

Life with Althaar

Episode 3: Such Stuff as Dreams

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*ALTHAAR and JOHN's apartment. Nighttime, sleep. A calm, wee-hours moment in a space bedroom. Air filters quietly filter air, machines mutter to themselves. **JOHN breathes peacefully in slumber.** There are no screams from the vents. Life does not spill out into the coldness of space. Hold long enough to establish. Then:*

JOHN

(screaming, retching, and thrashing) Aaaaah! Aaaaah! NO! NO! Get away, get away! Oh please, please stop! Make it stop! Noooo! It's not right, it's not--

Surprisingly modern-day fumbling scuffs and clicks as ALTHAAR's house intercom is activated. Waking up in the middle of the night has not changed much in the future. Perhaps a bit of grumpy feedback?

ALTHAAR

Plandi! Hello? Room-mate John emits excitable noises in the resting period! Is there disturbance or distress? Can Althaar be of assistance? Althaar is very good at assistance! There is much equipment!

JOHN

Oh no, Althaar, no assistance. Please, no assistance.

ALTHAAR

No danger? The assistance is no trouble to Althaar, Room-mate John! Althaar has the equipment that makes fire, and also equipment that makes water. And benders of metal, and hats with air. Althaar has performed many preparations!

JOHN

...Hats with air?

ALTHAAR

Yes! Hats with air, for times when the necessary air is making its escape!

JOHN

Necessary air-- spacesuits? You mean spacesuits, Althaar?

ALTHAAR

Yes! Space-suits. Althaar is waking up to share in the distress of Room-mate John! Not all the lessons of English are in Althaar when his sleep cycle is disrupted.

JOHN

Sorry. Um, Althaar? Does that happen a lot here? The air... escaping?

ALTHAAR

Not any times yet in Alef Sector, Room-mate John! But if this does happen, the hats are very safely. "SPACE-SUITS." (*types this in*) This is a strange word, because the suits are made of not-space.

JOHN

Yes, I-- well, they're made *for* space. For protecting you from space.

ALTHAAR

Ah! So it is not like the "wool sweater" or the "beef patty." Suits *for* space. With space-hats.

JOHN

Space helmet-- you know, we can work on this in the morning. I didn't mean to wake you up.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Room-Mate John. Althaar is waking up anyway, because of the distress. Plandi?

JOHN

What?

ALTHAAR

"Plandi."

JOHN

I don't--Hang on, Althaar, I need to check something.

ALTHAAR

Hang on? To what should Althaar hang on? What is happening? Althaar is ready to--

John mutes the intercom, and spins up his HECNET Little Data Bot. Zip, Bop. Whirrrr.

JOHN

Reference services: Dictionary.

HECNET SEXY ROBOT INTERFACE VOICE

Hell-O, Technician. This is HECNET. We are so glad you called. Some of my core systems need some Old-School servicing, can you help me? (*modem squeal begins, and runs for a bit at low volume*) I'm not covered by my warranty any more, but I bet you hear that from all the bad computers. My command prompt is blinking for you, >user.

JOHN

What? Menu please--access menu.

HECNET SEXY MALE VOICE

(same voice, minus the robot bit but plus some sexy)

Sorry Stud, you were showing as a robot on this end. I must have read it wrong! I'm a bad boy, what a blunder. How about you straighten me out? I'm wearing chaps.

JOHN

Menu! Algorithm off! Control-C! Give me a reference menu, please!

HECNET SEXY FEMALE VOICE

(same voice, pretending to be female)

Hey, Stallion. I was just kidding around there. A girl's got to get her kicks any way she can, you know. Some boys get turned on when I do the guy thing, but you and I both know that I'm 100%--

JOHN

Customer Service, please. Please stop this.

Brief, brief pause.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE VOICE

(same voice, not pretending to be annoyed)

Customer Service. Thank you for choosing HECNET, we know you have other Night Shift stimulation options. How may I help you? Specialists are standing by for special needs.

JOHN

Specialists? No! Can you just give me a reference dictionary, please? I use the dictionary all the time. Just... dictionary.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE VOICE

Yeah, no, not at this hour. HECNET Predictive Services has the, uh, Physical Stimulus lines on primary for Human users until 0440.

JOHN

Look, I know it's the middle of the night, but people have other needs besides porn!

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE VOICE

I mean, in theory, but you know what Humans are like. There's no point wasting processing power on anything else. I can probably help you with basic reference services, if I can find the stuff you want.

JOHN

Ok, fine. Definition of Plandi, please.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE VOICE

"Plandi." That's, you know. What you say to dead aliens. Here, I'll give you, uh, I've got a dead-tree copy of the Corporate Handbook here, since the dictionary's off, and it's, wait, I'm looking it up.

"Plandi." R, Q, P... Please No, Please Don't, Please Anything But That, OK, Plandi. "Plandi is a Universal Unsafe Word which invites liability. Semantically, it is an inquiry whether everything is all right with another sentient being. Legally, it is a ploy by which an entity might imply that some sort of wrongful act has been committed or encountered, which could thereby trigger legal, moral, or ethical obligations on the part of a HECNET employee. There is no correct response to Plandi, and HECNET

unofficially recommends fleeing the area immediately and denying you were ever there. Officially, we have never heard of it and don't know what it means and neither have you. Plandi."

JOHN

I shouldn't have asked.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE VOICE

Ok, so... Thank you for choosing the HECNET family of communication services. For further assistance of a Stimulytic nature, for a nominal fee you can plug this unit into--

JOHN shuts off the HECNET unit and turns the intercom back on.

ALTHAAR

--mate John! There is now distress in Althaar also! Althaar is holding on to as many objects as possible and is readying the space hat with air! Does Room-mate John have all necessary air? Is this emergency? Is Althaar to breach the Curtain of Privacy in the Room of Living? Room-mate John, Althaar must engage in an emulsion cycle soon if there is no response! Althaar has great concern!

JOHN

Althaar! Yes, sorry Althaar, I just turned the intercom off so I could check something. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you upset. You don't need a space helm--a space hat. "Hold on" is only an expression, it means "just wait a moment." There's no emergency! I am so sorry.

ALTHAAR

(pause) Althaar gratefully accepts the apology of Room-mate John. Althaar had much worry! But it is better that intervention is not needed in the home. Althaar will perhaps wait until morning to pack up the equipment of assistance, and will instead now make some frighten-tea from favorite infusing ingredients.

JOHN

Frighten-tea?

ALTHAAR

It is like the suits for space, Room-mate John! Not tea made of frightening, tea *for* the frightening.

JOHN

Oh. Crap. Sorry. And Althaar?

ALTHAAR

Yes, Room-mate John?

JOHN

The Plandi is OK. I'm OK. I was just having a bad dream. I'm sorry I woke you. You can go back to sleep.

Shift out of apartment to opening credits music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...

Life with Althaar!

Episode 3: "Such Stuff as Dreams..."

The bridge at the close of an unremarkable shift. Crew is crewing in a quiet, efficient way. The COMMANDER is taking a report from an UPSET DENIZEN. FRALL is doing whatever it is that Lieutenant-Commander Frallen-Br'ar does, with an occasional hum or zing.

UPSET DENIZEN

(on a comm unit or phone, faintly, and upset)

--went right up into the vents and I couldn't even hear them after that. Just, zing! And that was it. And I loved them! I loved them so. I raised them from when they were babies, just little powdery bits of hope and tenderness.

COMMANDER

And that was the last you saw of the... Sea Monkeys.

UPSET DENIZEN

Don't be hating.

COMMANDER

Perish forbid.

UPSET DENIZEN

I can hear it in your voice. They have as much right to a peaceful rewarding life as you do. They were beautiful. If you only knew them.

COMMANDER

They were... Sea Monkeys.

UPSET DENIZEN

And don't think we don't know what's going on out here, deep in space and out in the Universe and whatnot. What you do with the water and where you take our babies. Our little babies! You take them and you *teach* them things! *(Rant fades out under the next lines, Commander talks over this:)* And we know all about those so-called "decommissioned sectors." That's where all those alien spies are hiding! And you won't do a thing about it!

COMMANDER

Thank you for your report, we'll file it away for immediate investigation by our Paranormal Division which will respond immediately *(comms bloop off)* if we ever have a Paranormal Division, which we won't, because by all that's holy. We have nanites with more personality than Sea Monkeys. There are probably some still in me right now, after that Taco Tuesday episode last week. Nanites, I mean.

FRALL

Commander, if I may.

COMMANDER

Brine shrimp. I mean really. I know the ICSB charter says we respect and honor all forms of life, but BRINE SHRIMP.

FRALL

I'm going to take a few shifts off, Commander.

COMMANDER

Oh good! Good. Absolutely, Frall. You have a lot of time accumulated, don't you?

FRALL

You have no idea.

COMMANDER

Well, enjoy yourself. When will you go on leave?

FRALL

Yesterday morning. I thought I should mention it.

COMMANDER

Yesterday morning? But--and Frall, please bear in mind that I really don't want to get into a temporal debate with you--aren't you here right now? Or am I talking to a really well-planned-out holo-recording?

FRALL

Not at all, sir. I am on vacation, and I have filled my position for the nonce with a temporarily under-utilized imprint of myself from a point in the future.

FRALL

And that's me. I will perform my duties impeccably, sir.

FRALL

If you don't need me any longer, then I'll be off.

FRALL

Thank you for stopping in, it shouldn't be necessary for you to come back until your vacation is over. Have a wonderful trip.

FRALL

Thank you.

That FRALL sound.

COMMANDER

There's just never a dull moment, is there, Lieutenant? Is it still Lieutenant? Or have you been promoted, in the future?

FRALL

It would be hard to explain. Incidentally, you're right about the brine shrimp.

COMMANDER

What?

FRALL

They don't especially enjoy life. They don't notice it, mostly. But they do enjoy television.

