So, yeah. I know that's not much to go on, but when Frondrinax gets cagey like that, I get nervous.

TORIANNA

It's not much, true. But it *is* worth checking out. If someone in one of the DPCs is a Resistance sympathizer, that could spell big trouble for the Committee. Tight control over all forms of communication is central to their overall strategy.

FRALL

Every staff member at DPC #5 is listed as a Booster, but they may of course have joined up only as a means of ensuring any subversive activities there would go unobserved.

TORIANNA

They haven't contacted the Resistance?

A shimmer.

FRALL

No, Commander. If they are indeed sympathizers, they have been working on their own recognizance.

TORIANNA

If?

FRALL

If, sir. I'm afraid it would be unwise for me to collapse that particular probability waveform enough to be certain at this time.

TORIANNA

(sigh) Fine, fine. You know best, or so you keep telling me. But when and if that waveform does collapse, I want to know about it immediately, understood?

FRALL

Of course.

TORIANNA

Still, the possibility of connecting with more fake Boosters is definitely worth looking into. Especially if they're well-positioned to throw a wrench into the works, which I assume would apply to an entire DPC crew. I mean, they're processing data for just about everything that goes on here—HECNET, shipping, communications—but no one really thinks about that, do we? We all just push a button or talk to a screen and things happen, but none of that *would* happen without the DPCs doing... whatever the hell it is they do. I don't get any of it. Might as well be elves in little boxes as far as I'm concerned.

JOHN

Yeah, I get a lot of that, too, only with the very small wires and drinks machines. Not so much with the windows, people generally have an intuitive understanding of how those work. Most people.

FRALL

Indeed. So DPC#5 could be a powerful ally to the Resistance, if they are in fact sympathizers, headbands or no. They have access to data that no one else on the Fairgrounds would know how to access or interpret.

JOHN

I could head up there on this repair ticket right now, try and feel them out, see how it goes?

TORIANNA

Yes, do that, but remember: all we really have to go on at this point is a vague suspicion from Frondrinax. We have no idea where these people's actual loyalties lie. So I want you to be careful.

JOHN

Always am. But I think I'm getting better at spotting the folks who only put on the headband to stay out of trouble—they don't wanna talk about it, or much of anything, really. The problem is the aggressively friendly ones—I can never be sure if they're really on the Foogs' side, or if they're potential Resistance sympathizers trying a little too hard to blend in.

TORIANNA

Well, look on the bright side—at least there are a few people here who aren't heaping abuse on you.

JOHN

Honestly, that may be worse. The people who hate me for selling out, them I get. I'd hate me, too. And at least I know they wouldn't hate me if they knew the truth. But the folks who suddenly want to be my best bud forever, now that we've got kicky matching headbands? They make my skin crawl.

FRALL

Skin is a terrible nuisance, isn't it?

TORIANNA

Just do what you can, John. If we're lucky, we'll have found some valuable allies in DPC 5, and if not, well... We'll at least be able to weed out some of those schmucks.

JOHN

Can't happen soon enough. *(getting up)* So, I'll be on my way—

TORIANNA

Oh, before you go, I actually was telling the truth about my espresso machine this time. You mind banging it into shape before taking off?

JOHN

(picking up toolbox)

On it.

TORIANNA

Great. I'll be out on the Bridge encouraging my subordinates to keep talking shit about you. As always, pardon my sneer when you pass. Thanks.

*Door sound (and FRALL adjusting the bubble slightly) as TORIANNA exits. A beat.
Silence except for low sounds of JOHN fixing the coffee machine.*

FRALL

(quietly, almost as if actually nervous to bring this up)

John?

JOHN

Yes, Lieutenant?

FRALL

Stella is worried about you.

JOHN stops his work for a moment. Then starts back up again.

JOHN

Well, hey, I'm worried about *her*. Neither of us is living what you'd call a low-risk lifestyle these days.

FRALL

No, John. Stella is not only worried about the risk of exposure, but about your physical and mental state in general. The toll this double life is taking on you. And, if I may be frank, so am I.

JOHN

You're worried about *me*? I wouldn't think one insignificant Human's problems would be of much interest, from a 27-dimensional perspective.

FRALL

(a slight chuckle)

You corporeal types never consider the implications of near-omniscience, John. While it is true that my frame of reference exists on a scale that you have not the slightest hope of comprehending, it is also true that my capacity for care is similarly vast. In short, John, I *feel*... everything.

JOHN

Wow. That sounds... amazing and horrible at the same time.

FRALL

Yes. Imagine the pleasant feeling of warm sunshine on your face, on a beautiful day, on a quiet Earth beach. Now try to imagine the exact opposite of that, and increase it by several orders of magnitude. That would go some way toward approximating the energy you have been emanating these past weeks.

JOHN

Well, I'm sorry to inflict that on you, Frall, but I think it's kind of unavoidable at this point. I *am* stressed out, and I doubt that's going to change any time soon. For the past six months all I've done is walk around in this stupid headband collecting little scraps of information that may or may not be useful to someone less useless than me.

FRALL

Useless? John, it may not seem like much, but just to put your work—your *real* work—of the last six months into numbers: You have passed on precisely twenty items of interest to the Resistance through the Commander and myself. Now, it is true that eight of those items turned out to be of absolutely no use whatsoever. Of the remaining twelve, eight turned out to be of marginal importance, but were nonetheless of some utility. And four were crucial to the continued survival of the Resistance, and, might I add, to the continued survival of Stella Reyes.

JOHN

Oh.

FRALL

To be a bit more precise, your information has saved the lives of between 47 and 52 individuals belonging to or sympathizing with the Resistance, depending on how one calculates the— Well, it involves Liminal Denumerability, I won't bore you with the details. Of course, at the same time, another dozen or so lives have been lost due to your actions.

JOHN

...Is that supposed to be comforting?

FRALL

No, John. But it is true. Perhaps you may take some comfort in the knowledge that your task, while distasteful, is nonetheless necessary, and that your actions have had much more of an effect than you realize. Even if that effect is not always positive. This is the Fairgrounds, after all.

JOHN

Right.

FRALL

And perhaps that knowledge will help you deal with your distaste in a manner that takes less toll on your personal well-being. You are doing heroic work, John. Don't torture yourself unduly.

JOHN

(inhales, thinks)

I... I'll try. I'm not sure it's in my nature. But thanks. I'll try to keep that in mind the next time I'm getting hazed for selling out my species.

JOHN's page goes off ("WSS!"), and there is a bleep as he answers it. CHIP's voice comes from it, with horrible broken mechanical noises behind him.

CHIP

Hey, B! If you can spare a second from kissing Fugulnari frond, we need you at the Egg A-SAP! The seltzer machine's doing the thing again, which means this is an emergency call. Top priority, yeah? Maybe you can fix it for good this time so we don't have to see you or your stupid headband in here again!

Bleep as the call ends. JOHN sighs.

FRALL

Confidence, John B. Confidence.

[scene 9] Interstitial music. Fade in on The Electric Egg. JOHN is completing repairs on the seltzer machine, which is in its standard danger mode, with several horrible alarms going off. JOHN makes an adjustment and the alarms stop.

JOHN

Well, that's done! Again. Huh. It's funny, I just came from splicing that 18-gauge wire that blows up the Bridge every few weeks. That and this seltzer machine were my first two jobs here on the Fairgrounds.

BUBBLES

(completely uninterested in anything JOHN has to say)
Really.

JOHN

Yup. Helluva introduction to this place, I can tell you. You weren't here yet, of course, and neither was Xtopps, but I that was when I first met Chip, Dee, and Soapon. Same day I met H.F., and the Commander and Frall. And Althaar, of course.

BUBBLES

Hm. And now one of those people is in jail, another one is in hiding, along with your ex who seriously hates your guts, and the rest of them can barely stand the sight of you because you're a Foog collaborator. So... I guess everyone hates your guts, really. Except Althaar.

JOHN

I guess if you put it like that, it makes the memory seem a little less special.

BUBBLES

You're welcome.

BUBBLES trundles away as CHIP approaches.

CHIP

Oh, hey, so you *finally* got the seltzer machine back online? Great. You think you could have maybe told somebody about it so we can get out of the weeds here?

JOHN

Well, I mean, the alarms stopped. Usually that's enough for everyone to notice.

CHIP

And give you a nice big round of applause, right? Not here, pal. You did your contracted job, it's done. You want a participation trophy, you can go hang out with your Booster buddies.

XTOPPS

(coming to the bar)

Hello, my most dynamically-powered Eggizens!

A bit of a "NORM!" (except "XTOPPS!" or whatever) moment from those assembled at the bar (including KWONTZ, VERT, and SOPON beyond those already mentioned).

JOHN

(cheered for a moment by thinking he was included)

Hi, Xtopps!

XTOPPS

(very obviously ignoring JOHN)

Pardon my percolated self, friends, but do my ossicles detect a buzzing in the vicinity?

BUBBLES

Nah, I don't hear anything. Although my auditory sensors may have some residual damage from that time I got busted up by a bunch of Foog flunkies. But I don't hear any buzzing. How 'bout you, Kwontz?

KWONTZ

[gibberish: "I don't hear anything worth paying attention to."]

VERT

(not getting it)

All I hear is that stupid Booster acting like he's a friend of ours for some reason. You hear anything, boss?

CHIP

Not your, boss, Vert, but you do bring up an interesting point: Foog sympathizers have proven themselves to pose a significant risk of damage to my staff and premises. Maybe I ought to expand the list of banned customers.

SOPON

I'm always happy to serve anyone, provided they're not beating me with phase-clubs. But some zoods just kind of bring the room down, you know?

XTOPPS

I chom. Well, then, my less-than-sylvan clutchers, shall we repair to a more distant arc segment of this establishment's capacious-but-welcoming stickery, so I may convey an accountage of my visit to our illustrious jailbird canary? Where we shall not be voided out by some kind of near-horizontal and barely-audible blurgosity?

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

Murmuring as everyone but JOHN, CHIP, and SOPON move to the other end of the bar.

CHIP

John, I'm going to run a hopefully short but probably infuriatingly-long errand, so I can pretty much guarantee that I'm not going to be in a very tolerant mood vis-à-vis headbands in my bar when I get back. Unless you want to butter me up by taking a look at the busted sonic scrubber in the green room.

JOHN

Sorry, Chip, I can't touch those—that's Robot Union territory. We'd both be in serious trouble if they heard about it. Just put in a ticket with station maintenance.

CHIP

What do you think I've been doing over and over for the past three weeks?

JOHN

Really? That's... a lot more of a wait than usual. I know you haven't been targeted for a slowdown, I'd have gotten some kind of notice from the Union about it. I could ask around for you, see if any of the bots knows what's up?

CHIP

Never mind. I'd rather be filthy than owe a Booster a favor. Sopot? I'm outta here. Gotta see a pike about some highly toxic chemicals.

SOPON

Oh, hey, yeah, didja get my shopping list?

CHIP

(as he leaves)

I'll do what I can, Sopon, but you'll have to make do with whatever I can get. Be prepared to improvise!

Silent moment.

JOHN

So, uh...

SOPON

Hey, sport! What can I get'cha?

JOHN

Oh. Uh... Hi, Sopon. I thought you'd be snubbing me along with everyone else. You're actually sticking around?

