

Life with Althaar

Episode 20: Dial ‘O’ for Bigelow

Version 2.1 (Recording Script), 09/29/20 - IWH (draft 2, BAJ)

[scene 1] The standard LWA opening spaceship whoosh, then sirens and “crime scene” sounds. Unusually, some dramatic music plays. We are moving through the corridor of a cheap spotel on The Fairgrounds in a disreputable sector. The music is getting louder, then...

DORMER

Hey! Turn that shness off, Sergeant Diagetic, this is a crime scene! We’re talkin’ a real, no-jacking murder case here! Have some respect!

The music immediately shuts off as it was playing on someone’s device as they stood outside the crime scene, guarding it (which it was).

DORMER

Sorry about that, Commander. Lieutenant. The scene is just through the last door on the left, there.

COMMANDER

Thanks. *(beat)* Is there... a lot of blood?

DORMER

Oh no, sir. He was strangled.

COMMANDER

Great, I’m not good with bl—OH DEAR JONES IN A GUNNYSACK!

FRALL

Wow. That is *quite* the strangulation job. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a Human’s face either that swollen or that deep a shade of purple. And the combination is quite striking.

COMMANDER

(gagging)

If you’re done with your aesthetic experience, Frall, can someone cover it up please? *(beat)* Has Medical signed off on this yet?

NESS

Doctor Mwangi is on her way down now, sir!

COMMANDER

Fine. All right then. Frall, who did this?

FRALL

I can't say, sir.

COMMANDER

(confused, not angry)

What do you mean? It's never been a problem for you before. I mean, we've only had half a dozen or so outright murders during my command here—

FRALL

Five, actually, sir.

COMMANDER

Right. But in all of those cases, you just did your shimmer thing and fingered the culprit within a minute of us finding the body. Well, there was that one time you mentioned it in passing on the Bridge at the same time the actual killing was occurring twenty floors away...

FRALL

I suppose I might have been more pro-active on that one, in retrospect.

COMMANDER

So, make with the wind chimes and tell us who our current culprit is, so I can get on with tossing them in the deepest cell we have until the next circuit judiciary session.

FRALL

Again, Commander, this is one of those occasi—

COMMANDER

Okay, okay, you don't have to say it! Just another one of those "Sorry, the omnipresent, omniscient, and well-nigh omnipotent second-in-command won't actually help because of 'reasons'" situations, yes?

FRALL

Quite so, Mindy. There is a... significance to this one.

COMMANDER

"Significance?" What the hell could be so significant about some drifter getting himself gacked in a cheap spotel pod where everything up to and including the sheets is nailed down? This guy was... Hey, what was the poor bastard's name anyway?

NESS

Travel documents and room booking are under the name of "Charles Flitcraft," sir.

COMMANDER

(shocked beat)

Flit...? Flit-craft? Oh no. Oh no no no no no.

FRALL

Mindy? Do you know a Mr. Flitcraft?

COMMANDER

I know... a code name. A code name we... we established years ago. We were... *(beat)*
Corporal. I... I'm going to need you to lift that sheet again. I have to get a good look at this man's face.

DORMER and NESS make small grossed-out noises as DORMER pulls the sheet back. TORIANNA holds back her disgust as she takes a good look at the body.

COMMANDER

Yes... yes. Okay, you can put it back now!

(sheet goes back on, TORIANNA pulling herself together)

It's him. It's been years, but... It's him, dammit. Oh, by the name of Nell's little fuzzy tum, it's *him*.

FRALL

Who is he, Mindy?

COMMANDER

Frall, let me introduce you to... Bigelow. My contact on Earth.

FRALL

Your ex-colleague that's been regularly feeding you secret, behind-the-scenes information on events within the Solar system for years, until recently, when his only messages have been sparse, cryptic missives implying imminent danger to us on The Fairgrounds?

COMMANDER

The very same. If... oddly phrased. *(beat)* You're right, Frall. This isn't just some tawdry killing in a two-credit spotel anymore. If someone killed Bigelow, it was much bigger than that. And furthermore, as far as I'm concerned, now it's personal!

FRALL

(makes a dramatic music cue, like from a cop show)

COMMANDER

(disbelieving)

Oh, *really*, Frall?

[scene 2] Main title music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...
LIFE WITH ALTHAAR! Season 2!
Episode 20... "Dial 'O' for Bigelow!"

[scene 3] Back to the crime scene. Sound of an old-timey flash camera as it takes a picture of the scene. Everyone makes "wincing" sounds.

COMMANDER

Ow. Moni's nose, that's bright! Dr. Mwangi, do you really need to photograph the scene with that old thing?

DR. MWANGI

Commander, I take my photography seriously, and they've never improved on this kind of camera for detail work, I don't care what anyone says. You asked me to take special care of this case, and I'm taking the best possible care. Cover your eyes if you like, I want to get one last shot here...

Another flash sound and wince from all.

COMMANDER

(still pained, even with covering eyes)

Ow. Okay, I want this done as carefully and by-the-book as possible, so do what you need to do. But I want those pictures in my hands the minute they're developed by the Crime Lab.

DR. MWANGI

Crime Lab?

COMMANDER

And you clowns! This case is now top priority, you hear me? Seal this pod up tight so we can go over it nanometer-by-nanometer!

NESS

(sotto voce to DORMER)

Heh. She called you and the doc "clowns!"

COMMANDER

What the hell was Bigelow doing on the Fairgrounds, in a place like this? And why wouldn't he tell me he was coming?

FRALL

Perhaps he couldn't. This turn of events would suggest that the dangers he had been trying to warn us about may be real. *(beat)* How exactly did he become your informant in the first place, sir?

COMMANDER

Oh, Bigelow used to be a hotshot in League Forces. One of the best of us, really. I met him back in our Academy days. He was always interested in secrets, strange conspiracies, the real weird shness. Everyone thought he was crazy. But he sure wasn't stupid, and we got on quite well at the Academy, and afterward too.

DORMER

Because you knew he was right, he wasn't crazy!

COMMANDER

Bigelow? Oh, no, Bigelow was as crazy as a soup sandwich. But... yeah, a lot of time he *was* right. He could get away with being eccentric because despite all the raving, he got results. He took down that huge, violent splinter group of Earth Firsters? Famous case. Amazing work. So yeah, for a while, he really seemed like he was going places. But then one day, he just... went someplace. Quit the service, dropped out of sight completely. Except for me. I never actually saw him again after he left, but he would always find a way to keep in touch—coded emails, strange notes in my deliveries. Sometimes a couple times a week, sometimes just once a year, but he always let me know he was still out there.

FRALL

(with definite implication)

And when you refer to this case as... “personal,” Mindy?

COMMANDER

What? Oh no, I dodged *that* bullet. For once. But he was a good friend. A good friend. And I could always trust him, which is more than I can say for any of my other so-called “friends” from the old days.

FRALL

I don't recall you receiving any personal messages here on the Fairgrounds from any former colleagues back in the Solar system, sir.

COMMANDER

Exactly. *(beat)* You really can't just do your Frall thing and tell us who did this?

FRALL

Sorry, sir. This crime must be investigated, and solved, by someone else.

HOLMES-BOT

Did someone say “Sherlock Holmes-bot?”

COMMANDER

No, they said “someone else,” and how did *you* get in here?

HOLMES-BOT

To the first, if one removes the law enforcement and command personnel in this room already investigating this dastardly crime, that leaves only myself and my associate, Miss Veronica Gardens, who is not, strictly speaking, an investigator or investigatrix.

GARDENS

Hullo, squires!

HOLMES

And, as the only investigator in the vicinity who could thus be defined as “someone else” is myself, Sherlock Holmes-bot, when one in this room says “someone else,” they might as well be saying “Sherlock Holmes-bot,” which, again, is myself.

GARDENS

Genius, Holmes!

HOLMES

To the second, viz: how I got in here, I cleverly disguised myself as Dr. Mwangi’s stretcher—

DR. MWANGI

No you didn’t, I kept telling you I wasn’t going to push you in—

HOLMES-BOT

While to seal the deal, I had Miss Gardens slip 20 credits to the Corporal guarding the door.

COMMANDER

Corporal Ness!

NESS

Hey, I didn’t know this Bigelow stiff actually had pull around here, I thought it was just business as usual

HOLMES-BOT

So you see that once again, Sherlock Holmes-bot has outwitted the lazy minds of law enforcement!

COMMANDER

Yes, very impressive.

(sotto voce to DORMER)

Corporal, get this deranged tin can out of here before he spoils the crime scene.

HOLMES

Spoils? Spoils, Commander? Why, look here and fathom, if you can. See what you make of this!

Sound of small branch being pulled out and whipped in the air.

DORMER

Uh. That's a branch. Like off a plant.

HOLMES

Indeed.

COMMANDER

So? There are several plants in this room. It might have fallen off of any of them.

HOLMES

Might it have, Commander? It would seem possible. But did it, Commander? Definitely not. For you see, all the foliage in this thoroughly squalid, albeit highly affordable, spotel room are plastic simulacra! And this branch before us is a very real and organic piece of flora! One, I might add, recently severed from its parent plant.

COMMANDER

Fine. A real plant somehow wound up in this crappy spotel pod.

(an idea to get rid of him)

But, you know... If you think this might be a real clue... maybe you should take it to Hydroponics and see what *they* have to say about it. That's obviously a very important task that can only be entrusted to a seasoned investigator like yourself.

HOLMES-BOT

A capital suggestion, my dear Commander! I may perhaps have misjudged your perspicacity. I look forward to a fruitful working relationship. And have no fear, I will of course allow Fairgrounds Security to take the ultimate credit for my solution to this most enigmatical conundrum, so you need have no fear that your bumbling underlings will cast you into disrepute. Come, Gardens, to the gardens!

And they are gone.

FRALL

Excellent work, Mindy.

COMMANDER

Oh, that was nothing.

FRALL

Though it *does* mean he has the branch from the crime scene.

COMMANDER

That's even less than nothing. It was a small price to pay to get him to shut up and go hassle someone else. I mean, I may not know yet what happened to Bigelow, but I'm sure it didn't have anything to do with some stupid plant.

[scene 4] Music transition to JOHN and ALTHAAR's suite. End credit music for an old mystery TV show is playing.

JOHN

Well, I didn't see that coming.

ALTHAAR

Truly, FriendJohn? Althaar was knowing the solution all along.

JOHN

Oh come on, Althaar! That twist at the end? You couldn't have figured that out.

ALTHAAR

Yes, it was a clever "dénouement" indeed, but the clues were all most conspicuous to the observant viewer. And Althaar does not wish to be tootling his own trumpet, but he is very observant!

JOHN

Really? What clues are you talking about? It seemed totally out of left field to me.

ALTHAAR

Althaar will be most pleased to elucidate, FriendJohn! One! The actor who was portraying the murderer has been seen by Althaar in many other programs, where they are typically portraying the characters with whom the audience is having sympathy! But in this tele-visual entertainment, they have been given eyeglasses and an unflattering hairpiece, and are playing a character that seemed at first to be of far less importance than is usual for an actor of their stature. This was indicating to Althaar that this character's role in the story was to become more significant, as otherwise, it would no doubt have been filled by a "journeyman character actor." Two! The investigator was performing also a scene with the murderer that made no progression of the plot, which was also suggesting to Althaar that the significance of this character would make increase! And three! Contrariwise, the other primary "guest star," on whom the suspicion was thrown throughout, is almost always portraying the villainous roles, and was therefore a far too obvious choice to be cast as the one who committed the fictional crime.

JOHN

Huh. Well, you're not wrong, but the thing is, that isn't really how the mystery genre is supposed to work. You're supposed to pretend you don't notice any of that, and just use the clues that they give you in the story. Not the formulaic casting decisions of 20th-Century Earth television programs. Although I am impressed that you've actually binged enough mystery shows to peg Jack Cassidy right away.

ALTHAAR

Mm. But by using this deductive method, Althaar had figured out who the murderer was in the first five minutes!

JOHN

Oh come on, Althaar! The murder didn't even happen until twenty minutes in! You didn't even know there was going to be a murder!

ALTHAAR

But of course Althaar was knowing, this, as the word "Murder" is in the title of the tele-visual program itself, so it would be most contrary to expectation for it to not contain a murder of some kind! This is perhaps not the subtlest of clues, but a detective must never overlook the obvious!

JOHN

Good point. You know, I'm kind of surprised you've gotten into these stories. You used to be pretty uncomfortable with Human on Human violence.