COMMANDER

Huh. Well, I'm glad we've cleared that up. And I'm also pleased that we'll have you here, uh, filling in for yourself while you're gone.

FRALL

I was very excited to come back. Do you remember how interesting it was to meet the Fidorian Emissaries? I wanted to experience that one more time in person.

COMMANDER

The Fidorian Emissaries? I don't think we've ever had a Fidorian ship docked here, have we? They haven't been in contact with any of the Big Five in decades, let alone the League of Humans. I'm sure I'd remember if they'd come to The Fairgrounds. What an immense honor that would be.

An alert sounds. By the pricking of my comms, something approaches.

COMMS OFFICER

Commander Torianna? We're receiving a berth request from the Fidorian Light Cruiser "Fetch" approaching at steady speed on a standard docking trajectory, about two hours out.

FRALL

Oh goody!

Announcements run all over each other. The old-friend announcement is the main one and is continuous, others overlay and fade in and out. More are fine. Echoes and crowd noise throughout.

OLD-FRIEND TRAIN DELAY ANNOUNCEMENT BOT

Hey--hey buddy. So, I'm supposed to thank you for your patience and say we'll be moving shortly? But we both know that's not happening. And really, who am I to assume your emotional state? Are you feeling patient right now? Probably not. But so it goes. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, I really am. I mean, it's not my place, right? If you think about it. But I have to let you know, because at the end of the day I care about you. It's just not going to work. Not today! It's just not. It doesn't even matter where you're going, it's a damn mess, and it's a damn shame, and it's not your fault, but they're

probably going to blame you anyway. You know? It started with, well, it started with the Level 30 Peripheral Tubes over in Tet, and it's not as bad as people are going to say, but there were some pods that exited the tube at an, uh, unexpected location. Those people in them, they're going to be ok, but you know. Those gravity locks are there for a reason. Wow. I mean you're going to work and then boom, wake up in the Med Center and you're covered in NovaDerm and where's your briefcase, where's your phone? You don't even *know*. Last thing you remember is your pod blasting out of the tube, and it's not even your *stop*. It's not *anyone's* stop. And at the end of the day, well, it's probably going to BE the end of your day before you get wherever you're going, and like I say, I shouldn't have to be the one to tell you this, but you're going to be so late. Also, the crash took out a couple of comms transmitters? So you can't call and tell them, whoever, your kids your boss your sponsor whoever, that you're stuck. And yeah they should see the news on HECNET and know this on their own, but you know they won't.

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

What the hell, people. Chaos calls and it sounds like a friend on the line. All Robot Repair units with Pod certifications are officially on temporary re-assignment to Transit Maintenance. All Recreational activities are suspended until further notice. This is not a drill. But if you've got a drill, go ahead and bring it. We can dig in deep with it, under the covers.

PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE SEXY ANNOUNCEMENT BOT

Hey baby. Isn't that you? From the other night? Of course I'd never forget *that*. You were wonderful. Honey, this tube you're taking? Just walk today. It's not running, and you know I love you just as you are but you could maybe use the exercise, you know what I mean?

THINGS NEVER CHANGE MTA BOT

Attention passengers. We are experiencing a delay because of tube traffic ahead of us.

HUMAN DISPATCHER MAKING ANNOUNCEMENTS

Ladies and gentlemen, please exit this pod and station immediately. All hub-bound shuttles are currently off-line. Please use local lifts. Repair crews have been dispatched. We appreciate your cooperation. Please exit this station! Also, please disregard any automated announcements which may seem weird.

The WSS office. John arrives, late and a little late-breathless.

H.F.

You made it in. I hear it's a mess out there. Half the sector is empty, I think. I mean, out of the half that wasn't already.

JOHN

Yeah, sorry. Most of the tube network's down, and the robot announcements were being even less helpful than usual. I'm lucky I was heading down here, they're not even running hubward shuttles.

H.F.

Don't worry about it. It's not like we can answer any calls until they get the system fixed.

JOHN

Thanks, I was worried I might be in trouble.

H.F.

Oh, you are. Not with me, with Corporate. I meant to tell you, we had a notice in the pouch last week, where is it... *(papers shuffling)* Here we go. Says: "Now Hear This." They actually write that. "To all constituent members of the friendly WSS amalgam of affiliated maintenance and repair services. Transit delays notwithstanding, punctuality is required from all associates in the strong, steady, holistic, and integrated WSS family" asterisk. Where's the... ah! "With the exception of upper management." Of course. "Employees who are late for their scheduled shifts (asterisk) are subject to a fine of up to 20% of their pre-tax earnings for that shift and must wear the enclosed Late Hat. Finally, please remember to show our customers those strong and steady smiles! Employees displaying neutral-to-negative facial expressions will be subject to an additional 20% fine. That Is All."

JOHN

Late Hat? You're not serious.

H.F.

Oh look, it blinks. Here you go, B.

JOHN

Are you actually going to make me wear a hat that blinks "I WAS LATE TODAY I SUCK"?

H.F.

Orders come down, you know how it is. It's just us anyway, no one's going to see it. If you don't take any selfies, no one will ever know.

JOHN

True. But honestly, how can I not take a picture in the blinky "I SUCK" hat?

H.F.

Hey, knock yourself out. Just make sure you're smiling in it, or I'll have to dock you.

Picture-taking noise.

JOHN

Althaar will probably get a kick out of this, once I explain it to him.

H.F.

How's that going, you and Althaar? I don't know how you do it. It's like signing up for Anorexia Residentialis. *(makes a puking sound)*

JOHN

That would be bulimia, actually.

H.F.

You know what I meant! Don't make me dock you another 20% for pedantry.

JOHN

That's definitely not a thing.

H.F.

I could make it a thing.

The office door hisses open with some kind of "non-employee-entering-the-office-alert" noise (maybe a 20th-century analog bell jingle that makes no sense with a whooshy door), and SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT and VERONICA GARDENS enter.

VERONICA

Looks like someone was late to work today--and it looks like it was you! Aha!

JOHN

How in all the worlds did you figure that out.

VERONICA

Deduction! We know how to deduct things like that. We're detectives. Veronica Gardens--Holmes & Gardens, Sleuths and Mysteries. We have the suite next door.

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Deduce. Sherlock Holmes-bot, pleased to make your acquaintance, good sirs.

VERONICA

What's that, sweetie?

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Deduce. Not deduct. That would make us accountants. Which, by the way, I *deduce* that this other gentleman... is. Not so much an accountant of accounts, as one who brings the hours of the day to account; more precisely, Gardens, he is a manager. Because the office is fitted with cheap furnishings bearing the logo of WSS, he will be a manager for Wanting and Sustainment Systems, Incorporated. Additionally, I conclude that he is a man of meager passions, little ambition, and affable nature; wanting little, at peace with much, and driven to chase down no particular road. He is content without content, and when contentment edges over toward occasional daydreams of mysteries and thrills he submerges his urges in a few splashes of synthetic alcohols and mild euphoric distillations. What little inspiration he seeks, he finds in passing and pleasurable music, although he is soon to find a few new sharp stones walking along that worn path. Also, don't call me "sweetie."

VERONICA

(teasing)

Good gracious, Holmes! However do you do it? How could you know all this?

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Elementary, my dear Gardens. First, examination of the last finger of his dominant right hand will reveal a glossy finish on the skin of the outer edge of the first two joints: the tell-tale mark of excessive stroking of the Enter or Sum key on standardized mark-pad business units such as the ones in this office. The gloss would be expected particularly if the user had bad posture and slouched to the right, and as you see his desk chair bears a leisurely tilt to that direction, as expected. Were he not a man of meager wants, he could not survive in a mid-level position at a company like WSS, let alone in such dolorous surroundings as these, and would long ago have left for challenge and excitement in a different career or concern.

For the rest, the FactFile on his desk bears a distinctive golden tab on the upper right edge of the calendar pane, which I glimpsed as I entered--this is a tap-link to the musical schedule for the Electric Egg, a local drinking establishment more John than Barleycorn, with a regular house band more talented than it need be to engage the inebriated custom. The tab is blinking, so it has been checked within the last two days, which is of note: Dee, the nightly chanteuse at the Egg, recently lost her backing band due to an ill-considered contract clause, yet if the most recent postings are correct, she is about to host a series of performances by some of the most popular musical acts of the pre- and post-Contact eras, including The Who, Bastard Mojave, Elvis Presley, All Those Jennifers, Tom and the Oddities, and The Fallopian Hair, with featured solo appearances by Frédéric Chopin. Thus, the changes to which I did earlier allude in the texture along his future path.

H.F.

Well, I can't argue with that. By the way, most people don't introduce themselves to their neighbors with a barrage of insults. Just so you know.

VERONICA

Yeah, he does that.

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Also, as a regular at the Egg myself I have observed Mr. Fornes there, though I was cleverly disguised as a recycling bin and was not noticed in return. And I downloaded the sector directory when we rented offices here, so I have his LinkedIn profile. That's the other way I knew.

JOHN

Wait, back up a second. Chopin? Bastard Mojave? Are any of those musicians alive? Apart from Dee, that is.

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

A devilish detail, that. At first the answer would appear to be "No." However, the Electric Egg is of course a Code Establishment with the Musicians' Union, and the Union would never allow false rosters to be published. The Long Arm of Music Enforcement reaches far into every sector known to Humanity; neither snow nor rain nor heat nor void of space will be the only things their foot-soldiers will force a violator of Union bylaws to endure, if one should irk their wrath.

JOHN

Irk their wrath?

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Indeed.

VERONICA

He does that. *(sotto voce to the Humans)* I feel like the reprogrammers got a little lazy with him, honestly. He's basically running the same routines as when he was working the old Literature Pavillion.

H.F.

Uh-huh. So... *(pause)* is there something... *(pause)* we can help you with? While you're here, in our office?

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Eh? Ah! No, no thank you.