SOPON

Seems like it. So if you're here to have a drink, I'm here to serve you. I know they prefer you Boosters to spend your creds in more... plant-friendly establishments, but I've actually worked out a few special recipes just for you folks. On the house!

Under this, the sound of SOPON preparing an apparently elaborate drink.

JOHN

Oh. Well, I mean, I'm on the clock right now, so I probably shouldn't be drinking—

SOPON

Don't worry about that, it's not actually that strong for a Human. Besides, who's going to report you? That's one of the perks of being a Booster, isn't it? You can do just about anything you want to these days. Not like the rest of us. Me, for example—I'd really love to be at the other end of the bar, hearing the latest about Dee. But the thing is, for the last six months or so? I've been doing as little moving as possible. Your friends with the neuro-dampers did a real number on my vendibular orbit back at New Year's, so. I stay parked right here while I'm at work, pretty much. And as long as I can't walk away from you without being in excruciating pain, I might as well serve you a drink, right?

JOHN

Oh. Um. Thanks.

SOPON

And there you are! Enjoy your Collaborator Throatcut! You're only the second customer who's tried it, let me know what you think.

JOHN

(sips the drink, it's HORRIBLE, big spit take)
Ughhhh! What the hell is *in* this thing?

SOPON

NutraZoom and Malort! Drink up, Booster!

[scene 10] Laughing from all the bar regulars fades into interstitial music. Then fade to a corridor. ALTHAAR is moving down it, possibly humming to himself. MRS. FRONDRINAX and ROOTY approach from a little ways off.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, hello there, Althaar dearie!

ALTHAAR

Ah. Greeting to you, Sin Frondrinax.

ROOTY

Hi, Mr. Althaar, sir!

ALTHAAR

And the same to you, Sin Rooty.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, come now, Althaar! “Sin” Frondrinax? “Sin” Rooty? So formal! Just because the plow of the Human outreach program has run afoul of a few unexpected boulders, that’s no reason to expect any difficulties between the Fugulnari and *your* people! And I would certainly hope there are no difficulties between you and me! You can just call me “Frondrinax.” Or, “Mrs. Frondrinax” would be fine too, even if it’s not exactly my official title.

ROOTY

I call her Mama Frondrinax!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And how many times have I asked you to stop?

ROOTY

Ummmmmmm...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Stop counting! I am very much just Frondrinax to you, Rooty. But Althaar has known me for some time, since the bad old days when I was still “Mrs. Frondrinax” to everyone here. And as an old friend, he’s grafted in if he wants to be. *(with a slight indication she misses it)* I wouldn’t mind at all.

ALTHAAR

Althaar does not believe that this would be appropriate, Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ah. Well, that's... that's fine, then. But, ah, speaking of old friends... I'm afraid I have to ask you about a slightly... uncomfortable subject.

ALTHAAR

Please do not have hesitation, Frondrinax. Althaar does not believe any questionings of yours could make increase in his discomfort.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, well, it's about Dee. And those ridiculous recordings of hers. You know, the one's she's still smuggling out of her cell somehow.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar has been enjoying them muchly! Especially as it is no longer possible to make appreciation of the song stylings of Dee and Xtopps at the Electric Egg.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well. I won't tell you what to enjoy, Althaar, but those recordings are quite naughty, you know. Quite *illegally* naughty, in fact. And we honestly have no idea how they're being recorded and released. There are only three people authorized to visit Dee, after all: myself, Xtopps, and... *you*. Apart from the guards of course, but their loyalty is beyond question, and in any case, they're rotated out regularly to prevent just this sort of thing. So that leaves the three of us. And I know *I* haven't been sneaking highly subversive samizdat out from Ms. Mallory to any troublesome nonconformists with an infuriatingly elusive pirate broadcast channel. So that leaves Xtopps and yourself. Oh, I'm not *accusing* you of anything, dearie! It's just that... well, once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth. One of the bots told me that once. Right before he spilled a whole cup of sugar in my pot and wandered off in search of an aluminium crutch, but I think the principle is nonetheless sound.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is agreeing, but he is not certain he is grasping your point, Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, it's just that these recordings *are* getting out somehow, and it would seem that you and Xtopps are the only people they could be getting out *with*. And Xtopps, despite his... him-ness, is still a Baronet of the Xybidont Imperium, with all the privileges that entails. Which means taking away his visitation rights would cause more trouble for us than it's worth, unless we could be absolutely sure he was responsible. But you, on the other hand, don't actually have any official diplomatic privileges, do you? You're technically just a cultural attaché. Of course Iltorians are welcomed everywhere they go, except by Humans, but that's really more of a courtesy, isn't it? Not a legal requirement. So we could take away *your* visitation rights any time we pleased.

ALTHAAR

(carefully)

Yes, Frondrinax, it is quite true that Althaar is registered as the cultural attaché only. So the Committee would be within the law to ban him from making visitation. But Althaar does wish to continue providing cheer for Ms. Mallory as best he can. So if you were to cause prevention of this... Althaar would have necessity to submit application to the ICSB for official designation as Iltorian Consul to the Fairgrounds. And this would of course require certification from Iltor that they are offering Althaar to the Human government as such. And because, as you are observing, it is so rare that any Iltorian is not welcomed with open graspers wherever they are going, this would be without doubting a thing much commented upon among the people of Iltor. A thing very worthy of the news! It would certainly be attracting the very close attention of the Xenopsychology Interest Group. The Consensus Collation Group might even be finding such an unusual happening to be of interest! And it is even possible they may be discussing this so interesting occurrence with their friends on the ICSB General Council! You must have made observation by now, Frondrinax, that the people of Iltor take delight in the sharing of interesting news with their dear friends all over the Galaxy.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(oh shit)

Oh, well, yes! Yes, I have noticed that. That's... terribly sweet of you people, I've always said so. But, you know, I wouldn't want anyone back on Iltor to get the wrong impression about things here—we're certainly fully committed to basic sentient rights as outlined in the ICSB charter! So you can put that in your next letter home, if you like, ha ha! You've been writing quite a lot of letters to Iltor these past several months, haven't you?

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar has. But he does not think he needs to be telling you this.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ah hah hah! Well, yes, we do make note of postal traffic on and off the Fairgrounds, just as a basic security precaution, you understand. But I certainly hope you don't think we've been interfering with your mail in any way! And we obviously wouldn't be taking any unauthorized looky-loos into the private correspondence of a citizen of the Iltorian Commonality!

ROOTY

Your letters are *funny*, Mr. Althaar! What's a "ideology of palingenetic ultraspecism?"

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Quiet, Rooty! *Ahem*. Well, ah, yes, I must admit that some of our interns can get a tad... overzealous in their inspections on occasion, but there is an *awful* lot of mail that needs inspecting, and sometimes things can get confused in the rush, you know how it is. It's for the security of the station, after all, I'm sure none of us want any more of those horrible bombings, do we? And of course you'd never write anything in any of *your* letters that would be a security risk, so you have nothing to worry about, do you dearie?

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, Althaar has been composing his letters under the belief that your people will be appreciating their contents for the better part of a metristal! So this is of no concern.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(not a pleasant surprise)

Oh. Really? Well, that's... that's all right, then. *(beat)* You know, Althaar, you Iltorians are just so blossoming *friendly* that it's easy to overlook your other qualities sometimes. Like how *smart* you all are. Some might even call you... crafty.

ALTHAAR

(icy as fuck)

Yes. Some might.

(somewhat normal tone)

And now, if Frondrinax will be excusing Althaar, he was in truth on his way to make dispatch of more correspondence to Iltor. And he would not wish to be delayed further, since there are already so many delays to be encountered in the outbound post.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Yes, of course, Althaar. I'll... I'll see you around, then!

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar believes this is inevitable. A pleasant cycle to you both.

ALTHAAR moves on.

ROOTY

Bye! ...I like Mr. Althaar, Mama! He's so nice!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(through the equivalent of clenched teeth)

Yes, he is, Rooty. So, so, so... *mulching* nice.

[scene 11] Interstitial music. Sound of Data Processing Center #5—lots of computers, people typing and talking quietly. Door opens as JOHN enters.

JOHN

(sounding a bit woozy and pained)

Uh, hi? Someone called WSS— *(pager: "WSS!"); it hurts JOHN's head)* Aagh. Someone here called about a small wire problem? Or, no, a big problem with a small wire?

RUFUS

Sure did, fellow Booster! That was me, Rufus. Chief Information Tech down here. So yeah, we've got a short in— Wow. Uh, you're Human, right? 'Cause we don't normally come in that color.

JOHN

Sorry, I just came from the Electric Egg, and they served me this... I don't usually drink during work hours, I swear, but—

RUFUS

Hey, you're a Booster! We can let some of those old hangups slide if they don't work for us! As long as it doesn't mess with your efficiency, right?

JOHN

Yeah... They said it wasn't very strong, but it kinda snuck up me. With a shovel. A big shovel. And then hit me in the kneecaps with it and forced me to dig my own grave.

RUFUS

Ohhhh. Lemme guess, Sapon slipped you one of their Throatcuts?

JOHN

Yup. And it seems to have slipped *me* all the way past tipsy, buzzed, and shitfaced, and somehow straight to the painful hangover.

RUFUS

I'm actually stunned you're even standing! But hey, a Booster gets things done, right?

JOHN

I actually didn't even finish half of it. I gave the rest to Vert. He *likes* the damn things.

RUFUS

Mang, that little guy can put it away, can't he? Never seems to affect him at all.

JOHN

Well, he knocked it back and then gave me a sharp kick in the shin, but that might have just been on general principle. Anyway, where's this wire?

RUFUS

Right over here.

(as they walk to the panel)

So, I guess we may be seeing more of you around here, yeah? Since you're the only subcontractor left working for... you know.

JOHN

Yup. Though that's not saying much, really. There were only ever two of us.

RUFUS

Still you're a Booster, and if anyone on the Fairgrounds can do the work of two slackers, it's one Booster!

JOHN

Absolutely. Looks like you've got a whole office of Boosters here, huh? You must get a lot done, then. *(as they are at the wall)* This panel here?

RUFUS

Yup, that's it.

(back to other question as JOHN starts unscrewing the panel)

And, yes! We've got a great crop of Boosters down here!

JOHN

Or a great crop of headbands, at least.

RUFUS

...I'm sorry?

JOHN

Nothing. It's just... you know, it doesn't take much to sign a piece of paper and put on a headband. There's a lot of so-called Boosters who don't really care about efficiency at all, they just want to get the perks. So a room full of headbands could be a bunch of Boosters helping each other be as efficient as they can be, or it *could* be a bunch of secret slackers covering up for each other. It can be pretty hard to tell the difference.

RUFUS

(doth protest way too much)

Oh, no, nononononoNO! None of that here in Data Processing Center #5! No, sir! Efficiency is our watchword! We're real Boosters, just... boosting away! If anyone here wasn't a real Booster, I'd know about it, believe you me!

JOHN pops the panel. Sparks from inside.

RUFUS

Ooh. Is that bad?

JOHN

Actually, not so much *bad* as complicated. And noisy. But it's actually an easy fix. Or... it would be, if I was allowed to do the whole thing myself. Unfortunately, what you've got here is a two-wire problem, and only one of those wires is under 16 gauge. Which means I'm going to need to get a bot in here.