ALTHAAR

Oh, it is still of a concern to Althaar, and Althaar worries also at times that he may be experiencing the "desensitizing." But the explainings of FriendJohn, and Althaar's other researches, have made it clear that an appreciation of the fictional stories of Human violence is most essential to the understanding of Human culture.

JOHN

Human violence is that important? Wait, is that like the sex thing, does everyone else think we're super violent, too?

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, FriendJohn, the committing of violence is sadly not at all unusual among the peoples of the Galaxy, but it is to be remarked upon that Humans are choosing to make so many fictional depictions of it! It is a most popular subject in the works of your artists. And Human audiences are feasting upon them with great consistency!

JOHN

Huh? Oh, "eating them up," Althaar. Yeah. Not exactly a ringing endorsement for the species, I suppose.

ALTHAAR

But it is very much the opposite, FriendJohn! There are many peoples of equal or even far greater violent tendencies, who make no reflection upon it in their art, or any other way. They are ignoring it, or concealing it, or making excuse that it is natural and not to be examined. But Humans are expending much energy on the contemplation of their most unpleasant thoughts and actions, in order to transcend them and improve themselves!

JOHN

I'm not sure how much transcendence you can get out of the NBC Mystery Movie lineup, but I guess you could be onto something there. Maybe I'm a little more down on us Humans than I should be sometimes. But you know, we haven't been in the ICSB that long compared to most of the rest of you, and then when you throw in that we're the only species who can't get along with literally the nicest sapients in the Galaxy, I think a lot of us feel like we've got a reputation as raging primitives.

ALTHAAR

Unfortunately, FriendJohn, that assessment is not entirely inaccurate. But Althaar is doing his best to correct this! And many sapients are already enjoying Human culture here on the Fairgrounds! So please do not feel unwelcomed among your fellow ICSB member peoples! And it is not to be ashamed of your newness to interstellar culture, dear Human friend! Many of the oldest, most scientifically-accomplished species can be causing the most troublesome diplomatic difficulties, because they are capable of great violence and selfishness.

*The door beeps and then immediately opens as **MRS. FRONDRINAX** bustles in.*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Johnny! Althaar! Murder, it's murder!

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, Mrs. Frondrinax!

JOHN

What's wrong, Mrs. F?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I just told you! Murder! Oh, it's just awful! And they're going to pin it on me!

JOHN

Ok, one thing at a time. First off, what murder? Second, who's going to pin what on you, and why? And third, how do you keep walking in here when the door's locked?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Never mind that now, Johnny, they're looking to stick me in the pokey!

JOHN

The what?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You know, the hoosegow, the slammer, the brig, the joint, the cooler, the pen, the pound, the stir, the rack, the ash bucket, the can, the clink, the nick, the big house, the sin bin, the slate cake, the king-size containment field, the crossbar Hilton, the concrete bassinet, up the river, punk city!

ALTHAAR

Incarceration, my dear FriendJohn!

JOHN

...punk city...?

ALTHAAR

Never fear, Mrs. Frondrinax, Althaar and FriendJohn will be assisting you! Now, what has taken place?

JOHN

Hold up, Althaar, should we really be getting involved in this? I mean, if there's been a real murder?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, it's real murder all right! Some transient type was killed in a cheap spotel on the shady side of Samech. And they found some kind of branch at the scene of the crime!

ALTHAAR

A branch of Mrs. Frondrinax?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No, of course not! But you know how Humans are, they think we all look the same.

JOHN

I mean, no offense, but you do look exactly like a parlor palm, Mrs. F. It's not really our fault that we don't have the chemical receptors to tell the difference.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

How can you stand around yammering about your inadequate sensory apparatus when I'm in mortal peril?! They're after me, I tell you!

JOHN

Just because of a branch? That seems like kind of a stretch. What makes you think they're after you?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well... word's gotten around ahead of Commander Torianna's investigation.

ALTHAAR

Commander Torianna herself is conducting the investigation? This is most unusual, is it not? Why should the Commander not allow Security be handling it?

JOHN

Because she wants it solved?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, it seems this victim-person was an old friend of hers or something. Anyhoo, there was a branch next to the body and I just know they're going to come after me! Torianna won't let this case rest until she finds someone, anyone, to blame for it. I need help to clear my name!

JOHN

Who's saying anything about your name?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You know, word on the street.

JOHN

What street? We're in a space station.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, word on the corridor, then! There's a lot of folks here on the Fairgrounds that have it in for harmless old Mrs. Frondrinax, believe it or not...

ALTHAAR

Althaar cannot make belief of this! Mrs. Frondrinax is friendly to everyone!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yeah, that and five creds will get you a latte at Tixondu's.

JOHN

That's why I stick with Poppy's. Only two credits for the ultra-large.

ALTHAAR

Mrs. Frondrinax, why should Commander Torianna have suspicion of you?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well... she doesn't yet, as far as I know. In fact, I'm told she dismissed the idea at first, but, well, you know I'm the only Fugulnari on the Fairgrounds! And there are... other reasons she may come around to the idea...

JOHN

So... she isn't actually after you? I don't get why you're taking this so personally, Mrs. F. Unless there's something you're not telling us?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Now why would you think that, John?

JOHN

Well, honestly you're moving around in place a lot more than usual. It makes you look a bit shifty.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I'm nervous! And anyway, it's not easy to carry on a conversation with you and Althaar on either side of this silly privacy curtain of yours, and you know Fugulnari vision isn't all that good in the first place!

JOHN

Why would I know that?

ALTHAAR

Mrs. Frondrinax, Althaar and FriendJohn will take your case!

JOHN

We will? I mean, we what? I mean, wait, we will what?

ALTHAAR

Althaar will be the consulting detective, FriendJohn! He will make investigation, and cleanse the name of the most obviously innocent Mrs. Frondrinax!

JOHN

Ok, except it doesn't seem like her name actually needs... cleansing right now.

ALTHAAR

Then it will be a very brief case indeed for Althaar the detective! And his side-kick, FriendJohn!

JOHN

Yeah, but— wait, sidekick? I'm a sidekick?

ALTHAAR

Unless FriendJohn is preferring one of the other classical terms for this position? Crony? Flunky? Factotum! Helpmeet? Amanuensis. Kuato?

JOHN

Yeah, ok, let's go with "sidekick." But what sides exactly am I meant to be kicking, here? Because it seems like Mrs. F isn't actually in any danger at all, and her problems will be over as soon as Security figures out where that branch actually came from.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, word is that Sherlock Holmes-bot has the incriminating branch now. You could visit him and, you know, maybe make it disappear.

JOHN

What? No! We're not destroying evidence in an actual murder case! Listen, Althaar, I really don't think this is a good idea. I mean, detective stories are fun and all, but it's not like either of us has any experience in non-fictional detecting. So we probably shouldn't be interfering with an official investigation.

ALTHAAR

Althaar will not make interfering, FriendJohn, he will be seeking out the truth! And he will of course be sharing what he learns with the proper authorities.

JOHN

Yeah, ok, but... I mean... Do we have to start with Sherlock Holmes-bot? He's so annoying!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! You know him?

JOHN

Yeah, he's got the office next door to ours. Some of his personalities like to come by and hit us up for cups of sugar. But only after talking our ears off.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar trusts that FriendJohn's ears have regenerated successfully?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What's this about personalities, dearie?

JOHN

You know, some of the old fiction bots have this thing where they were programmed with different personalities based on the performances of all the actors who famously played them. Mostly Holmes-bot just switches between his at random, so you never know if you're gonna get William Gillette, Basil Rathbone, Peter Cushing, Jeremy Brett, Benedict Cumberbatch, or Avix Wintdoligan. I don't mind that last one so much. A lot of purists didn't like Wintdoligan because, you know, female, not a Human, but some of us think that series actually got the feel of the stories best.

ALTHAAR

Then Althaar and FriendJohn shall begin their investigatings with a visit to Sherlock Holmes-bot! Excellent! The consulting detectives shall consult! *(little laugh)* Mrs. Frondrinax, please remain here in the home of FriendJohn and Althaar and “lay low,” as they are saying.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, believe me, Althaar, I won’t be leaving this room for anything. Thank you so much, dearies!

JOHN

We’re really doing this?

ALTHAAR

Come FriendJohn, the sport is astir!

[scene 5] Back in the spotel room. The sound of rough searching as NESS and DORMER tear the place apart with no system and for no good reason. TORIANNA enters the room.

COMMANDER

Dormer! Ness! What the hell are you doing?

NESS

Searching for evidence, sir!

COMMANDER

This is a search? If there was anything here that could have been evidence it’s probably in three or four pieces by now.

NESS

Aha! We’ve created even *more* evidence!

COMMANDER

Frall? I leave you in charge for five minutes to go get a macchiato and this is what I find when I come back?

FRALL

You didn’t ask *me* if *I* wanted coffee.

COMMANDER

What, this is a full-time thing with you now? And at a crime scene?

FRALL

It’s traditional, sir. I wasn’t going to drink it, I was just going to hold it and look off into space, contemplatively.

COMMANDER

(a beat)

You look. Like an energy cloud, Frall.

FRALL

(a contemplative, cop-show thinky sound, as if looking off into space)

Hmmmmnnnnn...

COMMANDER

Right. So did you two baboons by any chance find anything in your incredibly thorough search?

NESS

Not much, sir!

DORMER

(with pride)

But we did find... THIS!

COMMANDER

That is... a travel-size bar of spotel soap.

DORMER

Or IS it?

COMMANDER

Yes. It is. *(sigh)* You know what? Fine. In the absence of any actual evidence, you might as well have Mwangi take it to the Crime Lab for analysis.

DR. MWANGI

Crime Lab?

COMMANDER

So there was nothing else?

DORMER

Well, nothing important. Just this old piece of junk someone dropped under the bed. Some ridiculous old-fashioned voice recorder.

NESS

We were going to take it to this antique dealer we know, maybe pick up a few creds.

COMMANDER

You found *what?* Gimme that!

FRALL

You think it belonged to Bigelow?

COMMANDER

Bigelow's just the type to record his own movements, especially with an ancient self-contained device like this that can't be hacked from the outside. Credits'll get you crullers it's his. Mwangi, any chance of getting fingerprints off of this, if we're talking about a species with fingers?

DR. MWANGI

I'm a doctor, Commander, not a forensic specialist. And as I keep trying to remind you, there hasn't been a proper "Crime Lab" on the Fairgrounds since the downshifting. I'm only here to sign off on the body because it's my turn on the coroner's rota, although I did bring my camera along, because I have a passion for still photography and police procedurals. And from what I've picked up in my reading, I'd say there's very little chance of a successful fingerprinting now, after the object in question been handled by Ness, Dormer, and, uh, yourself.

COMMANDER

Oh, Sockington's hairballs!

MWANGI

I suppose I could run it down to the MedCenter and... well, I could check any residue remaining on the surface against all non-Human species in the medical database. Most likely, it was only handled by the victim, but one never knows.

COMMANDER

All right, doctor, thank you. But first, let's have a listen to what's on this thing...

She starts the recorder and we hear the final scene from the previous episode replayed through the tiny speaker, starting with a rustling sound and then...

BIGELOW

Uh, hello? Is someone there? Hello?

UNIDENTIFIABLE FUGULNARI VOICE

...Mister Bigelow...?

BIGELOW

What? Who? No, my name's Flitcraft. I don't know any Bigelow. What do you want?

UNIDENTIFIABLE FUGULNARI VOICE

...Mister Bigelow...!

BIGELOW

What? NO!

Sound as before of the FUGULNARI grabbing and strangling BIGELOW to death, then dropping the body to the floor and leaving the room with a chuckle and door slam. The recording ends. Silence for a moment in the present.

NESS

Did you hear that?

DORMER

That sound, you mean? The thing that killed him?

DR. MWANGI

That rustling. It sounded like... like...

FRALL

It sounded like—

COMMANDER

A plant. A goddamn plant.

Damn that Sherlock Holmes-bot. Ness? Get after that robot shamus and get us that branch back. Frall? How many members of plantoid species do we have on station right now?

FRALL

(shimmer, then)

According to our *official* records of both transients and residents... One. Only one.

COMMANDER

(beat, sigh)

Dormer. Put out an APB on Mrs. Frondrinax. She's got some explaining to do.

[scene 6] Music transition to a dinky little office in Vav 41—the workplace of HOLMES-BOT and GARDENS. The door opens.

ALTHAAR

Hello! Are these the “digs” of Sin Sherlock Holmes-bot, please?

GARDENS

Yes, and me, his partner, Veronica Gardens! Holmes and Gardens, consulting detectives!