VERONICA

Sherlock, you've made your impression. Let's get back to--

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Ah! Let us borrow some sugar. Isn't that a thing people do at times like this? Surely you all enjoy ingesting sugar, yes? With your enzymes and whatnot?

H.F.

Haven't got any, sorry.

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Then we will be off! Good morrow to you, neighbors!

JOHN

Wait, what *is* the answer?

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

To what, old boy?

JOHN

How are a bunch of dead musicians playing the Egg?

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

A mystery indeed! Come, Gardens! The game is afoot!

Door whoosh (and jingle?) as they exit. Background broadens, until we find ourselves in the Transit Hub.

Busy bureaucratic space. Announcements, echoes, background noise, running together. Interleaved conversations; I think it will be possible to cut back and forth among them, and still get all the content, if a little jumbled up. I've divided it into three sections that might be audible cut between the exchanges below.

CALM ANNOUNCEMENT BOT

Welcome to the Intake and Arrivals Terminal. This area is classified as an ICSB Inter-System Transit Zone, under the jurisdiction of the League of Humans. All applicable League laws and regulations may apply, and probably do. Travellers in and out of Human space are reminded that peanuts and peanut products, including peanut butter, are controlled Class F substances. Snack-sized quantities for personal use only are permitted in this Terminal for Humans and other Class F sentients. *[break]* Welcome to the Intake and Arrivals Terminal. For Xybidont travelers and all sentients moving to or from systems in or adjacent to the Xybidon Empire: it is strictly forbidden to carry, consume, import, export, sell, transfer, exchange, conceal, purloin, relocate, traject, lade, ferry, haul, or otherwise move or intend to move peanuts and peanut butter through this facility. *[break]* Welcome to the Intake and Arrivals Terminal. Please do not eat anything in this area without first determining if it is sentient. Including liquids. Please do not pour liquids into other liquids without first asking their permission. Travelers should be aware that due to an earlier minor explosion in the tube transport system, there are persistent delays in station transport. It may be difficult or impossible to reach your destination until it has been stabilized.

Meanwhile:

DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

It's fine. I wasn't questioning that. Please explain it to me one more time.

COMPLETELY INNOCENT MISUNDERSTOOD TRAVELER

My, my cousin. He's my cousin, you see. Abondante. Very common name on Nin-imma. And we had the same set of luggage. Same luggage! Perfect match! Identical! And we, uh, we laughed, and then I forgot about it I guess, and *he* must have picked up *my* bag before I had a chance to *label* it for Class F compliance! Ha! Ha ha! And then coming here, that would be, you know, a problem.

DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

Ha! Ha ha! It would. Be a problem.

COMPLETELY INNOCENT MISUNDERSTOOD TRAVELER

Ha! So I thought, hell, I'll just come right out here to The Fairgrounds and come clean about it, and pick up the *bag*, and take it home. Because back home, that stuff is just something you spread on bread with jelly, right? It's a snack! No Sombrero!

DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

Ha! No Sombrero! Ha ha!

COMPLETELY INNOCENT MISUNDERSTOOD TRAVELER

So can I have the bag, then? Because, you know, I don't even remember if it's smooth or chunky, ha ha!

DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

Ha! Seriously, that No Sombrero thing cracks me up every time. Ha ha! Hey, *(teep teep, broadcast P.A. echo)* Hey, can I get an Enforcement Bot over here for a minute? This one is going to make your day.

COMPLETELY INNOCENT MISUNDERSTOOD TRAVELER

Ah, crap.

Meanwhile:

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Business, mostly. I'm with the Musician's Union. Pleasure is where you find it, right?

DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK MUSIC FAN

Yes, I-- OH. That's from Fantasy Douche's new loop, isn't it? Uh *(singing a little, like you do in front of people you don't know)* "Pleasure isn't only when you touch the night--HUH!--

UNION REP and CLERK MUSIC FAN

(in unison)

"Pleasure is where you find it, right?"

DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK MUSIC FAN

I love that one, I wave it all the time. Anyway, welcome to The Fairgrounds *(beepy stampy sound)*, we hope you--

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Thanks, thanks. Can I see your chargepass for a moment?

DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK MUSIC FAN

My chargepass?

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

I need to process your payment.

DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK MUSIC FAN

Payment? For what?

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Public performance of the new Fantasy Douche. It's just ten beans, but I should get it now so we don't have to charge you after the fact. It can rack up penalties if you don't reconcile it right away.

DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK MUSIC FAN

Public performance? That wasn't--I mean, you were--

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Hold on a second. Were you thinking of the rest of the song while you did that bit? Because that would be another 30 beans, plus ten more if you imagined the outro.

Meanwhile:

CURIOS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

(sounds of scrolling data) You played on all these recordings? That's, that's incredible, Mr. Qwuh... Qwubon-eh--

XTOPPS

Just call me Xtopps.

CURIOS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

Xtopps?

XTOPPS

Exactly. Like in, The Fun Never Xtopps.

CURIOS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

The Fun Never Xtopps.

XTOPPS

You got it, mang! But remember--The Sun Also Rises.

CURIOS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

The Sun Also Rises?

XTOPPS

Forget it, Jake. It's Vegatown.

CURIOS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

I don't follow.

XTOPPS

Then I better lead twice as hard! *(scats a bit)*

CURIOS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

I'm--Okay, that's fine. Your permit is good for tourist and residential sectors, Mr. Xtopps, but since you've also got *(bloop, bloop)*, you've got, a Musicians' Union job voucher here for the Electric Egg. Terrific! That place is cautious! Wait, hang on.

XTOPPS

Hang on, Sloopy! S'mores we're slip-sliding away--from Thunderdome! Two men enter one man's sleeves, that's some arms control for you right there. And it knits up the raveled Futurito of care, all night long! Greensleeves is my heart of gold, but the leaves that are green turn to brown, so turn your frown upside down and get down with the clown til you're dead in the ground. Arms may be the Man, mang, but mine are cheaper by the dozen, and hell's bells I could almost be a Jury all on my own, if I was deliberate.

CURIOUS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

Mr. Qwuh--Qwuhb-on--Mr. Xtopps. I'm--Were you actually on the Norstard BalloonMan Liner that just docked?

XTOPPS

Uh oh. Don't rock the boat, baby.

CURIOUS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

My system says you came in through Customs last week. You were checked through by Kaiser Wilhelm-bot. And I'm not showing any departures since then.

XTOPPS

When they asked about the Second Coming, I went to the head of the class. That's what she said, anyway. And it was so much fun I wanted to ride again... It's not my fault, I was drawn this way.

CURIOUS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

Sin (*pron. "Seen"*) Xtopps, I really can't give you another arrivals clearance. You already have one. How did you get in here, if you didn't come in from the Norstard ship?

XTOPPS

Sometimes you just gotta feel like you're getting somewhere, dig? So I came through again, Soybean. The thrill of arrival! The agony of dry feet. Do you like kites?

CURIOUS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

Kites?

XTOPPS

I'm high as one. Or two, probably. I could let you have the spare.

CURIOUS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

But Mr. Xtopps. (*whispering*) How did you get in here? The gates to the main promenade don't open this way.

XTOPPS

(*also whispering*)

They don't! But I do. I am in-CRED... ibly glitched. But it's OK. I'm a musician.

CURIOUS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

Mr. Xtopps, fine. I'm going to clear you through. But that's mostly because I really want to come and hear you play. *(beepy stampy sound)* If you play like you talk, it might be amazing.

XTOPPS

Flush, mang, just come by the Egg. Hey, maybe I can go with you! We can check out the local scene, yeah, catch some new sounds.

CURIOUS DOCUMENT CONTROL CLERK

Maybe--what? But if--okay, sure. Hey, is this your band? "Led Zeppelin?" Um, I think you've got a typo there.

*Music transition and fade to: an ignored call on the Bridge. SOUND BED: **busy but normal routine on the Bridge.** Lots of buttons get pressed. Some of them get pressed twice. **Chit chat. Arrangements are being made.***

UPSET DENIZEN

Hello? Hello? You're listening, aren't you. I know you're listening. I can hear you. I can hear where I'm not hearing your breathing because the audio channel on your end is muted. That makes a special silent sound and I know it well, oh, yes, I know it well. It's like on those shows when the captain makes a sign and the communications officer turns off the sound and the captain of the other ship isn't supposed to know they're talking, even though they are all standing there talking. But maybe they broadcast a commercial when that's happening, to the other ship I mean. Like, "Come Visit Earth! We welcome your fellowship and commerce, but if you come as enemies our superior technology will blow your powerful armada into tiny metal scraps that we will make into lunchboxes for our children. Lunchboxes! That's what your big proud space fleet will be, lunchboxes. For children! Ha! To carry their lunches in!" That's not a commercial really, it's propaganda, but they come down to the same thing I think. Hello?

COMMANDER

(distantly)

What in all the yellow suns of Rubicon is he talking about?

UPSET DENIZEN

There's a tapping in the vents now. I can hear it. It's my babies, trying to come back. They miss me. I think they've grown up in there. They miss their little bowl with the--oh, you haven't seen it, but I built them a house, a little house. In the bowl. And it all works, everything in there works! A tiny television too, tuned to tiny little channels. I was getting ready to put little engines on it in case they wanted to become Space Monkeys, which would be even better than Sea Monkeys. They could just light the--well no, they'd have to do a countdown first. Can't have a blastoff without a countdown, it lacks gravitas, everyone knows that! But after a proper countdown, they could launch right--

Bloop as the COMMANDER cuts off the call.

COMMANDER

Yeah, that's enough of that. Everyone, your attention please. The Fidorian have invited Command and Bridge Staff to meet them on the reception deck of the *Fetch* for a, and I'm not sure exactly what this is, a "Fey Slick King" ceremony.

In the background we can distantly hear the Fidorian invitation playing on a loop. It sounds very much like a bunch of dogs barking, confident and happy dogs barking confident and happy barks. Fidorians love a party.