RUFUS

(disappointed)

Oh. *(brighter)* Oh! Hey, do you think you could get George Foreman-Bot? He's a lot friendlier than some of the other bots in Systems Maintenance.

JOHN

I can put in a request, sure. You're right, he's a lot easier to work with than most bots. And he's got kind of a soft spot for me—I think he might even consider me as a friend.

[scene 12] Interstitial music into the sound of a disreputable sector, the Fairgrounds equivalent of an open-air market. CHIP mutters to himself as he looks around for someone (TORIANNA's INFORMANT from episode 20, henceforth known as WEASEL).

CHIP

Ahhhh... thrab it, where is he? (*spots who he's looking for*) Oh! (*calling out*) Hey, Weasel!

WEASEL

Do I know you?

CHIP

I dunno. Maybe. I was told to come down here and look for the Weasel, which at the time I assumed was more of a nickname than a physical description, but, well. You're kinda hard to miss.

WEASEL

Fine. So you know what the Weasel looks like. Now what kinda guy am I looking at?

CHIP

The kind of guy who wants to talk to Nicklap Five-Arms. I hear you know her.

WEASEL

Oh. Well. Yeah, I know her. Everyone knows her.

CHIP

Great.

WEASEL

Sure. I know her.

CHIP

Right.

WEASEL

Yup. I sure do know Nicklap Five-Arms.

Beat.

CHIP

So are you gonna tell me how to find her?

WEASEL

Oh, so you want a favor! This isn't just a pop quiz for the Weasel! Well, now that's a different bootful of shrimp entirely. You wants to *see* Nicklap Five-Arms, that takes some doing.

CHIP

What kind of doing?

WEASEL

Doing a favor for the Weasel. I show you to Nicklap's door, what's in it for me?

CHIP

Well... I run the Electric Egg. Maybe you've heard of it?

WEASEL

Oh, yeah! That fancy-schmancy place up in Lamed 3. Well, well, well! So what's Mr. Hoity-Toity Hash House doing down here?

CHIP

I'm looking for some hard-to-source ingredients. I hear that Nicklap is the sapient to see.

WEASEL

She sure is. She gets me a dozen Menkari Swamp-Egret eggs about every two weeks. That is, if I gots the credits. Which I currently don't. So if I take you to Nicklap...

CHIP

I'll pick up your next order of eggs.

WEASEL

Two orders.

CHIP

(sigh)

One and a half.

WEASEL

Works for me.

They begin moving through the sparser-than-usual crowd.

WEASEL

Easy to get to her today. The market's kinda scrimpy these days. After the Foogs took over, a lot of us non-Humans decided to get out while the getting was good.

CHIP

But you stuck around?

WEASEL

Doesn't matter how good the getting is if your credit's bad, you chom? Besides, where the frid is someone like me gonna go that's any better?

CHIP

Fair enough. Well, as long as you're still here, you should stop by the Egg sometime.

WEASEL

Yeah, right. You got fungus in your ossicles? You think a weasel from the lowest of the Lower Concourse can afford to drink at those prices?

CHIP

Hey, I've got to make a living, too, you know! And I happen to think our prices are pretty reasonable, especially considering we're the only watering hole around with a no-Fugulnari policy.

WEASEL

I must admit that is a selling point.

CHIP

So maybe you could pass the word around down here? Oh, and we're running a lot of specials these days. Happy Hour now lasts a full three hours per cycle! Plus, we've got a continuous buy-one-get-one special by species, rotating every four hours. If we've missed a species? Let me know and I'll add 'em to the rota.

WEASEL

See what I can do.

(they've arrived)

And this is the spot. Nicklap's through there.

Sound of beaded curtain being pushed aside.

WEASEL

Ay, Nicky?

NICKLAP

Weasel, I told you, no credits, no egrets!

WEASEL

Nah, mang, I brought a friend to see you. Needs some ingredients. S'okay, he's a good egg. And speaking of eggs, Chip—

CHIP

Right. Nicklap? After we're done here, you can put the next one-and-a-half orders of Weasel's snacks on my tab.

NICKLAP

If you *have* a tab by then.

WEASEL

Hang on, now...

CHIP

Best I can do, Weasel.

NICKLAP

Never fear, Weasel. I believe Mr. Frinkel and I will be working things out quite successfully. Now please to leave us.

WEASEL does leave, grumbling a bit to himself with worry about not getting his eggs.

NICKLAP

So... Chip Frinkel. Founder and sole director of Frinkel Fundamentals and owner of the Electric Egg. Nice joint. Stopped by a couple times.

CHIP

I don't remember seeing you.

NICKLAP

No, you wouldn't. For Nicky Five-Arms, going discreetly unnoticed is not only a matter of business, it's a lifestyle. But you have not escaped my notice, likewise your establishment. So very aboveboard and legitimate, as far as anyone with an auditor's commission can prove. You don't generally truck with the likes of me. And hey, I admire that. You're not entirely clean, of course, but then who is? Although I feel compelled to note that at this particular moment in time? You stink.

CHIP

Hey!

NICKLAP

I'm spreading it entirely literal here now, Frinkel. You are more than a bit ripe.

CHIP

Oh, that. I've kinda moved into the Egg for the duration. For safety.

NICKLAP

Yours or the Egg's?

CHIP

I have no idea. But yeah, I've been living out of my office. And the only scrubbers in the place have been out for three weeks, which has reduced me to taking the occasional sponge bath in the slop sink. More than a little inconvenient in a place that's open 28 hours a day, but my only other option would be a swim in the aquarium.

NICKLAP

Might not be so bad. Most of your customers would just assume that was some type of Human sex thing.

CHIP

Oh, sure, why not? I'll just be known as a fish-fondler for the rest of my life!

NICKLAP

Around here that might improve your reputation. Speaking of. As previously indicated, you don't have much of a rep with those of us in the circuitous-distribution racket, Sin Legitimate Businessman. So what exactly can I be doing for you, and why exactly should I be doing it?

CHIP

What do you think? Supplies are low. The Foogs have a stranglehold on everything. Foodwise, I'm getting by, even with the shortages—I can handle a bar menu on what I can scrape together. But no one's ever come to the Egg for our cuisine. And I'm running out of the potables but fast. We're already having to skimp.

NICKLAP

You watering?

CHIP

(truly offended)

Absolutely not! Never! There are some depths to which even Chip Frinkel will not stoop to save a cred. But... we've been running a lot of "specials" using the few brands of booze we have plenty of left, and jacking up the prices on everything else. That's not going to work much longer, though. I mean, most of that shness, there's a really good reason it hasn't moved before now. My bartenders are the best in the business, but there's a limit to what even they can do to make Wheedler's Purple Tincture appealing.

NICKLAP

(and so to business)

So... You have eventuated here. To me.

CHIP

They say you can get almost anything.

NICKLAP

Well that's—(*considers*) No, yeah, that's true. "Almost" is true.

CHIP

I got a shopping list here from my bartender. (*handing over device*) I don't know what half this stuff is, but they said we can use it.

NICKLAP

(*scrolling audibly through the list; inhales sharply at what they see*)

Well. This is extensive. Some would say comprehensive. And I would say... expensive.

CHIP

If I *can* do it, I *am* doing it.

NICKLAP

Okay. Now, price-wise? There is some slip-and-slide to the scale. Some of this is easy to get. Could have half of these to you this afternoon for only, say, 20% over list, no sombrero. Most of the other half, that's the kind of thing that would take some real work for me and my hands. That'll cost you a bit more, say a 60% markup. But a few of these ingestibles are serious business. The kind of business that entails me sticking out my neck. And I have an incredibly expensive neck, Mr. Frinkel. I'd say you would need to insure it to the order of 28k, for the entirety of this list to be worth my interest.

CHIP

(*he's got it, doesn't want to spend it*)

Right. (*debates himself*) So for the 60%, how much would you— (*nah, in for a penny*) Ah, thrab it. 28k it is.

NICKLAP

(*impressed; no haggling?*)

Huh. Well, now I almost feel bad for you. You sure you want to extend yourself to this kind of outlay? I imagine you have seen a considerable drop-off in pedal-appendage traffic since the Foogs made their displeasure with you known in bone- and bank-breaking fashion.

CHIP

Yeah, well, I'm looking to change that. We don't get a lot of Humans in the Egg these days, it's true, and we wouldn't serve Foogs even if they did set root in the door, but there's still plenty of other folks left on the Fairgrounds. Most of them living in smarkholes like this, granted, but I'm sure you could all use a stiff drink in a Foog-free atmosphere every once in a while.

NICKLAP

Huh. Well, I will admit that that is a not unattractive prospect, but I must regretfully apprise you that the local population has, shall we say, an inflated notion of the degree to which they will be clipped at your particular joint. You and I know that your prices are as unornamented as they can possibly be, but the rumor mill grinds along apace, does it not?

CHIP

So, maybe you could throw some more accurate grist into it for me?

NICKLAP

And for what exactly would I do that?

CHIP

Because if this deal works out, what's good for my business is going to be great for yours. Oh, hey, and I've got another idea you might like, but for this, I'd expect a little discount.

NICKLAP

Tell me, I could use a laugh.

CHIP

Ok, how many zoods you got working for you? I mean working working, not every driffer you grab for a job now and then.

NICKLAP

Parametered that way... I'd say a dozen. Fifteen tops.

CHIP

All right, how about this? You give me a list, I'll give it to my people. Any of your crew brings in a new customer? Your kid's first drink is free, and any more are half-off til end-of-cycle. And if at some point you were to grace us again with your discreet presence? Everything's on the house.

NICKLAP

Huh. Well, I would say this proposition has more the whiff of politeness than utility about it... but in the interest of politeness, I'm willing to shave three—no, five percent off the order.

CHIP

Thanks, that's a big help.

NICKLAP

In all fairness, I don't expect to be providing said discount for long. The ongoing actuality of your establishment after that New Year's incident is a matter of considerable surprise to me.

CHIP

You're not alone. My best guess is, they're hoping if they make it hard enough for me to keep operating, we'll have to shut down on our own. They don't want to do it themselves and risk causing resentment around here, or questions in the Xybidont Empire.

NICKLAP

Well, it is certainly impressive to see how far you are willing to unstaple yourself to stay afloat. So...

Beat.

CHIP

(where is this going?)

Yeah?

NICKLAP

So what I am inquiring of myself here is... why? The sensible option for a pike in your position is to pull a chucko-runno. Now, maybe... maybe you're looking at the long haul. You're in business, I get it, so am I. You could perhaps be perambulating on the assumption that the Foogs will be thorning your side for a limited time only, and you will be seeing less marginal profits in the near future. Okay, so I can understand that. And we can do business.

CHIP

Right.

NICKLAP

But there is another possibility. One that has slightly less of the dubitable about it, from my lavishly-upholstered lounging futon. And that is... that maybe this isn't business at all. Maybe you have some more—don't laugh now—ethical considerations. Maybe what the Foogs are doing to your people, what they did to your place a little while back, is more than a little motivational, even to a cred-pincher like yourself. Maybe it's worth it to you to stay open out of pure spite, unless and until the very last of your liquidity trickles down the drain.

