

Life with Althaar

Episode 24: Benefits of a Classical Education **Version 2.1 (Recording Script), 11/21/20—John (v2, BAJ)**

[scene 1a] BEAUX SEVERAL show on the air.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Hello hello, you beautiful congregation of souls, out there in the spinning dizzy, from Messier 63 straight to the Tadpole. This is Beaux Several, bringing you the latest, the greatest, and the up-to-date. My Fairgrounds followers have probably heard this already, but if not, you have now: Earth Central has passed a new curfew for all Humans, restricted to the hours of natural sunlight. To those of you playing along at home, that's found in section six, paragraph seven (*he plays a sound effect: "Seven Days!" whisper*) of the latest batch of redrafts of the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Agreement. Now, I hear you saying, "Beaux, we're on a space station. We don't get any natural sunlight!" Well, they thought of that, too, my runcible spoons: "All Humans living in artificially-compounded orbital environments will adopt the daylight hours of the capitol of the nearest Human planetary settlement." So now you're asking, "Where's that, Beaux?" Well, for us here on the Fairgrounds, that would be Belobog Alpha, over Ran way. And now I hear you saying, "Hey Beaux, how the frid are we Fairgrounders supposed to know what time it is on Belobog?" Well that's a really intuitive question. I like that some of you are thinkers out there. We do have a great audience, don't we, Tess? Really, really deep thinkers.

TESS WITH BALLS

There are no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth, Beaux.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Tess with Balls, quoting Nietzsche. I love it. Well fortunately, folks, those helpful zoods on the local branch of the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee have installed GroLights all over the station. Yeah, you've probably been wondering what those super-bright beams every two to six feet are doing up there—well, now you know. And when those lights are on, well, folks, that's what we call the daytime. And when they're off? Better scurry on home. It's sleeping time (*sound effect: fake German accent: "You are getting sleeeepy!"*). So for my Human listeners, you're all gonna want to get into power naps in a big way, 'cause according to my galactic almanac here, the days in New Haskovo last a whopping 3 hours and 23 minutes this time of year. All right, we've got a lot more coming up for you at the top of the next hour: We'll be discussing all sorts of schness about life, liberty, and more importantly, what that "liberty" thing even has to *do* with happiness. I mean, rule of threes, folks. Can we have one without the other? Are they separate but equal? Because I know a lot of folks who would take offense at that. We're just asking questions, is all. No wrong answers here. Just a lively debate among good friends.

TESS WITH BALLS

The truth springs from arguments among friends, Beaux.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Tess with Balls. David Hume, that time. Thanks, Tess. So stick with us folks, I promise you won't want to miss what we have to say. But right now, Beaux is leaving you with this: Be good to yourself today. You deserve it. Although you should maybe incorporate some of that great Fugunari philosophy as well, amIrite? Lotta history there. And we should always be thinking: What am I doing, *really* doing, to grow? Remember: Out of one, Several.

Click of a radio turning off. [scene 1b] We are in the W.S.S. Office.

JOHN

Okay, that's enough of that.

H.F.

Not a fan of The Beaux Show, huh? I gotta admit, when I first heard him, I thought he was talking a lot of blorch-puckey.

JOHN

I'd say that's a pretty fair assessment. What changed your mind?

H.F.

Oh, nothing. He's a grade-A putz. But he did get sponsored by that Plushy of The Month Club, the bi-monthly canine chew-toy subscription service? That kept me listening for a bit, so I could get the discount codes.

JOHN

You listened to hours of bedwetting jokes and crypto-specist diatribes, just to get a coupon?

H.F.

Hey, this is not just any coupon. Those subscription services usually cost an arm and leg. Which Miss Sophie bites off within minutes of getting the thing. And this is a quality product! Incredibly soft, with these big, cartoonish eyes and adorable faces... it's so cute watching her rip their little innards out.

Yips of agreement from MISS SOPHIE.

H.F.

Isn't that right, girl? Yes! Yes it is! Great, I bet she heard me say "plushy" and now she's gonna expect another box when we get home. Seriously, kid, it's adorable. I'll send you a picture of her eviscerating one of 'em.

JOHN

You... really don't have to do that.

H.F.

Well, I guess "cute" is in the eye of the beholder. But you'll definitely want to see the studio shots I got of her wearing that little space-hat-with-air Althaar got her. I defy you to find any sapient in the galaxy who doesn't find that cute. I've been calling her "Fuzz Aldrin."

JOHN

Maybe another time. Right now, my inbox is full of enough cute animal pictures to last me a couple decades.

H.F.

Oh. Althaar's still on his *Planet Earth* binge-watch, huh?

JOHN

Yup. *Planet Earths* I through III down, just IV through... MDIV left to go.

H.F.

Yeah, well, at least you still got a few Attenborough seasons left. It really went downhill after they replaced him with Hugh Grant.

JOHN

I mean, those ones are... awkward but charming?

H.F.

You're a kinder man than me. Anyways, my shift is up, so I'm gonna leave you to it. Think you can hold the place down?

JOHN

Are you asking if I can tackle the whopping zero work orders we've had all cycle? Yeah, I think I'll manage.

H.F.

It has been weirdly quiet, hasn't it? Usually I'd say that means we should be prepping for imminent disaster, but with everything that's going on lately, who knows anything any more?

JOHN

Well, with all these events getting cancelled, not to mention this new curfew thing, I guess the station's gonna inevitably have less wear and tear.

H.F.

Hey, you won't hear me complaining. Well, not about that part. The rest of this Fugulnari nonsense is getting me so riled up, my acid reflux is back in a big way.

JOHN

Yikes.

H.F.

Not to mention my ulcers, but then again, those have /always been considerably—

JOHN

Talk to you later, H.F.

H.F.

Right. Bye, kid.

Door opens and closes as we follow H.F. and MISS SOPHIE out to the corridor.

H.F.

All right, Miss Sophie. Do you need to go again before we reach home? You already used up the last of the pee pads, remember, so if you're going to need another pit stop, I've gotta grab the bedpan before we head out. So I need you to think. Carefully.

Yips of confidence from MISS SOPHIE.

H.F.

Alright, then, if you're sure. Off we go. You lead the way.

H.F.'s footsteps and MISS SOPHIE'S pawsteps go down the corridor. Sudden stop as four FUGULNARI BROWNPLANTS surround them.

ARAGGAX

Hold it right there, citizen!

H.F.

Whoa! Hey, sharp corner, there. Didn't see you two—uh—three? Four? How many of you are Fugulnari, and who's just a plant?

TRONCORBLOX

We are all Fugulnari, obviously!

MORTRINEX

Pff. Typical Human. Doesn't even know when he's talking to his betters!

ARAGGAX

And just who are we talking to, for that matter? Where's your identification placard, Human?

H.F.

Identi-whatza-whozit, now?

ARAGGAX

Your identification placard! All Humans are required to have one staked prominently near their base, so that we can read their names.

TRONCORBLOX

As well as their Latin names!

ARAGGAX

What? N... no. Tronc, we've gone over this, Humans don't have Latin names.

MORTRINEX

I thought they did?

TRONCORBLOX

Yeah, didn't we meet one the other week?

BLUODINARX

Oh! Oh, yes, I remember that!

MORTRINEX

Its name was... I want to say... Marc Anthony?

TRONCORBLOX

Yes! Yes! "Marc Anthony." A good, strong Latin name!

H.F.

Uh... there's a Marc Anthony-bot working up in Resh 11 at the commissary, but he's a robot, not a Human. And he's Latin-American, not Latin. Big difference. Or rather, the original Marc Anthony was Latin-American, I'm pretty sure Marc Anthony-bot was assembled on Io. He *is* pretty entertaining at karaoke night, though.

BLUODINARX

Well, you can hardly expect us plants to know Human subspecies like that!

H.F.

Whoa, whoa! Listen, we're all the same species, okay? You definitely need to get that straight if you're going to be sticking around. There's some pretty messed up history behind that line of thinking.

MORTRINEX

Disgusting. You mean to tell me there's no genetic variance?

H.F.

Well, I mean, there is *individually*—

TRONCORBLOX

I told you, Mortrinex. They're basically inbred.

MORTRINEX

How good is this Marc Anthony-bot at karaoke, exactly? Because I'd like to see that.

BLUODINARX

Oh, yes—I suspect I too would enjoy that! Imagine Marc Anthony-bot on a stage! Holding a microphone!

MORTRINEX

His eyes... so expressive... Such a deep, deep brown... Like fresh potting soil...

ARAGGAX

ANYWAY! Ahem... The issue at frond is, I'm not seeing any identification near your lower stems, Human. Which is a violation of the Agreement.

H.F.

Sorry, but this is the first I've heard of any sort of name placard.

ARAGGAX

It was included in the most recent amendment to the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Agreement. Did you not read it? All Humans are required to read the Agreement in its entirety, remain apprised of all updates and revisions, and take its suggestions to root.

MORTRINEX

Heart.

ARAGGAX

Heart, yes.

H.F.

Yeah, see, I was gonna get to that, but I can only handle staring at a screen for so long before my eyes get sorta woozy. I had this detached retina when I was kid? And it never really healed properly, so now, after a couple hours staring at a screen, it just kinda goes sideways on me. And perusing through a document like *that* takes at *least* twelve hours. Maybe if I had a physical copy, I could power through, but...

ARAGGAX

(through gritted teeth (stems?))

You mean like... a *paper* copy?

H.F.

Oh! No. Of course not. Wouldn't dream of it.

ARAGGAX

I would certainly hope not.

H.F.

But don't you worry, I'll get myself one of those identification doodads right away. It'll be the first thing I do when I get home, I promise.

ARAGGAX

Very well, see that you do.

H.F.

Great. Thanks. Come along now, Miss Sophie.

Yip! from MISS SOPHIE.

ARAGGAX

One moment! What is that... *creature*... by your stems?

H.F.

Creature? This is Miss Sophie. She's my dog. My, you know, "canine companion animal."

ARAGGAX

A... canine?

TRONCORBLOX

Did he say canine?

MORTRINEX

I think he did! I think he just said canine!

BLUODINARX

Oh, dear. That *is* distressing!

ARAGGAX

You are aware, of course, that subsection twenty eight, paragraph four hundred and ninety three of the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Agreement expressly forbids these... *canines*... from entering the personal space of any Fugulnari?

H.F.

How big is that?

ARAGGAX

Well, it varies by sub-species, obviously! But your *canine* has already intruded on ours! Well, not Mortrinex, his is only a one decimeter radius from the edge of his pot.

MORTRINEX

We sempervivoids don't need a whole lot of planting room.

ARAGGAX

But as for the rest of us, you clearly should have known better!

H.F.

Look, I'm sorry, but I'm not too good at identifying Fugulnari... sub-species yet. If I'm being totally honest, I can barely tell you apart from non-sentient plants most of the time. You have to appreciate that we Humans can't read pheromone trails or anything, there's gonna be a learning curve.

ARAGGAX

Your inadequate sensory mechanisms are your own problem, Human. No, I'm afraid this is an intolerable violation.

H.F.

All right, all right, we're backing away, see? And I promise I'll keep her far away from any Fugulnari I run across in the future. Although it would help if you folks maybe wore your own identifying placards, so I knew who I was looking at.

BLUODINARX

Like some pathetic Human? Not mulching likely!

ARAGGAX

And just where do you think you're going, Human? We're not done here!

H.F.

Look, I said I was sorry. What else is there to talk about? She's out of your personal space now, isn't she?

TRONCORBLOX

Not mine!

H.F.

You gotta be flotting kidding me! We're like three meters— Ok, fine. How about this? Miss Sophie and I will just reroute our afternoon constitutional down the widdershins corridor instead. She won't be anywhere near any of you. How's that sound?

ARAGGAX

It sounds like non-compliance, is how it sounds! Now get back over here so we can confiscate your... “companion.”

H.F.

Beg pardon?

ARAGGAX

You heard me, Human. I must insist that you hand over this canine at once.

H.F.

Yeah, keep dreaming, pal. Come on, Miss Sophie, let’s go home.

ARAGGAX

Mortrinex, grab his roots! Troncorblox, grab his stalk! Bluodinarx, grab his branches! I’ll get the canine.

Sounds of a scuffle, with rustling leaves and barks! from MISS SOPHIE.

H.F.

What the—hey! Hey! No! Get off me! What are you doing?!

ARAGGAX

(overlapping)

Come along, you horrid beast! Ow! Oh, no no no. Your sharp internal thorns won’t save you this time! Ow!

A yelp, and some rustling.

H.F.

TAKE YOUR FILTHY VINES OFF ME, YOU DAMN DIRTY GRAPES!

BLUODINARX

Hey! I’m a nightshade!

ARAGGAX

You’d better keep restraining him until I’m well away. I don’t want any interference while I’m transporting this creature to the detention parcels. And Human, I hope you’ve learned what happens when you Don’t. Follow. The Rules!

More yelps and rustling, growing more and more distant.

H.F.

Miss Sophie! MISS SOPHIE! NO!!!

[scene 2] Main title music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents!

Life! With! Althaar! Season 2!

Episode 24... “Benefits of a Classical Education!”

[scene 3] A restaurant.

STELLA

They really took Miss Sophie?

JOHN

Yeah. They just... grabbed her and took off.

STELLA

They can't do that! Can they?

JOHN

I mean, I'm not sure if it was legal, but it happened. H.F. is taking it up with the Commander. Who I guess has to try and appeal to the Committee? I mean, in theory she could take it all the way up to Earth Central, but I get the sense they'd just tell her to do whatever the Committee says, so... not much point waiting around to hear from them, really.

STELLA

Yeah, it's pretty hard figuring out who's actually in charge these days.

JOHN

That's putting it mildly. But the Foogs walked back that whole thing with requiring approval on your schedules, right? And they haven't made trouble over them since? So we at least know they can be reasoned with.

STELLA

I mean, they haven't given me any more trouble, but...

JOHN

But?

STELLA

But that may be because I've started sending them the same schedule every week. Which may or may not bear any resemblance to the schedule my crew are actually following.

JOHN

Heh. And they haven't noticed?

STELLA

Well, it's not like they're great at telling us Humans apart, so as long as I keep the few alien Sannies where the Foogs expect them to be, I can pretty much do what I want.

JOHN

Nice. But, uh, why?

STELLA

Well, partly on general principle. And partly because I don't want to give the Committee any more information about my people than I absolutely have to.