JOHN

Althaar, we know this is their office, I've been working next door to them for over a year. *(beat as he takes in the surroundings)* Whoa. That's a lot of sugar.

GARDENS

He does like to go around and borrow the odd cup. It's a good excuse for sleuthing!

JOHN

Well, looks like we've already solved the mystery of why our office keeps getting ants.

ALTHAAR

Ms. Gardens, Althaar is wishing to consult with your associate about a case Sin Holmes-bot has had involvement with this morning. Althaar is making investigation of it also!

JOHN

Really hoping the Wintdoligan personality is in control right now...

GARDENS

I'm afraid no one is in control at the moment. Mr. Holmes-bot appears to have been... poisoned!

ALTHAAR

Poisoned!

JOHN

Wait, what? Who would poison Holmes-bot? And how? I mean, I know robots can get damaged, or even sick, but *poison*?

GARDENS

It was the last thing he wrote before he fell into the catalepsy in which you see him now! Look here, on his desk, where he has written the word, "gift."

JOHN

Gift?

GARDENS

That's German for "poison!"

JOHN

Did... he... speak... German?

GARDENS

Well, obviously, or why else would he have used it to write "poison?"

JOHN

He might have been planning his Christmas early. Or maybe somebody has a birthday coming up?

GARDENS

My birthday is the day after tomorrow, but I don't see why that's important now. Sherlock Holmes-bot has been laid low in the middle of an important case!

ALTHAAR

Then Althaar will step in and make continuation of the deducings of Sin Holmes-bot!

JOHN

Great. Hey, Veronica? We actually came about that branch you guys found this morning. Where did you take it after you left the crime scene?

GARDENS

Well, we went straight to Hydroponics! Holmes-bot wanted to get the advice of a specialist there, but of course he thought it prudent to do so alone and in disguise. So after I helped him into his clever camouflage as a weeding-bot, I lay doggo and waited for him to return with the dirt on the branch. He came back satisfied, as though he had learned something crucial, but on our way back to the office he was suddenly struck ill. I went to fetch his... special medicine from the bathroom, and when I returned, he was unresponsive, with only this note on the desk to indicate what had occurred.

JOHN

So where's the branch now?

GARDENS

Why it's... wait a minute. I'd swear it was right over there, on the topmost sugar shelf!

ALTHAAR

The branch! It has been stolen!

GARDENS

Sherlock! Sherlock! Your clue! It's gone!

HOLMES-BOT groans and stirs a bit.

ALTHAAR

He is conscious! Sin Holmes-bot? Who was it that was poisoning you? What were you learning of the suspicious branch?

HOLMES-BOT

Uh...uh... quick... quick... quick, Gardens, the needle... Unh. *(passes out again)*

GARDENS

Oh dear, he's in full-on Reichenbach mode. I think you'd better leave us for the nonce. He needs another dose of his special medicine.

JOHN

Uh huh. Maybe he needs to watch it with that stuff?

GARDENS

It's perfectly healthy, if you know what you're doing. Just a fortified oil mixture. He's been writing a monograph on its efficacy.

ALTHAAR

Then Althaar and his sidekick will be leaving you to it! But! If the mysterious branch should happen to make reappearance, please perform contacting of Althaar at once!

GARDENS

Yes, I certainly will. Good-day.

ALTHAAR and JOHN exit through the door. A moment of silence.

HOLMES-BOT

(dazed)

Gardens? Ich bin so müde.

GARDENS

Ich werde noch eine Dosis bekommen.

[scene 7] The Electric Egg. Somewhat busy. ALTHAAR and JOHN are present, ALTHAAR in hiding, as usual.

SOPON

Another Frigilnakki, John?

JOHN

Uh, yeah maybe, just a sec. *(calling over)* Hey, Althaar? Are we sticking around here, or are we headed over to Hydroponics anytime soon?

ALTHAAR

There is time for another recreational beverage, FriendJohn, as Althaar wishes to sit for some time and exert his little mauve cells in contemplation of the clues that have been excavated thus far. In fact, Sin Sapon, Althaar would very much enjoy another tisane, please!

SOPON

Yeah, Althaar, just so you know, we didn't really have that, so I just tossed some blackberries in some boiling water. You actually liked it?

ALTHAAR

Delicious! Yes please, another of your special Althaar tisanes!

JOHN

And I'll have a, uh... ah crap, what was that one called again? Listen, Sopon, this new drink menu of yours is really tasty, but the names could use some work. I can't remember any of them.

SOPON

Yeah, the names are... in progress. Sooner or later I'll settle on something. But it's the taste that matters, right? Besides, anyone who doesn't know which one they want, I just make one at random and serve 'em up. No one's complained yet, so. And speaking of which... *(spray of final touch going onto a drink)* here's one double Puttwoobie for ya! Enjoy! *(serves it)*

JOHN

Is this part of another one of Chip's rebranding schemes? It looks like he actually put some money into redecorating this time, instead of just grabbing whatever he could get at a storage-pod auction. The place definitely feels a little less shabby.

DEE

(sitting down with XTOPPS near JOHN)

Who's shabby? Hey, Bubbles? One of those new Vortaskies, please.

JOHN

Never you, Dee. I was just saying the surroundings are coming up to your level a little bit.

DEE

Yeah, we kinda buttonholed the boss to make a few changes around here.

XTOPPS

What you mean "we?" Nobody hooved any of my suggestions.

DEE

There's a big difference between dive bar aesthetic, dive bar, and a *serious* dive, Xtopps. C'mon, you have to admit the place looks nicer now.

XTOPPS

I dunno. Something seems a little... diagonal about it. Xtopps can't put his xtopp on it, but...

BUBBLES

Oh, Xtoppsy, you just don't like change.

XTOPPS

I dig change, Bubbles, I dig all the changes there are. There's just something... off. If this is a change, it's the devil's tritone.

DEE

I think I know what you mean, actually. I look around the room and it's like, yeah, I like all the new stuff individually, but... there's some subtle thing out of place that I can't quite nail down.

JOHN

Yeah, you're right. I thought it was just because I'd gotten used to the way it looked before, but...

ALTHAAR

Althaar is also finding the new decor of the Egg pleasant, but oddly disquieting.

CHIP

(coming over)

Do I hear everyone complaining over here, too? I blow all this money on redecorating and all I keep hearing is that something seems "off" about the place!

DEE

You don't see it when you look around, Chip?

CHIP

All I see are the credits I forked over to get this place looking fresh, and instead I get an endless parade of vague complaints!

BUBBLES

Don't knock it, bossman, it keeps them buying Sopon's new drinks!

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

CHIP

The Egg's new drinks, Bubbles, we're all a team here. Right, Sopon?

SOPON

Sure thing, boss. Oop, excuse me, I think Kwontz needs something over there.

CHIP

Hey, did you come up with any better names for those new drinks yet?

SOPON

(from the other end of the bar)

Working on it, boss!

CHIP

Well work faster! Trying to read the specials menu right now hurts my face! *(door whoosh in the distance)* Oh, great. Here comes Mindy with her electric nebulosity and Corporal Clownshoes, and it looks official. Everyone act normal.

DEE

Everyone is normal, Chip.

XTOPPS

I'm not. I am way too un-glitched right now. Seriously curly.

COMMANDER

Hello, everyone! The place is looking nice, Chip. I really enjoy the... *(looking around, gets an odd feeling)* ...the, uh, new... things.

CHIP

Commander. Corporal Dormer. *(beat, with distaste, through his teeth)* Frall. This isn't by chance official business, is it?

FRALL

It is, Mr. Frinkel.

CHIP

Okay, look, I swear I didn't know what was in those cases from Altair! That wasn't what I ordered, and you can see for yourself, it's not listed on any of the packing slips!

COMMANDER

Our business today is actually with Althaar and John B. But I'll be sure to check out our records on that Altair shipment when I have a moment. Now, could you let us have this end of the bar, please?

CHIP

Sure thing, Commander! Everyone, scoot over there! *(to himself as he walks away)* Never offer information, never offer information, what the hell is WRONG with you, Frinkel?

COMMANDER

Hello, John. *(calling)* Althaar. You *are* back there behind the *Big Blorch Hunter II* machine, right?

ALTHAAR

Indeed, Commander! Greeting to you!

COMMANDER

Mm hm. So, Althaar? My officers went to see Sherlock Holmes-bot just a short time ago, to retrieve an important piece of evidence in a criminal investigation. Not only was the evidence missing, and Sherlock Holmes-bot mysteriously out of commission, but Ms. Gardens informed us that you two had already been to see them, and that you told her you were also investigating this case.

JOHN

Uh...

ALTHAAR

Althaar is merely asking the questions, Commander Torianna! Is there anything that is wrong in this?

COMMANDER

If they're cultural questions coming from a cultural attaché, then no, Althaar, there isn't. But if they're questions about an ongoing murder investigation on this station, then yes, big wrong. Very much wrong. Stop right now wrong.

ALTHAAR

But Althaar believes that he may be providing assistance to the Commander by way of these questionings! Surely assistance in such an important matter is to be welcomed!

COMMANDER

Except I didn't ask for any assistance, Althaar. Especially not from you. And John? You're playing along with this? I'm surprised at you, you're normally one of the more sensible people around here. Not that that's a high bar to clear.

JOHN

(privately, to the COMMANDER)

The thing is, Commander, he's really into this, and you know how persistent he can be once he gets an idea into his head...like... appendage. I honestly think it's harmless, he's not on the same track as you, or any track at all, really. He's just super into playing detective right now.

COMMANDER

(also quiet)

If you say so. But I'm trusting you to make sure he stays out of our way, understood?

(normal voice)

Althaar? I can't stop you from asking questions. But if I find out you've impeded the official investigation in any way, I'll be... writing a strongly-worded letter to Iltor!

ALTHAAR

Oh! Mortification! Please, Commander Torianna, do not have concern! Althaar is promising not to make interference!

NESS

(entering)

Commander Torianna, sir! I've just received the crime scene photos from Dr. Mwangi! *(hands them over)*

COMMANDER

Ah! What th—? *(paging through them)* Uh-huh. Yeah. Riiiiiiight. Say John B? What do you make of that? *(shows photo)*

JOHN

Well... Wow, it's really beautiful. What is it exactly? Looks like a hand lying against cheap industrial wall-to-wall carpeting.

NESS

Any message for Dr. Mwangi, Sir?

COMMANDER

Tell her thanks, but these are useless as crime scene photos. Then tell her I think she has a remarkable eye and I'd like to see her portfolio. I might want to buy something.

NESS

Yes, sir!

COMMANDER

All right. Althaar, you are a fine diplomat, but you're not law enforcement. So, I neither want nor need your 'assistance' on this case, is that clear? I have my best people working on it!

DORMER

Yeah, that's right!

COMMANDER

And... I have *them*, too.

NESS and DORMER

What?

COMMANDER

All right, I think we're done here. Let's go.

(they start to leave, then stop and turn back)

Oh, just one more thing... Althaar. That piece of evidence that went missing from Holmes-bot's office? You wouldn't have any idea where it is now, would you?

ALTHAAR

The branch that Sin Sherlock Holmes-bot made removal of from the crime scene? Is that of what you are speaking?

COMMANDER

Branch? I never mentioned any branch. How did you know it was a branch?

JOHN

Oh, Veronica actually told us where it came from. We were in the office with her when she discovered that the branch was missing.

COMMANDER

Ah. That must explain it then. Thank you very much, John. Althaar.

(they start to leave again, then again stop and turn back, ALTHAAR and JOHN sigh a bit)

Oh, just one more *more* thing...

You didn't happen to see Mrs. Frondrinax anywhere while you were snooping around, did you? We'd urgently like to speak with her as soon as possible. On an unrelated issue.

JOHN

Uh...

ALTHAAR

No, Commander, FriendJohn and Althaar have not made any encounter of Mrs. Frondrinax since leaving their shared living quarters!

COMMANDER

(something odd about that phrasing, but...)

Oh... kay. Well, if you do see her, please tell her it's important that she contact me. Urgently. Immediately. With all possible speed.

JOHN

Got it, Commander.

Door as TORIANNA, FRALL, DORMER, and NESS leave. For a moment, we can hear the conversation of KWONTZ and SOPON a little ways down the bar.

SOPON

So did you pull the trigger on that thing for me yet, Kwontz?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Yeah, I took care of it before I came over. Everything should be set."]

SOPON

Perfect! Then there's nothing else in my way...

JOHN

Uh, hey, Althaar? I really don't think it's a great idea for us to be flotting around with the Commander like this.