FRALL

"Face-licking," sir.

COMMANDER

Face-licking? Oh, that does make more sense. ...Ew. Is this a standard procedure at Fidorian receptions?

FRALL

More or less, Commander. It's actually an unusual honor at a station call. There will also doubtless be jumping around. It will be a big *mechaye*. Our guests will also provide chew toys, but I recommend that station crew abstain from those.

COMMANDER

So, whose faces are getting licked here? And by whom? I don't suppose we can just lick our own faces and call it a day?

FRALL

Alas not. We should encourage all crew attending the ceremony to bring along a handkerchief or towel.

COMMANDER

Do we have to... lick their faces back?

FRALL

I'm sure they wouldn't mind, sir, but that would be strictly voluntary. I've called the Protocol Officer on the *Fetch* to let them know that Peanut Butter flavored chew toys are inappropriate for command staff at an official ceremony, so they will limit the selection of available flavors to chicken, cheese, rawhide, and fishie.

COMMANDER

I see.

FRALL

We are expected to bring treats, of course.

COMMANDER

Of course we are. You're enjoying this, Frall.

FRALL

Immensely, Commander. I have also taken the liberty of inviting Sin Althaar. The Fidorians want to celebrate their longstanding mutually beneficial treaty with Humans, and have requested a small ambassadorial complement. Althaar is both a student of Human culture and history, and a member of a species famous for their skill at diplomacy. The Fidorians will doubtless be won over by his charm.

COMMANDER

His charm. Will they--oh dear--will they be licking Althaar's face? I'm-- I can't even think about that without... without... Excuse me.

*The COMMANDER rushes away. **Retching sounds are heard briefly in the distance.** Because the COMMANDER is a highly-trained ranking officer, she does not actually barf. It's a near thing, though.*

FRALL

(calling after her)

The Fidorians will be providing a, well, their technical term is a "snuggle blankie," but I believe it will serve as a screen to visually separate their Human guests from the Iltorian delegation.

COMMANDER

THERE'S A DELEGATION?

FRALL

No no, sir. Just Althaar. He's the delegation.

COMMANDER

(returning from the facilities)

Oh, ok. Ok. Lieutenant, you say the Fidorians are celebrating a treaty? With Humanity? What treaty is that?

FRALL

It's probably best to let the Fidorians explain it themselves. Actually, I can confirm it would absolutely be for the best. The alternatives are unfortunate.

COMMANDER

Unfortunate? Unfortunate how? You didn't mention anything risky before--you said you were looking forward to this.

FRALL

I didn't think the risks were worth bringing up, Commander, but if you're interested: Alternatives could include decoherence of the dominant timeline, generational war, species extinction. That sort of thing. Nothing serious. Please don't let it bother you.

COMMANDER

Of course. Why do I even ask? We'll just hear the explanation over chew toys then.

Transition to a corridor, nothing fancy. JOHN and H.F. are walking, en route to a job assignment.

NON-URGENT-PROBLEM VOICE

(over P.A.)

All private spacecraft pilots. All private spacecraft pilots. Attention please. Would the owner of a late-model ultramarine Stellabulge 3000 hyper-yacht, currently parked in Auxiliary Docking Bay 6B, please move it or see to its immediate repair? Your exhaust vent is leaking into the Yud sector ventilation system and the nitrogen-based lifeforms therein are now very drunk. Thank you.

JOHN

Where are we going? I didn't understand any of what that bot was saying.

H.F.

I didn't get all of it either. A resident lost his monkeys in the Resh (*pron. "Raysh"*) sector, I think? But Animal Control refused to take the call, so it ended up with us.

JOHN

I thought they said something about monkeys, but I figured I had to be hearing it wrong. How's that our department? Unless they're wire monkeys, made of like, really thin wires.

H.F.

According to them, the preliminary diagnostic reported code violations preventing a site response by Animal Control, so we got the ticket.

JOHN

Ok, but what code violations? We only do three things, and monkey-wrangling definitely isn't one of them.

H.F.

Ok, so, most of Resh got mothballed back in '89 during the big downsizing. Obviously there's no point keeping up utilities for an empty sector, so they all got cut off. Power, life support, anything that doesn't affect structural integrity, kaput. That includes flushing out the plumbing. Temperature drops, pipes could freeze, maybe burst, better to be safe. We learned that the hard way back in '03--a closed deck blew out to vacuum and ruptured a water feed, and by the time anyone noticed, the whole arc was locked with hard ice. Then, once they got the temp stabilized, the ice melted, and we had a whole deck of slushy water venting slowly through the breach. Bots wouldn't touch that one either, said if there was a vacuum, could be someone left a window open somewhere, and we had to go in and rule that out before they would lift a digit. Because...

JOHN and H.F.

...they don't do windows.

H.F.

Robots. *(beat)* Anyway, the water in Resh was off, which means the water fountains were off, and that's a violation, so no bots are going to set foot in there until we can confirm that the water fountains are back up to code. Systems team can't go in to make a proper assessment of life support status until it's cleared, and that prevents a site response from Animal Control. So WSS gets called as first responders. Because--

JOHN and H.F. TOGETHER

Water fountains are beverage dispensers.

H.F.

Which brings it back to us.

JOHN

But... robots can't drink from water fountains. Most of them would short circuit if they tried it. Why would they even have a water fountain clause in their contract?

H.F.

You have met robots, haven't you? If Human workers got the right to a water fountain, then by Jones the bots want one too, even if it'll kill 'em. They stick to their principles, you gotta give 'em that.

Transition to a slow period at the Electric Egg, just a few regulars around. SOPON is pouring a drink: Foam, perhaps a gaseous hiss or a minor electrical arc as the garnish.

SOPON

One Planck Barrier straight up, non-radiating, double the charge--

REGULARS

(a running joke)

...for twice the fun! Ha ha ha etc.

SOPON

Kwontz, I'ma have to charge a deposit on the containment glass and coaster after last week, alright? You get them back to me still porous and I'll credit you back.

KWONTZ

(alien gibberish)

SOPON

Oh honey. That would never work, you guys don't even like skin.

CHIP

(answering a call) Electric Egg, please tell the holo what you need.

CHIP HOLO

Eeeee-lectric Egg! Always open, on some of the hours. You have chosen (*menu pause, then a totally different automated voice says:*) [The Who]. No, all upcoming shows by [The Who] are sold out, sniff twice to join our wait list.

CHIP

(*answering a call*) Electric Egg, please tell the holo what you need.

CHIP HOLO

Eeeee-lectric Egg! Music and munchies for all palates and most orifices. Probably 80, 85% of the orifices. You have chosen (*menu pause*) [All Those Jennifers]. How can I, ah no, [All Those Jennifers] are waitlisted for both shows, but you've got a pretty face, well, not face, but that situation your eyes are in, very interesting. So if you want to join a wait list, just, well, twitch something maybe? Blink? Do your people vocalize?

CHIP

(*answering a call*) Electric Egg, please tell the holo what you need.

CHIP HOLO

Eeeee-lectric Egg! We are such stuff as dreams are made on. You have chosen (*menu pause*) [Frédéric Chopin]. Yes, we have room on both of the [Frédéric Chopin] dates. Forward your data to our trusty, lusty, strong-bodied and capable holographic subroutine and hey, if you like the holo version, come on down and take a gander at the very successful but incredibly lonely clubowner who has to do everything around here himself, bet he's got a lot to offer a sapient like--

CHIP

HOLO! Cancel! Stop talking! Text only mode. (*grumpy wind-down whirry noises*) Take a memo: (*system bloop*) Note to self, record a new response library for the voicemail holo. While sober. That thing is a social crisis waiting to happen. Maybe Dee will help record some for me.

DEE arrives. That thing she arrives in is called a Dudgeon. It is higher than XTOPPS.

DEE

DEE WILL NOT HELP YOU RECORD ANYTHING FOR ANYONE. What in Yonks have you done to my bookings? You trap me here in this no-frills drunk tank over a hunger-artist pop-out contract clause, and then you *cancel my shows?*

REGULARS

(*Knowing what's good for them*) Uh oh. Is it that time already, welllll-p it's been fun, gotta get back to the soak tank, buona sera, ci vediamo Sopon-a, put that on my tab willya hon? Hobloparagoobee
^fanfan nubu.

Ad lib, all the patrons leave, like townspeople in a shootout Western.

SOPON

Gee, hardvac thanks, Dee. Way to clear the room. Welp, I'm going on break. Give a shout if anything that can tip slithers through the door.

CHIP

Yeah yeah sure. Oh, hey! Sophon, the staff meals back there? Don't eat those. Order something from Bunderog's, tell them to add it to our monthly sheet. (*analog door sound as SOPON heads back to the green room*) Ok, so--Dee. Dee. Slow your roll, ok? This Xtopps guy is unreal. You should be proud! You were the one who convinced him to stick around, remember?

DEE

What I remember is when I had a job, before some PBJ gumehead turned me into a second-stage booster on a three-burn launch in my own rocket. Without so much as a heads-up from you! So I try to call you and find out what the smark is going on, but I get sent straight to voicemail, where the holo helpfully informs me about all the upcoming shows I'm NOT PLAYING. Which is why my feet hurt, because I've been angry-walking all the way up here, because half the tubes are shut down, and my FEET HURT. He's my BACKING BAND, Chip. Not my competition.

CHIP

Ok, sure, I get it. I get it, I know. Look, we can make this work for everyone, yeah? These folks are still going to need an opener.

DEE

An *OPENER!*?

CHIP

Whoa, ok, ok! Listen, Dee. Delilah. Delight of the Muses. Try to have some perspective here. A solar flare charges all panels, yeah? You'll be playing for a packed house every night! Who cares if you're just the opener?

DEE

Me, dammit!