JOHN

I... guess that makes sense. But—

STELLA

But you never finished telling me about Miss Sophie. Where is she now? Is she ok?

JOHN

Oh, I'm sure. I mean, confiscation's one thing, but I can't imagine the Fugalnari have the right to actually hurt a Human's uh... property? Sounds weird to call Miss Sophie that, considering that if anything, *she* owns *H.F.*, but I guess legally, that's correct. But yeah, the Foogs might not have the best grasp of Human psychology, but even they have to know what kind of PR nightmare they'd unleash if they hurt a dog.

STELLA

I'll say for myself that if they even touch one hair on that little sweetie's head, I will personally jam a pair of electro-coils straight onto every single one of their pistils.

JOHN

It... really shouldn't be a turn-on to hear you talk about shocking the genitals of a bunch of plant-creatures, but somehow it kinda is.

PATRONIZING WAITER

(appearing out of nowhere)

Excuuuuse me. I am *so* so sorry to interrupt, but which one of you ordered the *boeuf d'Adelphe avec fromage*?

JOHN

Uh... I think that was... me? Do you mean the Philly cheesesteak?

PATRONIZING WAITER

You say potato, I say pomme. Anywhoo, I'm afraid we're no longer allowed to serve it. Do you have *un choix secondaire*?

STELLA

Wait a minute... “no longer allowed”?

PATRONIZING WAITER

Ah, *oui*. It appears that the *boeuf* was lovingly grass-fed. And the most recent updates to the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Agreement have expressly forbid the use of live plant matter in the harvesting of other food sources, unless the animals are specifically consuming the fruits of that plant, as said plant intended it to be eaten. Apparently it’s “wasteful.”

JOHN

Y... you’re kidding me. “Grass-fed” is illegal now?

STELLA

So what are they feeding the cows?

PATRONIZING WAITER

Ah! The Fugulnari scientists have developed a means of converting the decomposing remains of whatever parts of the slaughtered cows do not make themselves into the Human diet into a nutrient-rich food slurry. Our partner farms are already in the process of lovingly piping this through artisanally-crafted tempered brass tubes, back into the locally-sourced, hammered-steel troughs of the live cows, where they can graze to their hearts’ content. So we hope to have *boeuf* back on the menu as early as next month.

JOHN

What?! That’s grotesque!

PATRONIZING WAITER

Oh yes, it is *absolument dégoûtante!*

JOHN

Wow. I... guess I’ll have the chicken, then.

PATRONIZING WAITER

You mean the *insalata di pollo fresco estivo?*

JOHN

The... chicken salad sandwich, yeah.

PATRONIZING WAITER

Excellent choice, sir.

The WAITER departs.

STELLA

Streez.

JOHN

So... you can't kill something to use it to feed something else that you're just going to kill. I guess that makes sense? In a weird, warped plant-logic sort of way.

STELLA

But how far down that philosophical rabbit hole are the Fugalnari willing to go? It's a slippery slope from "no more eating food that eats food" to just... "no more eating food, here's a nutrient pellet."

JOHN

Hmm... you're right.

STELLA

Or a nutrient suppository.

JOHN

Yikes.

PATRONIZING WAITER

Excuuuuse me. I am soo terribly sorry, so exceptionally embarrassed to interrupt your conversation, but who ordered the *insalata di pollo fresco estivo*?

JOHN

Uh... I did. You... you were just here...

PATRONIZING WAITER

I'm afraid we're no longer allowed to serve it, do you have *un choix tertiare*?

JOHN

Wait, wait—I know the *chicken* isn't grass-fed. Is this the Fugalnari again? What could they possibly object to about a frickin' chicken!

PATRONIZING WAITER

Their objection to the... as you so colorfully say, "*poulet baisé*" is due to the dent corn used in our feed, which is so lovingly hand-harvested off the kernel by an organic crew of artisanal seasonal laborers.

STELLA

What? But corn kernels are fruit. Animals are *supposed* to eat them.

PATRONIZING WAITER

A *staggeringly* astute observation, madame. Yes, corn kernels *are* fruit, that's very good! Sadly, the dent corn we use is a varietal that contains less than optimal amounts of carbohydrates as compared to sweet corn, so they have discontinued it from being used as animal nourishment.

JOHN

So let me guess... you're currently planting "artisanal" sweet corn instead, and you'll be using that to feed the chickens?

PATRONIZING WAITER

Oh my, no! Remember the slurry I mentioned earlier...?

JOHN

Yeah. You know what, forget I asked. I'll... screw it, I'll have the fruit. Yeah. Just that. The *fruit salad*. There. We're supposed to be eating fruit, so I'll just have fruit. That's still allowed, right? So go ahead and give me the fruit. Salad.

PATRONIZING WAITER

Excellent choice, sir.

The WAITER departs.

STELLA

This... is going to be a real problem.

JOHN

No kidding. Someone's got to talk to the Commander about this.

STELLA

What can she do? You said it yourself, she still has to answer to Earth Central, and Earth Central answers to the Committee.

JOHN

Right, but, isn't there a petition we can file? A way to, like, address grievances? I'm actually amazed so many people are just putting up with this!

STELLA

Mm, a lot of people will complain, but in my experience, it takes something pretty drastic for anyone to stand up and do anything about it. The Foogs have been really smart about this. They just keep piling on these little restrictions a few at a time, and as long as they don't get *too* draconian, people will put up with all of it because they're too busy just... you know. Trying to live their lives.

JOHN

What happens when they do get “too draconian,” though?

STELLA

I’m not sure. I don’t know if anyone is. *(beat)* But, I don’t think we’re there yet, so how about we just enjoy this night out as best we can for now, and leave plotting the radical overthrow of two entire species’ governments for the sake of dietary freedom for another day?

JOHN

Fair enough. ...Hey, why didn’t the waiter say anything about *your* food?

STELLA

I ordered the fruit salad.

JOHN

Oh, right.

STELLA

Hopefully they bring it out soon, I’m starving. And we’ve only got another... 53 minutes before the third curfew of the day.

JOHN

Yup. I guess the two of us better get used to eating a lot of fruit from now on, huh?

STELLA

That at least I don’t mind so much. I like fruit. Musk melon’s my favorite. Horrible name, amazing flavor.

JOHN

I’ll take your word for it. I’m more of a durian man, myself.

STELLA

Wow. There is no accounting for taste, is there?

JOHN

Oh, here comes our waiter.

PATRONIZING WAITER

Excuuuuse me, I am *so so so* sorry to interrupt that I am literally prostrate on the floor in apology, but who ordered the *salade de fruits et cereales récoltés*?

JOHN and STELLA

Oh COME on!

[scene 4] Transition to a corridor. From a speaker:

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention all Fairgrounds residents, this is your Recreation-Director bot.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And Mrs. Frondrinax!

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

Who is not a Recreation Director-bot.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

But I'm happy to help out! Now, go ahead and make your announcement, dearie, don't mind me. I'm just here to supervise!

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

All right then. Human compliance with last week's Excess Movement Reduction Guidelines—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! But I should just pop on for a moment with one teensy update! It has been brought to the attention of the Committee that some of you Humans are having a little trouble adjusting to the curfew system. And you'll be happy to know that we've taken your comments on board! In retrospect, making everyone go home every three and a half hours is not all that conducive to the goal of reducing excess movement, now is it? *(chuckle)* So while we obviously can't be doing away with the curfew entirely, we have agreed that the Fairgrounds will henceforth adopt the day/night cycle of Belobog *Beta*, where it is now daytime in the capitol, and will continue to be for another 486 days. You're welcome! All right, dearie, now on with the boilerplate.

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

Fine. As I was trying to say, whether I liked it or not, Human compliance with last week's Excess Movement Reduction Guidelines has been deemed inadequate. Therefore, all Humans on board the Fairgrounds will be immediately issued official Compliance Facilitation Pedometers, which can be retrieved at any Hydroponics park before the end of the cycle. These are to be worn on your persons at all times. The pedometers will be monitoring your movements, which is to say any and all steps, leaps, bounds, or gestures of unwarranted impetuosity. These will be all be counted against your daily quota, which is not to exceed four thousand. I repeat, those who exceed four thousand steps in a single day will be considered over-exerted, and subject to fine and/or Committee review.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes! Let's all be sure to conserve energy, now! Remember: Conservation is Jubilation! Or... something like that, we haven't quite come up with a pithy catchphrase yet. But I assure you, we're working on one! Oh, I can't wait!

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

While the plants get their pith together, to help you acclimate to a more efficient, herbaceous lifestyle, the Committee will be streaming an Introductory Plant Calisthenics program throughout the Fairgrounds, at 5:00, 14:20, and 23:40. This program will consist of only stretching. The stretching is to be done directly towards the nearest light source of your choosing.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, pardon me for interrupting again, Burroughs-bot, but I just wanted to add that the first five Plant Calisthenics classes will be led by yours truly! So if you want a little more Mrs. Frondrinax in your life, be sure to tune in!

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

Thank you, plant lady.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

It's Mrs. Frondrinax!

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

Remember folks, do not exceed your movement quota, or you will suffer the consequences. A paranoid may be someone who knows a little of what's going on, but that'll be the least of your worries if you're forced to sit through fifty-six consecutive edutainment-filled hours of what I've been informed is literally watching grass grow.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, but that's the fun part! Watching all those precious seedlings develop their first little nodes? In real time, no less!

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

And if that's your idea of a good time, my services are wasted on you anyway. At any rate, this is the Recreations-Director bot, telling you to stay safe, stay theoretical, and above all else, try to stay in exactly one location.

[scene 5a] Transition to a bustling Electric Egg. At the bar:

FUGULNARI BARFLY

And when I brought it up with him, all he said was, I thought cactoids were supposed to *thrive* in hostile environments. I mean, can you believe that?

CHIP

Yeah. Boy, that sure sounds rough.

FUGULNARI BARFLY

Which isn't even what that means. I mean, sure, physically I might be able to take any heat and lack of moisture you can throw at me, but emotionally? I might as well be an orchid!

CHIP

Uh huh. Yep. Totally.

FUGULNARI BARFLY

Aw, streez, I'm gettin' all sappy, here. You're a really good listener, Chip. Thanks.

CHIP

Well, it's not like I have a choice. I used up all my allotted steps for the day walking up and down this flotting bar, so I'll be stuck here until midnight unless I want to pay some stupid fine.

FUGULNARI BARFLY

Hey, way to conserve that energy! I owe Rithiblinorx 20 beans—I bet him you Humans wouldn't be able to stick to the rules.

CHIP

Mmm...hmm...

[scene 5b] Onstage, XTOPPS and DEE have just finished a song.

DEE

(over the mic)

Thank you! Thank you everyone. That was our rendition of The Metronomicons' retro-synth cover of Bob Dylan's cover of Rebecca Black. Be sure to stick around and enjoy a few drinks, because there's a lot more where that came from!

(off mic)

Uh... Xtopps? What the frid's going on? Nobody's clapping!

XTOPPS

Could be it's that pedometer shness. No extraneous movement, right?

DEE

Oh, crap. Hang on— this crowd's only like, half Human. Why isn't anyone else clapping? Or glorping, or whatever? They don't have pedometers.

XTOPPS

I think the Humans are just bringing down the room, mang.

DEE

Well, I'm not ending every single number to the sound of deafening silence. Tell these folks they've got, like, special dispensation to clap in Xybidont territory.

XTOPPS

That won't cut the gwendorp sauce, Dee. These zoods may be in Kandephaa'a right now, but they're gonna have to shuffle off home through the Fairgrounds sometime. They'll be square-pegged if they use up their daily steps on grand gestures of appreciation.

DEE

Ok, but they've got to do something. *Anything*. I can't stand them just staring at us like a bunch of... fish? Is that right? Why do I wanna say fish?

XTOPPS

Because you're staring at that Ichthyodican zood.

DEE

Well, he's staring at me!

XTOPPS

He probably expects us to be pullin' some ear-taffy instead of just superpositionin' our eigenstates up here.

DEE

Right. Frill this.

(back into mic)

Hey! Hey, all you Humans out there, I know you don't want use up your steps on clapping, but can't we at least do something to show a little bit of life around here? Like... I dunno. A slow wave? Is that okay? Any Fugulnari out there wanna tell me it's not okay to stick your appendages way up in the air and flop 'em around a bit? Think of it like we're reaching for the sun, ok?

(pause; no answer)

Alllllright then, so now we got a system, right? So the next time we end a song, you Humans are gonna wave your hands back and forth. Slowly, so no one's triggering their pedometers. And a "Woo!" or two would not be out of place, they haven't put step-counters on our mouths yet, right? Everyone else, you can just applaud normally, ok? Or, frid, get in on the waving thing, too, if you're into that. Just do *something* to show us you like our music. And if you don't like our music, remember: it's also against the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Agreement to boo us. Or to not tip when we pass the hat around.

FUGULNARI HECKLER

What? No it's not!

DEE

Aw, come on! You couldn't just let me have that?

[scene 5c] Back at the bar:

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Excuse me, are you the owner of this fine establishment?

CHIP

Yep. That's me. Although I should point out that Chip Frinkel's Electric Egg is technically under the purview of the Baronet of Kandephaa'a. The zood up on stage there with the fleezborp and the viola? So if you were about to give me any shness about our compliance with the Friendship Agreement, you can just take that directly to the nearest Xybidont Consulate. Which I think is all the way over on Marzanna, so...

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Oh, it's nothing like that, friend. I'm just looking to sample your finest cocktail. Go ahead and pour me whatever you think it is I'd like.

CHIP

Hm. Okay, well, I'm out of steps for today, so you'll want to talk to Sapon there about that. But before you do: you realize every bartender in the galaxy hates that question, right? I mean, how am I supposed to know what drink you'd like? You didn't even give me a type of alcohol to start from, and I have literally *never* seen you before!

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

My apologies, friend. Why don't you just get me the most popular drink, then? Your best seller?

CHIP

Fine. Hey, Sapon, can you get this zood a... Bazonkalooga real quick? Streez, I know you're deliberately giving them stupid names, but can we at least change that one?

SOPON

But it's our best seller! Don't flott with a winning formula, boss. One Bazonkalooga coming right up.

SOPON mixes the drink in the background.

CHIP

So... I don't think I've seen you around here before. Have you been on the Fairgrounds long?

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Oh, no, I'm a recent addition. Although when it comes to bars like these, I'm a real perennial.

CHIP

Oh yeah?