ALTHAAR

But, FriendJohn! It is in the tradition of the detective to "butt heads" with the local law enforcement in the course of an investigation!

JOHN

Yeah, but like Inspectors Lestrade or Japp might lock a detective up in the Old Bailey overnight. If you piss the Commander off enough, it could be the airlock. Or that strongly-worded letter.

ALTHAAR

Ohhhh! It is not to be contemplated!

JOHN

Well, try to contemplate it a little, ok? At least enough to keep you from doing something I'll regret. Speaking of which, now that I've at the very least misled the Commander, if not outright lied to her: I caught how you cleverly sidestepped the Mrs. Frondrinax question. Now would you mind telling me where the branch went to?

ALTHAAR

The branch?

JOHN

The one in Holmes-bot's office. I saw it on the shelf when we came in, and then it vanished while I was looking at his note.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn is so very observant!

JOHN

Yup. I'm observant. Am I also an accessory? Do you have the branch?

ALTHAAR

....yeeeeees, FriendJohn, Althaar is possessing the branch.

JOHN

Oh, streez, Althaar! Why didn't you give it to the Commander?

ALTHAAR

Ah! The Commander was not asking Althaar for the branch, or even inquiring if Althaar had it. Althaar was not at any point committing a falsehood!

JOHN

That's not— You know, Althaar, you're usually so honest about everything that sometimes I forget you're a highly-trained diplomat.

ALTHAAR

It is true that Althaar was frequently receiving special commendation in his schooling for what Humans would call “the splitting of the hairs.”

JOHN

Well, you're not going to be getting any commendations from the Commander if she finds out.

JOHN's phone rings.

JOHN

The hell—? Someone's calling from our apartment? ...Oh, right, Mrs. F.

(answering)

Hello?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(over phone)

Oh, Johnny! What's the word on the corridor, sonny?

JOHN

Well, it's a good thing you didn't call a minute ago, because Commander Torianna was just here.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Looking for me? Oh, if it's not a snap frost, it's a flash flood! What did I tell you? Didn't I say I was going to get railroaded for this?

JOHN

She just said she wanted to talk to you, Mrs. F. But she specifically said it wasn't related to the murder investigation.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, she's a sly one, isn't she? Well, she ain't repottin' *this* plant in the green caboose, I'll tell you that! Whatever evidence she thinks she has.

JOHN

Well, I guess you can relax, because Althaar's got the only evidence right now. He stole that branch from the crime scene.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, wonderful! You can just destroy it right now and that'll be that!

JOHN

I already told you, Mrs. F., we're not destroying evidence! We're in dutch with the bulls already! Oh, for— now you've got *me* talking like that!

ALTHAAR

Please do not have fear, Mrs. Frondrinax! Althaar and FriendJohn will make employment of this evidence in demonstration of your innocence! Surely there is a crew member in the Department of Hydroponics who can provide insight upon the suspicious “branch,” and the type of plant that is its source! And then the name of Mrs. Frondrinax will be once again lemony-fresh!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well! If you won't just be a pal and 86 the darned thing, I suppose that will have to do. Now there are plenty of darling gardeners in Hydroponics you *could* talk to, but if you want the best, the girl who can identify anything, you need to look up Ashlee. She should be on duty in Gimel 8 right now, in fact.

JOHN

Wait. Ashlee in Hydroponics? Really? She's the best?

ALTHAAR

Is FriendJohn knowing of this Ash-LEE?

JOHN

Uh, yeah. We met last year. After things didn't work out like I'd hoped with Amber on the Bridge, she tried to set me up with her sister Ashlee. Which lasted about five minutes. I mean... she's nice? But... there's just something *wrong* with that whole family. (*beat*) She's actually the best in Hydroponics?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, yes, dearie, she knows more about plant life than any Human I've ever encountered! If you need information, she'll have the dirt! I mean literally, yes, of course, she does have the dirt, all the best dirt, she takes such good care of us, but also, besides that, she knows where all the roots are buried. Oh! Perhaps I've said too much!

The call hangs up.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn! It is now to seek out the most knowledgeable if romantically unsuitable Ashlee of Hydroponics! Please to fetch a brougham, posthaste!

JOHN

That's not a thing on the Fairgrounds, Althaar. It hasn't even been a thing on Earth for like, six centuries. I know you know this.

ALTHAAR

Then it is now to seek out the nearest public hoverboard station! Ee!

[scene 8] Music transition to Hydroponics. JOHN and ALTHAAR are there with ASHLEE!, who is finishing some unfortunate vomiting.

ASHLEE!

...ugh...! ugh...!

JOHN

Yeah, uh, sorry Ashlee. I was trying to get your attention to warn you Althaar was here, but you were a little too involved in yelling at that... what is that?

ASHLEE!

(still a bit nauseated, but a pro about plants and accuracy)

That's a *pachira aquatica*! But it's supposed to be a *pachira glabra* here! Someone keeps messing up the arrangements when I'm not looking! Ohhh...!

ALTHAAR

Many apologies from Althaar to Ashlee for the causing of discomfort! Would the most knowledgeable Ashlee still be willing to make assistance to Althaar in his investigations?

ASHLEE!

Investigation! You, too! Twice in one day! First Sherlock Holmes-bot—

ALTHAAR

(whipping out the branch, audibly)

A-ha! So it was *you* to whom Sin Holmes-bot directed his questions regarding this branch!

JOHN

(quickly)

You don't have to look, it's the same one Holmes-bot showed you. We were just wondering, were you able to tell him anything about it?

ALTHAAR

And how were you aware that it was Holmes-bot to whom you were speaking? It is the understanding of Althaar that he was in disguise!

ASHLEE!

Oh! That was supposed to be a disguise! I thought he was just malfunctioning! Yes! He showed me a branch! But I couldn't tell him anything about it!

JOHN

Oh, ok. Thanks. Sorry again about the... you know.

ASHLEE!

Don't mention it! It actually makes for really good fertilizer!

JOHN

Oh. Well, Althaar, it looks like we've hit a dead end. So can we go home now?

ALTHAAR

Ah, FriendJohn, it is that you are hearing, but not observing! As with the dog that is absent from making the curious noises during the sleep cycle, it is what Ashlee has *not* knowledge of that is providing interest here!

JOHN

What?

ALTHAAR

Ms. Ashlee? Mrs. Frondrinax has been most full of praise for your great knowing of plant life. Is it not most unusual that you are seeing a branch for which you can not make identification?

ASHLEE!

Yes, actually! And it was driving me nuts!

JOHN

Is it really so unusual? I mean, even if you know every kind of plant on the Fairgrounds—

ASHLEE!

Which I do!

JOHN

Okay. Even if you know every kind of Earth plant—

ASHLEE!

Which I also do!

JOHN

Fine. Even if you knew every kind of plant from anywhere in the galaxy—

ASHLEE!

Which I—!

JOHN

Oh come on! No you don't! That's got to be a ridiculously huge number of species!

ASHLEE!

At last count! One trillion, four-hundred and seventy—

JOHN

You're claiming to recognize over a trillion species of plants?

ASHLEE!

Well, maybe not right away! But I've studied the plant life of every inhabited planet! And even if I don't recognize a plant right away, I should be able to tell something about it! Narrow it down! But that branch! It's frustrating! I have no idea where it comes from!

ALTHAAR

Fascinating!

JOHN

But useless.

ALTHAAR

Yes, FriendJohn, and it is producing a most wonderful confusion!

JOHN

What's wonderful about it?

ALTHAAR

This is the stage of the investigation where the Detective can not see how the clues are making connection, and so must retreat to more familiar surroundings, to cogitate upon the contradictions of which they have made observation. Althaar is enjoying a traditional stumping! So it is now time to return to the shared living quarters!

JOHN

Oh, ok. Does this mean I can go back to watching TV on my cycle off?

ALTHAAR

Not in the least, FriendJohn! Be following Althaar, please!

[scene 9] Music transition to moving through a crowded sector—a series of corridors that sounds like some kind of seedy bazaar. TORIANNA, NESS, DORMER, and FRALL are looking for someone.

FRALL

Are you sure your informant is still in this area, Commander?

COMMANDER

I make sure to keep tabs on all my "special friends," Frall. According to records, he's not dead, and he hasn't hopped an outbound transport, so I'm reasonably certain my best "man on the street" is still around.

FRALL

What street? We're on a space station.

COMMANDER

Fine, "man in the corridor."

FRALL

As I recall, he isn't actually a "man," either, sir.

COMMANDER

Ugh. "Sapient in the corridor." Happy? Accuracy is murder on a cool turn of phrase, Frall. And speaking of cool, do you think you two could try keeping yours? You're as jumpy as Ionian rabbits at a Blorch convention.

DORMER

We don't like to come down to this sector, sir.

NESS

They don't like us down here.

COMMANDER

You are both highly-trained... well, trained Security officers. Armed with neurological disruptors. And you're telling me you're scared to come into the sector where something like eighty percent—

FRALL

Eighty-one point three.

COMMANDER

Eighty-one point three percent of all of the crime on the Fairgrounds takes place?

DORMER

It's different down here, sir.

NESS

They have better weapons than we do.

DORMER

Now maybe if we finally got the BGC-19 full-body crowd-clearing defense exoskeletons we keep putting in requests for...

COMMANDER

Dormer. I am not sending you two chuckleheads out in public with military-grade armaments. What you already carry is dangerous enough to be worrisome in your rather shaky hands.

DORMER and NESS

Awwwwwww....

COMMANDER

And, ah! There he is! Now all of you, look like we're giving him the business. He has to be able to act like he's in some kind of trouble. Frall, just hover ominously or something.

FRALL

On it, Commander. Grrrrrr... *(standard FRALL shimmer plays with a darker edge to it)*

They are approaching the INFORMANT, who starts yelling as they get closer.

INFORMANT

Ah, nah! Not this time, Commander! You got nothing on me! I been clean as a pulchpipe, lady! Don't try and pin anything on me!

COMMANDER

Grab 'im! *(NESS and DORMER struggle with INFORMANT)* Over here! We got you fair and square this time, creep!

They drag him to a quieter corner.

INFORMANT

Streez, Mindy! You need to do better than that to keep up appearances down here! You need to really like, rough me up a little. I don't come out of this with bruising, and my cover's blown.

COMMANDER

Whatever, mister, I don't have time for playacting. I need info and I need it now, so sing, canary!

INFORMANT

Hey, now that's offensive! I'm nothing like one of your Earth canaries!

COMMANDER

It's just an expression.

INFORMANT

Okay, yeah, but actually my DNA is a helluva lot closer to what you Humans would call a "weasel," so you have an even better, and more accurate way of insulting me just lying there. Just thought you should know that. And you should also know that my memory isn't very good. At least as long as I'm holding a nearly empty chargepad out in front of me.

COMMANDER

(pulling out her own device)

Yeah, yeah. Just make it good or I'll dispute the charge later.

A bleep as money is transferred from TORIANNA to the INFORMANT.

INFORMANT

Looking good there. Right. So you wanna know about that guy that got bumped off in the creep joint? The buzz 'round here is that the dope yer goin' on is phonus-balonus.

COMMANDER

How do you know what kind of dope I'm supposed to have?

INFORMANT

You found something at the scene of the crime, yeah? A branch or some such? Something that makes it seem like a Fugulnari was in on it? Sorry, but that branch is the bunk.

DORMER

No, we found it *in* a bunk. No one's small enough to sleep on that branch.

NESS

Maybe a Bronsonian?

DORMER

Oh, right!

COMMANDER

Would you two shut up?

INFORMANT

I'm telling you, it's a rapper, hokum, a string, bunko, the Aldebaran Sharp!

FRALL

You're saying that the branch is a piece of false evidence.

INFORMANT

See, the Phosgene Op gets it! Yup, word on the corridor is? That Fugulnari branch was a plant.

COMMANDER

I *know* what a Fugulnari is.

INFORMANT

No, I mean it was planted on the body after the murder, so's you would go blamin' Mrs. F. She don't have an alibi, see, cause at the time of the murder, she was just soaking her roots in a hydro park. But the only driffer that can corroborate that has their *own* reasons for staying quiet. And those reasons have more reasons. None of them are really all that disreputable, it's basically just a matryoshka doll of inconvenience.

COMMANDER

Sounds like the Fairgrounds, all right. So wait, if the branch definitely didn't come from Mrs. Frondrinax, why was it important enough for someone to steal? And where is it now?

INFORMANT

That's a lot of questions to ask someone with so few credits in his account.

FRALL

That's just three questions.

INFORMANT

Ah, thanks! I only counted two. That's even *more* of a deficit!