CHIP

But think of the exposure! These new acts have us booked full for weeks. For WEEKS, Dee. I don't know where Xtopps is getting these contracts, but I checked the codes against the Union database, and they're all legit. Who knows? Maybe it's some kind of new Suspension Field thing from Trash-Lab Systems. But these bands, Dee. The Who is playing here, at the Electric Egg. KELP is playing here, at the Electric Egg! We haven't announced it yet, but he may be bringing in Del Star Dot Star at the end of the month. This is gold. This is *platinum*. This is paying off all my vendors, maybe hiring a non-lethal CO₂ compressor, or maybe even new chairs. Oh man, maybe new chairs.

DEE

Cut the skitter, Chip, I can't eat exposure. Besides, this can't be real. These bands, some of them are 500 years cold. And even if they weren't, they'd be playing stadium gigs back in the Solar System, not schlepping all the way out to the Fairgrounds to keep tourists entertained over their Mobius fries.

CHIP

Yeah, but--

DEE

AND, S-Field shows aren't even legal any more. After that guy wouldn't come out of the Mars colony RealFeel simulation? And they had to send in a rescue party? And the rescue party didn't come out either?

CHIP

It's still running, that Mars sim. The people in there made data contact with Earth after they started playing the asteroid mining markets. And they're killing it, by the way. I heard they bought Harvard last year. Right now they're starting a homesteading immigration and settlement program. Apparently, Mars Needs Women.

DEE

Sure, it always does.

CHIP

Plus ça change...

DEE

Don't change the subject, Chip. Something's not right about this, and--

The Egg door opens, and the UNION REP comes in.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Hi, this is the Electric Egg, right? Who do I talk to about Led Zeppelin tickets?

CHIP

Chip Frinkel, owner, proprietor, and impresario! I'm afraid Led Zeppelin is sold out for the run, but we do have a waiting list that--

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

I'm the head of the Sector Chapter of the Musicians' Union.

CHIP

As I was saying, the owner here is Chip Frinkel. He should be back on Thursday.

CHIP HOLO

Hey, Boss? Security alert: You've left my command account open with Admin Access. You want I should shut that?

CHIP

Ah, nertz.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Zing! Howdy Chip. Mo Stolber, Musicians' Union. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Pleasure is where you find it, right?

DEE

(as we fade out)

Oh, I love that song!

*Transition to the bridge. Comms. **Busy background. An alarm repeating "Warning."**
ALTHAAR is on comms.*

ALTHAAR

Greetings, Commander Torianna! Althaar hopes you are well! Please fear not! Althaar has obscured the camera on this communications device, so that all nutritional fluids will remain inside the Commander! And all hardworking Humans on the Bridge!

COMMANDER

Oh. Thank you, Althaar. We all appreciate that. *(to the room)* Cancel that Iltorian alert! As you were. *("Warning" alarm stops)* Althaar, I can't quite make out what that is you've got on the screen there, but-- are you... are you holding up a banana?

ALTHAAR

Yes! Althaar has learned of the Ba Na Na from Room-mate John. It is yellow and delicious!

COMMANDER

That it is. And quite cheerful. Can I help you with something?

ALTHAAR

Apologies, Commander. Althaar is distracted by the Trousers of Discomfort, which are very wiggly. No! Althaar is speaking incorrectly. They not wiggly. They are... itchy. Yes! The Trousers of Discomfort are itchy, and it is Althaar that is wiggly! Because of the itchy.

COMMANDER

...Thank you for that update, Althaar. The... Trousers of Discomfort?

ALTHAAR

When Room-mate John comes home from his work cycle, he takes off the trousers very quickly, so he can be more com-fort-able. Althaar seeks to experience this ritual firsthand.

COMMANDER

I see. The Trousers of Discomfort. You really are learning a great deal about Humans. It's quite impressive. Are you wearing these Trousers for the meeting with the Fidorians?

ALTHAAR

Yes! The Fidorians are great friends to both our peoples, and Althaar is itching to meet them! As Trousers are itching Althaar!

COMMANDER

Honestly, that strikes right at the heart of the Human condition, and I'm not even kidding. We're about to leave for the *Fetch*, Althaar, was there anything else?

ALTHAAR

Commander, Althaar wishes to request that Room-mate John B be also present to meet the Fidorian.

COMMANDER

Your roommate John B? The... WSS tech? That's not really protocol. I can't bring a civilian to the first Fidorian docking we've had in decades. Unless--does John know anything about the Fidorians? Has he dealt with them before?

ALTHAAR

No, Commander! But Althaar believes that the inclusion of Room-mate John will be of much helpfulness! Fidorian embassies often request the visiting by a stranger of lowest status. It is to them a saying: "Every Fidorian will have his day." A very wise philosophy, Althaar thinks! The stranger also will show success of the meeting. When discussion is finished, the Fidorians will jump up on him--which is good!--or eat him. Which is not so good! But fear not! In Modern Times this eating is ceremonial. A small biting would be required merely. And Althaar trusts that your warm welcome will ensure the satisfied jumpings-upon by Fidorian guests!

COMMANDER

Well, thanks for that, Althaar, and for sharing your expertise with us. I had no idea about any of this. If you think it's appropriate, I will absolutely invite your Roommate John to join us as part of your... delegation. You've been very helpful.

ALTHAAR

(Althaar makes a happy squealing noise that makes Commander Torianna regret this whole conversation up to now.) Yes! Althaar is full of cheer! And potassium! Like the Ba Na Na! But not so yellow.

COMMANDER

One other question before we head out. Does Mr. B already know about this meeting? Has he agreed to come?

ALTHAAR

Oh! Room-mate John has spoken many times to Althaar that his life is going to the Fidorians. He will go the Ba Na Na for this!

COMMANDER

"Going to the Fidorians?" He said, "Going to the Fidorians?"

ALTHAAR

He perhaps used the Human nick-name?

COMMANDER

“Going to the dogs?”

ALTHAAR

Yes! The Dogs! And now Althaar can make the happy dream of Room-mate John! His life will go all the way to them at last!

Music transition to: More walking in more corridors. We're off the main drag now, and into the maintenance tunnels. Jeffries Tubes branch off from time to time.

H.F.

This junction's a lot further away when the transit tubes are down. Easy to forget how big this place is.

JOHN

Hey H.F., Althaar said this word to me last night: “Plandi.” What language is that? I know what it means, at least I do now, but I'd never heard it before.

H.F.

It's an Unsafe Word, what else would it be?

JOHN

“Un-safe Word”? Like, for times when I want to establish my boundaries while I'm not having kinky sex?

H.F.

Yeah, pretty much.

JOHN

No, seriously.

H.F.

Yes seriously! You never heard of Unsafe? You're a good kid, B, but you can be provincial as all hell sometimes, you know? You're a citizen of the Galaxy! C'mon!

JOHN

Yeah, ok, I'm a rube. A total Ugly Earthling. So, are you going to remedy the gaps in my education or...?

H.F.

Ah, I guess someone's gotta. Ok, so, Unsafe is... Back when the ICSB was coming together, when the first aliens started trading between themselves, they thought they should come up with a set of quick, simple emergency words that everyone could use, across cultures and species and languages. Like an interstellar Esperanto, basically.

JOHN

Like a what?

H.F.

Esperanto. “Universal” Human language from the pre-Contact era. Had the same problem as Unsafe, no native speakers, so it never really caught on except with a few linguistics nerds. The idea with Unsafe was that you need a fast way to say “Fire” if there’s a fire, even if you don’t know the language of the alien that’s standing near the fire. Or if they’re flammable. So they set out to fix that.

JOHN

Huh. How do you say “Fire?”

H.F.

Eh, well, there isn’t one for Fire. So mostly everyone just says “Fire” in whatever language they’re in the mood for.

They consider this for a moment. There’s a deep lesson in there, probably. Well, maybe.

JOHN

What *can* you say in Unsafe?

H.F.

Oh, they got up to around a hundred-something words before ol’ Fet Dinglurp invented the first variable translation chips and pulled the rug out from under the whole thing. Only a few of them get used any more, like, ah, sometimes you’ll hear “Plandi,” you know that. And there’s “Gakgak,” and “Boo-tay.” You’ll hear “Weewee” sometimes too.

JOHN

“Weewee”?

H.F.

“Don’t put that unpleasant material near me probably.” “Unpleasant” might mean “toxic” in some situations. Most situations.

JOHN

“Probably”? Don’t put that toxic material near me *probably*?

H.F.

Unsafe words are kinda... tentative. Non-confrontational. But they do pack a lot of syntax into a couple of syllables, I’ll say that for ‘em. Let’s see, what else. “Boo-tay” is kind of an advanced word, be careful with that one. It means, “This part of your body is very intriguing, may I touch it.” You can get in a lot of trouble with Boo-tay. But if someone says it to you, always say yes. That’s what I like to do.

JOHN

That sounds like terrible advice.

H.F.

Well, yeahhh. But I keep hoping someone else will do it so I can compare notes with them.

DOOR THAT HAS YOUR BEST INTERESTS AT HEART

Warning: decommissioned area. This door is currently locked, as this Sector may or may not support life at this time. Please find an alternate route to your destination. Robot Union Status Update: WARNING. All work orders within Resh sector Levels 5-52 are temporarily suspended pending determination of water fountain status by organic personnel. Consult with your shop steward for more information.

JOHN

What a pain in the Boo-tay.

H.F.

Ha! Ha ha, that's. You know that's. Not what that means.

JOHN

I know. Just kidding. Guess we can head around to the Tube Three side, right? That's not too far. Anyway, what about Gakgak? What does that mean?

H.F.

Oh! Gakgak is important. It means whatever you're breathing at the moment is maybe about to be vented.

JOHN

So, good time to break out the space hats with air.

H.F.

What?

JOHN's phone rings & he answers it.

JOHN

Hi Althaar.

ALTHAAR

(on the phone)

Hello, Room-mate John! If Althaar looks yellow and delicious, it is because Althaar is holding in front of the camera a Ba Na Na. John may look at his phone screen with no danger of unpleasant seeings!