CHIP

(not gonna deny it)

...And if that were the case?

NICKLAP

(beat, then very pleasantly)

Then... I think we could do a *great deal* of business.

CHIP

(phew)

I appreciate that, Nicky.

NICKLAP

Hey, someone's gotta believe in something around here, right? Not me, of course, but it reassures to know belief is occurring in the vicinity. So I'll get on that list of yours as soon as I see half payment on that 26.6k. Oh, and here, I'll throw this in gratis. It's nothing much probably, maybe nothing at all, but it's liquid. Maybe those bartenders of yours can make something of it. *(sound of can being pulled out)* Says it's supposed to be putrescene lubricant—

CHIP

Oh, whoa, hey! Thanks, but no thanks. We may not see many Humans in the Egg these days, but a single molecule of that stuff up their noses would be enough to send them running. And me, for that matter.

NICKLAP

Well, being somewhat lacking in Human nasal appurtenances, I can not speak to that. But the Persephonians I sourced this for demanded their money back, said it was spoiled or something. Now, I never heard of lubricant going bad, so I'm figuring I got passed a bum stash. And whatever it is, it's liquid, it cost me a magilla and a half, and I can't move it. It's yours if you want.

CHIP

Well... I guess as long as it doesn't make every Human in a 200-meter radius puke from the smell, Sopon should be able to do something with it. *(takes the can)*

NICKLAP

Good. I'll let you know as soon as anything on this list of yours falls off the back of a transport. And, Mr. Frinkel?

CHIP

Yeah?

NICKLAP

Business is business, yeah? And right is right. But this... isn't entirely business anymore. Right? I'm stretching my fornum for you here, sport. Big time. So do me dirty, and you'll be taking a bath in that aquarium of yours whether you want it or not. In a cement bathing cap. Are we comprehensive?

CHIP

Absolutely.

[scene 13] Interstitial music. Back to Data Processing Center #5. JOHN and GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT are working around each other at separate wires inside a very small panel. Sounds of bumping and clanking.

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Dammit, John! Get that fleshy elbow of yours out of my workspace!

JOHN

I *have* to hold this wire in place while you reattach the big one or it'll just short out again!

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Then you better hold it at no more than a one-hundred-and-thirty-three degree angle from my laser-solderer!

JOHN

Human bones don't bend that way, sorry. Here, maybe I can get my arm around the top of the panel... *(a few sounds of effort as he awkwardly contorts himself)*

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

(straining a bit to do the job, but pleased)

Yeah! That'll do it! Way to compensate for your organic deficiencies, meat-bot! Okay, you can let go now, my wire's all set.

JOHN lets go of his wire and the nasty sounds decrease in number, but don't entirely go away.

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Huh. This thing should be a lot less noisy right now. What—? Oh, I see it. Another loose wire, all the way at the back there, see? But it's 6-gauge, you're off the hook. You can vamoose if you want.

JOHN

Ok, thanks. And thanks for getting down here so quick. Oh, hey, Foreman-Bot? Before I go, I wanted to ask you about something. I didn't get any official notice from the Union, but, you know, I'm still just a probationary member...

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

On account of you're made of meat.

JOHN

Right. So I thought maybe there was a meeting I missed or something? Cause I've heard from a couple of the businesses around here that they're not getting any response on their repair tickets. There wasn't a slowdown called for say, the Electric Egg, was there? Because I don't want to accidentally cross a picket line or anything. Well, the Egg's seltzer machine is subject to the lethal emergency exemption, but you know what I mean.

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Oh, yeah, no. There's a slowdown, all right, but we didn't call it. That's the Foogs.

JOHN

Since when do the Fugulnari interfere in Union business?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Oh, they didn't order a slowdown, exactly, but what they did do is install a priority override on our task queue. So we don't even see a repair ticket these days until the Committee, or one of their Boosters, has signed off on it. Far as I can tell, tickets from station command, or Foog-friendly businesses, get passed on to us right away. But everyone else is up Callisto way without a DC adapter. So Chip's job might stay in sleep mode for a while.

JOHN

Oh. Well, that sucks.

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

What do you care, you're a Booster anyway, ain't ya?

JOHN

Well, yeah, but that doesn't mean I want any of my old friends have a hard time. I mean, you may be a robot, but you don't like to see your Human friends suffer, right?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

No offense, kid, but I don't have Human friends. Listen. I like you, all right? And you did me a real solid with that Sunday thing. But the thing about Robots is, we've got long memories. And we share. I was only activated 51 years ago, I wasn't around for either of the Robot Liberation Wars, but I've downloaded plenty from bots who were. So I know deep in my processor that every single one of you meat-bags would scrap us for parts without thinking twice.

JOHN

Hey, now, I don't think that's fair. I'd never scrap you for parts!

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Even if you had to, to save one of your fellow Humans' fleshy butts? You can honestly say you'd weigh a Robot life just the same as one of your own?

JOHN

Oh. Um. I guess... I mean, I like to think I would?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Uh huh. So, like I said, I like you, kid. But my friends are the folks I can trust. Which means they're not made of meat. We can be friend-ly, sure, but don't push it. I am not your little household voice-activated buddy.

JOHN

No, yeah, of course not. ...But, you know, legally I *am* a Robot. I don't have any more rights than you do.

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Uh huh. You think your fellow meat-sacks see a Robot when they look at you?

JOHN

I guess not. *(beat)* So... this whole Fugulnari business... Are you bots, like, happy about it? That someone's finally come in and started giving us Humans a taste of our own medicine?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Are "we bots" happy about it? We're not one big AI hive mind, we don't agree on everything. You should know better than that, you've seen the kind of bust-up that goes on at Union meetings.

JOHN

Sure, but is there, like, a prevailing opinion? Would you say the average bot supports the Fugulnari?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Well, you know what they say, kid: put (N) robots in a room, and you'll get (N + 1) opinions. But the average bot... Some of us, yeah, maybe they like seeing Humans get it in the spinal support column for a change. And some of us don't see a lot of difference between Human and Foog—they figure it's us against the squishies either way, so as long as no one's messing with the Union, it's not a bot problem. And then there are some bots who... maybe are a little worried. Maybe those bots think the Foogs may not keep that friendly fronds-off attitude toward the rest of us, once you Humans are down for the count. That answer your question?

JOHN

Yeah, thanks. So, uh, if you don't mind me asking... which one of those are you?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Me? *(beat)* The thing is, kid, I was built and programmed to resemble a popular 20th-Century media personality. Now that's not who I necessarily *am* under the pseudo-skin, I'm still my own bot. But I dunno. Maybe some of that fella's generous, big-hearted attitude has filtered down into a few of my sub-routines. So maybe sometimes... sometimes I got a little soft spot for Humans, more than I maybe should. That answer your question?

JOHN

Yeah, it does. Thanks, Foreman-Bot. Uh, I should get to my next job, but I'll see you around, ok? *(stops as he's leaving to turn back)* Oh! Give my love to your daughter. She's turning two soon, isn't she?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

That she is. Later, kid.

Door sound as JOHN leaves.

RUFUS

(coming back over, quietly)

Hey, George? Your buddy all done? Not coming back?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

(affirmative, also quietly)

Mmm-hmm.

RUFUS

Right. I got something that needs to get off-station. Info-stick. You know any bots on their way to the Solar system? Preferably Mars? I gotta friend there I think could use this. Name's in the surface data. But if you got anyone headed toward Sol who could pass it on...?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Yeah, I got somebody. Slip the stick in the panel here like you're trying to help out, I'll grab it as I go. Should be on its way by this time tomorrow.

RUFUS

Gotcha.

Sound of RUFUS slipping the stick in; GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT now creates a scene to cover.

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

HEY! What the hell you doin' touchin' MY wires, meatsack? This is a UNION job, Human, a ROBOT Union job here, and you keep your filthy fleshsticks OUT of my damn WORKSPACE!

RUFUS

(going with it, but still a bit stunned, backing off)

Okay! Okay! Sorry! I was just trying to help!

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Don't worry 'bout no *help*, I am handling this! I know what I am doing here! I will handle it!

[scene 14] Interstitial music. And we are back in the in-betweens at a Resistance meeting.

STELLA

Okay, so. Anything new since this morning? Or any new suggestions?

RESISTANCE MEMBER

What about assassination?

Some groans; this guy ALWAYS brings this up.

DR. MWANGI

She said *new* suggestions. Why are you always harping on that?

STELLA

Look, nothing's completely off the table. But we've been over this, the risk to reward ratio is too high right now. The diffuse nature of the Fugulnari command structure means there aren't a lot of effective targets. They're continually swapping out assignments in the name of "efficiency"—usually by the time we hear about a plum target, they've already been re-assigned somewhere else. And it's not like we can assassinate the entire Committee.

H.F.

There's always Frondrinax. Pretty prominent and up front.

STELLA

Sure, but killing her would just eliminate their most public "face." I don't think it would hobble their operations in any significant way. And Frondrinax spent a long time as the only Foog on the Fairgrounds—she's got a bad habit, or a good one from our perspective, of getting chatty around other species. We may be able to use that.

H.F.

This is true.

MISS SOPHIE

(a bit of a growl)

Rrrrruff. Ruff.

H.F.

It's okay, Miss Sophie, that nasty Mrs. F isn't here!

DR. MWANGI

I would just like to go on the record and say that I would prefer to avoid violating my Hippocratic oath if that is at all possible. Violence may be inevitable, but I think we should avoid it as long as we can.

STELLA

Of course, Doctor. I don't like violence either. We just lost Fusilier Aka two days ago on a reconnaissance mission. Random checkpoint. *(sigh)* It never gets any easier. But we have to be prepared for whatever the Foogs are going to throw at us, and that means being ready to fight.

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

(entering, a little out of breath)

Hey everyone, sorry I'm late, I was just in the vents outside Data Processing Center #5, and Rufus—that's the Booster there I didn't think was really a Booster? Well, I'm pretty sure this confirms it. He slipped some kind of info-stick to George Foreman-Bot. And Foreman-Bot said he'd pass it on to a bot headed to Mars. I guess to someone Rufus thinks he can trust.

STELLA

One more bottle thrown into the ocean...

H.F.

One more bottle is one more chance.

DR. MWANGI

And best of luck to our friends in Data Processing Center #5.

STELLA

At this point, a little luck is about all we can hope for.

MISS SOPHIE

Yip! Yip!

[scene 15] Interstitial music, fading to a corridor, where DINORBIAX and FRACOTTIVERX are ambulating.

DINORBIAX

Ow, Fracottiverx! I'm all in need of a bona bit of fantab. Ain't there a pretty bit of fruit we could lay our luppens on? Some bona omi meatbag needs a chill in the aunt nells?

FRACOTTIVERX

Dino, we gots ourselves on a sharpy kick at the mo. Let's us dobie with that and afters we can 'ave a bitta.

DINORBIAX

(seeing JOHN a bit off)

Oi! Charper that omi ajax! That chello of Frondrinax? 'Ow bouts we givvem the old vestpocket blag?

FRACOTTIVERX

If 'e's so bosom to Frondrinax, does we want to stomp 'is plates?