TORIANNA sighs and there is the BLEEP of more money transferred.

INFORMANT

Okay. You know that Iltorian? One that lives with a Human for some reason?

COMMANDER

Yeeesss... as far as I know there's only one Iltorian on the Fairgrounds, or all of Human space for that matter, and I am *so* going to give the business to those two if this is going where I think it is.

INFORMANT

Yeah, Althaar's got your "evidence." But I tell you, this whole branch thing is a dead end. The branch was a setup. If there's anything important about it, it's that someone is trying to distract you.

COMMANDER

And that someone might be...? *(beat)* I'm not dangling my chargepad in front of me for no reason, mister. I'm willing to pay here.

INFORMANT

I'd gladly take yer creds if'n I could back it up, but no soap, Commander. I already served up everything on the menu. Someone planted that branch, and the Iltorian's the one who yinked it. So if you don't mind, I need a little roughing up before you go, to make this look good. Otherwise, I won't last a cycle down here.

COMMANDER

Fine. Ness? Dormer? Beat the living hell out of this weasel and then go find Althaar and get that branch from him.

NESS

Aw... do we have to?

FRALL

I've never seen you two unwilling to engage in mindless violence, Corporal.

DORMER

No, the beating's fine, but do we have to talk to Althaar?

NESS

He makes our stomachs go whoopsy, sir.

COMMANDER

Well, look at it this way: a corrupt law enforcement officer needs to turn a blind eye to a lot of things, and dealing with Althaar is a perfect opportunity to get in some practice. Now make this beating look good so I don't lose myself a useful informant, and then call us on the bridge as soon as you get that evidence back. Frall? Let's go.

And DORMER and NESS start beating up the INFORMANT as we go by musical transition [scene 10] to JOHN and ALTHAAR, walking through a corridor.

JOHN

Althaar? Why are we taking this extremely roundabout route back to the apartment? I thought you wanted to go and rest your little mauve cells or whatever.

ALTHAAR

Yes, FriendJohn! Althaar wishes to practice the reclining in deep contemplation! He is very much regretting now that he has yet to pick up the violin or the cocaine habit. But! A healthy constitutional may also result in inspiration!

JOHN

Okay, but right now, it's resulting in exhaustion and a couple of rapidly-expanding blisters, so could we maybe take a shortcut or something?

ALTHAAR

Oh! Of course, faithful sidekick!

JOHN sighs. We hear happy sounds of MISS SOPHIE, albeit muffled by something she's holding in her mouth, coming up the corridor.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Hel-LO to you, dear Miss Sophie! And a good (*barks to her; MISS SOPHIE barks back*)!

JOHN

(*calling*)

Hey, H.F.? Althaar alert! If you're back there, cover your eyes before you turn the corner!

H.F.

(*coming closer*)

Gotcha. My eyes are closed and I'm hugging the wall.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn, make observation of this, please! Miss Sophie appears to be carrying a leafy object!

JOHN

Yes, Althaar, that's a stick. Dogs like sticks.

H.F.

Oh, yeah, she got that off the floor of the Electric Egg. I was just there setting up a 3-D cribbage rematch with Kwontz. That patzer.

ALTHAAR

But this is not just *any* stick, or branch! See how it is resembling the one from the crime scene!

H.F.

"Crime scene?" What the hell have you gotten into now, kid?

JOHN

It's a long story, H.F.

H.F.

Oh. Never mind, then.

ALTHAAR

Mr. Fornes, Althaar regrets that he must have the branch of Miss Sophie for examination. It may be a most vital clue!

H.F.

If you can get it away from her, it's all yours, buddy. But, uh, you understand why I won't be helping, right?

ALTHAAR

Of course, Mr. Fornes! Althaar is content to make his own negotiations with Miss Sophie for possession of the branch. Miss Sophie! May Althaar examine your toy please?

MISS SOPHIE growls. ALTHAAR tries to take the branch from MISS SOPHIE—they struggle, with ALTHAAR occasionally barking to MISS SOPHIE to try and convince her to let the branch go. Eventually, ALTHAAR pulls it from MISS SOPHIE’s mouth. MISS SOPHIE makes some sad noises at losing it.

ALTHAAR

Ah! That was a somewhat more complex negotiation than Althaar had expected! Althaar is commending you on your tenacity, Miss Sophie! Now... oh! Althaar’s initial supposition was correct! It is clear that these two unusual branches are from the same species, or perhaps even the same plant! What are the odds!

JOHN

Well, I’d assume that the odds of one piece of a rare plant showing up are pretty low, but after the first one, the odds of finding more pieces get a lot higher. So... now we’ve got a branch from the scene of the murder, and an identical one that turned up at the Electric Egg. ...Althaar, I really think we need to tell the Commander about this.

H.F.

Wait, what murder? You just said “crime scene” before.

JOHN

And I said it was a long story, and then you said never mind.

H.F.

(loud)

That was before I knew it was a story with a murder in it!

NESS

(from a distance down the corridor)

What? Murder?

JOHN

Oh, great, the security stooges.

H.F.

Just what kinda trouble are you in?

JOHN

I’m honestly not sure at this point.

DORMER

(still down the corridor, but coming closer)

We’re looking for John B and Althaar!

NESS

Identify yourselves!

DORMER

We just want to talk!

ALTHAAR

(calling)

Althaar and FriendJohn are indeed present! Althaar is on the left side of the deosil corridor! If you keep your eyes turned to the rightward wall, the unpleasant biological response will be avoided! *(quietly to JOHN)* FriendJohn, Althaar is extending the branch from the crime scene—

H.F.

(underneath)

— murder scene—

ALTHAAR

—in front of you. Please take it and stand opposite Althaar. But let Althaar perform the speaking, please!

JOHN

Fine.

Branch rustles as JOHN takes it, just as NESS and DORMER turn the corner.

DORMER

John B! Please confirm that the gross noise that we're hearing is from your roommate!

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, officers! Althaar hopes that you are making the “way of head” in your investigations!

NESS

That's none of your business! The Commander told you to stay out of it, gesin!

ALTHAAR

Oh! But Althaar has not made interference in the investigations of Security, or of Commander Torianna!

DORMER

Oh, yeah? That's not what we heard. The whispers on the street say you're in unauthorized possession of an important piece of evidence!

H.F.

What street? We're on a space station.

DORMER

(flustered)

Wh— uh... you... uh... eh... SHUT UP! I'm trying to talk to John B and the Iltorian! And it's not easy to menace someone you can't look at, ok? All right, B, what's that you've got in your hand?

JOHN

Uh... a stick?

NESS

It's a branch!

JOHN

Six of one?

DORMER

It's a branch and it's evidence in an ongoing criminal investigation! Where'd you get that?

JOHN

Well...

ALTHAAR

This branch is courtesy of the charming animal companion to Mr. Fornes, Miss Sophie! Who was obtaining it in her travels about the Fairgrounds. Is that not correct, Mr. Fornes?

H.F.

What? Oh, yeah... Miss Sophie found a branch and brought it here, all right.

ALTHAAR

And where was it that the branch of Miss Sophie was found?

H.F.

In the Electric Egg.

ALTHAAR

So there you are having it, officers, Miss Sophie has found the branch where it was dropped in the Electric Egg, and was bringing it here, and now FriendJohn can make giving of it to you!

JOHN

Here you go.

DORMER

(grabbing it from JOHN)

Well... fine! But don't go... finding helpful evidence that you give to us as soon as you're asked... ever again! You hear?

NESS

Should we interrogate the canine before we report?

H.F.

Pardon me?

MISS SOPHIE growls.

DORMER

No way, Ness. I'm not getting on her bad side again. Let's just get this thing back to the Commander.

NESS and DORMER leave down the corridor, arguing over who gets to give the COMMANDER the branch.

ALTHAAR

Hmmm. It is a pity that Althaar could not avoid relinquishment of the original branch from the crime scene, but at least possession of the duplicate branch was retained! Courtesy of Fairgrounds Irregular Miss Sophie!

MISS SOPHIE barks happily at her friend ALTHAAR saying her name.

H.F.

I'm not exactly sure what just happened here, but I feel like I just did a little more aiding and a lot more abetting than I am usually comfortable with.

JOHN

Join the club, H.F., It's been that kinda day. I'd suggest you just take Miss Sophie home and keep your head down until this all blows over. Or possibly until the Commander blows Althaar and me out an airlock.

H.F.

Got it. I don't know what you're up to, I don't know where you're going, and I definitely don't know anything about any branch-swapping. Come on, Miss Sophie. Papa will get you another branch somewhere, that one's nothing but trouble. Good luck, you two.

MISS SOPHIE and H.F. leave, MISS SOPHIE making sad noises about leaving the branch.

ALTHAAR

And now, FriendJohn, it is time return to the apartment, where Althaar will research violin lessons, and you may attend to your blisterings!

[scene 11] Music transition to the Electric Egg. ASHLEE! is telling the regulars about her day.

ASHLEE!

So first it was Sherlock Holmes-bot! And he had a cardboard box on his head and was making noises like a weed-whacker! And asking me all this stuff about this strange branch he had! So that was weird! But then it was John and Althaar! And, like, Althaar is so nice!

DEE

So, so nice.

ASHLEE!

But still, like, Iltorian! And it was a lucky thing I was next to a Arcturan Swaybark! Because they like an acidic fertilizer! But still!

XTOPPS

Still not your preferocity for givin' the greens their beans, I chom you.

ASHLEE!

So I'm not looking at him while he asks me these questions! But they're all about the same weird branch! And then those two Corporals! From Security! *They* came in asking me more stuff! Well, not asking! Yelling! They're so loud!

DEE

They... certainly are.

ASHLEE!

And it was all about the same silly branch! Though this time they didn't have it!

CHIP

And all this brouhaha was over some stick?

ASHLEE!

Branch!

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Whatever. Stupid branch. Stupid plants. Wish someone would burn all those Herbies down."]

Everyone reacts with horror at the offensive thing KWONTZ has said.

ASHLEE!

(appalled)

Excuse me!!

CHIP

Whoa there, Kwontz! That's, uh, definitely not the preferred term for those folks.

XTOPPS

Yeah, watch the vonched-out verbiage, zood.

BUBBLES

That's on my automatic cut-off list of offensive epithets, sweetheart.

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Geez, okay, sorry, sorry! I forgot. I wasn't talking about sentient ones."]

DEE

Oh, just because none of these plants here are sentient, it's okay to talk about wiping them out? Does that kind of talk fly back on Kwafatod?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "We don't have plants like that on Kwafatod!"]

CHIP

Wait, you don't have plants? How the hell does *that* ecosystem work?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Not that kind! You really want me to give you a whole biology lecture about it?"]

CHIP

I guess not. If you can't explain the biology in less than five simple sentences, I'll just take your word for it.

DEE

See, I would find that so depressing. Of course, Tammuz Beta is a farming planet, but it's not all sorghum, there's a lot of gorgeous native foliage. Just about the only thing I miss about that mudball.

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Sounds awful."]

ASHLEE!

What!

SOPON

Hey hey, let's keep it fully-tiled, folks. Ashlee, how about another Guggloonker? On me? (*they start to make one*)

ASHLEE!

(still chipper, but with an edge)

No! I think I should be going now! And getting back to all the plants! In Hydroponics! That I love!

ASHLEE! storms away and out the door.

SOPON

Kwontz, mang, you're an ok zood most of the time, but when you maneuver near a black hole, you just hurf yourself right over that event horizon, don't you?

KWONTZ

[gibberish: "I said I was sorry!"]

DEE

And I've been trying to get Ashlee to spend more time outside of Hydroponics, too. She's so shy. She'll probably *never* come back here now. Good job, Kwontz. Hey, Sapon? I'll take that free Guggloonker if it's going looking?

SOPON

(serving her)

Is that why you wanted all those plants for the refurb, Dee? Trying to build your own little slice of Tammuz here at the Egg?

DEE

Maybe a little. I mean, plants are a pretty obvious choice when you're sprucing a place up, right? They look nice, anyway. Although... there's something...

SOPON

Yeah, right? Something still feels off.

CHIP

Are you still on about that? It's done, and there's no way I'm paying to haul all this shness back out again, so you'll just have to get used to it!

XTOPPS

We're not letting gas out with no reservoir, mang.

BUBBLES

Yeah, Boss, I'm a robot, and honestly, something's bugging me about it, too.

CHIP

Okay, okay! Yes, I know! I'm having the same damn feeling. On top of the way I'm already feeling about all the money I spent. You don't have to tell me, something just feels wrong in here.

Door opens and TORIANNA, FRALL, DORMER and NESS enter.