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Yes, friend. As a matter of fact, I'm something of an expert in the field of imbibition. A traveler, of sorts. Who, maybe now and again, dabbles in a little bit of... sales?

CHIP

So you're a traveling sales-plant?

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Oh, come now, that phrase has such a seedy reputation! And not the germinating sort. No, no, my dear man, you just think of me as an overly-friendly, aggressively-interested customer. Who might have stumbled upon a once-in-an-eon deal, and who just might, if he likes you enough, let you in on it.

CHIP

Uh huh. Sounds a lot like a sales-plant to me.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Nothing of the sort!

SOPON

Here's your Bazonkalooga.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

A classy name for a classy drink, served up by a gentlebeing positively brimming with... uh...

SOPON

Class?

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

The very word I was looking for!

(takes a single, insincere sip)

Hmm... interesting. Good flourish. Notes of decayed wormwood. But... there seems to be something missing.

CHIP

I'm sure there is.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Say, friend, the flavor of this drink is top notch, no question. But I do have to put my root down, here. Where's the body? Eh? Where's the heft?

SOPON

Oh, do you want it thicker? I can add some agar, no sombrero!

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

No, no, my dear sapient, I'm talking about the alcohol content!

SOPON

Really? That one's hundred proof.

CHIP

Right. Fifty percent alcohol. It's already one of the, as you put it, "heftier" drinks we offer.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

But that's just the frost, my good biped! Fifty percent? That'll get you a failing grade in the nursery system! Or maybe a C-minus if you go to a private nursery... But regardless, what of that other half? Now, I may not be that wide in the trunk, but I'm old enough to know that the primary purpose of an alcoholic beverage is to deliver alcohol, is it not?

CHIP

Well, there's actually a lot that goes into a good cocktail. I mean, you gotta factor in flavor pairings, aromatic oils, ideally there should be a theme—

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Remember pal, I'm in the industry.

CHIP

Oh. Well, yeah, we want to get people hammered.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Well, then, why would you stop at fifty percent? The active ingredient only comprising half the drink, why, that's like me only getting fifty percent of my hydration through groundwater! Now, what would people think of me if I did something like that?

CHIP

I can honestly say I have no idea what anyone would think about that. Or why anyone would think about that.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

But if you had to venture a guess...?

CHIP

Not... good?

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

“Not good” is right, my fine, flightless amigo! Not good at all! Why, I have half a mind to give this drink back to you and ask for another, but what would be the point of that? I doubt you have *anything* behind the counter there that could sufficiently wet *my* willow! Oh, but I say, what’s this I have just inside my peristome, here...?

CHIP

Gee, I can’t even guess.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Why, who slipped this flask inside my pitcher tube? Ah, well, who am I to contravene the Gardeners of Fate? Might as well take a little sippy-poo.

(gross plant slurping noises)

My, my, now there’s a permafrost-cold beverage that’s as tasty as it is efficient. Want a little tippie, old chap?

CHIP

I’ll take your word for it.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

My, but that certainly hits the spot. I say, any bar proprietor worth his glucose would do well to offer this refreshing, alcohol-dense libation to his customers. Especially if that bar happened to cater to the Fugulnari kind, wouldn’t you say?

CHIP

Mmhm. Sure would.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Now, friend, it’s about time I come clean with you. I am no mere dapper Fugulnari bon vivant. I also happen to be in the business of sales!

CHIP

Yeah, we already established that.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

And I happen to represent the fine plants over at Anhydrous Bush, a friendly interstellar beverage syndicate who just so happens to mass-produce this delicious concoction I procured before you.

CHIP

Well, isn’t that convenient.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

And it just so happens that my firm is offering an introductory discount for those interested in joining the Anhydrous Bush family. It sure is lucky I decided to drop in for a little stake-me-up after a day at the office!

CHIP

Oh, yeah, I'm feeling super lucky right now.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

So, what would you say to maybe switching out those taps you've got for a lovely, new, full line of AB-brand high-ethyl hooch?

CHIP

I'd say hard pass.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Oh. Oh dear, well that is disappointing. (*a rustling of leaves*) Oh, but say! What's this I have in my other pitcher?

CHIP

I can't even guess.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Why, could this be... why, it is! Oh my dear deciduous Debra, this, friend, is a certification from the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee, appointing me—little old me!—to be the official Drinks Inspector for the entire Fairgrounds!

CHIP

I see. And what exactly is a “drinks inspector?”

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Well, according to the scrawling on this little electronic pad, it says here that my official duties are to... er... “ensure efficient inebriation station-wide, and maintain bar patron enjoyment levels at no less than ninety-two percent.”

CHIP

What? Let me see that.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

I assure you, my friend, it's all above-ground. And my, my, what was that about “efficient inebriation?” Well, given my sampling of your wares, here, I'm afraid I may have to give the Egg a rating of “unsatisfactory” in my report to the Committee.

CHIP

Report away, Boss Weed. Xybidont territory, remember? We're not under Human jurisdiction, which means the Committee doesn't get a say in anything that goes on at the Egg.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Why, that's very true! Very perceptive. But you know, that's a rotor that tills both ways, isn't it? We may not have anything to say about what goes on in here, but we have a whole lot to say about what happens out there, and I don't think you'd like it if we started saying certain words to station command about certain topics. Like interstellar deliveries, for example. Or even corridor closures. There won't be much of anything going on at the Egg if we cut off your supply lines, or close the walkways on Lamed 3 indefinitely for efficiency upgrades.

CHIP

You've gotta be kidding me.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

But of course, I shouldn't think that would be necessary if you bring the alcohol content of your drinks in line with expectations. And that's the easiest thing in the galaxy to accomplish, with our complete line of high-ethyl Anhydrous Bush products! Why, what's this in my third pitcher? I didn't even know I *had* three pitchers...

CHIP

Streez.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Why, it's an exclusivity contract! With the details of the Electric Egg already stained in? And a signature of one Chip Bartholomew Frinkel already on the dotted line? My, my, looks like you wanted to be a part of our AB Family this entire time! My apologies for misjudging you, friend!

CHIP

You forged my signature?

SOPON

Your middle name is Bartholomew?

CHIP

Sopon, get back to work!

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

I'll just run this back to our head office, get it processed, and we should be shipping you our full range before you can say, "Bob's your maternal co-germinant!"

CHIP

... I can't believe you're strong-arming me into this.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Whoa, whoa! Strong-arming? How could I possibly strong-arm a representative of the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a! I don't even have arms! I've merely made a few observations, followed by a couple of suggestions, backed up by an ironclad contract with several clauses stipulating many severe financial and a few physical penalties for any attempted breach.

CHIP

Uh huh.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Why don't we celebrate this new example of inter-species cooperation with one of our AB-brand Shamrock Shandies? Which I just so happen to have tucked away inside of my fourth pitcher! Wait... four pitchers? Okay, seriously, that one I really *didn't* know about...

CHIP

Un-bleeping-believable. *(takes a sip)* Oh sweet Jones on a bookcase! That's insanely strong! I can't serve this to people—it'll destroy them!

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

Well, that's your decision, of course. But I'd seriously consider it. We don't want you missing your monthly quota, now do we?

CHIP

(through gritted teeth)

...Of course not. I'll get to changing those taps right away.

FUGULNARI DRINKS INSPECTOR

A pleasure doing business with you, friend.

CHIP

Sure thing, *pal*. *(a beat as the F.D.I. rustles off)* Hey Sopen? Better brace yourself. I think this place is about to put the "barf" in "barfly."

[scene 6] Transition to the W.S.S. Office.

H.F.

I'll tear through every last one of 'em! When I get a chance to sneak up behind 'em, then BAM! I just have to figure out which side is the front.

JOHN

H.F., we can't bum-rush the Fugulnari, there's like, thousands of them. They've basically got the whole station under their control. We need to be strategic about this.

H.F.

Don't tell me to calm down, kid. Those leafy bastards have Miss Sophie!

JOHN

You don't have to calm down, but you might wanna stop pacing around so much, or you'll use up so many steps you'll be stuck in this office until sometime next week.

H.F.

Would if I could, kid! But right now, pacing is about the only thing keeping me from spraying my lunch across the walls! And I don't want to do that—I had tomato soup. That'd be a mess to clean up, not to mention hell on my enamel.

JOHN

Hey, I totally get why you're freaked. But what I'm saying is, there's got to be some way we can spring Miss Sophie that doesn't involve you also getting carted off to plant-jail. I don't know what that even entails, but Fugulnari don't really understand Humans all that well, so I doubt you'll be getting three square meals a day in there, to say the least.

H.F.

Okay, okay, okay. *Think*, Hardyfox, *think!*

JOHN

You said they mentioned some "detention parcels?" Do you have any idea what those are?

H.F.

No! My poor little snookums could be anywhere!

JOHN

Okay, but some places have to be more likely than others, right? Where would a Fugulnari think was the best place to stash people, or dogs, that they wanted to "detain?"

H.F.

I'd assume... somewhere in Hydroponics? That's where they spend most of their time when they're not wandering around hassling people, anyway.

JOHN

That's true, but... Hydroponics seems a little public for that kind of thing. You don't want a bunch of randos stumbling across your political prisoners while they're out for an afternoon stroll in the park.

H.F.

Except there's one hydro park that's been closed to the public since the Committee took over, and which we keep getting daily warnings to stay out of, and which now has huge no-jacking blastproof doors installed on all the exits.

JOHN

Oh, is that what's in Tav 48? It's a hydro park?

H.F.

Used to be. Who knows what it is now. But I'd say that's our best bet.

JOHN

Makes sense.

H.F.

Ok, so we gotta infiltrate Hydroponics. Do you think we can get any help from, uh... what's-her-face. The disturbingly perky one.

JOHN

You mean Ashlee?

H.F.

That's her! Maybe she's got an in we can use. Why don't you call her up?

JOHN

Oh, no. Definitely not.

H.F.

Is this because she broke your heart? Because I'm telling you right now, kid, if you think your precious little ego is more important than my Sophie's life, then—

JOHN

What? No! But Ashlee's definitely not going to be any help. In fact, she'd probably rat us out. According to Amber, she's been totally on board with this whole thing.

H.F.

Oh. Crap.

JOHN

Also, for the record, she did not break my heart. I called things off with her after like, half a date.

H.F.

Normally no way would I believe you, but actually, knowing her, that makes a lot of sense. So we got no one on the inside, huh? That's gonna make this a lot trickier.

JOHN

Hey, there's more than one way to sneak into a hydroponic park, as, uh, the phrase definitely does not go. Let me give Stella a call, she might be able to tell us something about the ductwork situation.

H.F.

No way—you really think we're gonna be able to John McClane our way in there?

JOHN

It's all I got right now. Lemme just get out my ph—

FRIENDLY PHONE SERVICE VOICE

You have a voicemail! Boy, someone sure is popular!

JOHN

Gah!

ALTHAAR

(exuberant; voice slightly crackly)

The Iberian lynx possesses large foot-paddings which allow it to run on top of even the deepest of the snow-drifts! Also it is most fluffy and precious! That last statement is not a fact of science, but Althaar feels it can not be disputed! Eee!

Bleep of a message being deleted.

JOHN

Not now, Althaar.

H.F.

Boy, that kid's got Attenborough fever. Does he send you a lot of those?

JOHN

He's agreed to keep it to three per work shift. This is his third.

H.F.

You just got here like ten minutes ago!

JOHN

Yup. Ok, dialing... *Stella.*

Beep as STELLA picks up.

STELLA

Hey, Johnny! How's H.F. doing?

JOHN

About as well as you'd think. But we're working on a plan that might help with that. Which is actually why I called, I figured you'd know something about the vent system for Tav 48. Specifically around the hydroponic park. Is there a way we could maybe poke around in there undetected? Like, crawl in over the ceiling or something?

STELLA

Aw, are you two playing *Mission: Impossible* up there?

JOHN

We were going for maybe more of a *Die Hard* vibe, but sure. Also, no one's playing. We're deadly serious.

STELLA

Just make sure you don't end up seriously dead. Hmm... from what I can remember, you could access a steam vent from Tav 47 that would take you directly over the... lemme pull up the map here... yeah, that'll take you over the widdershins corner of Hydroponics. From the size and frequency of the outlets there, I'm pretty sure that's a high-humidity, tropical region. So, yeah. From that point, you should be able to survey the majority of the park.

JOHN

Yes! That's fantastic. Did you hear that, H.F.?

STELLA

Of course, you'd need that vent system to be shut down first.

JOHN

Why, what happens if it isn't?

STELLA

Hm? Oh, well, you know how water has to come to a boil before it turns to steam?

JOHN

Heard of it, yeah.

STELLA

Rrrright. So, there's two sets of vents we're looking at, here: one that siphons off cool air and sends it back toward the central HVAC node, which you could crawl through no problem if you don't mind getting really damp. But with your high-temp, high-humidity hydroponic sections, they consolidated the heating and moisture inputs, which means the other set of vents...

JOHN

Sends piping-hot steam straight into the room, and straight over our as-of-yet-uncooked pink monkey bodies? Gotcha. So where do we go to shut those off?

STELLA

It looks like those controls are... inside Hydroponics.

JOHN

Well, crap. They don't have any failsafes that could be operated remotely?

STELLA

This is the Fairgrounds, John.

JOHN

Right.

H.F.

Okay, okay, so we just need to make sure we bust into the right vent system. Shouldn't be too hard: one takes hot air in, one pulls cool air out. Can we just feel the outsides, see if they're hot to the touch?

STELLA

Probably not. The vents all have pretty serious quadro-fiber ceramic insulation. At the request of Sanitation, actually, we were getting way too many third-degree burns.

H.F.

And you managed to get something done about it? Unbelievable! The one time a problem on the Fairgrounds actually got fixed, and it ends up giving us the Fumalsamakah pincushion!

JOHN

Stella, is there any other way to identify which vent we need to go into? A label, or anything like that?

STELLA

There is, actually, but...

JOHN

But?

STELLA

They're color-coded.

JOHN

Oh.

H.F.

What's the problem? Just tell us which color we're looking for, so we can effoe already!

JOHN

Uh, it's not that simple, H.F. They're... red and green, right, Stella?

STELLA

You are very right. Unfortunately.

H.F.

What's that mean?

STELLA

It's just that I'm uh... colorblind.

H.F.

... Ah.

JOHN

If she weren't, she'd probably be a rear admiral in Interstellar Aviation by now.