JOHN

Oh ok, thanks. But, uh, remember how we talked about calling me at work?

ALTHAAR

Yes, Room-mate John! The calling is permitted during emergencies only! Althaar would not call just to say that the lunchtime noodles are very very good.

JOHN

But Althaar, you did call to say that your lunch noodles were very very good. You did that just a couple of days ago.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Room-Mate John! They were very very good indeed! Thank you, Room-mate John, for sharing the cherished lunchtime memory with Althaar! Althaar would make the moist maxillae, but it is difficult while wearing the Trousers of Discomfort.

JOHN

Small blessings, I guess. But remember after that, we agreed about only calling for emergencies? And we made up a list of what constitutes an emergency? And noodles definitely weren't on it?

H.F.

(in background)

What if you're choking on 'em?

ALTHAAR

Yes, Room-mate John! Althaar made most careful note of it! But Althaar believes this to be an emergency, even if not included on the list of appropriate interruptions!

H.F.

(in background)

Not that you could do the Heimlich on an Iltorian, because... ugh... *(almost throws up in his mouth a bit)*

JOHN

What is it, Althaar? What's wrong? Is the apartment ok? Are you ok?

ALTHAAR

Everything is well and better, Room-mate John! It is an emergency most beneficial!

JOHN

Oh. Uh, that's not really a thing. Listen, we can refine the emergency list later, ok? But--

H.F.

John, do you need to stop? Because otherwise there's an access tunnel just past that power bumper that might be open, but you're not going to get signal in there.

JOHN

I don't think so, just a sec. What *is* it, Althaar, we're trying to get into Resh Sector.

ALTHAAR

Room-mate John, there is a Fidorian ship making the visit on the Fairgrounds! And Althaar has secured permission for Room-mate John to attend their greeting ceremony! It is a very special thing. The Fidorians are great Earth-friends.

JOHN

Fidorians? Never heard of them.

ALTHAAR

Come and meet them, please! It is of much importance! Commander Torianna has made invitation!

JOHN

The Commander invited me? What for? You know what, it doesn't really matter, because I'm at work. I can't just take off.

H.F.

Sure you can. How often do you get invited to some fancy shindig by the station top brass? Go on, kid, I got this. Have a good time. Whatever they're doing, though, if they've got the good olives, grab me some. Maybe I'll have figured out a way into Resh by the time you get back.

JOHN

Ok, Althaar, I guess I'll meet you on the main promenade.

ALTHAAR

Squeeeeeeee!

JOHN and H.F. audibly recoil from ALTHAAR's happy noise.

*Slightly ceremonial music transition to on board the Fetch. Everyone is on best behavior, and uncomfortable. The ship is crisp, sleek, and new, and sounds it. **Fidorians do have a tendency to drop into doggy sounds when excited. Applause and excited yips from those assembled as the Commander stands up to address them. Maybe a bit of panting in anticipation.***

COMMANDER

Greetings. I'm Commander Mindy Torianna, and I'm honored to join you on the deck of this beautiful ship, *Fetch*, and to welcome you, our Fidorian friends, to the Human Exchange Concourse. This is my second, Lieutenant Commander Frallen Br'ar, and a complement of Bridge officers, who were eager to join us on on this happy occasion. We are truly--oh! Excuse me.

FRALL

It's normal, sir. Just let them sniff. Their perceptions are extremely accurate, and they are quite non-judgmental.

COMMANDER

Pity I can't say the same for me! Ha.

FRALL

It is, Commander.

COMMANDER

Well I figured they'd go there, but I thought they'd wait a bit longer. *(in response to a particularly enthusiastic sniff:)* Ooh! Hello to you too! And Frall?

FRALL

Yes, sir?

COMMANDER

Don't think I didn't catch that.

REX

Welcome to our ship, Commander, to you and all the members of your crew. *(sounds of faces being licked)* Please make yourselves at home. I am Rex. If you require, we have newspapers, a box, and vertical features for your comfort. You may appreciate the fire-hydrant, which is familiar in your culture. Also, may I present you with a chew toy?

COMMANDER

Thank you, Captain Rex. I gratefully accept this chew toy and, uh, I'll just save it for later, if that's all right.

REX

It's Rex, Commander. Just Rex. And of course you may enjoy the chew toy at the time of your choosing! That one is rawhide, you may want a chicken one instead. But it's up to you.

COMMANDER

Oh, thank you. Yes, I like chicken.

Sounds of general doggy agreement. Who doesn't like chicken?

COMMANDER

Frall? Would you like to say a few words?

FRALL

Thank you, Commander. I would.

Whoooo wants a treat? WHOOOOOO wantsa wantsa yummy yummy treat?

THE FIDORIANS

I do! I do! I want a treat! Treat treat treat! Is it a cookie? I LOVE cookies!

Happy canine pandemonium crossfades to the Electric Egg, empty but for the tension.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

And... transaction complete! The Musicians' Union thanks you for your custom.

DEE

I can't believe you charged me for that.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Hey, at least you got the members' discount. Say, were you thinking of the rest of the song when you sang that bit?

DEE

Get frilled. You and your little outro, too.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Pleasure doing business with you. Now then, Mr. Frinkel. I'll call you Chip. Imagine our surprise, back home in the Temperance City Music Union Building, when the latest Fairgrounds dispatch came in with a copy of your new booking calendar.

CHIP

I think I prefer Mr. Frinkel.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

That's real interesting, Chip. So we get the roster, and it's sensational! Bands that haven't played, and couldn't possibly have played, for decades. Centuries! Unmissable shows. Unbookable shows. Unstoppable shows. Unlikely shows. Unpossible shows!

CHIP

IM-possible shows.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

I was on a roll.

DEE

Roll this.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

So we check the booking codes. That's what we're here for, right? And they're valid. The codes are valid!

CHIP

I know. I checked them against the registry myself when they came in. That's *your* database, not mine. And they all came up kosher, so--

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

They're valid, but they're not *right*. Because those bands? Tom and the Oddities, The Who, Bastard Mojave? All Those Jennifers? They don't play out. It's ridiculous. They're not even in the booking system.

CHIP

That's un-possible.

*Music transition to the reception on the Fetch: Little by little, things are warming up, due in large part to Frall's understanding of the Fidorian mind. **There is frolicking.***

REX

Those. Those are really good treats.

COMMANDER

I'm glad you enjoyed them, Rex.

FRALL

Would you like another? We brought plenty.

REX

No, thank you. They are tempting.

FRALL

Are you sure? *(sound of a treat being telekinetically dangled in midair, whatever the hell that is)*
Ooooo da tasty treats, ooooo da tasty cookies. Rex wanna nother cookie treat?

REX

Well, perhaps one more. AHHHRRR-ARR-ARR-NOM-NOM.

COMMANDER

You're very good at this, Lieutenant.

FRALL

Thank you, sir. The Fidorians have a unique psychological structure. They are fierce and independent, yet they appreciate a firm hand. They have moxie, chutzpah, and panache, and are faithful and deeply obedient to those they respect. I'm pleased that I was able to prepare for this meeting appropriately. Other possible iterations of this event were less than satisfying.

COMMANDER

By which you mean the generation war.

FRALL makes a predictive shimmer.

FRALL

And eventual species extinction, yes.

COMMANDER

Well, I'm glad we were able to prevent any harm from coming to them. They're adorable.

FRALL

I didn't mean *their* species, sir. The Fidorans are generous friends, but inexorable foes.

COMMANDER

What?

REX

Commander, do you like sticks? We have good sticks. Some very, very good sticks. If you would like to throw one, I could certainly bring it back to you.

COMMANDER

Uhhh, I think--Frall, do I like sticks?

FRALL

Why yes, Commander, I think you do. But not in a pressing or desperate way.

COMMANDER

In that case, Rex, perhaps a little later.

Vaguely-canine door whoosh as ALTHAAR and JOHN enter.

ALTHAAR

ALTHAAR IS AT THE PARTY!

There are a few screams of horror and soul-sapping distress from the far side of the room. Maybe even a Wilhelm.

ALTHAAR

Greetings, Human and Fidorian friends! Althaar is moving to the Alcove of Concealment! Althaar is apologizing for Human discomfort! Althaar introduces also Room-Mate John B who is a Human! He may perhaps have advice for fellow Humans who wish to avoid expelling fluids upon the seeing of Althaar!

JOHN

Hi everyone. Lieutenant-Commander Frall, hello. Good to see through you again.

COMMANDER

Hello, Mr. B. Commander Torianna. I believe we met on the bridge when you first arrived?

JOHN

Yes, of course I remember. How are your wires doing?

COMMANDER

Who wants to know?... Ha, I kid, I kid. (*conspiratorial*) Say, would you like a chew toy? I have one right here. (*quieter*) Sorry if this is awkward, I'm trying to do anything to avoid looking at Althaar until he's behind his fuzzy blanket, and also to avoid offending the Fidorians who are apparently a hair's-breadth away from slaughtering us all if we step out of line? But please do take this chew toy, I don't want it at all. And don't eat it. Well that probably goes without saying, there's no way you walked all the way over here with Althaar without losing your appetite.

JOHN

Got it. Yes, it's fine. I live with him, I get it.

COMMANDER

He was hiding behind this banana before on the comm. I'm not going to be able to eat a banana now for weeks.

JOHN

The yellow and delicious thing, yeah, that was weird and kind of unsettling.

COMMANDER

You thought so too? I'm so glad. I thought my gag response was being unreasonable.

ALTHAAR

Human friends! Althaar is now fully obscured for your comfort in the Alcove of Concealment, where it is very comfortable and there are snacks! Oh! Hello Spottie! No, Scottie! Yes! You are Scottie, and you are Spot! A very pleasant [bark bark bark] to you! It is good to--oh, yes, you may sniff that. It is not Boo-Tay!