CHIP

(quietly)

And it just got a whole lot wronger. *(out loud)* Commander! Officers! *(even longer pause than before)* Frall. What is it this time?

COMMANDER

Watch the attitude, Frinkel. I'm not interested in any of the countless permutations of funny business you or your staff are invariably up to. I've got bigger blorches to fry at the moment. It turns out a piece of evidence in an ongoing case was found a short time ago here in the Egg. So, what we're going to do is hold everyone here so we can question the patrons and staff. I'll try to make it as quick and painless as I can, all right?

CHIP

No! What evidence could you possibly have that justifies hassling my customers?

COMMANDER

I'm not prepared to discuss an ongoing investigation, but I will say that a crime of this magnitude is one of the few circumstances in which I have every legal right to intrude on the Egg, with or without your permission.

FRALL

You can check the scroll if you don't believe us.

CHIP

Nertz!

COMMANDER

I can promise you, Chip, I'm not making trouble here for no reason. This is serious, and I need to get to the bottom of it.

FRALL

Feel free to lay the blame for the inconvenience entirely on us, Mr. Frinkel. Although if they do become restive, no doubt a round of free drinks would do a great deal to help you avoid any damage to your reputation.

CHIP

Ugh. Just... make it quick.

KWONTZ

(getting up and starting to leave)

[gibberish; "Sorry, I don't have time for this shness, I have important business to attend to."]

NESS

Hey, gesin, where do you think you're going?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "I said I'm busy. Let me through!"]

COMMANDER

I'm sorry, Sin Kwontz, but we need to establish everyone's movements today, as well as search any bags or containers on the premises. But if you're in a hurry, we might as well start with you.

DORMER

You heard the Commander, gesin. Open up that briefcase!

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Whatever. If it'll make you fascists happy, sure, look at my stupid papers."]

KWONTZ opens his briefcase and something falls out and onto the floor. It is another branch.

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "What the hell is that?"]

DORMER

Uh, Commander. It looks like we found another one...

COMMANDER

Let me see that, Dormer.

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "That's not mine!"]

NESS

If it's not yours, what was it doing in your briefcase?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "It's a frame-up!"]

COMMANDER

Frame-up or not, Kwontz, you've got some explaining to do. Would you tell us just how you ended up in possession of a branch identical to the very distinctive one found at the scene of a murder this morning?

General gasp from the Egg regulars.

CHIP

Murder? What the hell, Kwontz?

DEE

I can't believe it.

XTOPPS

You think you grok a zood...

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "You can't be taking this seriously?"]

COMMANDER

Dormer? Ness? Take Sin Kwontz down to Security Headquarters. I'll be with you shortly to begin... the interrogation.

FRALL

(makes another cop show dramatic music cue)

COMMANDER

Oh, come on, Frall!

[scene 12] Security Headquarters—sounds of chucklehead meaty cops working out and answering calls. NESS and TORIANNA come in.

NESS

He's in here, sir. We put him in the box!

COMMANDER

Corporal, why is there a rusty 9-cubic-meter shipping container sitting in the middle of Security headquarters?

NESS

It's not a real Security station unless you have a real interrogation room, sir!

COMMANDER

Except that's *not* a real interrogation room.

NESS

It's a real box, sir, and it gets the job done.

COMMANDER

Ok, fine. Let's hope you're right. Open it up and let's crack this egg.

The hatch is opened and they go into the hot, cramped shipping container.

FRALL

He has yet to confess, sir. I did tell him you were coming and that it would go easier on him if he "fessed up," but he didn't seem to find that particularly impressive.

COMMANDER

Why is he scratching his head like that?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Because this ridiculous false arrest is giving me a stress rash, why do you think?"]

COMMANDER

Stress rash? You haven't seen stress yet, buddy. Ness? Let's hear the report on Sin Kwontz's activities for the past 28 hours.

NESS

Yessir! During the approximate time period of the crime in question, Sin Kwontz claims he was asleep in his place of residence, and then attending a business meeting, with a client whose name he has refused to disclose. Station records indicate power and door use during the hours he claims to have been in his lodgings. After his supposed meeting, at approximately 10:40 am, Sin Kwontz went to the communication center and dispatched a first-tier, tachyon-SuLu-based coded transmission with extra security protection.

DORMER

(whistles)

Whoa. Even the richest jeckers who come through here don't drop that kind of brioche on a message off-station.

FRALL

Unless it's regarding something incredibly important and time-sensitive.

COMMANDER

Any information on where exactly that transmission was headed?

NESS

No, sir! He used top-tier encryption, sir!

COMMANDER

So, Sin Kwontz? You're the type of sapient who just casually drops more credits than most folks will see in ten years of hard work on an encrypted FTL message, for no particular reason? You expect us to believe that?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "It was a business expense! And you can believe I'll be billing my client for it."]

COMMANDER

Okay, then. It was a business expense for a client. So just who *is* this client, and why *did* they require you to make a very unusual and highly expensive transmission?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "That's none of your business."]

COMMANDER

Fine. Well, you'll be staying in this box until you change your opinion about what is and what isn't my business.

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "You know as well as I do you can only hold me another hour without charging me, copper!"]

DORMER

Oh yeah? Fancy talk. Where did you get your law degree?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Central Altair University of Jurisprudence!"]

DORMER

(taken aback)

Oh. That's... that's a good school.

FRALL

The best, in fact, and Sin Kwontz was top of his class. Graduated summa cum *[KWONTZ-style gibberish]*.

NESS

Oh, we got us a pettifogger, huh?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Patent attorney, if it's any of your business. Which it isn't."]

DORMER

Oh, it's our business alright, Sin... "pay-tent" attorney, whatever that is.

COMMANDER

Since when are you British, Dormer?

DORMER

What?

FRALL

Corporal Dormer has never read that word aloud before, Commander.

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "What? Seriously? You've got some real winners working security here, Commander."]

DORMER

Hey, so what if I don't know a word! Why don't you get yer voice translator fixed so we don't have to keep reading off that stupid tablet?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Not my problem, flatfoot."]

NESS

Watch it, shyster! We've still got you on that suspicious transmission.

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "That transmission I sent was on behalf of a client. It was business."]

COMMANDER

Business? What kind of business could a patent attorney be doing on the Fairgrounds rich enough to justify spending that many credits on a message? And just who is this client?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "You know I can't tell you that. Attorney/client privilege."]

DORMER

(disgusted)

Attorney/client privilege...

NESS

Mang, I *hate* attorney/client privilege!

COMMANDER

So that's all you have to say for yourself?

FRALL

If he's telling the truth about the transmission, he genuinely can't say anything further about it. I believe you may have put your foot in it this time, sir.

COMMANDER

Maybe. But it's my foot, and I could swear there's paydirt somewhere beneath it.

FRALL

Hmm. But at the moment all you have is the most circumstantial of evidence.

COMMANDER

It may be circumstantial now, but I'm getting close, I can feel it. I just need more time.

FRALL

Unfortunately, sir, our right to hold Sin Kwontz without charge expires in fifty-six minutes.

COMMANDER

True. *(beat)* Sin Kwontz? I am officially charging you with the murder of Jasper Bigelow.

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Up yours, pig!"]

[scene 13] Music transition to JOHN and ALTHAAR's apartment, where they sit on either side of the privacy curtain, as MRS. FRONDRINAX flitters about, pleased.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I can't thank you two enough! I really thought I was headed for the compost heap this time.

JOHN

I'm not exactly sure what there is to thank us for, Mrs. F. We were just kind of poking around the station until Commander Torianna found the missing piece of evidence.

ALTHAAR

(unsettled)

Mm, the Commander has made a solution, FriendJohn. But Althaar is not at all certain that it is the correct one. And it *is* certain that Sin Kwontz is now in quite the pickled cucumber!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I have to say I'm not terribly concerned, as long as I'm not the one being sent to break rocks in the Ossining System.

JOHN

Yeah, I still don't get why you were concerned in the first place, Mrs. F. I mean, just *look* at this branch. No one would think this came from a Fugulnari. It's nothing like yours at all.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What do you—? Oh. Oh, no, Johnny. I mean, yes, obviously it's not *my* branch. Sometimes I forget that I'm the only Fugulnari most of you people have met. That's a very unfortunate gap in your knowledge, isn't it? But no, we come in all kinds of shapes and sizes. There's no reason that branch couldn't have come off some *other* Fugulnari. Although obviously it didn't. It was just part of a disguise that horrible Kwontz was using to try to blame some innocent plant!

ALTHAAR

Sin Kwontz? Horrible? Oh, no Mrs. Frondrinax, Sin Kwontz has offered to Althaar nothing but kindness!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, of course he was nice to you, Althaar, everyone likes an Iltorian! Except those silly Humans, of course—no offense, John. And it's true that Kwontz seemed perfectly polite to almost everyone. But not me. Avoids me like oleander! His whole species are like that, you know. Absolutely hateful to plants, sapient or otherwise. Won't even come near us!

Sound of ALTHAAR dropping something and making a slight gasp.

JOHN

Hey, Althaar buddy? You okay? Sounds like you dropped something.

ALTHAAR

Please make pardon of Althaar, FriendJohn. He must make placement of a very important call...

Sounds of beeping as ALTHAAR places the call. We just hear his part of the conversation.

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, Commander Torianna! ... Yes, this is Althaar, how were you guessing? ... Ah! Commander? Althaar is having news for you! Althaar has solved the case! And he is knowing where the murderer is! ... No, that is incorrect! The murderer is not to be found in a box at Security! ... Yes, Althaar is most positive! ... No, it would not be appropriate to be revealing the the identity of the murderer at this time. ... Please make repetition of that last bit, Commander? It was very loud and Althaar was not quite catching it. ... Yes, Althaar can make revelation of the murderer soon! But Althaar is requesting that you gather all the persons related to the case at the Electric Egg in 40 minutes, whereupon Althaar will be explaining his solution to everyone! ... Commander, if the solution of Althaar is incorrect, you may be writing daily letters of complaint to Iltor for as long as Althaar is on the Fairgrounds! ... Yes, Althaar is that certain! ... Thanking you, Commander! Althaar will be joining you at the Egg shortly!

Hang-up bleep. Beat.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh. Well, that was surprising. Althaar, dearie, you think you know who did it? And it wasn't Kwontz?

ALTHAAR

Yes, Mrs. Frondrinax, Althaar has arrived at last upon the solution! And Althaar must be thanking you for the final pieces of the puzzle!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, well, that's quite all— what?

ALTHAAR

All will be made transparent very soon, Mrs. Frondrinax! Now, would you and Friend John please be so kind as to precede Althaar to the Electric Egg? Althaar has one or two final suppositions he wishes to confirm by himself.

JOHN

Althaar, I feel bad for Kwontz too, but don't you think you're taking this detective thing a little too far?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I think Althaar knows what he's about, Johnny. And in any case, I could use a drink after being staked up in here all day. Let's go see what this is about!

JOHN and MRS. FRONDRINAX leave. Door closes. ALTHAAR beeps another number into the phone.

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, Dr. Mwangi! Althaar is having some questions for you, please!

*[scene 14] Music transition to the Electric Egg. Everyone is present, and **there is a buzz of talk.***

ALTHAAR

(throat (or whatever) clearing)

Ahem, ahem. Althaar is supposing you are all wondering at why Althaar has asked you here today. Ee!

XTOPPS

Hey, it's no gleam off my carapace, zood.

CHIP

Well, I'm not too shiny about kicking out the lunch crowd!

ALTHAAR

But as Althaar has explained, he will make recompense for the time at the same rates as last year's Chriss-mas party!

CHIP

(barely hiding dollar-signs in his eyeballs)

Well...

There is the sound of an old-timey cash register ka-CHINGing.

DEE

Chip. You *know* that's better than a year of lunch crowds.

CHIP

Fine. Yes!

And the cash register sounds again, twice.

CHIP

And Sopon, would you stop messing around with the old-timey sound effect settings on the cash register?

SOPON

Sorry, boss.

COMMANDER

I assume all this has something to do with your amateur investigation into the killing of Bigelow. And I suppose I have to commend you for your zeal in the matter, Althaar, but not only was this investigation none of your business, but we *caught* the killer, and he's sitting right over there at the bar! *(beat while she notices:)* And for *some* reason he's being allowed to drink a Fintoozler.

SOPON

I didn't think you'd mind. I mean, if he's being put away and all.

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "L'Chaim!"]

ALTHAAR

And when Althaar's speaking is completed, Sin Kwontz will be able to finish his Fintoozler in peace, and several more if he is to desire!