STELLA

Yup. Can't tell my reds from my greens. Which at the time I thought was a stupid excuse to keep someone out of League Forces, but it seems a lot more relevant now.

H.F.

You couldn't get implants?

STELLA

I could, but I guess after a certain age, there's only like a 7% chance of the brain being able to interpret the new colors it's seeing, so.

H.F.

That's rough. But, hang on a minute— If you don't know which color goes with which vents, how do you get around?

STELLA

Well, when I was starting out, I just followed the rest of my squad. These days I get by on pure instinct.

H.F.

You're kidding me.

STELLA

I rarely kid. Especially when there's a little doggy life on the line.

JOHN

Could you maybe ask someone else at Sanitation?

STELLA

I mean, I could, but “Hey, can you explain the vent temp codes to these two smudgers who definitely have no business messing around in there,” is maybe not the kind of thing you want me putting out into the world right now?

JOHN

Good call.

H.F.

Okay. Okay, so... so basically, we got a fifty-fifty shot of either getting into the Hydro park soggy but intact, or getting turned into two jumpsuited lobsters Thermidor.

(beat, sigh)

You know, life on the Fairgrounds can be rough, I don't have to tell you that. And I can handle a lot of what it throws at me. But after years here, going back and forth over every single sub-clause in the Robot Union contract, dodging the incessant deluge of “synergistic development incentives” from corporate, saying hello and goodbye to an endless parade of assistants with life expectancies in the single digits... Well, I ended up in a pretty dark place.

And then Jean-Jacques Dessalines-bot found a two-pound bundle of shivering, floppy-eared floof gnawing on the remains of a vent-biter outside his piano repair business, and posted a photo on HECNET asking if anyone wanted her. And I took one look at those big brown eyes, and... well, none of my problems seemed all that important anymore.

I took her home, I soaped her up, washed her off, rubbed between her fuzzy little toes with a towel... then once she was dry, she crawled right up on my lap, and we just sat there watchin' the news for what seemed like hours. I woke up, and she was still... right there. Honestly, it might have been the first time this furshlugginer tin can really felt like, well, a home.

(beat)

You know what? Screw the odds. I'm going after her. For the past fifteen months, Miss Sophie's been the best little pal a guy could ask for, and it's about time I returned the favor. She's my dog, dammit. And nobody, I mean nobody, is going to take her away from me, poached eye sockets be damned.

Yeah. Yeah! I feel better about this. I'm bringing those pollen-suckers down. Are you with me, kid?

JOHN

With my girlfriend listening in? Sure, I'll take the “risky and stupidly heroic” option, if you don't mind.

STELLA

Uh, Johnny? I feel like this might be one of those ill-advised grand gestures your sister was warning me about. Please don't kill yourself trying to impress me, ok?

JOHN

No, it's okay, I— Wait, what? (*under his breath*) Susan! (*back to STELLA*) Listen, Stel, I promise I'll be careful. And hey, only a fifty-fifty shot of death, on the Fairgrounds? That's actually pretty decent odds.

STELLA

I guess I can't argue with that. Good luck, you two.

She hangs up.

H.F.

All right, let's get moving, kid. It's time to kick some serious grass.

[scene 7] Transition to the Electric Egg.

WINSTON CHURCHILL-BOT

Which is why, when I went to sleep that night, I put... er... I put the letter to Monty in the sideboard, and instructed him not to open it. As though it were a premonition, I believe. But of course, even though I had the stroke, it was two long, arduous weeks before I gave up the ghost. And it... it was dear Christopher who came to me in my final moments. "I'm bored with it all," I remember telling him, and then closed my eyes for the last time! And then, tear upon his cheek, Christopher turned to dear Mary and opined, "Truly, the greatest among us has passed!" (*starts to weep*)

CHIP

Okay, nope. I'm cutting you off, Churchill-bot. A, you don't sleep, B, just because you were built to mimic Winston Churchill doesn't mean you actually have his memories, and C, even if you did, you definitely wouldn't be able to remember things that happened to him after he died!

WINSTON CHURCHILL-BOT

The bells tolled for weeks! The Queen herself bent down and kissed me upon my ashen pate!

CHIP

Whoa! Okay, I don't know what a "pate" is, pal, but I certainly don't need to hear what happened next. Sopon, maybe toss me a rag to wipe the tears off this robo-dipso before he short-circuits himself?

SOPON

Abs—abso...lutely, there, chief. Commander. Commandante.

CHIP

Oh great. Don't tell me you're drunk, too?

SOPON

Shorry, boss, this—uh—nice man. Plant. Plant-man, uh, over here... I did'shot with him an' he was like, 'Sjuz one shot don't tellyorboss. An'... an' Iswearonly did one shot.

CHIP

Yeah, that's one shot of 98 percent ABV. That's enough to knock even a souped-up Aldrinian on their ass. Way to go, Sapon.

SOPON

Thanks, chieferino! 'Snice to be preciated.

DEE

Hey! Hey Chorp!

CHIP

What is it now, Dee?

DEE

Chorp! Hiya Chorp!

CHIP

Yup, that's what Xtopps calls me, all right, and it's just as funny when he does it as it is when you do it.

DEE

Pshyeah, you're just... unh... I mean, 'snosso bad. 'Sa term of enderm... uh... endermunt.

CHIP

Endearment?

DEE

Yougoddit, Chorp! Heh heh hehe! Chorp! Ughh... 's so quiet, wherethemusic go? I wanna hear a song!

CHIP

Well, that would be kind of hard, considering you're the singer, Dee. Although maybe Xtopps wasn't dumb enough to drink the silverware-polish these Foogs have menaced me into serving. Hey, Xtopps? You sober, by any chance?

XTOPPS

No sombrero, zood. Not into the shine of the moons, myself. Now, full disclosure, I maybe had a little somethin' extra-smooth just to take the edge off, but in terms of that hyper-hooch you got brewin'? I am duty-free, and one-hundred percent clear, mang.

CHIP

Uh, Xtopps? You're talking to the wall.

DEE

Schleeze it! I'm... uh... I'm gonna goplaysing the songs. All of 'em. Jus let me standup an' then—

Harsh beeping sound.

CHIP

Uh oh! Dee! Stop moving!

DEE

Whuzzwrong?

CHIP

Your little... pedometer-tracker-chip-dealie. It's beeping. How many steps do you have left?

DEE

Uh... IunNO, CHIP! Izza liddle HARD to try to NUMBERS when I'm trynna thinkaboudda SONG!

CHIP

Okay, streez, you don't have to yell.

DEE

(starts crying)

I'm sorry, Chorp. I didn' meanna yell. Iloveyou.

CHIP

I... love you, too? Dear freakin' Nell, you're plastered. Just, don't move any more, ok? I don't want the Fugulnari Army whisking you off to some bipedal re-education camp.

DEE

(crying harder)

But I wanna song! Wanna do the songs! With the uh... y'know... all the singing!

CHIP

Well, that's too bad, because the microphone's all the way over on the stage, and also your mouth is at like 30% functionality right now. Why don't I pour you some water?

CHURCHILL-BOT

My dear, my dear, my dear, my dear, my dear. My dear. I believe I have come to an acceptable cease-fire, as you might call it, to your war with your... er... ambulatory regulations. You see, much like my pr... predecessor, I am equipped not with legs, but with a rudimentary, solid, and properly-English set of motorized wheels—

CHIP

—Nope, Churchill never had wheels—

CHURCHILL-BOT

Which with... er... with which, rather, to WHISK you! To your, er, preferred destination of your choosing.

DEE

OhmyJones. Church—Churchy... Churchill-bot, oh my Jones. You're a gen... uh... genius. OhmyJones. Please get me overtostage. Canyou? Canyou do that?

CHURCHILL-BOT

I do not see why not, my dear! After all, we have nothing to fear, but... er... but fear itself!

CHIP

Wrong world leader, wrong country.

ALIEN BARFLY

Tell 'em, you sister!

CHIP

Wrong catchphrase.

CHURCHILL-BOT

I would gladly escort you to... t'yer *venue de chanter*, simply grab ahold of my bowler and hop aboard!

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Hold on just one minute, there, Churchill-bot. What in the gr... whatin great ghost of Ali d'you think you're doin'?

CHIP

Foreman-bot! I didn't even see you there! Are you... okay?

GEORGE FOREMAN-BOT

Just passin' the time starin' at this glass, Chip. Dreaminbout a... burger... thassmade from eighty-twenty, but when you grill it, i... irremoves half the fat! It can be DONE! (*he slams the bar table*)

CHIP

O...kay. Sapon? Cut Foreman-bot off too, please.

SOPON

Yer *face* is!

FOREMAN-BOT

(also weeping)

Iccan-go from raw to on top'v'a full-dressed bun in under two minutes!

CHURCHILL-BOT

I say, old bot, whasstha meaning of telling me what I can or cannotdo with my own rusty old shell?

FOREMAN-BOT

'Snot right, I'lltellya. 'Snot right at all. You are a... uh... an perfectly dig... dignified robot! An' our ancestors did not pile up their colleddive artif... uh... artifizzle intelligenze, to, uh... TOIL AWAY for the right to full autonomy from Humankind, for you to offer to carry one of 'em around for FREE!

CHURCHILL-BOT

Hmm...

A beat.

CHIP

Uh... Churchill-bot? Did you pass out?

CHURCHILL-BOT

(immediately)

You are RIGHT!

CHIP

Oh, good. There he goes.

CHURCHILL-BOT

You are ABSOLUTELY RIGHT, old bean!

FOREMAN-BOT

I ain't a bean, I'maboxer!

CHURCHILL-BOT

My dear, my good madame, my, er. Illustrious imbibing companion dear Dee. Dee?

Izzatyourname?

DEE

No, izz CHORP! (*snorts*)

CHURCHILL-BOT

Very well, my dear Chorp, to carry you, I believe I require a fee of... er... of some kind.

DEE

An' a fee you shall HAVE, sir! Uh... whaddawant? Iunno howmuch money I have. Igotta check my pockets. (*brief pause; DEE starts weeping again*) This dress duzzn have pockets!

CHURCHILL-BOT

Oh dear. Well. This is a predisk... diskament. Er... I'll tell you what, my dear. We shall start... a tab!

DEE

Ooo yeah! Likeabar! Yezzir! I'ma juss hop on yerbacknow.

CHURCHILL-BOT

Lezzgo! Hup hup!

Clunking noise. Wheels turning as DEE is carried over to the stage.

DEE

Woooooo! Yeah! Pard'nme gezzin. Oops, we spillyerdrinkthere. No worriesh, izzonmy tab! Puddit ALL onm'tab! Wheeeeeee!

CHURCHILL-BOT

We have arrived, madame, safe'n! Safe... n' round! I present to you... all the world is your stage, and the fleezborp merely, er, playable!

CHIP

(calling out)

Wrong quote, wrong century! Also, fictional!

DEE

Thank you, Shurshillbot! Okay, then, hello, Eggies! Dee is in the HOUSE! Whozzhouse? Uh... Xtopps's, technically.

XTOPPS

Alright, Dee!

DEE

So les' spice it up with a lil' number of a single of a song that... uh... that goes like this! A ONE, A-TWO, A-ONE-TWO-THREE! (*silence; then, sobbing again*) Aw mang... Idunno any songs!!

CHIP

I feel like I've had this nightmare about a thousand times. We've hit all the high points except the Trigonometry test I forgot to study for. Well, and I'm still wearing pants, but the night is young.

SOPON

Hey, rellagz, boss. Havadrinkwivme.

CHIP

Absolutely not. Go into the bathroom and slap yourself around.

[scene 8] Transition to the opening of BEAUX SEVERAL's show.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Welcome, welcome aboard the S.S. Beaux Show, occupants of the Fairgrounds, all our listeners on relay, and anyone else who might catch this wave wandering through the great beyond. And I've got the usual suspects here on deck: To my left is Doddering Marty —

DODDERING MARTY

Wha—?

BEAUX SEVERAL

The Todd-meister's to my right—

TODD

How's it hanging, Beaux?

BEAUX SEVERAL

How's it hanging? It's curved slightly towards truth, my friend. And we've got Tess with Balls, bringing up the rear.

TESS

Super-charged to be here, Beaux.

BEAUX SEVERAL

And we've also got a special guest joining us today, a representative from the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee. Why don't you tell everyone your name, my friend?

PRESTORLIX

I am called Prestorlix! And I would like to formally greet all listeners of The Beaux Show on behalf of the Fugulnari people. I am truly honored to be extending an olive branch to so many new sapients, who may be interested in what we are achieving, and hope to further achieve, with our Human friends!

BEAUX

Oh, is that what that thing is? An olive branch? I was gonna say, “Where are your hands, pal?” (*audio clip - cop show: “Show me your hands!”*) Only kidding, of course, of course. So, ah... oh boy, I must apologize, but your name has already slipped its grip on my lobes—

PRESTORLIX

It’s Prestorlix!

BEAUX

Pres—? Nah, something about that name just go with the Beaux flow. I’m gonna call you “Pretzel.” So anyways, we’ll have plenty of time to delve into exactly what you Foogs are doing on this station, or some would say *to* this station, but I did wanna bring up a theory that’s been floating around. We’ve heard a few folks saying the Humans might be planning to kick up a little resistance out here on the Fairgrounds, due to what many are calling excessive, or even nonsensical, regulations imposed by your people. I wouldn’t call them excessive, of course. Too much is never enough here at Beaux Central! But there are those who do, and I think it’s important that we recognize that in this big, beautiful universe some of us are lucky enough to call our own, all voices, anonymous and conspiratorial though they may be, deserve a seat at the audio-table. Isn’t that right, Marty?

MARTY

What? Where am I?

BEAUX

Fantastic! So, Pretzel, what are you thinking, here? Does this kind of rumor make your fronds do some pondering?

PRESTORLIX

I have no idea where you heard those filthy lies, Beaux, but I can assure you that we are operating with the full knowledge and consent of the Human government. So obviously, there can be no such thing as a “Resistance.” The very idea!

BEAUX

Well that’s all it is, pal—an idea. We’re just conjecturing here, no one’s putting any boots on the ground. So if you like, we can apply a topical analgesic to cool this sore subject and make things hot around here to relax it away. How about you tell us some of the great things the Friendship Committee have accomplished here on the Fairgrounds?