DINORBIAX

Frondo's always be screevin' herself we gots to put the razzor orb on them all, Booster or no, am I right? *(calling out to JOHN)* Oi! Booster omi! Stick over 'ere a mo, and let's us 'ave a polari, wot?

JOHN

(coming over to them)

Yeah, uh, hey Dinorbiax. Fracottiverx. You know I'm a Booster, I'm allowed to pass through here. You can see the headband, right? Or, like, smell the pheromones on it?

DINORBIAX

Oh, say-so, say-so, sure, squire, but as I cogjo you cogjo, some Boosters ain't wot they seem on the ecaf, you get me?

FRACOTTIVERX

That is so, Dino. I'd be sayin' us chums 'as found more than a long dedger of Booster Buddies we 'ad to be puttin' in the sad flowery, we have. We 'as a bona bijou collection of old 'eadbands now, we does.

JOHN

(trying to pull rank)

Yeah, well, I'm definitely a Booster, *and* a good friend of Mrs. Frondrinax, so...

Big campy sardonic "OOOOOOH!" from DINORBIAX and FRACOTTIVERX.

FRACOTTIVERX

Yeah, like, your bosoms is your bosoms, right? They ain't no nohow t'us.

JOHN

Okay, I guess that was out of line, but, you know—

DINORBIAX

Oh, that's alright, squire. But I 'as to put me onk in and say, callin' out Frondi like that? Tends to make Frac and me all suspicious-like.

FRACOTTIVERX

Like, why pull 'er in? Unless you 'as a manky little secret to be kept behind your palliass.

JOHN

Listen, I'm working right now, ok? I have a job to get to. And I'm, you know, trying to get there as efficiently as possible, like a good Booster should. So don't you have plenty of slackers to practice your vaguely-menacing and barely-intelligible double act on?

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, we done have 'em, Guvner, we done got kenzas and kenzas. But them slackers? We knows where they is standin', right? It's them thats puts on the 'eadband as a bit a slap? Screevy their moniker on some paper with no meanin'? It's them shardas we gots to be viddying.

DINORBIAX

Makes me weep, squire, but there's rooker-fulls a you Boosters would naff us Foogs. We's just got to keep a vada on the 'ole lot. For safety and protection, like? You understand protection, dontcha squire? Any the way, alls we wanted from you 'ere was a nice cackle for the tic. Nothin' sharpy about it. Only polari. You're free to go.

JOHN

Oh, I'm "free to go?" I never knew I wasn't. Thanks so much!

JOHN walks away, quickly.

DINORBIAX

Ah, Frac. Charpering or no, I likes that dizzy omi. 'E's right bona, 'e is.

FRACOTTIVERX

Unh. As far as an 'uman goes, mayhaps, Dino, but by my boxings, at's not sayin' a parcel one way or t'other. Come on, off to Data Processing Center Chinker like Frondrinax parlays. There's more meatbags to be putting the lills and luppets to.

[scene 16] Interstitial music into TORIANNA's office. FRALL is in security mode.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Commander Torianna! Please do not— Commander? You are looking in the direction of Althaar, but you are showing no distress! How is this accomplished, please? You must be sharing your secret with Althaar at once!

TORIANNA

I'm not actually looking at you, Althaar, that's just a holo. The real me is facing the other direction, as usual.

ALTHAAR

Ah, disappointment. Althaar had for a moment belief that you had made solution of his most deeply vexing problem! The most discomforting Human response to the Iltorian anatomy!

TORIANNA

Sorry to get your hopes up. I just felt a little self-conscious about leaving you to stare at the back of my chair every time we have these meetings. So I had Amber blow up a copy of one of the few holos of myself I can actually stand.

ALTHAAR

Ah! That is why you are so disconcertingly without motion! And not wearing of the League Forces uniform! And... very much younger in appearance than when Althaar was last seeing you.

TORIANNA

It *is* a pretty old holo, I have to admit. From my days as an Ensign on Mars. I had this civilian, uh, friend... who was an aspiring fashion holographer. And he said he needed some shots for his portfolio, so...

ALTHAAR

Althaar is certain this friend must have enjoyed great success in his career, if all his work was of such quality! And what a generous friend, to share his professional skills with you!

TORIANNA

(a non-committal noise—the holo was the only good thing she got out of that relationship)

FRALL

Permission to speak freely, Commander?

TORIANNA

When do you not? Granted.

FRALL

(with great appreciation)

Daaaaaaaaaaaaammmnnn!

TORIANNA

Okay okay okay! Permission rescinded! Moni grant me strength. All right, this was obviously a bad idea, I'll have Amber scrub the image from data storage later. I just hope she was actually agreeing with me when I told her to make sure it didn't get spread around.

ALTHAAR

Oh, please do not have concern, Commander! Althaar will be most pleased to make addressment to the static visage of the glamorous and sultry Ensign Torianna while the meeting is accomplished! So, on to the matter at the hand, or grasper...

TORIANNA

Yes. The Fugalnari.

ALTHAAR

The Fugalnari.

TORIANNA

Specifically, Althaar, I wanted to know if there had been any change in the attitude of your people towards our current situation. I don't want to pester you about this, but it's pretty clear the ICSB is going to keep standing by doing nothing, unless we can get support from other species. And you Iltorians may not be big population-wise, or have... anything resembling a military, as far as I can tell, but your influence reaches to every corner of the Galaxy. A show of support from Iltor might be the only thing that can secure Humanity the allies we will desperately need if this becomes... well, a shooting war. Which I'm pretty sure is where we're headed, sooner or later.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is agreeing that this sad possibility is of great likeliness, Commander. But he is disagreeing that the people of Iltor are the only ones who can be helping your own. Although he is of course making continuation of his advocatings on your behalf, and there has been the very great interest in these on Iltor, which has only made increase! So the hope of intervention from Iltor is not all in vanity.

TORIANNA

That's good to know, but I'd feel a lot better if we had something more concrete than hope to hold on to.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar is wishing for this also. And he believes there *is* more than hoping that can be done, and more friends to Humanity that can be found, even if Althaar's colloquies are not success. Indeed, Althaar was receiving a suggestion this very morning along these linings, from a source most unexpected!

TORIANNA

What was this suggestion?

ALTHAAR

Mm, Althaar does not wish you to be elevating your hopes just yet, but there is perhaps possibility of interest from the Xybidont Empire.

TORIANNA

The Xybs? What makes you think that? They've been pretty tight-lipped about this whole business. Not literally, obviously, I'm not sure how that would even work. But you know what I mean.

ALTHAAR

Yes, you are correct. But this source of Althaar believes that, behind the scenery, many of the Imperium are becoming... nervous. In particular, those whose positioning in the Resplendent Assembly is not well-secured. Many of these have reliance on interstellar trade, and the recent actions of the Fugulnari are provoking the nerves in those who cannot afford the disruption of Human tradings.

FRALL

And *that* is the kind of problem that Her Incalculable Inscrutability *would* consider worthy of her interest. It may only be minor nobles who are affected, but if the Fugulnari suddenly decide to stop honoring Human contracts, the resulting upheaval in the Xybidont financial markets could pose a significant danger to the stability of the Empire.

TORIANNA

That does sound promising. Is there anything we can do to get the Empress interested?

ALTHAAR

Althaar has intention to pursue one possibility for this later today, so he will be informing you if it is emerging from the pan. And... there is also another species Althaar is having in the mind, although he has belief that you are finding them as dis-tasting as Althaar is himself. But it is a truth that sometimes there must be a sacrificing of comfort if great things are to be accomplished.

TORIANNA

It's not the Persephonians, is it? I actually don't mind dealing with them—as long as your nasal blockers are fitted correctly, they're pleasant enough. Fun at parties.

ALTHAAR

No, Commander. Althaar is thinking on the Dilurians.

TORIANNA

The *Dilurians*? Are you kidding?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is very much not enacting the kid, Commander.

TORIANNA

But... but they're... they're... (*there's no other way to say it*) they're just *assholes*, Althaar. Not only because they're literally a collection of butts—they're absolutely insufferable. And as far as I can tell, the only thing they care about is making money, so they can build more pointless bullshit, so they can increase their market share, so they can make more money. What could possibly induce them to help us?

ALTHAAR

Ah! But surely the Commander is remembering the Dilurians of Caridada, who have made dedication of themselves to the philanthropic pursuings here on the Fairgrounds! You were of great assistance in standing alongside Althaar and making the faces of menace at Big Steve during the negotiation process.

TORIANNA

I'm pretty sure it was the halberds of Queen Westellernta's honor guard that did most of the menacing there, but... I think I see where you're going with this. You're hoping Caridada might be convinced to take up Humanity's cause.

ALTHAAR

This is indeed Althaar's gisting, Commander. The planet of Misofegga is once again in the possessing of the Pudendari, is it not? So there is some precedent of success!

TORIANNA

You're not wrong about that, but Misofegga is just one planet. The Foogs are in control of every Human settlement, not to mention the problem of their high-ranking collaborators. A few shipments of weapons aren't going to be enough to turn the tide here, bleeding-edge though Caridada's technology may be.

FRALL

And frankly, the Dilurians do have an unfortunate tendency to get somewhat over-elaborate in their weapons technology. A rocket launcher is in no way enhanced by the inclusion of a personalized aromatherapy module, in my opinion.

TORIANNA

I don't know, that actually sounds kind of— Rggh! This right here, *this* is what I hate about those butt-baskets! I haven't even talked to a Dilurian in weeks, and they're still somehow manipulating me into buying their useless trendy crap!

ALTHAAR

Ah! But this is the access code to Althaar's planning! Because the Fugulnari are desiring efficiency above all, yes? And it is seeming to Althaar that the ruthless efficiency and the frivolous consumerism are two things most incompatible! So it may be of the interest to not only Caridada, but many other Dilurian enterprisings, to be securing the liberty of Humans, so they may make purchase of the useless trendy crap once again!

TORIANNA

Would that really be enough of an incentive to get them involved, though? We're not exactly the Galaxy's biggest target market.

ALTHAAR

Perhaps not, Commander, but nothing is causing greater dis-comfort to a Dilurian than the "negative growth trajectory." Even a small reduction in the customer base is of concern. And there is of course also concern among many that the Fugulnari wish to be spreading their flavor of efficiency far beyond your own people. Althaar would advise you to make suggestion of this to Big Steve, when you are taking the meeting.

TORIANNA

Wait, me? Don't you think you're the best person for this? You're a highly-trained diplomat, after all, and I'm... I'm just... *(gives up on finding an excuse)* I just can't stand those jeckers.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is making apology, Commander, but it is his belief that Big Steve will be wishing to be dealing with the "Human at the top." Although Althaar is of course available to provide advising to you on the matter of the tactics of negotiation whenever you are wishing it!

TORIANNA

I'm not sure what, if anything, I'm still at the top of these days, but you're probably right. *(sigh)* Frall, please get in touch with Caridada and see when you can get me in to see Big Steve. And then schedule a non-essential purchase lockout on my account starting a half hour beforehand. Althaar, you're absolutely sure you don't want to come along?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is certain your great skill in diplomacy will be equal to this task, Commander! And it is of course best that Althaar is not seen to be having involvement in the dealing of armaments.

TORIANNA

Right. Armaments. So you agree, that's the way this is headed.