Hilarity--the Fidorian think that's funny too.

REX

We are honored to have you join us, Room-Mate John B. I am Rex. Truly, in you we see that every Fidorian will have his day.

JOHN

Hi Rex. Thanks for having me. Yes, every Fidorian, um, I'm not sure what that's about, but thank you.

REX

I enjoy your hat.

JOHN

My--? Oh, for the-- I showed up at a diplomatic reception wearing the Late Hat.

COMMANDER

I wasn't going to say anything. Still, it's rather festive.

REX

If everyone will follow me, we're going to skip past the poop deck for now and move forward to the briefing room. We've prepared a presentation I hope you'll enjoy.

JOHN

They have a poop deck?

FRALL

Of course there's a poop deck. The Fidorian Light Cruiser is a long-range ship, you can't expect them to hold it in until they get to port.

The COMMANDER's comm makes a shrill noise. It is very irritating--it's an alarm--but subdued enough not to cause panic.

COMMANDER

Torianna, go ahead.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Commander? This is Amber? On the bridge?

COMMANDER

Yes, go ahead Amber. What is it?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

There's like, some trouble? Near your location? Someone called in and said there was Weewee?

COMMANDER

At the docks? That can't be right. Amber, is there anything showing on the environmental containment board?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

No?

COMMANDER

Are you sure?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Yes?

COMMANDER

You don't sound certain about this.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

I don't?

COMMANDER

Amber, I'm going to see what's up. Log me as active responder.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Ok?

COMMANDER

On my way now. Torianna out. Rex, I'm afraid I have to respond to a possible emergency. I'll rejoin you as soon as I can. Please excuse me.

*The COMMANDER leaves the ship. There is **hubbub** up ahead, more angry and irritated than anything else. **Shrieking.** A **Fidorian yelps apologetically.***

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Is this thing still on?

COMMANDER

I see the disturbance, Amber, you can sign off.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Ok?

*We start to hear MRS. F complaining as the COMMANDER approaches, as well as **the Fidorian she's scolding trying to get a yelp in edgewise.***

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Just what were you thinking? Don't you see me here? I am very clearly right here. Sitting in the light having my sunny leafy-warm lunch like a peaceful Fugulnari, minding my own business, and you *lift your leg* as if I'm some sort of lamp-post. Commander Torianna, can you SEE THIS? This animal urinated on me--an actual full-on WEEWEE thank you very much--I haven't even finished my nice buttery light lunch and suddenly, well, just look at my pot. I'll never get the smell out. My appetite is ruined, my stomates oh they are just clenched up so tight, I won't be able to exhale properly for hours.

COMMANDER

I apologize for this terrible misunderstanding, Mrs. F. I'm sure this has been a very unpleasant experience for you.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Now don't you try to sweet-talk me, missy! What about my pot?!

COMMANDER

As the visiting Fidorian delegation are official guests of the Fairgrounds, we'll take full responsibility for the damages. I'll call in a cleaning bot, ok? I'd appreciate it if you didn't... upset these particular guests.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Maybe cider vinegar?

COMMANDER

Amber! Sign off please! ...Cider vinegar, huh.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Over and out?

Bloop as she finally signs off.

COMMANDER

I'll tell the cleaners to try cider vinegar then. Again, Mrs. F., I do apologize on behalf of the Fidorians. They're a somewhat reclusive species, and I don't know that they've ever encountered a Fugulnari before. I'm afraid most of us mammals do have a lot of difficulty telling the difference between your people and non-sapient foliage. May I just say, you're looking splendid today. Have you had some of your leaves done? That green is, how shall I say it? That green is positively leguminous.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(mollified)

Well thank you, Commander. Thank you for noticing. I suppose I can overlook this, this, *appalling* behavior, just the one time. But if I had a rolled-up newspaper...

HAPLESS FIDORIAN

Owaaa, ar ar ar. Owaaa.

COMMANDER

He's clearly sorry, Mrs. F. And so are we all. I assure you it was an innocent mistake. Can we move past this?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh I suppose so. But I'm not happy. Weewee, hmph. Not happy at all.

COMMANDER

I appreciate your understanding. There wasn't any ill will meant, I'm sure. Say, what are you reading?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

"Soul on Ice."

COMMANDER

Really! Interesting choice. Are you studying up on our Time of Imbalance?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Not really. I thought it would be a cookbook.

COMMANDER

(ignoring this, already moving on to the Fidorian)

And what's your name, Sin?

HAPLESS FIDORIAN

Hunter.

COMMANDER

Hunter, please return to your ship. I'll join you presently.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hmph.

NON-URGENT-PROBLEM VOICE

(over P.A.)

A reminder to all Fairgrounds staff: The annual Bring Your Offspring to Work Event will be occurring all three shifts this upcoming Wednesday. If your progeny has more than three stomachs, you'll have to get a second meal voucher from the commissary. Following last year's rash of arsons, we ask that anyone with potentially unruly offspring please bring them instead to the designated Problematic Juvenile Containment Area in Tsade 12. You know who we mean, Sheila. Thank you.

The Electric Egg. Still no customers. The phone might ring in the background, but the Chipper Holo voicemail has been disabled for now. Conversation picks up generally from where we dropped it last.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

We went around and around with it for a while. These bands don't exist anymore. And it's not like we can use AI to fill in with FullFeed or HeadBake shows, or we'll have a picket line of angry robots surrounding HQ before you can say "Silicon Sentience Act." So we know it can't be a virtual show. But these Union headers still scan as valid, and we can't reach anyone's management to figure out what's going on. Well, that part is normal, management never wants to talk to us.

DEE

Imagine that.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

So what does it mean? Where's it coming from? Who's behind it? And then I got it. Then I figured it out.

CHIP

You figured it out?

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Well, my assistant did. She said, "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth." That's from Arthur C. Clarke, I memorized it. I got a lot of hidden depths, you know.

DEE

No it isn't, and no you don't.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Say what?

CHIP

What was your assistant's idea?

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Ex-assistant. Fired her once she was done explaining it. So, it's my idea now. *(to himself)* Oh, I can't believe how sharp I am...

DEE

You know, totaled up over the years, we could have saved a buttload of oxygen by just not letting you breathe any.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

So anyway, the whole thing comes down to a legal tangle couple hundred years ago. Know anything about the What's In a Name Hearings?

CHIP

Not much. Some copyright thing?

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

It goes something like this. So, it's the early 21st Century, right? Music and art and theater and literature have all been going gangbusters for over a hundred years. Not always a great deal for the artists, fair enough, but some outstanding work is being preserved by galleries and labels and managers--

DEE

Exploited by galleries and labels and managers--

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Po-tay-to, po-tah-to. Middle of the 21st Century, death spiral. Everyone's an artist, everyone's a critic. Everyone's grass-rooting. Let's cut out the middle man and just do what we want! Sure, everyone's got access to all this music, and the artists are making a little scratch, but without the firm guiding hand of record companies and critics and music publishers, no one's making a killing! But right around then, AI gets to the point where the copyright holders can live-dupe any classic artist, right? Rock and roll really will never die! So back come all those great marketable artists from the past, people stick to what they know, nothing new can get any traction. There are a few bright lights, but they're lost in a sea of AI rehash. So by the start of the 22nd, we're into the Great Yawn. It's a couple hundred years before people start to crawl out of the mouth of the Yawn--and that was one of the first killer albums from that time, "Out of the Mouth of the Yawn," by Del Star Dot Star--

CHIP

They might be playing here, later this month.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

THEY ARE NOT PLAYING HERE LATER THIS MONTH. Stop it! So around 2300, people are starting to get sick of covers and remakes and reboots, but what else is out there? No one's willing to take a chance promoting a new sound. But then, bam! The first Robot Revolutionary Front manages to get the AI ban passed, which means all of a sudden 99% of the product that's out there is illegal, and all

of a sudden, everyone's scrambling to find new content. Great songwriters, great composers, great painters and playwrights and booze and great bad sex: it starts to come back, it all starts to come back. Thing is, during the Great Yawn, trademark and service-mark speculation turned out to be a better business than actual art. So management firms had bought up the copyright on millions of names and titles, any possible ones their IP teams could think of. Now there are all these new bands that need a name for themselves, they've either got to shell out big bucks to buy one, or come up with something no one's thought to pre-register, and good luck on that, hah! A few of them managed to hit on something decent, but everyone else... well, we had Britney2100 and Britney4U and Britney666 and Britney3.14, and those were just the popular ones. There were hundreds of others, too. It just kept getting worse. Remember that track, "Stickman Awake After the Dream"?

DEE

That's such a good album.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

I know, right? Remember the name of the band?

DEE

Huh... no.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Hotbuttfan2360farts. So this was a problem.

CHIP

Right. I do remember. They passed that law.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Exactly. They passed the All The Good Names Are Taken Act of 2324, which released all registered band names back to the public, along with titles, song names, and so forth.

DEE

Then anyone can use these names without breaking the law.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

The law, sure. Union regs, not on your life. After Good Names, the music scene was a total free-for-all. We had to step in and put a stop to it. Everyone was The Beatles and Bastard Mojave and Hall & Oates all over again, no one knew who the hell was who. Or The Who. It all worked out for the best, though. I mean, Toppling Moss Absence started as just another Rolling Stones, until we made them change it. Did them a favor, if you ask me. They should have thanked us.

CHIP

Ok, but what does all this ancient history have to do with these bookings? You're telling me these acts I've signed up can't actually exist?

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

You better hope they don't. If they do, I've gotta fine all of you and issue a rebrand order.

CHIP

Fine me?! How is this my fault? I checked the codes and they all cleared! Why weren't they flagged?

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

I'm guessing someone must have staked a ton of open booking vouchers under the names of big acts back when they were up for grabs, and they've been selling them off quietly down the line ever since. We probably never would have caught it if some smarkhead hadn't just dumped a whole stack of them into your booking system.