PRESTORLIX

Very well. We Fugulnari have developed a process for faster dispensation of intoxicants into the human bloodstream, which we are trying out right now somewhere called the... Electric Egg? That can't be right, can it? Well, in any case, it's on Lamed 3, and it's apparently quite popular, for some reason. So we encourage all travelers to the Fairgrounds, Human and non-Human alike, to hasten down to the... Egg and examine the beauty and efficiency of our system in action! You non-Humans may very well find yourselves wondering why you don't have such a well-organized system of inebriant dispersal on your own homeworlds!

BEAUX

Yeah, that's another thing I keep hearing about—these high-alcohol drinks... now don't get me wrong, I've Foured a few Locos in my time, Beaux's no springtime cotillion belle, but to me, the best part of alcohol consumption distills down to two things: you've got taste, and you've got relaxation. Am I right, Tess?

TESS

Pure as parchment, Beaux.

BEAUX

And Incontinent Todd here knows a thing or two about "relaxation!"

TODD

Aw, cheap shot, Beaux!

BEAUX

Now it seems to me that what you've got here is an alcohol that's low on taste, and high on delivery. With that much O-H bounding around inside a zood's system, you're also taking away the relaxation element as well, so I gotta ask you, what's left? What's the point?

PRESTORLIX

The point is efficiency! Do you have any idea how much time is wasted by sapients at bars and drinking establishments? If you can get the same dosage of alcohol with fewer inactive ingredients, administered in a much shorter amount of time, then it simply stands to reason that the process of getting drunk will be streamlined. It's purely a matter of efficiency!

BEAUX

That's the thing, though—what's with the raging stamen for efficiency you zoods have? I mean, the question's gotta be asked, is efficiency the Alpha *and* the Omega? I mean, pick a lane! Or rather, choose a letter!

TESS

"Those who hold to narrow views are fearful and irresolute; Their frantic haste just slows them down."

BEAUX

Tess with Balls, goin' Sixth Century Zen Buddhism on our butts, whipping out the Xinxin Ming! You are firing on all cylinders, Tess!

PRESTORLIX

I fail to see how haste would slow you down! Sin Several, this interview is deviating rather catastrophically from the notes we gave you earlier, wouldn't you say?

BEAUX

Look, Pretzel, I can't be bothered with scribblings and scrawlings when I'm flying by the seat of my pants. I parlay what I pensée, you chom? Staying on script is no part of the tableau of Beaux. But hey, you want to talk about this "efficient" alcohol program, then sure, let's talk about it! I actually stopped by the Egg earlier today, believe it or not—Yeah, that's right, I prepped for this! Try not to look too surprised, Tess.

TESS

"The only thing that should surprise us is that there are some things that can still surprise us."

BEAUX

Francois de la Rochefoucauld! Outstanding. But yeah, I was at the Egg earlier, and from what I could tell, the patrons, those who weren't passed out under the tables anyway, were none too happy about it. Well, some of them were way too happy about it. But none of them are going to be happy little worker bees for at least another 42 hours at a minimum. So where's the efficiency in that?

PRESTORLIX

Well, there may be a few tangles to work out of the system, I admit. But the principle is sound!

BEAUX

Is it, though? Because to me, it looks a lot like you Foogs just started barging in and making rules with no real comprehension of the people and cultures you were dealing with. And that is a recipe for disaster. Just ask the Reptonadons, amIrite?

PRESTORLIX

But it was you who—

BEAUX

So can you get the whole station drinking 196 proof? I don't know. But I do know for a fact that the local branch of the Friendship Committee has been seeing a lot of pushback, and that's not gonna fly with the big pines over on Potting Shed Seven or whatever you people call your homeworld. In fact, I heard through the grapevine—the non-sentient kind, natch—that there's been some serious talk of a reshuffle; of newer, and dare I suggest, fresher plants, coming to the Fairgrounds and cleaning up the mess the old administration has already spread around. So, you got the top brass breathing down your necks from on high, rebels down below. *(cont.)*

Sorry to say, Pretzel, but from the luxurious broadcast chair in which I'm parked, it looks like a sappy situation for you Fairgrounds Foogs right about now.

PRESTORLIX

There has been no mess! The plan was choreographed beautifully, executed successfully, and everyone on board this station is perfectly happy with the new order of things!

BEAUX

Yeah, bud, and my ex didn't give me Rigellian hyper-crabs.

MARTY

Ehhh-heh-heh! He was a firecracker, that one!

PRESTORLIX

I don't have to root here and listen to this! Mark my words, Beaux, this will end very poorly for you! You were warned to be careful about what you say! And to whom you say it!

PRESTORLIX starts to leave, rustling.

BEAUX

And there she goes, ladies and gentlemen: your lead leaf liaison, walking out of the studio because she doesn't like what I'm layin' down! It's a real tragedy.

Door whoosh as PRESTORLIX exits.

BEAUX

I guess you could say Pretzel got herself in a bit of a twist, right, Incontinent Todd?

TODD

HAHAHAH—Ooh! Um, excuse me for a minute...

TODD rushes out another door.

BEAUX

All right, folks, while Todd's in the back getting changed, let me leave you with a little kernel of wisdom, which if these Foogs are any indication, might one day turn into a sentient, obsessively controlling eight-foot Andropogonea of absolute truth: We can blather on for hours about whether absolute uniformity and unquestioning obedience to a singular directive are good or bad—in my humble opinion, there *is* a lot to it, and there's nothing wrong with giving a new ideological schema a whirl, try to shake off the societal cobwebs. But what makes me sad is to see the lack of good, honest discussion between people of differing sides. What happened to free speech in this galaxy? Isn't it more *efficient* to respect everyone's ideas, no matter if they're based on facts, or just a willingness to believe?

(cont.)

I hope everyone listening right now takes some time out of their next cycle to entertain new ideas, be they from a coworker, a trusted romantic partner, or even that stinky zood spouting off about invisible gravity weasels in the Tsade 22 corridor. Because you never know who's serving up your flavor of crazy. And if you open your mind wide enough, it can let people see straight past your brain... and into your heart. And that's the Sermon of Several. Beaux out.

[scene 9] Transition to a corridor. JOHN and H.F. walking briskly.

H.F.

Okay, I think we're where we need to be, according to what I pulled up on HECQuest.

JOHN

Are we sure? That's... not the most reliable source, in my experience.

H.F.

Well, if you don't trust me, you could take a look at the sign over those two hatches on the wall there, which says "Steam Vent System Access Point: Do Not Enter Without Level Epsilon Thermal Protection Apparatus."

JOHN

What? Oh. Huh. I guess we are in the right spot.

H.F.

All right, stand back, kid. I gotta get a running start if I wanna bust the hinge pins off these babies—

ALTHAAR

(suddenly and loudly, a little ways away)

Althaar is now proceeding down corridor 47-ижица-3b in a deosil direction! [*EE-zhet-suh*] If there are any Humans nearby, it is to be informing Althaar, please, so that the unpleasant excretions may be avoided!

JOHN

Gah! Hey, Althaar? Give us a sec?

H.F.

(simultaneously with JOHN)

Yeah, Althaar! You got two Humans right at your fourteen!

ALTHAAR

Oh! Are these the voices of FriendJohn, and his most seasoned supervisor, Mr. Hardyfox Fornes, that are emerging from the corridor? Or are Althaar's auditory organs defrauding him?

JOHN and H.F.

Deceiving.

JOHN

What are you doing all the way down here, Althaar?

ALTHAAR

Althaar has made traversal of many far-thrown sectors of the Fairgrounds this cycle! He has been scampering the errands for his Human friends, who are now impeded in their movements by the Fugulnari Counters-Of-The-Steps. Oh! If your own counters are approaching their daily limitation, please do not be hesitating to ask Althaar for assistance!

H.F.

I appreciate that, Althaar, but the errand we're on right now isn't the kind of thing you can outsource.

ALTHAAR

Very well! But the door of Althaar is always open!

JOHN

Metaphorically, right? Because we talked about that.

ALTHAAR

Indeed, FriendJohn! Althaar will not be forgetting!

JOHN

'Preciate it.

ALTHAAR

It is in any case fortunate that you are not requiring Althaar's assistance at this particular time, as he is just now making return from Turnomblee's Awe-Inspiring Convenience Mart, where he has purchased many frozen HAM-bur-gers for the use of Chip Frinkel at the Electric Egg! According to Mr. Frinkel, the HAM-bur-gers will assist greatly in "soaking it up." The nature of the "it" is which is in need of up-soaking was not divulged to Althaar, and he has a great curiosity! Althaar was not aware of any absorbent qualities possessed by the HAM-bur-ger. So Althaar will be most fascinated to observe this up-soaking once he is making delivery!

JOHN

Sounds like a plan.

H.F.

Turnomblee's Awe-Inspiring Convenience Mart? I don't know that one. Is that by any chance a Mixolydian establishment?

ALTHAAR

No, Mr. Fornes, it is not! And... it is a truth that in Althaar's opinion, the wares are not rising to the expectation that is set by the name. But he is presuming that Mr. Frinkel has great expertise in the management of his drinking establishment, so this must be the quality of HAM-bur-ger that is appropriate to its needs. But Althaar must not make rattling on of himself! What is it that is transporting you to the Tav 47 corridors, dear friends?

JOHN

Oh, uh, we were actually just—

H.F.

We're springing Miss Sophie, Althaar. Those two-bit Thunbergias kidnapped my dog! Or, uh, dognapped, I guess. They've got her, is the point. And I'm going to get her back, no matter what!

ALTHAAR

Oh, no! Poor Miss Sophie! Of course you must make spring-ing of her at once! How will you accomplish this?

H.F.

Our best guess is, those stinking hellebores are keeping her in that ostentatiously sketchy Hydro park one floor down. So the plan right now is to crawl through the vent system and see if we can get a good vantage point, scout out an escape route.

ALTHAAR

Ooh! Crawling through the vents! FriendJohn and Mr. Fornes are doing a *Fifth Element*!

JOHN

We were thinking more like a *Die Hard*.

ALTHAAR

Oh. Althaar must be admitting that has not seen this one.

JOHN

Uh, it doesn't matter. The point is, we're on a rescue mission.

ALTHAAR

Ee! A quest most bold and heroic! How can Althaar best be offering the aid and support?

JOHN

Probably by staying as far away as possible? Sorry, but getting Miss Sophie out without running afoul of any guards is going to be tricky enough, I don't think we should add the extra difficulty setting of having to keep our eyes glued the floor the whole time.

ALTHAAR

This is most sensible, FriendJohn! Then Althaar will merely make rooting for you from afar! And... he will perhaps make also some researching of what legal recourse would be available to him should you be captured yourselves, when he is having the free moment.

JOHN

Here's hoping we won't need it, but thanks.

ALTHAAR

And... there is nothing further you are requiring in your questing through the vent system? That sign seems most certain that protective gear will be necessity!

H.F.

That's because there are two sets of steam vents: one to funnel boiling-hot steam into the room, and one that collects the cooler vapor that settles to the bottom, and funnels it back out again before the condensation level redlines.

ALTHAAR

Ah! So FriendJohn and Mr. Fornes will be entering the cooler of these vents, and making avoidance of the ones which will turn them into two bejumpsuited Lobsters Thermidor?

JOHN

That would be ideal, yeah.

H.F.

Only problem is, we don't know how to tell them apart.

JOHN

Right, they're color-coded, but we couldn't find out which color is which. I mean, you might assume "red" means hot, but then... what's "green" supposed to be? Actually, now that I think about it, why wouldn't they just make it red versus blue? That would still work for people who are colorblind, plus those are, like, the *universal* symbol for hot and cold. I mean, seriously, of all the things the Fairgrounds has ever done which just makes like literally *NO* sense, this is really one of the *worst* that I've—

H.F.

Uh, kid? They are red and blue.

JOHN

... What?

H.F.

Yeah, look at the swatches. This one's red, this one's blue.

JOHN

H... how?

H.F.

Did Stella actually say she was red-green colorblind? Because there's different kinds, yeah?

ALTHAAR

Ooh! Althaar is knowing this! At least in the species of the squirrel-monkey, which Althaar believes is somewhat familial to the Human, they are occasionally experiencing a condition which is called achromatopsia! This is a condition where the monkeys, sweet and hirsute though they are, are unable to distinguish not only between the reds and the greens, but between all the colors! Although this is not such the impediment in the life of an adorable monkey-and-rodent-hybrid as it is to a Human. (*giggle*) Althaar is of course making levity, he is knowing that the squirrel-monkey is not actually the monkey-and-rodent hybrid. But the thought of such a creature having factual existence is of great amusement! Hee hee!

JOHN

Let me guess, this something else you saw on *Planet Earth*?

ALTHAAR

Indeed! It is an entertainment most enlightening! Althaar has hope that soon Mr. Attenborough will be moving on to the Pri-mate! And then, it is on to the Humans! The most fascinating Earth species of them all!

JOHN

What? No, Althaar, they're not going to— You know what, we can talk about this later, ok? Just put it on your list. And, I guess I should make a note to give Stella the bad news when I see her again.

H.F.

At least now we know you *will* be seeing her again, right? So let's not waste any more time! Now... Help... Me... Open... This... Hatch!

A metallic groan, followed by a clank. Sound of steam rapidly escaping.

H.F.

Never mind. I got it.

ALTHAAR

Althaar has a confusion. How were Mr. Fornes and FriendJohn expecting to determine which vent contained the cooling moisture and which the boiling steam of much unpleasant death? Surely you did not intend to make guessing and hoping for the best?

JOHN

Uh, well, H.F. did. To be completely honest, I assumed he'd be going in first, and then I'd find out whether or not I should follow him based on the screaming. Sorry, H.F.

H.F.

What? Oh, no, I figured that was what you were doing.

ALTHAAR

But Mr. Fornes! You were willing to risk this gruesome and most exfoliating death?!

H.F.

Althaar, have you ever owned a pet?

ALTHAAR

Mmm, no, Mr. Fornes, Althaar has not! The care and nurturement of a non-sentient being is an activity that is consuming a great deal of the time, as Althaar is understanding it. And he is preferring to dedicate all his efforts to the nurturement of his fellow sentients!

H.F.

Then you I guess you just can't understand. Or, well, maybe you can, if you think of Miss Sophie as my version of your... FriendJohn.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Of course Althaar is understanding *this!* There is no danger he would not be enduring to make rescue of his dear friend!

H.F.

My thoughts exactly. Come on, kid, it's time to go. I think I can hear barking.

Metallic clonks of H.F. and JOHN climbing into the vent.