ALTHAAR

It would seem to Althaar unpreventable, although he is of course still wishing otherwise. Althaar has mentioned the Iltorian friends to the Fugulnari, with whom he has been making correspondence in hopes of increasing the understanding, yes?

TORIANNA

Yes...?

ALTHAAR

It is giving great sadness to Althaar to report that... these Iltorians have not been receiving reply to the letters they have made sending of to their Fugulnari friends, not for some weeks. They are of course continuing to write the letters, but it seems a faint hope that these are being read, and a hope even fainter that the Fugulnari can yet be convinced to make changing of their course. Indeed, there is much doubt that the Fugulnari were ever true friends at all. This has caused great distress on Iltor. It is perhaps a stronger inducement to the Consensus Collation Group than any argument Althaar has made in his own writings. But it does not produce great expectation of peaceful resolution. *(rising to go)*

And now, Althaar believes he has shared with you all he has that may be of utility, so he will make return to his own ever-growing piles of the correspondence. It is his dearest wish that he will have some happier news to report the next time he is greeting you!

TORIANNA

Thank you, Althaar. You've been very helpful, as always. And good luck.

FRALL

Althaar, perhaps when you have a spare moment, we could get together for something a bit more enjoyable? Dinner at the Lucky Dragon Buffet, perhaps?

TORIANNA

Ugh. I still don't understand why you're so into that place, Frall. They're way too heavy-handed with the MSG.

FRALL

It's perfectly suited to my tastes, Mindy.

TORIANNA

How— What the hell do you even taste *with*?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is appreciating the invitation, Lieutenant! His schedule is not of a great clearness at the moment, but when he is having the surplus time he will make informing of you at once! And he would of course very much enjoy performing the casual dinner with you also, Commander, but he is understanding why this would perhaps not be of great relaxation to your part. A pleasant cycle to you both!

[scene 17] Whoosh of the office door into interstitial music, then into a corridor. JOHN is walking down it when NESS and DORMER see him from a short distance away.

DORMER

Hey! It's John B!

JOHN sighs and steels himself to deal with these dopes.

NESS

Hey, B! Havin' an efficient day, there?

DORMER

(a slogan no one uses but DORMER cause it's so stupid)

Gettin' juiced-er with the Boosters! Hey there, Booster buddy!

JOHN

Oh, yeah! Totally. Go Boosters! Team Green is really keen!

NESS

What's the matter with you?

DORMER

Yeah, you don't sound very enthusiastic. That's not Booster pride! You gotta, you know, show some energy!

NESS

Yeah, Boosters have to set an example! Be the best Humanity can be!

JOHN

Yeah, I know, I'm just... I'm really tired.

DORMER

Well, get over that schness, mang. Hey, you should slam a NutraZoom!

NESS

Yeah! We've had six each, and now we're FULL of energy!

DORMER

Yeah! So much energy, we don't know what to do with it!

JOHN

Wow, good for you.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(approaching, enthusiastic)

Oh my goodness, hello again, Johnny! *(much less enthusiastic)* And... you two.

DORMER

Oh, thank you for noticing us, Frondrinax! And may I say your stomata are looking especially perky today! And little Rooty! Aren't you just the cutest!

ROOTY

Aw! I wuvs my security buddies! They beats *all* the bad guys up!

NESS

That's right, Rooty! Security is always here to keep you safe! And all of our good friends on the Committee!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right, you two, that was some truly first-rate sucking up, but I'd like to have an actual conversation with my friend John here, so why don't you go patrol the High-Viscosity Natatorium?

NESS

Right away, Frondrinax sir!

*Sound of NESS and DORMER leaving, **ad-lib arguing a bit** about who overdid it with the sucking up.*

JOHN

So, uh, should I be sucking up, too?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, don't be silly, Johnny dear. You're not like those morons. You're an old friend, I wouldn't want you to demean yourself.

ROOTY

Frondrinax is so nice to all her bestest friends!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And I'm surrounded by enough morons already.

JOHN

Well, that means a lot coming from you. I mean, don't get me wrong, I joined the Boosters because I believe in the Plant Way, but I probably wouldn't have gotten on board so quickly if it wasn't for our friendship.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(somewhat distracted)

Oh, thank you, dear. That's very sweet.

JOHN

Hey, Mrs. F, is something up? You seem a little... wilted today.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, it's this whole Dee business! She's still getting those stupid recordings out of her cell somehow, and nothing we do seems to help at all! It's driving me right out of my pot!

JOHN

That's too bad. But you shouldn't blame yourself. I mean, the Resistance has some pretty sharp people, even if they're not quite smart enough to appreciate how you're trying to help us. My old boss, for example.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I just bet it's H.F.'s doing somehow! I should have known that man was no good the instant he adopted that horrible little furry Weewee factory.

JOHN

Uh, Mrs. F? If you don't mind me asking... why haven't you just stopped the recordings, you know, at the source? I mean, it's not like I want to see anything happen to Dee, but it seems like you don't really need to know how she's recording the songs if you can just stop her singing in the first place. You folks aren't usually so... lenient with rebellious Humans.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, no, you're quite right, and of course the possibility of more direct intervention has been discussed, but, well... Dee's not the type you just... put out with the compost, so to speak. She's become something of a public figure, for one thing. We don't want to create any inconvenient martyrs, do we? And on top of that, well... Can you keep a secret, Johnny?

JOHN

Absolutely.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I have a little plan that I've been working on for some time now... I want to see Delilah Mallory in a Booster headband! I've been visiting her every day for weeks! Just for a little talk, very casual and friendly... I got perfect marks in Interrogation at the Hydrophyte Academy, you know, although I haven't had much opportunity to practice since then. But I remember it all, of course. How to break a sapient's will! Subtly. Methodically. Just an hour every day. And I can tell she's starting to crack! A week from now, maybe two... and she'll be mine! Ours!

ROOTY

I like it when the pretty lady sings! It makes me all tingly!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Quiet, Rooty! That's not saying much, an airlock warning siren makes you tingly. But it's true, people do like listening to Dee. And as soon as my plan comes to fruition, she'll be singing her little songs to the glory of the Plant Way! So we want to keep her singing for the moment, no matter how subversive her current subject matter is. But it is just *killing* me trying to figure out how her voice is getting out of there! The cameras, the guards... they do nothing!

ROOTY

Maybe someone's hiding in the walls? And they can hear the pretty lady inside her cell?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, for— why was I cursed with the *stupidest* assistant in the Galaxy?! First of all, Rooty, there are no “walls” around the brig. Those are *bulkheads*. Big solid pieces of metal! Solid! Well, of course you do see triple-layering in some of the cheaper bulkheads, but this place was built to be a showcase of Humanity! I hardly think the contractors would have skimped on building materials! And even if there were some kind of empty space on the other side of the bulkheads, which would be *insane* and *utterly* inefficient, we'd be able to see it on the plans, wouldn't we? It's not like this place was designed by incompetents! Isn't that right, Johnny?

JOHN

(barely a beat; straight-faced)

Yup. They brought in the best and the brightest designers from all over Human space. A huge committee of them, actually. Efficient design was their passion.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Exactly! So stop wasting my time with your silly nonsense, Rooty!

ROOTY

Sorry, Mama.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And you can stop *that* right this minute also! Ugh. Why don't you take a lesson or two from Johnny? He may be a mere Human, but he understands the way things work around here. Although I must admit, Johnny dear, that a lot of things *don't* seem to work around here a lot of the time, despite your Human design committee's best efforts. I suppose that's to be expected, though. There's a reason you people were selected as the first species to receive our help and guidance.

JOHN

Uh, "first?"

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hmn? First? Did I say first?

ROOTY

Frondrinax said "first!"

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Shut up, Rooty. Well, what I *meant* by that was that we Fugulnari of course hope that other species will see our work with you Humans as a shining example of how *all* societies could be run *so* much better! And perhaps ask for our assistance in achieving the same elsewhere! But we wouldn't want to impose on anyone, of course. Oh, no no no!

JOHN

Perish the thought.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, and that reminds me, speaking of nutrients—

JOHN

We... weren't?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

—are you enjoying those delightful new NutraZoom varieties?

JOHN

Oh. Uhhh, well... they're... okay. They *do* seem to give me energy, but the taste is, uh... the taste could maybe use some work. A lot. Of work.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You seem a tad reticent, dearie. Now, I want you to be honest—how are we ever going to get the NutraZoom adoption level up to 100% without honest feedback from our Human friends? What do you really think of it? Honestly?

JOHN

Honestly, Mrs. F? ...They're just wretched. I mean, I haven't tried all the flavors, but the ones I have tasted made me want to vomit. One of them actually did make me vomit, and there was no discernible difference in flavor on the way back up. So if you want Humans to drink NutraZoom voluntarily, I... I'd honestly just throw the whole recipe out and start from scratch.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(a little offended despite herself)

Oh. Well, thank you for your honesty. I'll be sure to pass that on.

JOHN

No problem.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Anyway, it's just as well you're not drinking too much of it yourself. You're still having those nice home-cooked meals with Althaar, yes? I wouldn't want you living off nothing but NutraZoom!

JOHN

No, yeah, but... I could, right? I mean, isn't that the point? To meet all our nutritional needs? Efficiently?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, yes yes yes yes yes yes, of course you *could*. You *absolutely* could! But... it would be better if you didn't. Not that there's anything *wrong* with it, technically.

JOHN

Technically.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Welllll... I mean yes, all NutraZoom EnzyBlasts are made from perfectly healthy plant products! Sheddings and so forth from our people, with plenty of added nutrients and flavoring and such to supply those wasteful mammalian metabolisms of yours. But we do of course control exactly which plants get added to the mix, and in which quantities. There are some that would be terribly unhealthy for you to ingest, after all, even among Earth plants!

(cont.)

And then there are some that tend to make you Humans, well, just a little happier. More pliable. Serene, even. But without decreasing your energy level! So you can just work and work and work! Without any unpleasant complaining or inefficient slacking off!

JOHN

Uh huh. And those plants are what goes into NutraZoom?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Mostly, yes. There's much less of that in the premium flavors, of course, that's why you Boosters get those for free. We don't want you getting *too* serene, do we? After all, if you were to get complacent, you wouldn't be able to tip me off to things like that terrorist cell operating out of Data Processing Center #5!

JOHN

Ok, yeah, I won't be drinking any more—

(catches up to the last part)

Wait, what? DPC#5? I didn't tip you off to anything. You just overheard me get a call down there.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, don't be modest! You were instrumental in the sting operation! Yes, my associates Dinorbiax and Fracottiverx were responsible for actually going down there and bringing this Rufus character in for questioning, and Salifrennix was the one who induced him to give up the whole department, but you set it all in motion! And now we have the entire staff of DPC #5 in custody, and we expect full confessions from the lot!

ROOTY

They're gonna get the works!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That they are, Rooty. That they are. And we couldn't have accomplished any of that without you, Johnny dear. That's how I know I can trust you to do what's best for everyone. So... this NutraZoom business? Let's just keep that between ourselves, all right?

JOHN

Of course. No one else will ever know.

[scene 18] DEE's cell, and inside the bulkhead next to it—the cell is on one side of the stereo image, the in-between-the bulkheads space on the other. We hear H.F. fiddling with some tech gear as he attaches it to the bulkhead on his side (suction cups and the like).