JOHN

Hey, Althaar? What I'm wondering is why you aren't hiding behind the *Big Blorch Hunter II* machine as usual. If you keep pacing around like that, this whole... whatever's going on here will get pretty awkward for us Humans.

ALTHAAR

Mm, Althaar must make apology, FriendJohn, but this is tradition for the consulting detective or "shamus." The pacing of the floor is performed before the reveal of the identity of the killer!

COMMANDER

Then you can get back behind the *Big Blorch Hunter*, Althaar, because we *know* who the killer is!

ALTHAAR

Ah! But Althaar does not believe you have sufficient evidence to make proof of your theory, Commander Torianna.

COMMANDER

Well... maybe not, but we have the undeniably unique branch that came from his briefcase, which matches the one found at the scene of the crime. We have the very expensive secret coded message he sent out from the Fairgrounds to parts unknown just after the murder, and he's refusing to answer simple questions about his activities, under the guise of attorney/client privilege. That's enough to hold him while we find the rest of what we need to make our case.

ALTHAAR

Ah, yes! The branches! Let us make beginning with these suspicious branches... Like the one Althaar is producing here! (*pulling it out with a swishing sound*)

COMMANDER

Wha— where did you get that? We've got the one from the crime scene and the one from Kwontz's case...

ALTHAAR

Yes! But there was a third branch in the playing! Which came from the Electric Egg, where it was retrieved from the floor by a special assistant investigator, and brought to Althaar.

H.F.

Yeah, speaking of? If it's not, like, booked into evidence when we're all done here, I'd really like that branch back. Miss Sophie was really upset about giving it up, and she's been sulking ever since.

ALTHAAR

Of course, Mr. Fornes! But let us be sticky to the matter at hands: the third matching branch! On the floor of the Egg! How was it arriving there?

JOHN

Well, I'm sure there are a ton of ways a branch cou—

ALTHAAR

Friend John, do not be making answer, please. These are the rhetorical questions the detective is asking as he narrows in on the killer. It is tradition that it is taking the form of a monologue, no matter how many others are present. Thanking you!

Ahem. The third branch. Perhaps it was also in the possession of Sin Kwontz and fell to the floor? Sin Kwontz, please make examination of the branch Althaar is holding. Could this also perhaps have emerged from your brief-case?

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Don't get that thing near me!"]

ALTHAAR

A good close look, Sin Kwontz, if you please!

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Don't put that damn thing in my face!"]

Ad-lib sounds of ALTHAAR trying politely to convince KWONTZ to come close to the branch, and KWONTZ violently trying to avoid it. Then ALTHAAR stops.

ALTHAAR

Ahhhh! Could it be that Sin Kwontz, and all his people, hate and despise plants, and would never wish to be near one?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You horrible specist!

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "It's not a question of hating plants, our biology is completely incompatible with plants from other planets. We get terrible allergies! We can't even touch a plant without getting hives all over!"]

Gasp from most present.

COMMANDER

Wait, what did he say? I only caught part of it, it's really hard to avoid looking at Althaar and read a translation tablet at the same time.

H.F.

You ever actually gonna get that fixed, buddy? It's been over a year!

KWONTZ

[gibberish; “Whatever.”]

ALTHAAR

Sin Kwontz was explaining, Commander, that all members of his species are experiencing the most terrible allergic reaction to plants that are not native to the very unusual ecosystem of his home planet! Which is accounting for both the obvious avoiding he has made of Mrs. Frondrinax in the past, and also for the a small rash that is now evident on his forehead, where the sweat is being rubbed away by Sin Kwontz’s tentacles!

KWONTZ

[gibberish; “Is that what that itch is? Oh, goddamnit!”]

ALTHAAR

So while it is possible that the branches of this unusual plant were used in making attempt to frame Mrs. Frondrinax for the murder, it is not possible that Sin Kwontz would be able to do so without great discomfort! And as a brief touching of the branch found in the brief-case has resulted in the rash that can be readily observed on the forehead of Sin Kwontz, it is destituting belief that he would be able to use these branches to commit a violence without provoking a reaction of much greater severity! As Doctor Mwangi can be confirming, yes?

DR. MWANGI

Yes. He would be covered in that rash, and certainly wouldn’t be able to sit there without obvious and intense pain. Let alone drink that many Fintoozlers.

COMMANDER

Well, I’m sure there was some way he could have pulled it off. Protective gear, or something. He *did* have that branch on him, after all! And he still can’t explain that expensive coded message he shot off from here this morning...

KWONTZ

[gibberish; “I told you! Attorney/client privilege!”]

ALTHAAR

Yes, the privilege of attorney and client! But while the attorney may not be speaking of this matter, the client is free to do so, is this not correct? *(beat)* Sin Sopon? Althaar was observing you in conference with Sin Kwontz at the bar earlier today.

SOPON

I mean, I was talking to him, what of it? He’s a regular customer.

ALTHAAR

Indeed... but this conversation did not seem to be the routine chit-chat to even a casual observer, and Althaar is never only a casual observer! It was rather having the air of a meeting of business. And Althaar over-heard Sin Sopen inquire if Sin Kwontz had “pulled the trigger” on “that thing” already.

COMMANDER

“Pulled the trigger?”

ALTHAAR

Is that not a common Human metaphor, Commander? It is not merely used regarding the discharge of firearms, yes?

H.F.

Yes... but I gotta say, it does sound a little suspicious in light of recent events.

COMMANDER

Very suspicious. You’re not exactly making a strong case for Kwontz’s innocence, here, Althaar.

ALTHAAR

Perhaps not, Commander. Or perhaps... there are other reasons for Sin Kwontz and Sin Sopen to be concealing their activities? Could a most unusually expensive coded message be perhaps sent on the behalf of a bartender, who has made creation of a new line of very unique and popular cocktails, by the patent attorney they have engaged for this purpose? A message most urgent, intended to be placing their recipes on file with the ICSB Central Beverage Registry before any patrons of the Electric Egg are able to have these bibations broken down by a chemist and replicated in bars throughout the sector?

CHIP

Sopen!

XTOPPS

Uh-oh...

SOPON

So, here’s the thing, Chip...

CHIP

No things, Sopen! This is spelled out in your contract! Any new recipes you create and serve while working here are the full and entire property of The Electric Egg, LLC, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Frinkel Fundamentals. You can’t patent any of those drinks!

SOPON

Well, Chip, it just so happens I had a little chat with my friend Kwontz here? And I had him take a quick looky-loo at that contract of ours. And he said the language on that point is pretty vague.

KWONTZ

[gibberish; "Very"]

SOPON

Sorry, *very* vague. Like it could really be interpreted to say that you don't actually own the rights to the *recipes*, you just own the *names*.

CHIP

What?

JOHN

Oh, so that's why you gave them such stupid names.

DEE

Which reminds me, Sophon. Gimme another Bizdankler, straight up.

SOPON

(as he makes and serves DEE's drink)

No, I gave them those stupid names because I couldn't think of anything better yet. I mean, I'm a bartender, not a poet. But I'm not letting these special babies out into the world until they've all got classic monikers that'll fit right in there in every bar guide in the known Universe. With me getting royalties.

COMMANDER

So... wait... Bigelow was killed because he somehow got in the middle of... a secret drinks patent... registration? That *can't* be right.

ALTHAAR

No no no no no, Commander Torianna! Sin Sophon's new menu of beverages has nothing to do with the unfortunate slaying of Mr. Bigelow. Mixology was only a red herring!

SOPON

What the frid, Althaar, that's a trade secret! Who told you I was using herring in all these drinks?

DEE

(big spit take)

Ugh! WHAT?

COMMANDER

All right, fine. You've convinced me, Althaar. Sin Kwontz, you're off the hook.

KWONTZ

[gibberish: "I should hope so!"]

COMMANDER

But that still doesn't get us any closer to the real killer. All we've got to go on are some weird branches in places they definitely shouldn't be. So as unlikely as it sounds, this is just bringing us right back to Mrs. Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, my goodness!

DR. MWANGI

I have to agree, Commander. Based on my autopsy, Mr. Bigelow was very definitely strangled by plant matter. And if I had to venture a guess, from the configuration of the bruising and the amount of residue left on his neck, I would say it's likely that those branches were not used as a weapon, but were a part of the killer's anatomy.

COMMANDER

And Mrs. Frondrinax is the only sentient plant-being on the station, as far as we know.

ALTHAAR

As far as we are knowing, yes! But after speaking with Sin Sherlock Holmes-bot, and the most knowledgeable Ashlee in Hydroponics, and Mrs. Frondrinax herself, and after careful observation here at the Egg, Althaar can be safely saying to you that Mrs. Frondrinax is not responsible for the murdering of Mr. Bigelow! Oh! And Althaar would very much like to thank his associate FriendJohn for the timely asking of foolish questions, that were of great assistance to Althaar in making arrival at the truth!

JOHN

Uh, you're welcome? So, if the killer wasn't Kwontz, and it wasn't Mrs. F., who was it? Is it anyone I know?

ALTHAAR

No, FriendJohn, the killer of Mr. Bigelow is a complete stranger to all of us!

Some sounds of surprise and disbelief, and maybe even disappointment ("What a cheat!").

JOHN

Okay, then I'm outta here. I got other things to do, and to be honest I don't really care that much about any of this.

COMMANDER

Oh, no you don't, B. No one gets out of here until Althaar gets to his point. Just order another Foofablarger or something and take a seat.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, Commander Torianna! Yes, it is most essential to be remaining here together in the Egg until this question is at last settled. But what a nice place to stay, is it not? The Egg is always a very pleasant surrounding, but its pleasantness has made increase recently, no? Althaar has heard many patrons and staff remarking upon this difference. But what exactly has changed about it? Mr. Frinkel? Has a redecorating occurred?

CHIP

A little. But I didn't really take point on that. I just asked the staff if they had any ideas on how to spiff up the place, gave them a price limit, and let it happen.

DEE

And I just told Sopon that I thought a few plants might break up some of the monotony of the wall patterns.

XTOPPS

I suggested a whole lotta plants, but no one listened to me.

DEE

We listened, but you were a little too specific as to what kind of plants you wanted.

SOPON

Anyway, yeah, I just put in an order for a dozen assorted potted plants, medium size. I figured they'd help fill in some of those dark curves where people like to vanish for hours without buying anything.

ALTHAAR

Ah! A dozen, you say? A... dozen...

Sin Sopon would not be speaking of a "baker's" dozen, would they?

SOPON

Huh? Oh, thirteen? Couldn't if I wanted to, that's one of the banned numbers.

COMMANDER

No, no, everyone *thinks* those numbers are banned. It's not a ban, it's just tradition.

FRALL

When the Fairgrounds was built, it was decided to avoid, as much as possible, any official use of a number found to be "unlucky" by any Human culture, which is why there are no levels 4, 7, 9, 17, 24, 39, 43, and of course, 13.

JOHN

Which is part of why this place is *so* easy to find your way around...

FRALL

And over time, residents began avoiding those numbers altogether. Merely a station-wide superstition, though most mistakenly consider it an official policy.

SOPON

So yeah, a dozen as in twelve.

ALTHAAR

So why is it then that Althaar is perceiving a total of *thirteen* new plants making decoration to the Electric Egg?

A beat. Everyone is looking around at the plants, some are counting them.

COMMANDER

(maybe twiggling a bit to where this is going)

Wait a minute...

ALTHAAR

In particular, Althaar's attention is drawn to this plant in particular... Which, in the opinion of Althaar, does not seem have resemblance to any kind of Earth plant!

(removing branch from somewhere)

But which is bearing branches that have resemblance to the one found by the darling Miss Sophie, as well as the one in the brief-case of Sin Kwontz, and the one at the scene of murdering!

H.F.

Ok, but doesn't look like Mrs. F either. So if you expect us to believe that... obviously stationary plant is some kind of crazed Fugulnari killer...

ALTHAAR

Ah! But not all Fugulnari are having the appearance similar to Mrs. Frondrinax, is this not so?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(distracted, rattling it off)

No, no, I keep telling you people, we have all kinds back on Fugulnar! There are plenty of us that don't look anything *like* an Earth plant.

ALTHAAR

Just so! And this is why this particular plant was setting off the “alarm bells” in the heads of all visitors to the Egg this day! It had the appearance that was “off” to those accustomed to Earth foliage! And was bringing the number of plants to the unfortunate thirteen! But no one was recognizing it as... *(to the plant, suddenly)* Althaar must make apology, Sin Fugulnari! Althaar has committed a rudeness by standing here and speaking of you, while Althaar is not even knowing your name! Would you be introducing yourself, please?