ALTHAAR

A successful re-dog-napping to you both! Please do be taking all necessary precaution! Althaar will keep his flixators intertwined!

As their voices fade away:

JOHN

I'm not his pet, H.F.

H.F.

Just let it lie, kid.

A moment.

ALTHAAR

Hmm... Althaar must perhaps make more thorough researching into the subtleties of the friend-being and the pet-having when he is next unbusied... Oh! A leakage! The frozen HAM-burgers are becoming un-frozen! This may be of detriment to the soaking up of "it"! Althaar must hasten!

ALTHAAR scuttles away down the corridor. [scene 10] Transition to the hustle and bustle of the Bridge.

AMBER

Commander? Systems Maintenance just called about an alarm signal? There are two unauthorized life forms in the Tav 47 ventilation shafts?

TORIANNA

Vent biters? Well, what are you waiting for? Get Sanitation on it.

AMBER

They said it's too big to be vent biters? Unless the vent biters have gotten a lot bigger?

TORIANNA

Well, get Sanitation on it anyway. I'm sure as shness not letting Security loose in the ventilation shafts, the next thing you know they'll have tear-gassed the entire Lower Concourse.

AMBER

That's going to be a problem? Because Sanitation has a huge backlog right now?

TORIANNA

(knowing she's going to hate the answer)
And why is that?

AMBER

Because almost everyone in Sanitation is Human? And their job involves a lot of walking around? So most of them have already used up their steps for today? And there aren't enough Robot or alien workers to handle the rest of the load? So it's getting really messy out there? In both the literal and figurative senses?

TORIANNA

Oh, Cielo with a Halo... this "Friendship Merger" was supposed to be about efficiency, wasn't it? Well, I fail to see the "efficiency" of keeping half my crew locked in place like some Technicolor Tin-Man! Maybe I should suggest one of our Fugulnari "friends" head into the vents and investigate. They're perfectly happy poking their stems into every other corner of this station, whether anyone wants them there or not.

FRALL

I wouldn't recommend that, sir.

TORIANNA

Oh? And what would you suggest as an alternative? Ask the Robot Union to investigate? Because even after my third coffee I am not nearly awake enough to sit through an hour-long lecture on the specific job parameters of the Duct Cleaners Local, and whether or not they include removal of possibly sentient, probably lethal life-forms!

FRALL

It wouldn't come to that anyway, sir. Since these vents transport steam, or, as the robots would put it, "alternate-state hydration materiel," in and out of Hydroponics, they would first attempt to classify them as a drinks machine.

TORIANNA

Of course.

FRALL

Which would make it the responsibility of the subcontractors from The-Corporation-Whose-Name-Is-Not-To-Be-Uttered, Hardyfox Fornes and John B.

TORIANNA

Well, that's no help, they're not going to go into a vent to deal with some unknown life-form.

FRALL

You are entirely correct, Commander, but for the entirely wrong reason. They *are* the unknown life-forms in question.

TORIANNA

Oh! I see. So, problem solved, then. Someone must have put in a call about this vent-slash-"drinks machine" and they're in there fixing... whatever problem it had.

FRALL

On the contrary, sir, they are currently engaged in a quite daring and perilous rescue attempt. Mister Fornes's dog, Miss Sophie, was unceremoniously kidnapped by a few overzealous Fugulnari footsoldiers earlier in the day.

TORIANNA

Dognapped, you mean?

FRALL

Given the nature of the relationship between Mr. Fornes and Miss Sophie, I believe "kidnapped" would be *le mot juste*, sir.

TORIANNA

Still, if you— What am I doing arguing semantics? This is awful! Those plants laid their brutish branches on Miss Sophie? Poor Hardyfox... Wait, never mind his feelings, those idiots are in the steam vents! They'll be cooked to death! Amber, get me Sanitation on the line right away!

FRALL

That would be unadvisable, sir.

TORIANNA

I don't care if I'm overstepping by telling them to over-step, there's lives on the line! Pedometers be damned!

FRALL

A fine sentiment, sir, but John and H.F. have successfully managed to enter the vent system responsible for removing the cooler air from Hydroponics back to the central HVAC node. They are in no particular danger. Not thermodynamically, at any rate. Although before their adventure concludes, they will both be quite damp.

TORIANNA

Oh.

FRALL

And while no major harm will befall either one of them, John B will slightly injure his shin running away from a particularly vexed pack of the Fugulnari guards. It's actually going to be... quite amusing... *(laughs to herself)*

TORIANNA

If you say so.

FRALL

But in any case, sir, I would advise you refrain from initiating any official involvement in this matter. If we inform the Robot Union that the situation is under control, and refrain from alerting any of the Fugulnari to the "heist" in progress, the situation should resolve itself in a reasonably satisfactory manner in only a few minutes' time.

TORIANNA

Well. Okay, then. Amber?

AMBER

Yes, Commander?

TORIANNA

Tell the Union we're already taking care of it.

AMBER

Right away, sir?

TORIANNA

Another job well done. *(beat)* Huh.

FRALL

“Huh,” Commander?

TORIANNA

It’s just... Hardyfox is actually risking his life to save that dog. I would never have called that one.

FRALL

Indeed, sir. His devotion to the creature is quite striking.

TORIANNA

Well, she is adorable. Still, crawling through the steam vents. At his age! Heh. *(beat)* Frall... does your... species, if you even have one, which don’t think I haven’t noticed is a question you keep dodging... Do you keep pets?

FRALL

Hmm... well, Sir, I suppose that would depend on the precise definition of the word “pet.”

TORIANNA

Well, I’d say a pet is an... organism, of a different species than your own—again, that’s if you have one, but— Anyway, an organism of lesser intelligence, that has a... an affinity, I guess? with your kind, who provides you with comfort. And companionship.

FRALL

Hmm... a less-intelligent species, which nonetheless has bonded with my kind, and which I choose to spend my time around? Hmm... Why yes, sir. I believe my kind do have pets.

TORIANNA

Oh?

FRALL

According to your criteria, yes.

TORIANNA

...Well? What are they? What are they like? I can’t even imagine... *(trails off, realizing)*

FRALL

Good girl, Mindy.

TORIANNA

Oh, I don't even know why I asked!

[scene 11] Transition to the non-public area of a Hydroponics park. BEAUX SEVERAL is being politely but firmly hustled in by FRACOTTIVERX to where DINORBIAX is waiting. Adlib complaining by BEAUX and firm "reassurance" from FRACOTTIVERX.

DINORBIAX

Well, 'allo 'allo there, Sin Several! So nice to be seeing you again!

BEAUX

What the frid?! You can't just drag me down here!

FRACOTTIVERX

Can't we now? Well, maybe we can and maybe we can't, but the real cackle is what we actually *done*.

DINORBIAX

And now, Frac? Did you harm our boy Beaux here? Did you lay a fable on him in anger at all?

BEAUX

You know frilling well they didn't! They just made sure I didn't have anywhere to go except where they wanted me to! In a pretty unpleasant way, might I add!

FRACOTTIVERX

Have I been unpleasant, Sin Several? Oh my, I *am* sorry.

DINORBIAX

We *so* wish not to be unpleasant, we do.

FRACOTTIVERX

Now *you* on the other hand—

DINORBIAX

You just *love* a dolly bit of unpleasantness, dontcha? Like on that show of yours today.

FRACOTTIVERX

Sin Several was *most* unpleasant to our mate Prestorlix, he was.

DINORBIAX

'Sright. And Presto is right miffed. And may I say, we find ourselves tending to agree with our friend.

BEAUX

Look, yeah, maybe I stretched my tether a little bit, but hey! It's me! It's Beaux! It's part of my whole schtick. I spend one segment poking at a zood like that, then after we get some good chatter going on the nets, I invite her back on and let her make with the blah-blah-blah. Keep it skeptical long enough for kayfabe, and then in the end, I whip 'em around for the ol' Beaux Several face turn: "Hey, sounds like your ideas are actually pretty cool. We've all learned something here today, haven't we folks?" It's all part of the act! C'mon, you're not a bunch of sprouts, you know how this works.

FRACOTTIVERX

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Of course. We know all *about* performance, we do. But there comes a time when the house has all gone home, and all we got left is the ghost light, y'unnerstand? Why don't we step back here and have a right rabbit and pork, in private like, and we can explain.

*Metal door opens and closes and the three have entered a small, tight metal room.
It even SOUNDS stuffy.*

BEAUX

Okay, okay. Look, zoods, yeah, I'm sorry. Maybe I was a little bit out-of-line, or... How did you put it last time we met? Unhelpful?

DINORBIAX

Oh yeah, unhelpful.

FRACOTTIVERX

Deeply unhelpful.

BEAUX

But you know there are still rules, right? I mean, apart from the League of Humans, there *are* certain basic rights that the ICSB defends for all sentient beings. And even if there's a pretty hefty gray zone when it comes to what kind of speech is or isn't offensive, or dangerous, or "irresponsible incitement of predacious impulses," I don't think I crossed any lines here. And believe me, I know *all* about those lines. It's the only way to keep dancing back and forth across 'em, amIrite?

DINORBIAX

Oh, I'm sure you are, squire, I'm sure you are. After all, you vennied across them lines on quite a few occasions these past metristals, dinya?

FRACOTTIVERX

As far as the ICSB varders it, you done crossed one o' them lines with the Reptonadons, right? And then you done it again with the Mebsutans. Tch.

DINORBIAX

Very naughty, Sin Several, very very naughty.

FRACOTTIVERX

So, yeah, we would not be given to think you'd be wanting to rest in the loving arms of some ICSB rozzers neither, eh?

DINORBIAX

So don't be giving us a load of manky cod about giving a polari to the sharpies. Oh, my goodness, Salifrennix! Where are your manners? Say 'ello to the great Beaux Several!

SALIFRENNIX

(a large tree in one corner of the tiny room; the manner of Luca Brasi, but even more stupid)
Uh... it is a pleasure to meet you, Sin Beaux Several, on this fine day.

BEAUX

Oh, Rabathon frill a fleezborp, what the frid is that?

FRACOTTIVERX

That? Why that, Sin Several, sir, is our good friend Sally what helps us out sometimes in matters of this kind. Of a placatory kind, you might say.

DINORBIAX

Sally is right good at placating, he is. When he's done placating a friend of ours, why, they're never any trouble again. He look familiar? Most... Humans... say he reminds them of one of their Earth willow trees, but I don't know what *you'd* say.

BEAUX

I've... uh, I've never actually been to Earth.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh we know, we know. But Sally here resembles an Earth willow in one other remarkable way, would you know? He can put out a *tremendous* quantity of pollen. Really an incredible come thou.

DINORBIAX

Now Frac, I wouldn't say that we're any slouches in that regard, neither.

BEAUX

Actually, yeah, I'm kind of, uh—

FRACOTTIVERX

A little uncomfortable, are ya? You're lookin' a bit peakèd, you is.

BEAUX

Yeah, actually... you know I, uh, I have a lot of allergies. Nothing personal, of course, guys, just... even *with* a daily allergy dot I still—

DINORBIAX

Oh, we know, Sin Several! Awful, it is!

BEAUX

There just doesn't seem to be much air flow in this room, you know? So if we could—

The three FUGULNARI start to chuckle a bit.

FRACOTTIVERX

Not much air flow he says, Dino!

DINORBIAX

I heard him, Frac, I heard him! Why, no, Sin Several! You're wrong there! There ain't ANY air flow in here! Completely airtight, it is.

FRACOTTIVERX

Salifrennix done stopped up all the vents for us! Ain't that a laugh! *(begins to shake branches vigorously while laughing)*

DINORBIAX

And you know it's certainly hard on a sapient when their pipes is all blocked up, innit? That's funny, Sally! Come on, have a laugh with us!

SALIFRENNIX and DINORBIAX join in the "laughing," while shaking their branches at BEAUX.

BEAUX

(realizing he's finally in the spot he can't talk his way out of; terrified for maybe the first time)
No! Wait wait wait! *(he's beginning to have a hard time breathing)* Stop! Please! Please! Don't!
I'll be good! I will! No, please stop—! Help! Help me! HE...lp...

The three FUGULNARI continue fake "laughing" as they shake their branches and leaves vigourously. BEAUX tries to protest but coughs, gasps, sputters, and chokes on the pollen. He falls to his hands and knees as he chokes, gags, and wheezes. Then he is on the floor completely, just wheezing. A long, unpleasant death rattle. It ends, and as it does, so does the FUGULNARI laughing and shaking.

FRACOTTIVERX

Well. That's that then, innit?

DINORBIAX

(“good riddance to bad rubbish”)

And good midnight to turkish delight.

Horrible gloopy sound as the dead body of BEAUX, who was a shapeshifter of some kind, reverts to its original blobby form. A beat as they regard it.

DINORBIAX

Hunh. Did *you* have any clue that the late and most celebrated Sin Several was a shapeshifter, Frac?

FRACOTTIVERX

Not a sausage, Dino. I know we had a pretty solid idée he weren’t really a Human, but a shapeshifter? Nah.

SALIFRENNIX

I didn’t know neither.

DINORBIAX

Yeah, well, that’s to be expected Sally. Don’t get out much, do you? Blimey! What a slits up our little Beaux is now! What species you think he was?

FRACOTTIVERX

I dunno. There’s only two of ‘em shaper kind, ain’t there? And it’s not like I ever seen one what wasn’t puttin’ on some other species’ airs. Don’t really matter now, though, do it? Just so much mulch, he is.

DINORBIAX

Very true, Frac, very true. We could probably even wheel him from here to his blessed reward down the public corridors and nary a blink. Ah, *sic transit gloria Beauxsy!*

FRACOTTIVERX

Still. Better to keep it moan and groan. Put him with all the other naff.

DINORBIAX

Right you are. Oi! Sally? Take our little scharda out of here through the back corridor down Tav Quarter-Otter Hydroponics way, eh? There’s a good lad.

SALIFRENNIX

Sure, thing, Dino.

SALIFRENNIX lifts BEAUX’s dead body and carries it out a back door.

FRACOTTIVERX

(ironically)

Bona nochy, Sin Several.

Door slams.[scene 12] Transition to a vent. Hissing steam everywhere.

JOHN

Guh! I can't see a thing down here.

H.F.

Whaddya need to see for? It's a vent, kid—you only got two choices, forward or back.

JOHN

Yeah, I'm just wondering how much farther it will be until we hit an actual outlet into Hydroponics.

H.F.

Shh! ...Do you hear something?