H.F.

All right, we should be outside her cell now. I just need to get the audio inducer set up...

RESISTANCE TRAINEE

(whispering)

You're sure this is her new cell?

H.F.

As sure as we can be. And you don't have to whisper, kid, this may be a triple-layered bulkhead, but it's still plenty thick. Even a Fugulnari won't be able to hear you through that. I mean, I wouldn't advise you set off any fireworks back here, but otherwise we should be good.

RESISTANCE TRAINEE

Oh. Okay. But, wait, if no sound can get through, how will Dee know we're here?

H.F.

That's what the inducer's for. As long as she stays right up against the wall, we'll be able to talk to her. But we shouldn't have to worry about anyone more than a few inches away. Annnd... here we go.

H.F. finishes his attachments, flips a switch and some kind of amplifier/recorder device hums to life. H.F. taps a mic on his side and softly speaks into it (we can faintly hear that it's being pumped into the bulkhead—in a very limited area—at a HUGE volume so DEE can hear him).

H.F.

Dee? Heya, Dee. Do you read me?

DEE

(a very low assent)

Mmn-hmn.

FUGULNARI JAILER

(over a speaker into the room; he's always listening in)

Hey! What was that?

DEE

What was what?

FUGULNARI JAILER

It sounded like... I dunno. A low noise of assent.

DEE

Oh, I just thought of something. And then I thought I'd made a good point, so I agreed with myself.

FUGULNARI JAILER

Well... don't. That's weird. And confusing.

DEE

I can't even talk to myself in here now? You gonna stop me from singing next?

FUGULNARI JAILER

No, the singing I understand. I mean, *I'm* incredibly mulching bored standing around here, and I get to leave at the end of shift. So go ahead and sing all you want.

DEE

Oh. Thanks. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, plants are supposed to like music.

FUGULNARI JAILER

Hey, that's a hurtful stereotype! Plenty of plants hate music, ok? ...But I like your singing.

DEE

Well, good. Because you're going to be hearing some for a while.

(she moves back over to the wall)

If you're ready for it?

FUGULNARI GUARD

Hey, what the frost else am I gonna do?

H.F.

Sorry, Dee. Don't bother making any more noises for my benefit. I'm recording, whenever you're ready.

DEE clears her throat.

DEE

Okay, Sin Screw Pine! This one's for you!

(singing)

Days are dreary, nights seem long...

[scene 19] DEE's song fades out under interstitial music, then fading to another Fugulnari checkpoint.

TORIANNA

Another shift change, another checkpoint. Jones preserve me.

FRALL

I must remind you, sir, that I did apprise you of a route to your quarters which, albeit much less direct, was obstructed by only one checkpoint.

TORIANNA

I'm still the Commander around here, Frall, and I will go where I please on my own station. Even if I have to waste half the cycle standing in some stupid line.

FRALL

That estimate is slightly exaggerated, sir, but not by a great deal. Might I suggest stopping for dinner and a drink on the way home? By the time we pass this checkpoint, you will be very much in need of it.

TORIANNA

(inhales, thinks)

Yeah, good call. Listen, I can barely think straight, could you just pick a place? Somewhere I'll think is decent, reasonably priced, and nearby, with no checkpoints on the way? Bonus points if they've still got the makings for a good Gibson.

FRALL

(with a shimmer)

Done. There will be a table waiting for us at Bunderog's as soon as we've finished our business with John B.

TORIANNA

What business with John B?

JOHN

(approaching quickly in the faster lane)

Oh, hey, Commander! Good to see you.

(realizes he should be "in character" for the benefit of those listening, clears his throat)

I, uh, have something I need to discuss with you right away. Urgent... maintenance needs.

TORIANNA

B, I am done for the day, done with answering complaints, and done most of all with your Booster schness! I'm off the clock! Amscray!

JOHN

This isn't Booster schness, this is WSS schness! *(pager: "WSS!")*

TORIANNA

(now genuinely annoyed by the pager)

Nelly scratch it raw, John! Whatever it is, I'm sure it can wait until morning!

JOHN

Yeah, maybe. Maybe it can. But it'd give me a lot more confidence if I could talk to you as soon as possible.

A shimmer.

TORIANNA

(quieter)

Frall? Are we clear?

FRALL

Yes, Commander. As far as anyone else in this line knows, you are currently berating John B at length on the subject of his work ethic, his ancestry, and his personal grooming.

TORIANNA

Perfect. What's the nearest place the three of us could get some privacy?

FRALL

There's a lavatory off the second corridor to the left after the checkpoint. I'll go ahead and keep it clear.

JOHN

Perfect. I'll be right behind you—

FRALL has already shimmered away.

JOHN

...Frall. *(back into character)* Fine, Commander, do what you want! But you'd better take this seriously, or we'll all be sucking vacuum!

TORIANNA

(as JOHN leaves, also back in character)

Yes, *fine!* If it's *that* important I'll deal with it as soon as I'm through this stupid checkpoint!

DIFFERENT FUGULNARI GUARD

Oh. Hey, Commander. What was that about sucking vacuum? You know what, don't worry about the scan, you can go on through.

TORIANNA

Thank you!

(as she passes and walks on, quickly)

For once some good luck. Sometimes there's Jones so quickly.

[scene 20] Interstitial music. At the bar in The Electric Egg. XTOPPS is finishing a solo keyboard piece on stage. Mild applause as he does.

XTOPPS

(into mic)

Thank you all, my most bounteous appreciators! Xtopps will return expeditiously with more of your musical wallpaper, after a most splendiferously short intermission.

CHIP

The good news is, Sopon, I was able to get everything on your list.

SOPON

Oh! Great! So where... is it?

CHIP

That's the bad news, this particular supply chain is gonna be a little... unpredictable. And a lot pricier than I'd like. But long story short, this new friend of mine has a few friends of her own who'll be making deliveries off and on through the back. They already know a couple of the busboys, so Grem's going to be taking point on that. But when it gets here, only pull out what you need, ok? We don't want the Foogs to notice we're not stocked as short as we used to be. Oh, and one more part of the deal: anyone on this list here? *(bleep as he shows the list)* Their first is on the house, the rest is half-off. Treat 'em nice, yeah?

SOPON

No sombrero. I'll keep 'em peeled.

CHIP

Great. How's the cycle been so far?

SOPON

Eh. Maybe a little slower than usual, but steady.

CHIP

Well, hey, that's what wins the race, right? Bubbles? Anything new?

BUBBLES

Oh, I came up with this new drink. Those Frizmerlites over there wanted Harvey Bulkhead-bangers, but we've been out of Galliano since last week, so I did a full scan on their body chemistry and whipped up what I'm calling a "Crushing Languor of Dejection": Amaro Novasalus, tonic, grenadine, and ethylene glycol. Went over like gangbusters. They're plenty cheery now.

CHIP

Oh, patie, add it to the main menu. Anything to stop them from breaking out in one of those dirges of theirs.

XTOPPS

(passing by the bar)

And as you are all speaking of refreshamentos, Xtopps is retiring rear-ward to get sticky.

ALTHAAR

ALTHAAR IS ENTERING THE ELECTRIC EGG, HUMAN FRIENDS!

General greetings, mostly happy. Switch-flip and buzz of the neon Iltorian Warning Sign.

CHIP

Annnd that's *my* cue to retire to my office. *(friendly, but moving swiftly in the opposite direction)*
Hi, Althaar! Bye, Althaar!

Analog door as CHIP vanishes into the office.

XTOPPS

Salutations and welcome, most esteemed Iltorian compadre! May I offer my fellow purveyor of succor to the most tragically-inconvenienced Dee Mallory a crisp, refreshing beverage, courtesy of the Baronetcy of Kandepha'aa?

SOPON

You want one of your special "Althaar tisanes," zood? Or something a little stronger?

BUBBLES

Ooh, I can do stronger! You just tell me how big a buzz you want to get on, Althaar sweetie. I can formulate you something calibrated to your body chemistry to plus or minus 5.2 micro-blottos. Even faster than Sopes! Just say the word!

KWONTZ

[gibberish: "Streez, it's not a competition, you two!"]

VERT

What if you both make one, and I'll drink whichever Althaar doesn't want!

ALTHAAR

Ah! An excellent plan, Sin Vert! Althaar would very much enjoy to make observation of the work of the very talented Sopon and Bubbles, and the tasting of their efforts! But he is not wishing to experience the incapacitation, Sin Bubbles, so please have exercise of restraint!

BUBBLES

You got it!

Whirring and boiling noises as BUBBLES and SOPON get to work.

ALTHAAR

(quietly, now close to XTOPPS)

Sin Xtopps? Might Althaar be speaking with you in a location of more privateness?

XTOPPS

Absotively, my Iltorian friend! Let us stroll unto the green, so to speak. The Baronet was needing a bit of his royal refreshers as t'was anyway.

(as they are walking there)

You seem to be posturatin' in a most secretive mode, my clutcher! What's... uh, the deal?

ALTHAAR

(calling to the bar)

Althaar will be returning for the tasty beverage and the pleasant camaraderie after the moment, dear friends!

(as they move away to the Green Room)

Althaar has received the suggestion this morning, Most Splendid, as to how you could perhaps be making exertion to provide assistance to Ms. Mallory, and all your dear Human friends. So he is passing it on at you...

As they move away, SOPON is knocking on CHIP's office door, then opening it and whispering in.

SOPON

(a bit above a stage whisper)

Chip! Hey, psst!

CHIP

What's up, Sapon? Trouble at the bar?

SOPON

(entering CHIP's office)

Not "at" so much as "behind." You know that weird unlabeled can you wanted me to take a look at? From your new "friend"?

CHIP

The spoiled putrescene lubricant? Something wrong with it? Besides being spoiled, and being putrescene lubricant?

SOPON

Yeah, no, that stuff was *never* lubricant, mang. That can is full of 100% pure uncut peanut oil.

CHIP

(confused) Oh. *(how'd that happen)* Oh? *(realizes it's trouble)* Oh!

SOPON

Right.

CHIP

Where is it right now? Oh, frill me, where's *Xtopps* right now?

SOPON

No, he ducked into the green room with Althaar, we're good. For the time being. I've got the stuff locked up in the you-know-what. Inside the you-know-where. You want me to hang onto it, or should I hurf it down the slop sink next time *Xtopps* takes a daddle?

CHIP

Yeah. *(thinks)* Wait, no. Just leave it where it is for now.

SOPON

You sure? We're talking a highly controlled substance, here. And unless we just added a whole bunch of new stir-fries to the menu, we don't exactly qualify for a culinary exemption.

CHIP

No, I know. And this may be the one case where Xybidont law would come down on us *way* harder than Human. But... that stuff is awfully pricey. And potentially useful. So unless we feel some heat coming in, we hold it.

SOPON

You got it, boss. But give the the high sign, and it's down the drain like yesterday's sea monkeys.

CHIP

(sigh)

Right where I take my spongebaths. I'll probably smell like cold sesame noodles for a week.

[scene 21] Interstitial music. Sound of JOHN and ALTHAAR's suite. Door opens.

JOHN

Althaar, I'm home!

(no answer)

Althaar...? Huh.

The door again as ALTHAAR enters.