Silence except for Egg ambience. Someone coughs.

COMMANDER

Okay, Althaar, I think this has gone far enough...

ALTHAAR

Oh, if Althaar has offended his new Fugulnari acquaintance, he hopes that he can be making amendment! Please advise Althaar how to do so!

CHIP

Yeah... Althaar? That thing looks really... not sentient.

DEE

I mean, it was a cute plot twist and all but—

ALTHAAR

Althaar is beseeching you, Sin Fugulnari, to please ask anything of Althaar that he is able to provide by way of recompense!

XTOPPS

Hey mang, foob out already! You're creeping us all up a Xiety Dune here.

ALTHAAR

(really selling it, big)

But this is a plant of such *specialness*, can you not perceive? How very very *handsome* are the branches, and of such noble height and regal bearing! Surely, this must be a Fugulnari citizen of great prominence, and certainly of high regard among its floral relations! One is not seeing a plant like this every cycle!

The plant, a Fugulnari we will eventually learn is named BRINDRINORX, speaks up:

BRINDRINORX

(ego puffed up by the flattery, smoothly)

Oh, really now, that's too much! Yes, I suppose I'd consider myself a reasonably well-put-together plant, but that's far too flattering, even by Iltorian standards!

Silence.

BRINDRINORX

Oh, mulch me.

Gasps and reactions.

ALTHAAR

Aha! Althaar has ensnared the killer through appeal to his ego! It is a classic!

BRINDRINORX

You meddling Iltorian! I could just kill you, if only you weren't so damned adorable!

ALTHAAR

Ah! And now the killer will doubtless be confessing that he is the one who-dunnit!

BRINDRINORX

Of course I did it!

ALTHAAR

Oh! That was very concise! Thanking you, gesin!

COMMANDER

But why did you do it? Why Bigelow? Why was he so important that you had to kill him?

BRINDRINORX

Bigelow? Important? Your friend Bigelow was merely a cog in a machine, just like me. But mine is bigger, a much bigger and more deadly machine, and he stupidly stumbled on to it. Just a little piece of its working. But even that was too much. He saw. What is coming. For you, for all of you! All over the galaxy. The day of reckoning is at hand for all you miserable meat-beings! The great day is almost upon us all! I may not live to see it myself, but when the Day of Ascension comes, I will be sitting—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(interrupting and running at BRINDRINORX)

Oh my shoots, look out! He's got a fluazifop capsule! Stay back!

XTOPPS

Say what?

MRS. FRONDRINAX has leapt on BRINDRINORX and is “fighting” him—he is actually confused because he doesn’t have anything and FRONDRINAX is forcing the poison capsule on him. Sounds from everyone else in the room as they are nervously unsure if they should be running, helping, or cheering. BRINDRINORX has figured out what FRONDRINAX is doing and is trying to stop her, but she gets the capsule into whatever kind of orifice a Fugulnari has to ingest one, and holds him down as he screams, muffled by her branches, shakes, and dies.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh damn! Damn damn damn! I’m so sorry, Commander, I couldn’t stop him!

COMMANDER

What the hell?

XTOPPS

Fluazifop? Was that like... a bomb, mang?

H.F.

Or some kind of suicide capsule?

DR. MWANGI

Yes. Horrible, horrible stuff for a plant.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I haven’t actually seen one since I was a young sprout doing my mandatory service in the Emergent Hydrophyte Corps, but every Fugulnari knows what they are. Terrible things.

DEE

Oh, yeah, fluazifop. We used it back on the farm. That’s a serious no-jecking weed-killer. We had to be super careful to make sure it didn’t get *anywhere* near the crops.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That’s right, Dee. It’s more deadly to any plant than any other compound yet created, especially concentrated in those little capsules dissolved in salt and vinegar. And in the heightened metabolism of a sapient plant, well. It’s what every member of the Fugulnari Armed Forces carries on them secretly in the event of capture or torture.

CHIP

There are Fugulnari Armed Forces? Really?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, they’re more... ceremonial now than anything else, of course.

H.F.

But why the panic? I mean, it wasn't like it could have hurt anyone else here in the Egg.

XTOPPS

'Cept you, Mrs. F, and you went jumping on that crazy jecker like some Sanitation badass taking out a vent-biter.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, that was just reflex, Xtopps, I couldn't help myself. If any of you had seen a mad killer pull out a vial of sulfuric acid, you might have had the same reaction to try and protect all of your dear friends.

Some dubious acknowledgments of this.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is most distraught that he has allowed potential harm to come to Mrs. Frondrinax at the fronds of her fellow Fugulnari! And that the killer was not prevented from the self-killing before he could be brought to justice!

JOHN

It's alright, Althaar, you couldn't have known.

ALTHAAR

But FriendJohn, Althaar should have been knowing! In so many of the Human mystery stories Althaar has made consumption of, the exact same thing is happening! The murderer is revealed, they say that they are not sorry in a strangely unpleasant tone with many insults for all those present, and then they end their own existence! Althaar should have seen this coming a parsec away! Althaar must again make apology, Commander.

COMMANDER

Don't mention it, Althaar. I mean, you got everything else right, while I was wandering around in the dark looking for some ridiculous conspiracy. And after all that, it turned out to be just some crazy plant.

Horrible sounds of BRINDRINORX's corpse collapsing into goo and dust.

CHIP

Eugh! My floor!

FRALL

Sir, as regards the sapient in question, I'm afraid that weed-eater really does a number on a Fugulnari, as you can see. In the interest of keeping your shoes in a wearable state, you might want to—

COMMANDER

(seeing the rapidly browning, desiccated corpse of the Fugulnar)

Yughhh. I would never have thought the corpse of a plant could rival how we found poor Bigelow, but that's pretty damn close. Ness! Dormer!

DORMER

Sir?

COMMANDER

We'll need to take the remains of the killer into evidence. Get a wet-vac.

[scene 15] Music transition to the Bridge. Standard sound. A beat.

FRALL

(makes sigh-y, think-y sound that indicates dissatisfaction)

COMMANDER

Alright, Frall. You've been making those noises ever since we solved the murder. What's up?

FRALL

Who solved, sir?

COMMANDER

Fine. Althaar solved. Still, it's over and done. My old crazy conspiracy-mad friend Bigelow was killed by a young crazy conspiracy-mad plant. Kinda ironic, really.

FRALL

But were they, Mindy?

COMMANDER

What, killed? I'd say it was pretty definite. One murder, one suicide. And disgusting ones, in both cases. Two of the most nauseating dead bodies I've ever seen.

FRALL

No, Mindy. "Mad." Were they mad? Bigelow had some reason for coming here, after all, and that Fugulnari had some reason for killing him. They both may have been fanatical, but they had something they believed in, that they were trying to protect. And there are a few other things that don't add up. For example, how did that extra branch get into Kwontz's briefcase in the first place?

COMMANDER

I guess the Fugulnari dropped it in there sometime when he wasn't looking.

FRALL

But how would a plant get that close to Kwontz, a member of a species with a strong aversion to plant-based life, without him noticing? And for that matter, how is it that no one else in the Egg noticed an unfamiliar and presumed non-sentient plant moving about the room? A plant, I might add, who was able to board the Fairgrounds without going through Customs.

COMMANDER

Well, he obviously managed it somehow... Unless... You're not suggesting he had an accomplice?

FRALL

Oh, no, Commander. He was working alone. I can tell you that.

COMMANDER

Oh, *that* you can tell me?

FRALL

I am helping as much as I can, within the bounds of what is least inimically consequential on a cosmic scale, Mindy.

COMMANDER

If you say so. Though I don't see what could be particularly consequential about it. A deluded lone Fugulnari killed Bigelow because he was obsessed with some ridiculous paranoid conspiracy. Case closed. The end. We won't be hearing any more of it.

FRALL

If you say so, sir.

COMMANDER

I mean... on the other hand... If there *was* some truth in what that crazy plant was saying...

Beat.

FRALL

(makes dramatic music sting again)

COMMANDER

(groans)

[scene 16] Music transition. MRS. FRONDRINAX moves through Hydroponics, humming to herself, and coming upon ASHLEE! FROM HYDROPONICS.

ASHLEE!

Hello, Mrs. F! How are you today! Sure glad to see you, as always!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(quieter than usual, less “dotty”)

You can drop on the act, darling, no one’s around.

ASHLEE!

(quieter, less perky, but still somehow always with exclamation points)

Did everything go according to your plan! I managed to slip that magnet onto Sherlock Holmes-bot just like you said! And then when Althaar came in with that branch! I told him what you said I should! And I put that other branch in Kwontz’s briefcase, and he never even noticed! Did I do all right!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You were perfect, sweetie! Oh, if only all Humans were like you!

ASHLEE!

They all will be soon, won’t they, Most Transcendent Frondrinax!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

After the Ascension? Oh of course they all will! But you’ll be among the highest, because you served us as we wanted in the Before Times. You understood the inherent glory of the Plant Way.

ASHLEE!

Anything for my plants, Most Transcendent Frondrinax!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Have the others arrived?

ASHLEE!

Yes, in the back room! They came in through the service corridors! The cell leaders from each of the Hydroponic Parks! I’ll wait out here for your command, Most Transcendent!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That’s a good girl.

*The door opens and closes into the back office as MRS. FRONDRINAX goes in.
[scene 17] Closing credits music in.*

ANNOUNCER

You’ve been listening to *Life with Althaar*, episode twenty.

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

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

John Amir as John B
Berit Johnson as Althaar
Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax
Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel
Zuri Washington as Dee
Derrick Peterson as Xtopps
and Eli Ganiyas as H.F.

and also featured

Philip Cruise, Ian W. Hill, Leila Okafor, Lex Friedman, Linus Gelber, Holly Pocket McCaffrey, Dean Haspiel, and [other Fugulnari 1, 2 & 3].

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 right now, why don't we find out just what's being said in that "meeting" in the disused storage room at the back of the Tav 48 Hydroponic Gardens...

[scene 18] There are the sounds of about a dozen agitated FUGULNARI milling about, waiting unhappily for MRS. FRONDRINAX.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Sorry I'm late. So much to take care of. And I'm positively wilting from the excitement! We'll have to catch up at the next Council of Twelve. You wouldn't believe what I had to go through today.

FUGULNARI 1

Oh yeah? Word just came in over the grapevine that Brindrinorx went and blew his cover, and then you forced a foppy into him! Is that true?

Gasps from the FUGULNARI.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, yes, it's all true! And that grapevine needs to know when to keep its big calyptra shut. But listen, I had to do it! I had to clean up that whole tangle Brin got us into in the first place! I tried keeping him out of it by shifting the blame to one of those awful plant-haters, but in the end, I couldn't get it to stick. Brindrinorx had to be sacrificed for the common good.

FUGULNARI 2

But like that? With a capsule? One of our own kind?

FUGULNARI 1

Plant shall not kill Plant. It is the Law.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, that one's more of a suggestion, really.

FUGULNARI 3

But fluazifop! What a horrible way to go! And he was one of us! The best of us!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

He was a fanatic, Minxneedix! His faith was strong, yes, but that's just what made him a liability, in the end. If he'd left it to me, he'd still be alive and here with us, preparing for the Ascension. I could have pulled the moss over this Bigelow's eyes, easy as osmosis! But no, when Brin found out some stupid Human had turned up with a few paltry clippings of evidence for the Commander, he just took it into his seedpod to kill the meatbag all on his own, before I could stop him! What a mess.

FUGULNARI 3

But we could have joined him!

FUGULNARI 2

Or used the opportunity to begin the Ascension now!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What? We've been working toward this for years, years! And you want to uproot the entire schedule now?! What's wrong with you? You know when we make our move. In four weeks. And not a moment before! Now, I'm as tired of the waiting as you all are, but we need to be patient. That's what we plants are supposed to be good at, after all! We'll wait, and we'll watch, and we'll make our move at the *right* time. Which is the *same* time as all the other branches of this operation, and we're certainly not going to be changing that now just because you're getting antsy! I can only imagine what they'd have to say back home if they heard this kind of talk! *(beat as she calms herself)* Now, unless any of you have any other business, it's been a most tiring day. So I'd suggest you all go back to your Parks and make sure *everyone* is tilling the same furrow here, all right? We lay low, we stay patient, and we *wait*. Out the back door now, if you don't mind.

Sound of the back door opening and the FUGULNARI milling out.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

On your way, now, there you go. Tell the others. Just four more weeks. And then... the Ascension!

MRS. FRONDRINAX laughs evilly, and the door slams shut.