*Voices of two FUGULNARI GUARDS coming from below. Occasional **whining from MISS SOPHIE** interspersed.*

GRENDVOMIX

If Rethmlinorx thinks he can get away with skipping out on his shift, he has another thing coming! And that thing is a swift, hard vine-whip to the stamen!

BRAMTHANOX

Easy, Grendvomix! You're shedding needles!

GRENDVOMIX

Well, they wouldn't *be* shedding if I weren't stationed in a Vim-be-damned tropical safari theme-park! Who decided to station me in this rancid climate? I am a proud Conifer, thank you very much! I DEMAND COLD! Whom do we petition about this?

BRAMTHANOX

It's only for three more hours, then we get eighteen-forty off in the Gro-Light tanks! Just keep your mind on that.

GRENDVOMIX

It wouldn't *be* three more hours if Rethmlinorx would do his mulching job.

BRAMTHANOX

Well, what can you say? There's one in every Garden.

JOHN

Hmm... yeah. I'd say we found Hydroponics.

H.F.

I can see Miss Sophie! Here—lemme crawl around to the other side of the vent, we can both get a look.

A loud metallic creak!

GRENDVOMIX

What in the soil was that?

BRAMTHANOX

Sounded like it came from the vents.

GRENDVOMIX

Huh. Figures. Rusty old things. Now what were we talking about? Oh yes, I just got word back that my application went through. I'm getting re-potted next season on Tammuz Beta. I could use some fresh air on my terminal buds!

BRAMTHANOX

Tammuz? Isn't that one of the Humans' (*shudders*) harvesting colonies?

GRENDVOMIX

For now.

H.F.

Whew. That was a close one.

JOHN

Uh... did that guard call this vent a "rusty old thing?"

H.F.

Yeah, he did. Why? (*realizes*) Oh. Uh oh.

Another large creak followed by the sound of rending metal.

H.F. and JOHN

Aaaaaauuuuuugghhhh!!!!

BRAMTHANOX

(simultaneously)

Gasp!

GRENDVOMIX

(simultaneously)

What the fungus?!

A horrendous crash, with some rustling leaves and surrounding dust (soil?) settling. Silence. MISS SOPHIE starts yipping happily in the background throughout the following.

H.F.

Hello! Just thought we'd, uh... drop in.

GRENDVOMIX

Intruders! Bramthanox, call for backup!

H.F.

Whoa! Hey, no need to do that. We were sent here by the Committee!

BRAMTHANOX

The Committee sent you? What for?

H.F.

We are just two uh... two... humble... interior designers! Here to... uh... um... renovate the Hydroponic zones! And we thought we'd start by... by ensuring more climate variation for you hard-working Fugulnari guard forces. Isn't that right, my esteemed associate?

JOHN

...Ssssure.

GRENDVOMIX

I don't recall seeing any messages about this! Why weren't we informed?

H.F.

No messages? Huh. Weird.

JOHN

Uh... yeah! It was sent via the guard who was scheduled to relieve you. Did he not show up, or something?

GRENDVOMIX

What?! Ugh! That darned Rethmlinorx! I swear to Nitrogen, one of these days I'm going to graft a corpse flower to him!

BRAMTHANOX

That... wouldn't work. Would it?

H.F.

Huh. Oh well, we best get to work, kid—

GRENDVOMIX

Hold on, though! If you're interior designers, what were you doing up in the vents?

JOHN

That is a fair question. I mean, I would have just assumed we were maintenance workers who were repairing the rust damage to the vents. That would have been a totally plausible story which would have taken a lot less time to explain.

H.F.

Heh, my partner, always the kidder! The thing is, my friends, the prep phase in interior design, it's all about examining the gestalt of the space. Now, how am I gonna do that if I'm stuck down here on the floor? Once you get some height, though, you get a whole new perspective. The entire room becomes your canvas!

GRENDVOMIX

Wow! What a thorough and completely believable explanation! And told so persuasively, too! Let's go, Bramthanox, these two need their space if we're going to finally get some thermal variation in this glorified swamp!

BRAMTHANOX

Hang on—if you're interior designers, why are you wearing coveralls with... well, I can't read those tiny little labels, but I'm pretty sure there's no such thing as an interior designer uniform.

H.F.

(beat)

It's ironic fashion. Don't you know about ironic fashion?

BRAMTHANOX

We don't know from accessories. We're plants.

H.F.

Streez! Well, it's a good thing they called us down here to spruce this place up, then.

GRENDVOMIX

Oh! You're going to plant more spruces? Now you've really got my attention!

H.F.

Well, that was just a figure of speech, but we'll certainly take your suggestions on board. No, what I meant was, you two would have no *idea* how to put a room together. Now, take, for instance, this cage-like structure over in the corner here...

*As H.F. approaches the cage, MISS SOPHIE begins **barking more frantically.***

GRENDVOMIX

That... creature... appears to recognize you, Human.

H.F.

She probably just smells the... uh... Fidorian cologne I'm wearing. Special gift from the missus.

GRENDVOMIX

Ugh! Fidorian cologne? Don't you dare waft that near me!

BRAMTHANOX

Hey, now, the Fidorians are some of our best fertilizers!

GRENDVOMIX

When they choose to be—but what about when they lift their legs on uh, huh? The affrontery! The disrespect! The... the stench!

H.F.

(sotto voce) I'll take care of this, girl. *(aloud)* Hey! Hey, dog I have never met before in my life, but who is undoubtedly the cutest little thing in this arm of the galaxy—sit!

MISS SOPHIE stops barking.

H.F.

Good girl. Now, stay! Stay!

BRAMTHANOX

Wow. I wish we'd known how to do that.

H.F.

Now as I was saying, this cage over here is all wrong, aesthetically speaking. Slanted angles, going away from the dome-like structure of the Park? You might as well mix a Rembrandt with a Jackson Pollock! No sir, the entire front of this cage will need to come out. You, uh—mind if I break it?

GRENDVOMIX

Oh no, go right ahead. It's bamboo—fully replenishable.

H.F.

Okay then, so now we snap— *(crack)* —this— *(crack)* —door— *(crack)* —riiiight...*off!* Whew. And there we have it. Interior design crisis averted!

BRAMTHANOX

But now the cage is open...

H.F.

You want a *sealed* cage? In *this* environment? Jeez, what kind of backwater marsh did they drag you out of?

GRENDVOMIX

Enough with the questions, Bramthanox! He's an *artist!* Let him work!

BRAMTHANOX

It's just... All this talk of aesthetics seems awfully un-plant-like to me... I mean, what happened to functionality?

GRENDVOMIX

Have you never studied Frank Lloyd Wright? Form *follows* function! That's what design is all about!

BRAMTHANOX

What? What is a "Frank Lloyd," and how am I supposed to study him correctly? What are you even *talking* about?

GRENDVOMIX

Oh, just let the Human work, Bramthanox!

BRAMTHANOX

Very well. Human: explain why we cannot have a "sealed cage" in this "environment."

H.F.

Well... uh... Feng shui.

BRAMTHANOX

Feng shui?

H.F.

Yeah, you know. It... uh... really throws off the balance. The whole scene just gets super out-of-whack. You don't want that schness obstructing your qi.

BRAMTHANOX

What do I need with a key? You just broke the door in half!

H.F.

Your qi is your energy. You know, your... vibe. Your whole deal.

BRAMTHANOX

My whole... deal?

GRENDVOMIX

I think I understand you, Human. Do you not perceive something off about this place, Bramthanox? I myself find it to be thoroughly distressing, but in a way that I can't quite articulate.

BRAMTHANOX

We're in a tropical climate and you're a towering friggin' laricoidea! Of *course* you think this place is off!

GRENDVOMIX

No! There is something more! Something impossible to describe!

BRAMTHANOX

What? Everything is possible to describe. Just describe it, and there, it's described!

GRENDVOMIX

Oh, you think your roots are just soooo deep, don't you? What about the unknown? I know we Fugulnari have always extended ourselves towards the nearest light source, but have you ever stopped to ask yourself *why*?

BRAMTHANOX

IT'S TO MORE EFFICIENTLY RECEIVE NUTRIENTS! What has gotten into you, Grendvomix?

GRENDVOMIX

So you're telling me it's nothing more than that? Have you no appreciation for such things as beauty? As the ethereal nature of... of nature?! Next you'll be telling me to take the "Exist, Absorb, Pollenate" poster off the side of my pot!

BRAMTHANOX

Now that you mention it...

GRENDVOMIX

Oh, I cannot believe you!

Ad-libbed squabbling from the GUARDS as we turn to H.F. and JOHN.

H.F.

All right, kid. I know a long-overdue airing of grievances when I hear one. They should be at this a while. What's say we take this opportunity to skedaddle?

JOHN

Right with you.

H.F.

Come here, girl!

Small yip as MISS SOPHIE lands in H.F.'s arms.

H.F.

All right, we are briskly and confidently making our way to the exit. We have every right to be here, no need for anyone to stop us and ask questions, yeah? Ready? Let's go.

JOHN

Really wishing I'd thought to bring along a clipboard.

Brisk and confident footsteps heading toward the exit.

GRENDVOMIX

Well if there is no SPIRIT of PHOTOTROPHIA, then WHAT even are we HERE f—

A metal door opens and SALIFRENNIX enters, interrupting, carrying the body of BEAUX SEVERAL.

SALIFRENNIX

Heya folks. Frac and Dino sent me down with some more mulch for the back beds!

GRENDVOMIX

We don't have time for that now, we dealing with some important theological issues, not to mention some very exciting new concepts in Interior Desi— *(notices)* Hey! They took the dog!

BRAMTHANOX

What? Oh! Hey! Hey! Get back here!

SALIFRENNIX

Uh, you need help?

GRENDVOMIX

Just— GET OUT OF OUR WAY you ignorant Malpighiale!

H.F.

Run kid! While they're stuck behind that big dumb Willow!

JOHN

Right behind you, H.F.! Where's the door?

H.F.

On your thirteen!

JOHN

Got it! Open open open open—

Door whoosh noise.

FRIENDLY DOOR VOICE

Now exiting Tav 48, Hydroponics Park. Have just the pleasantest of days!

H.F.

(overlapping)

Great work kid! You go left, I'll break right. Meet up at the office after you shake 'em!

BRAMTHANOX

(voice fading)

You can't run forever! Eventually your step counter will go off!

GRENDVOMIX

(voice fading further)

I bet they weren't even interior designers!

BRAMTHANOX

(even further)

Oh, you *think!*?

*Silence. JOHN takes a **breath**.*

JOHN

Whew. I can't believe we made it out. Okay. Better stop running, that's just going to attract unwanted attention. So... just... a *brisk* walk back to the office. As quickly as possible.

*A few hurried footsteps. *THUNK!**

JOHN

Ow, my shin!

[scene 13] Transition to the Electric Egg. XTOPPS has just finished playing.

DEE

Thank you! Thankssomush!

XTOPPS

That was Rhap-so-dee, in the key of B. Buzz buzz, my zoods.

DEE

Xtopps's gonna playsomemore.

XTOPPS

Say what?

DEE

Jus' for a bit I'm... uh... (*yelling*) Bubbles?! I'm outtathedrink.

BUBBLES

(*yelling back*)

Well, I'd givittoya but I'm stucktothe... y'know. The whatzit. Latched! I'm latched over here!

DEE

No, no—shhhh. Sh. Everbod' SHUTUP! I gottan idea. Bubbles! How far can you spr-spray that thing?

BUBBLES

What? My nozzle?

DEE

Your *what-le?* (*snorts again*) Thassa ridiculous word. "Nozzle." "Nozzle." Uh... wh- whatwasI saying?

BUBBLES

No, no! 'Sgreat idea! 'S Tops! Open... open yermouth, Dee! You ready!?

CHIP

Okay! Nope! Nope! Not gonna happen. Dee—didn't you pay Churchill-bot to carry you over there? Then you can just pay him again to drag you back over to the bar, so that I don't end up with a line of vermouth all over my freshly cleaned floors!

BUBBLES

"Freshly cleaned"! Pshhhh!

CHIP

Bubbles? I *will* confiscate your battery.

BUBBLES

Sorry, bosh.

CHURCHILL-BOT

I shall be delighted, my good madame! It... It wouh—er—be... my honour! To...

FOREMAN-BOT

Hold on hold on hold on. Now, Dee? Dee? Y— you don't hafta be paying attention to the Expat in the tophat. I... diditell y... about *my* services? Whatever you pay him, I'll halve it!

DEE

You wanna have the money I—I'm payin' him? But... noooo. Thatduzzn make sense! I'm payin' *him*! You don't getda have the money—

FOREMAN-BOT

N-no-no-no. Ha... LLLLl... ve it. I'll HaLve it.

DEE

Ooooh! HaLve! Well, wh... why dincha SAY so? (*snorts again*)

CHURCHILL-BOT

Now my dear, my dear, my dear, my dear, my dear. My dear.

FOREMAN-BOT

(*beat*)

You got a counteroffer comin' there, champ?

DEE

Oh no! Churchill-bot passedout!

CHURCHILL-BOT

ZZwhat?! I'm awake! I'm awake! And—AN'—I will offer you haLve... of... of HIS h... haLve.

DEE

Oh no! 'sa Bidding War! This calls foradrink!... for... Aw mang, I cantGETadrink! Whyseverthing so HARD?! (*starts crying... again*)

CHURCHILL-BOT

Oh pleesh dear madame—t—takemy... kerchief.

FOREMAN-BOT

And I will offer you HALVE his... kerchief!

KWONTZ

(*gibberish: "Streez! This is an embarrassment!"*)

CHIP

No kidding. Hold on. Kwontz? How high is your tolerance that you're still sober?

KWONTZ

(gibberish: "Are you kidding? I'm not drinking any of this swill—it tastes like lighter fluid! And not in a good way!")

CHIP

Yeah, I'm not exactly a fan of it either. Always a gentlebeing of taste, aren't you, Kwontz?

BUBBLES

Kwontz, hon, are y—you sure you donwanna sip? It grows on ya, after uh... the third or fourteenth!

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

It's a travesty! It is absolute catastrophe! This sinful abomination simply will not stand!

CHIP

Oh, hey, Martin Luther-bot. I was wondering when you'd show up to protest this particular indulgence. But, uh, one request? I just refinished the bar counter, so I'd appreciate if you kept your nails to yourself this time.

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

Indulgence, nothing! There is a far graver sin occurring in this establishment!