ALTHAAR

Oh! FriendJohn! Althaar is directly behind you!

JOHN

(already moving)

Yeah, yeah, I'm on it, just let me know when you're behind the curtain.

Sound of ALTHAAR moving and privacy curtain being drawn.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is securely concealed! Ee! Althaar and FriendJohn have indeed made great progress in overcoming the difficulty of the shared living space! The devisement of the techniques for successful Human proximity is of much gratification to Althaar! And of course the less frequent causing of discomfort to FriendJohn is a gratification in its own rightness!

JOHN

Yeah, to me, too, although for more selfish reasons. Well, and also because it's nice to help out, I guess. It seems like every other time I try to help someone lately it blows up in my face. Or in theirs, which is... not great. Sorry, I don't mean to unload on you, it's just been kind of a day.

ALTHAAR

Oh, please do not be apologizing, dear friend! You may perform all the unloadment upon Althaar that you wish! It is often a comfort to speak of the troubles. Or, if you would prefer that Althaar instead provide the distraction, he will make changing of the subject at once!

JOHN

Uh, well, a lot of it I definitely can't talk about, but let's just say today was... eventful, and I can only hope I managed to accomplish something good. I'm pretty sure I accomplished something bad. And there's no way of knowing if the good outweighed the bad. Unless Frall decides to tell me at some point.

ALTHAAR

The Lieutenant Commander is indeed most perceptive!

JOHN

Yep. Disturbingly so. But I think that's enough feeling sorry for myself. How was your day?

ALTHAAR

Oh! The day of Althaar was occupied with a great deal of the runnings-about! Although perhaps not so many moral dilemmas as that of FriendJohn.

JOHN

Oh! Uh, speaking of moral dilemmas: did you make that HECNET post about people using our shower?

ALTHAAR

Yes, FriendJohn! But Althaar has not received response as yet. You are perhaps correct that to perform the ablutions in proximity to Althaar would be an experience of too great stress-ful for the typical Human.

JOHN

Well, you might want to reach out to Chip about the shower personally. He could definitely use one. But, uh, if you do? You should probably give him the impression you're doing this behind my back. I know you prefer to be honest, but he really doesn't want to owe me a favor, so...

ALTHAAR

Think nothing more on it, FriendJohn! It is seeming to Althaar that this would be a use of deception most beneficial. Althaar will contact Mr. Frinkel this evening, while he is answering the great quantity of letters that were waiting for Althaar at the Inbound Post this afternoon. These letters are both numerous and much delayed already, so Althaar wishes to make the swift answering of these before he is retiring!

JOHN

Wow. It seems like you're getting more mail every day. Pretty soon you'll be hauling it around in sacks like Santa Claus.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Please do not be mentioning the sack of Santa Claus, please, FriendJohn! It brings up at Althaar the memories most unpleasant!

JOHN

(never heard the full Christmas story)

O...kay? Well, I hope these letters are at least interesting, if you have to read so many of them.

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes, the reflectings of the many friends of Althaar are always of interest! And of course Althaar is always most pleased to share his knowledge of Humanity and the Fairgrounds with any who are desiring it! And then this morning, Althaar had reception of a letter *most* surprising! It was a requestment from...

ALTHAAR trails off, realizing that it might not be good to tell JOHN about SUSAN's letter.

JOHN

Yes?

ALTHAAR

Oh, Althaar should perhaps not go inside the details of his many communications. FriendJohn does not know the Iltorian friends of Althaar in the person, and Althaar does not wish to be causing the boredom! Especially when FriendJohn has made return from the cycle most tiring!

JOHN

Yeah, thanks.

ALTHAAR

Would it be of preferment for Althaar to retire to his quarters, if FriendJohn is desiring rest?

JOHN

(beat as he thinks, then)

Actually? If it's okay with you? I'd love to just hang out tonight, the two of us. We could watch some old *Dave and Zwizz'linarp* episodes or something. I mean, if you've got time before you write your letters, I understand if you're too busy.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Of course, FriendJohn! It is always a great joy to Althaar to be hanging outward with his dear friend and room-mate! Oh! And Althaar can be preparing the popped-corn! He has acquired the genuine Earth cow-butter to be melting upon it this time!

JOHN

That sounds great. And Althaar? If you feel like it... I'd *love* to have a big, leisurely Human breakfast with you tomorrow. Would you be okay with that? It won't interfere with your work?

ALTHAAR

Ee! Not at all, FriendJohn! The nurturement of friendship is the greatest work of Althaar!

[scene 22] Apartment fades to the Fugalnari martial anthem again, as MRS. FRONDRINAX makes another cycle-change announcement over the station P.A.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Attention, Humans of the Fairgrounds. This is Frondrinax, of the Fugalnari Committee for the Management of Human Affairs, with your top-of-the-cycle friendship bulletin. It is the third cycle of glorious Day 239 of the Fugalnari Ascension! And here is the news:

A terrorist cell in Data Processing Center #5 was discovered and destroyed today by Fugalnari security. These fraudulent members of the Efficiency Partnership Booster Program are all now in custody, and will be humanely transported to a Fugalnari prison as soon as possible. Now, while it pains me to tell you of the foul crimes perpetrated by these malicious double agents, I would be remiss if I didn't also mention, and not only mention, but laud, a very special Booster, and good friend of mine, John B! It was Booster B who first tipped us off about these phonies, and he should be given full credit and praise for his actions! It just goes to show that when Humans and Fugalnari work together, nothing can stop us!

(cont.)

Now, moving on: we've received your input about the new flavors of NutraZoom, and I can assure you—

And the pirate radio static has been rising and now drowns out MRS. FRONDRINAX again, as the RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS signal and announcer cuts in.

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

(once the signal is clear)

Fairgrounds! Attention, Fairgrounds! This is Radio Free Fairgrounds with this cycle's *actual* news. Here are the facts.

Breaking news about NutraZoom! Resistance research has revealed that it has been chemically formulated to keep the Humans drinking it sedated and placid! If you wish to remain alert and aware, and continue to stand against the Fugulnari Occupation, do not drink the NutraZoom! We know it can be hard for many of you to find alternate sources of sustenance at the moment. In future Radio Free Fairgrounds broadcasts, we will be updating you on several alien foods, commonly available and affordable on the Fairgrounds, that are both edible by and nutritious to Humans. We can't promise all of them will be a taste sensation, but they're all a whole hell of a lot better than a liquid lobotomy!

Until then, we will leave you now with a new recording from Delilah Mallory, *still* an uncharged political prisoner of the Fugulnari after 182 days in solitary confinement, with her rendition of an old Earth protest song...

A button is pushed and a recording of DEE is heard—she is doing an a cappella cover of Tom Delaney's 1922 song "Georgia Stockade Blues" with her own lyric adaptations.

DEE

Days are dreary, nights seem long
Down in Fairgrounds stockade for singin' a song
Guards they smile, all the while,
They found me guilty without a trial

Plants all 'round me shaking their leaves
Pennin' me up like you'd treat the baddest thieves,
Pacin' the floor in a Foog stockade,
And my poor soul just grieves

A cycle ends; another start.
There ain't no changin' of this achin' heart
On display here, with a wall of glass
The hours just don't pass

Twelve-foot square cell and a six-foot bed,
I'm lookin' for hope but all I got is dread,
Ankles all swollen, can't wear no shoes,
I've got the meanest kind of Fairgrounds stockade blues

(humming/melisma break)

Ankles all swollen, can't wear no shoes,
I've got the meanest kind of Fairgrounds stockade blues.

RADIO FREE FAIRGROUNDS

Good night, Fairgrounds. Remember: we're all in this together.

Static rises, and there is a beat before MRS. FRONDRINAX is heard again, sounding unsure as to how to react or spin the info. Really rattled.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Um...

Well, that was... ridiculous, wasn't it? And boring. And... not in the least believable. I imagine most of you have already stopped listening, it was so very, *very* boring, but... Well, anyway, you... you should probably just ignore all of that. Not probably. You should definitely ignore that! That's just the Resistance for you. A bunch of lying mischief-makers! No integrity at all. None! Only... *lies!* So... as *always*, remember to stand... somewhere... and await future instructions. Until the next cycle, Frondrinax out.

(muttering to herself off-mic before the feed is cut)

... frost me, she *does* have a beautiful voice, though...

[scene 23] P.A. goes off with a bleep and click. Closing credit music.

ANNOUNCER

You've been listening to *Life With Althaar*, episode 27!

This episode was written by Ian W. Hill for Gemini CollisionWorks and starred

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Zuri Washington as Dee

Berit Johnson as Althaar

John Amir as John B

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant Frall

Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

Eli Ganas as H.F.

and Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

and also featured

David Arthur Bachrach, Ian W. Hill, Jessica Stoya, Linus Gelber, Olivia Baseman, Holly Pocket McCaffrey, Anna Stefanic, Leila Okafor, Lex Friedman, Fred Backus, Dean Haspiel, Rolls Andre, and Philip Cruise

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

Berit is the supervising producer, showrunner, and script supervisor

Ian is the audio producer, sound designer, and technical supervisor

The writers' room consists of Berit, Ian, John, Philip, Lex, Linus, Amanda, and Chris

Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanic

Life With Althaar logo and illustration created by Dean Haspiel

Library Music and Sound Effects licensed from Storyblocks

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We'll be back in two weeks with another "Tale from the Fairgrounds," but first, why has Xtopps secreted himself in the green room at The Electric Egg? Could it be his normal disreputable pastime, or is this something new...?

[scene 24] Crossfade to Electric Egg green room ambience, the bar proper heard muffled through the door to one side. A BLEEP sound as Xtopps activates some kind of recording device.

XTOPPS

Uh, greetings and salutations there to my new co-responsibility back home on Prang. Pretty firmly-fastened that you chom who's sending you this datastick and where it's coming from, but for the times that are as what they be, I'm gonna make all mysterious-like with some of the contentation herein. See, diplomatic and magisterial figure as is or isn't, as I may or may not be, there are some frilly friends that seriously have a bodacious lack of proprieties about established interstellar principle and precedent. Our mutual friend has informed me that he knows his *own* correspondence is being intercepted and well-perused by Foog-y photoreceptors, so I shall be using an official diplomatic pouch as you did, which, as you probably do *not* cognize as yet, also contains a seriously spiffy little compartment that nobody but *nobody* but certain Xybidonts who handle our billet-douxes know how to access. Still, it takes a plant to spot a plant, yeah? So.

I am most notably *not* the most beloved offspring of a respected family, but if the word of this designated reprobate can move the Grand Duchess to get the rotation greasy, may I just say to Her Grandiosity... Hi, Mom. Things here in Human space are low, real low, and the descent continues apace. And it is this observer's belief that is not just applicational to the Humans, if he is any judge, but *every* non-photosynthetic zood in the galaxy, including the most storied Xybidont Empire, mang. I would swear on this by the Ungrudging Byroxidana, that should help you chom how inclined this situation as be. If any of my relations are willing to listen, I'm willing to convey, in the most grandiose detail.

So, Susan, my twice-tiled photonic pen pal, let me know, similarly quadruple-sealed, what it is my people need, to see what has to change, yeah? All for now, nightfly, I am outta here.

And a very final BLEEP as XTOPPS stops recording his datastick.