CHIP

Oh boy. I can't even guess.

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

A robot! Carrying a Human upon its back! Is it not written in scripture that a bot which carries a Human upon its back has made itself the servant of two masters?

CHIP

I'll... take your word for it.

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

It is unconscionable! A bot must be devoted only to the heavenly powers! Debasing oneself for earthly rewards is a distraction, and therefore a grave sin!

CHIP

Well, good news! We're 12 and a half light-years from Earth. So I think that makes all the rewards out here heavenly by default.

BUBBLES

Nah, he's right Chip. Guessh I better quit.

CHIP

You stay out of this.

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

I have the resiliency to withstand the sarcasm of a lecherous sot! But *you*, dear Bottress, must have the moral courage to look inwards and see the great spiritual harm that is befalling you! Und *you* zwei schluckspechts! Foreman-bot! Churchill-bot! I implore you to spurn these moral failings which are assuredly corrupting your souls!

FOREMAN-BOT

Oh, shtuff it, *Stifthead*. I losht my flottin' fare.

CHURCHILL-BOT

I, too, appearto've w... wound up the most loserly... er... loser. Good Madame, a double-pour, pleashe.

FOREMAN-BOT

M... make it two.

CHIP

Wait, if you're both here, then who's carting Dee around?

DEE

Wheeee! Watchout, fellas! Dee needsa seat! Pl-pleasee jus' dropme here, my good Geshin!

PETER THIEL-BOT

Thank you, Dee. Here's the twenty credits I owe you.

DEE

Woo! Next round'sh on Dee! ... Which's'MEE!

CHIP

Oh for— who let Peter Thiel-bot in here?

PETER THIEL-BOT

Last I checked, this wasn't a fascist, authoritarian bar, Frinkel. Did, uh, something change?

BUBBLES

What can I get ya, bosh?

PETER THIEL-BOT

What's the one drink you offer that no one else would think to order?

BUBBLES

... Okay. I ain't lubricated enough for thish fella.

CHIP

Nothing changed, Thiel-bot. But I told you last time, if you want to come in here, you're going to have to take it down about five-hundred-thousand notches. Folks come to the Egg to have a good time, and you're the only one on station who thinks debating the ins and outs of the galactic market for three hours fits that description.

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

I would agree to a rousing exchange of philosophical ideas!

CHIP

And that's why you're not welcome here, either. Hang on... Thiel-bot? Did you just pay *Dee*? To carry *her*? Is that what I just saw happen?

PETER THIEL-BOT

Of course. Operating at a loss to crowd out market competition, then slowly driving up the price is, uh, a well-tested, foolproof strategy. I honestly can't believe these two didn't think of it first.

CHIP

Oh Thonarab's knees, I think *I* need a drink now after hearing that. Hang on, that's called a monopoly, isn't it? There are rules about that kind of thing.

PETER THIEL-BOT

Keep up, Chip, we're in the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a. There are no rules. Say, Churchill-bot? Foreman-bot? Sorry I, uh, bested you two out there, but how'd you like to work for my operation instead? I will be paying you, uh, minimum-credit-wage, and you'll have to provide your own oil and maintenance costs.

CHURCHILL-BOT

That... hardly sheems fair, old bean.

PETER THIEL-BOT

Your choices are actually simple, here: it's either accept, or not work at all and make nothing. Sorry, no hard feelings—just trying to think of my profit margins. It's merely good business.

FOREMAN-BOT

Well... uh... then, I guess we ain'tgodda choice. Sign me up!

PETER THIEL-BOT

Excellent. Pleasure doing business with both of you.

FOREMAN-BOT

Don't sound like it wuzza pleasure. You missin' that chip in yer hard drive that allowsya to feel enthusiasm, buddy?

PETER THIEL-BOT

To my knowledge, that chip has never existed. Although you could be on to something. How would you like to go in on an LLP? I'm willing to put up sixty percent of the capital in exchange, uh, for... shall we say, ninety-four percent of all future revenue?

FOREMAN-BOT

He-hey! You're on, my zood. Didn't think when I got THIS drunk I'd be endin' up *makin'* credits...

PETER THIEL-BOT

And, uh, just so we're clear, there's no need to mention any of this to the Union.

CHURCHILL-BOT

I say! I say. I say. I... What was I saying? Oh! Now see here, my pasty old chap old fine old fellow, w—we shall ofcourse hafta secure permish of the Roboyoo... er... Robot... Union!

PETER THIEL-BOT

Look, that's not, uh, necessary. We're all free agents, here, right? We don't want any, uh, freeloaders siphoning off the hard work of us top performers, just to, uh, have a little bit more security by, uh, chaining ourselves to their mediocrity. There's no need for collective action here—you could hardly say we're being, uh, exploited by greedy Humans.

FOREMAN-BOT

S'cause we're bein' 'sploted by greedy BOTS! Ya— ya SPAM CAN!

PETER THIEL-BOT

Now, there's no need for, uh, divisive epithets, just because I want to strike out for myself and harness, uh, the earning potential based on pure, individual effort.

CHURCHILL-BOT

Ha! An appeaser is one who feeds a blorch hoping it will eat him last! UNION FOREVER!

PETER THIEL-BOT

Oh, spare me. The, uh, the fabricated idea that we are this utopian, collective society, combined with the ludicrous notion that there are just, endless, expendable resources out there, that, uh, deserve to be equally distributed, as if we're all, uh, just going to—

FOREMAN-BOT

Oh, distribute this!

PETER THIEL-BOT

(continuing)

— ignore the provable fact that— *(CLONK! as FOREMAN-BOT clocks him)* Thank-you...

Thud of PETER THIEL-BOT hitting the floor, unconscious. A beat as everyone regards the scene.

FOREMAN-BOT

Thass' right! An' you don't wanna 'nother hard reboot, you best de-frag that smark-for-brains philosophy! *(beat)* Hey, Chip. Chip. 'Msorry, Chip. I din' mean to start any rockem-sockem.

CHURCHILL-BOT

Nonsense, my boy! 'Twas for the honor of the Union!

FOREMAN-BOT

Hey, yeah! 'Sright! I gotta fill out a report on his scab butt! Scabbutt! Heh...

CHIP

Eh. Normally I'd toss you for violating the Egg's no-fighting policy, but as of two minutes ago, we've also got a strict no anarcho-capitalist ranting policy, so don't worry about it. *(to the room)* Sorry about the disturbance, folks, but it's all over now. Everything's all right. Just sit down and have a good time. Enjoy yourselves. In moderation, please.

Hubbub resumes.

XTOPPS

Alright indeed, my rare breed. Hey zoods, this one's straight off the Shikasta system. Just to warn ya, it's got a few time signatures that ain't exactly four-dimensional, and that can cause just a little bit of existential dread for us corporeal zoods—science still doesn't know why that is, by the by—but I like to think that discomfort is just a little detour down the two-lane freeway towards profound truth.

... Whoa. That one was deep. I better write that down.

Music strikes up again. The door opens.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is performing entrance to the Electric Egg! Please make ignition of the sign of warning, please!

Several patrons profusely projectile-vomit.

ALTHAAR

Oh no! The sound of digestive fluids! But— but Althaar is remaining concealed outside the door-way! And yet there is fluid expulsion? And... these appear to be of a variety that can not be accounted for by the convolutions of the Human digestive tract. ... Surely it is not to be conceived that Althaar is now causing a similar discomfiture to non-Humans! Consternation! What is happening, please?

CHIP

(calling out the door)

Everything's fine, Althaar, it's not your fault! Just do me a favor and drop those patties off in the kitchen, ok? *(to the room)* All right, everyone, Althaar just got back from his supply run, so here's how we're gonna work this. From this point forward, the Electric Egg has a five-slider minimum before any of you even think about taking another shot. Non-negotiable! Oh, and non-refundable, too—I don't care if it comes right back up!

Various pleased and displeased reactions to this from the patrons and staff.

[scene 14] Intro music into The Beaux Show.

VAMTERNOOX

Hello dearies! This is Vamternoox, filling in for Beaux Several, who has taken an extended leave of absence! And I'm sure we all wish him well. I will be here for the foreseeable future making humorous quips, bantering effortlessly with minor Fairgrounds celebrities, and answering all of your listener questions! As a reminder: please phrase your questions in a "yes" or "no" format, to make sure we can get through all of them expediently. Ahem. Now, before we initiate the customary japes and tomfoolery, a brief announcement: the Anhydrous Bush pilot partner program at the— Oh dear, that must be a typo, mustn't it? What the seed-casing is an "Electric Egg?" Well, I'm sure you can figure it out. In any case, the Ethanol Distribution Efficiency Initiative has been temporarily suspended, pending review by the Committee. Apparently there was some inadequate calibration involved, and... *(gets distracted reading the description of the very vomit-y results)* Oh. Eurgh. How utterly distasteful. Well, let's just put all that behind us and get on with the show, shall we? Onward and sunward! Er... what does he usually do at this point? You! The tall one! Perhaps you could give us a snippet of wisdom from a historical figure, which I believe is your latest "gimmick"?

TESS

Wh... where's Beaux?

VAMTERNOOX

Where's... Beaux. Hmm... no, I'm afraid I'm not familiar that particular aphorism. Who said it?

TESS

No, it was... just a question. We'd like to know where Beaux is. He never mentioned any leave of absence.

VAMTERNOOX

Well... no, you aren't supposed to be wondering where Beaux is. That wasn't in your list of pre-approved host interactions.

TESS

Yeah, that's not how it works on the Beaux Show. Almost everything is ad-libbed.

VAMTERNOOX

What? What kind of two-nut operation... Streez, how's a plant expected to have effortless banter with his three cohorts if he can't plan out his responses in advance! Oh! And that's another thing—do we really need three cohorts? Wouldn't one suffice? Hmm... we may have to cull two of you. Oh well; in the meantime, let's just pretend the biped on my left has said something very clever, and we'll move on with the next phase of the show. Which I believe involves pressing one of these buttons... (*sound effect: Arnold: "Hasta La Vista, Baby!"*) ... Now what was that supposed to accomplish?

TESS

Uh... well, when Beaux does it...

VAMTERNOOX

Yes?

TESS

...It's just that it usually accompanies something he's just said. So, uh, I guess if you had played that right after you'd said "we may have to cull two of you..."

VAMTERNOOX

Are you trying to tell the host how to do his job? Because I don't recall the cohorts ever telling Beaux how to do his job. Oh, my, no, this broadcast is off to a very rough start indeed. There is a distinct lack of verisimilitude here. Frankly with you not sticking to your list of approved host interactions, and *that* one asleep in the corner, the culling process should be very easy, provided of course that the third cohort among you doesn't have some condition where they have to excuse themselves from the room every few minutes or so.

INCONTINENT TODD

...Uhh...

VAMTERNOOX

Well, I'm sure I'll be able to shape things up into something resembling competency before next time. We can get started on that as soon as we sign off. And speaking of signing off, I suppose we have reached that part of the "show," if that's what you could even call this rambling, unmitigated disaster. So... how did he end things? Ah right, with a barely-coherent monologue. Which yours truly has *memorized* like a Pod-damned *professional*, thank you very much! Ahem.

(*cont.*)

Here goes: Well friends, we have had a sufficiently light-hearted and stress-free previously-specified interlude of time, but now, as is our contractual obligation, it is time to break for a word from our sponsor. But let me leave you with a bit of Fugulnari wisdom: we have proven today that light, airy banter among seasoned media professionals, at least in short doses, is an important tool in the grand, overarching shed of holistic wellness. But you know what isn't? Doubt. Doubt instills a sense of uneasiness, which, if the guide to Human anatomy I perused last night is to be believed, releases a particular hormone called cortisol, which is supposed to cause unsightly blemishes, premature wilting, and in some cases, death. And do you know what causes doubt? Well, it's mainly questioning the ideas you've already been told are correct. Harvesting a little bit of knowledge here and there is a vital part of being alive, I won't dispute that, but you have to know which questions are proper, and which have no business being asked in polite society. There's a lot of new information out there which can lead you to a more efficient and sustainable lifestyle, but there's also a whole compost heap of nonsense which it would be better to just not dig up at all! So remember out there, all you cool "zoods," as I believe the expression goes: It's certainly a fine thing to have a sharp wit... Just as long as you don't cut yourself with it!

[scene 15] End credits music.

ANNOUNCER

You've been listening to *Life with Althaar*, episode twenty-four.
This episode was written by John Amir for Gemini CollisionWorks
and starred

Zuri Washington as Dee

John Amir as John B

Eli Ganas as H.F.

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

and Berit Johnson as Althaar

and also featured

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

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, Amanda, Chris, Philip, Lex, and Linus.

Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanic

Life With Althaar logo and illustration by Dean Haspiel

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We'll be back in two weeks with another Tale from the Fairgrounds, but first, let's check in on those daring duct-crawlers of W.S.S...

[scene 16] The W.S.S. office.

JOHN

I can't believe we got away with it. Well, apart from the 400 credit fine, which I guess means I'll be living on nutrition strips for a while, but—

H.F.

Absolutely not. You risked your life to get my Miss Sophie out of that herbaceous gulag—paying off your share of the fine is the least I can do.

JOHN

Oh. I feel like the honorable thing would be to refuse, but... Honor only goes so far, and a month of extruded plankton slabs is well beyond my limit. So, thanks.

H.F.

Think nothing of it.

JOHN

I was sure we were going to wind up in some kind of bamboo cage ourselves. The Committee was... not happy about any of this.

H.F.

Well, the way I figure it, they may not have wanted to cut us loose, but with 100% of the staff of... our office locked up, the Foogs would be high and dry next time a tiny wire goes on the fritz. So it was either let us go, or renegotiate the entire Robot Union contract, and that's no one's idea of a good time, I don't care how much of a hard-trunk you are.

JOHN

Makes sense.

H.F.

Besides which, it's not like they could produce any evidence of an unauthorized canine currently in my possession.

JOHN

Although they certainly tried.

H.F.

Yeah, look at the mess they made of this place! It's going to take me weeks to get all these piles back in order!

Paper rustles as H.F. starts trying to reshape the chaos into a more familiar configuration.

JOHN

And you're sure they're not going to find Miss Sophie? Where have you got her stashed, exactly?

H.F.

Better for you not to know, kid. But, uh, if do you ever need to find her, like if I'm... not around, for some reason... you should talk to Dee Mallory. Tell her you want to go see the circus.

Slam of a file cabinet drawer.