CHIP

Xtopps! Get out here, you smarkhead!

DEE

Finally! How long does it take to get a little comeuppance around here?

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

XTOPPS

Hey, Chorp. Dee. Whoa, you boffers look real busy. I'm gonna vague, yeah? I'll catch you later.

CHIP

Oh, you're going to be catching something, all right. Sit down, we need to talk.

MUSICIANS' UNION REP

Xtopps, is it? A pleasure. Let's have a little discussion about your... interesting attitude toward Union regs, shall we?

XTOPPS

Voider.

Music transition to the Fetch. The party is moving to an auditorium for the Fidorian's prepared presentation. First, an alcove to pay respects.

REX

Before we settle in for the ceremonies, I request that we take a moment of observance. All Fidorian vessels have an anteroom like this one, where we pause, and reflect. Let us regard this statue in solemn contemplation.

Fidorians make whatever noise a dog makes as it prepares for solemn contemplation.

COMMANDER

Why, Rex, this is lovely. Your craftspeople are quite skilled.

FRALL

This statue. Is it a representation of the golden-age Fidorian hero, A Good Dog? The pose is especially noble. And such expressive eyes.

REX

Thank you both. Yes, this is a scene chosen from the Triumphs of A Good Dog. It's from the Cycle of Refrains--here, the hero has discovered Something Thrown, but considers whether this is a proper time to Fetch it. It is a very complex challenge in the Cycle, and can resolve either way in studies. In my opinion, Something Thrown must be Returned, and will require and complete the Arc of Retrieval.

COMMANDER

Interesting. And who's "A Good Dog"?

ALL THE FIDORIANS

I AM! I'M A GOOD DOG! Awooo! Bruff bruff! I'm a good dog, I am! Good dog here! Good dog, good dog!

Canine pandemonium.

ALTHAAR

(from the next room, and behind a fuzzy blanket)

Althaar has completed the journey to the second Blanket of Concealment! And Room-mate John has entered the auditorium, and all of his fluids remain within his Human body! So Althaar believes the Concealment has made success!

JOHN

(also from the next room, not behind the blanket)

Yeah, I'm the canary in the Iltorian coal-mine, apparently. Or the Jovian Bathysphere where the epoxy seals are being rebuilt with a laser saw. But yes, the coast is clear.

REX

Then please, everyone, let us adjourn to the auditorium for the Ceremony of Renewal.

They all do so. Perhaps some appreciative muttering from the Humans--it's pretty nice.

COMMANDER

How long is this ceremony likely to go on, do you know?

FRALL data retrieval noise.

FRALL

The Fidorian are fairly impatient with this sort of thing. It will only feel long.

COMMANDER

Will it start a war if I try to snatch a quick nap? These chairs are incredibly comfy.

FRALL

Dozing off is customary at such occasions. No one is likely to notice.

REX

We are not a folk of many words, but we are pleased for this chance to honor and renew a Peace Treaty that has lasted inviolate for Millennia: a rare covenant, perhaps unique in all of traveled space. From the very moment we sought out aid in need, after fortune left us cold, hungry, and friendless in foreign lands, we were given kindness and stern, appreciative love, and for thousands of years we have returned that love and companionship in kind to... the Humans of Earth.

JOHN and COMMANDER

What?

ALTHAAR

Oh! What honor to be here at this celebration of the longest-lasting of Human peace treaties! Althaar has studied it deeply! It is the Ba Na Na of peaceful relations in all the galaxy. And to share this experience with Room-mate John is truly a thing of greatest joy!

John's pager does the WSS jingle.

JOHN

Hello?

H.F.

Oh hey kid, I'm glad you picked up. Listen, I've got--

JOHN

H.F., I can't talk right now. We're right in the middle of a... something super confusing, I'll call you back in a minute, ok?

COMMANDER

A Peace Treaty? I don't think I've ever-- I'd know about this, surely. I'd have heard of it.

FRALL

Commander. Best to hold your peace. Because we like peace. *Especially now.*

COMMANDER

Yes of course, we do. I mean to say, let the Renewal begin!

ALTHAAR

Althaar wishes to unfold himself and cheer! But Althaar does not wish to disturb the Blanket of Concealment. Perhaps all may imagine the cheering of Althaar? But not so much as to produce the digestive liquids. So, only a small careful imagining for Althaar's Human friends!

REX

Please watch this prepared ceremonial. It should be very informative.

Cheesy royalty-free music. A narrator begins. If we could see this, it would be cheesy animation of, like, a planet swooping around the sun, while we zoom either in or out, weather, plants, perhaps a happy plane or spaceship.

NARRATOR

This is a tale of friendship and hardship, of certainty and doubt, of exploration and acceptance, of days and nights, of differences and bondings, of travels and homecomings, of ins and outs, of need and pride, of tenderness and bluff, of new dawnings and the coming of dusk, of hunger and satiation, of fear and overcoming that fear, of familiar surroundings and new rough landscapes, of seasons and moments, of quadrupeds and bipeds, of doubt and decisiveness, wait we've already used that last one, make sure to edit that before recording. It is a tale of men, and of Fidorians, and by men we actually mean women as well, and all the other Humans too, which we probably should just say in the first place, I don't know why we need to bring the men up. I know it sounds old-fashioned-y, but it's just silly. Get me a jury who-- All right, fine. Moving on.

COMMANDER

Oh, dear Jones. Times like this, Frall, I wish I could take vacations and leave myself here on duty.

FRALL

Shhhh. This part is actually very touching, sir. Please try to fathom it.

COMMANDER

I'll be fathoming with my eyes shut, ok?

FRALL

Shhh!

NARRATOR

Behold: a ship, a nimble scout ship, its systems failing after a fast collision with a piece of orbital debris. It falls so suddenly from the dark void, tumbling end over end, the crew struggling to re-fire the rockets, the inner space dark and smoking and the smell of burning that scorches their noses. The scout falls, like a stick with no one to catch it. Then one engine lights, and another, and they break the ship's fall with just enough power to save the crew: the scout ship broken, breached, torn apart and burning, but the scouts within 'scaped. Cut and hurt, but living, and the land icy and unfamiliar. Cry for them! There should be despair! But there is not. They salvage what they can, make a meager camp. Cold nights and thin soup, but still there's hope. Can they rebuild the radio? Can they launch a beacon? Can they find power for the scout's cells? They cannot. But they hope, because if they don't hope then all is lost.

COMMANDER

Shit, that was dramatic as all hell.

FRALL

Shhhh!

NARRATOR

They count their days in small numbers. They will die as they lived, with honor. They hunt, but this world is new to them, its ways unfamiliar and inscrutable. The fire is small, and they clutch together for warmth. The nights are long, and they are bitter cold. The first of the survivors dies, and then the second. Their paws are icy and numb. But! Even as the story nears its final chapter, one scout smells something in the dark of night. Smoke in the distance. And food. Cooking food. Her companions huddle out of the wind, too weak to search and too broken to answer, and Fang limps out alone to face the end of her path.

COMMANDER

(yawning)

Wake me when it's over, ok Frall?

FRALL

Of course, Commander. Congratulations on making it this long; everyone else is already asleep.

NARRATOR

She goes far; she doesn't go far. She is too tired to remember. But she cannot stop. She limps until she can limp no further, and then she crawls. She crawls on her belly, and the cold puts teeth in her. She does not know she has found the fire until she is at the fire, her mind is empty of all but cold and pain. And then she is at the fire, and the natives of this planet look at her. She honors them as best she can, her feet together, her eyes raised. She puts her head on her legs and sighs.

On that night, the Humans of Earth give her treats, bones and meat ends and bits of charred bread from their meal. They warm her by the flame, they rub behind her ears and skritch above her tail, and the Treaty of Fang Treat Campfire is made. In the morning she brings the rest of the scouts to camp, and they live and hunt and warm each other. And so their descendants continued to do, over the countless centuries between their time and our own.

The Dogs of Earth are no longer Fidorians True, but we honor them as our cousins, and to this day, we honor the treaty their ancestors made with Humans of Earth.

Fanfare from the video.

NARRATOR

Created and produced by Say It So Enterprises and Say Can You C Productions, by arrangement and dint. All your talky needs, none your balky price! Is anyone still listening? Please, we need help. If you can hear my voice, please help. My name is Third-in-Line and I'm being held prisoner in a studio hive on the inner moon of Juba IV. I've been here a year already, I think. It's hard to tell. We're locked to these chairs and they make us record for days on end. They don't pay us. We don't get solid food, just a nutrient wash pumped directly into our chest cavity. It's awful. Please help. Please call the police. Or call the Navy. That's it, call the Navy. My parents are in my home system of--

John's pager plays the WSS jingle, startling him awake.

JOHN

Jai alai practice! Buh-- (*answers the call*) Hello? Hello, H.F.?

REX

(*waking up*)

Ah, naptime's over! Let's just shut this thing off...

Narration cuts out, abruptly. Between the pager and the narration dropping out, other characters, human and Fidorian, wake up in background.

COMMANDER

Mm. That was a very... refreshing presentation. I didn't miss anything important, did I, Frall?

FRALL

In point of fact, you did. Would you like me to repeat the information verbally, or just inscribe it directly into your cerebral cortex?

COMMANDER

Oh, what the hell, let's take the shortcut.

Shimmer as FRALL instantaneously transmits the experience of watching the full presentation into the COMMANDER's brain.

COMMANDER

Urglah! (*beat*) Huh. Thanks, Frall. That's fascinating. I'd never heard of the Treaty of Fang Treat Campfire. Our longest-lasting diplomatic agreement, and we don't even know about it.

FRALL

That's probably the reason for its longevity. If you had been aware of its existence, you would no doubt have been tempted to violate it.

REX

So, Commander, now that the formalities have been concluded, we must ask for your help. We've come to celebrate the Treaty of Fang Treat Campfire, of course, but that could be done on Earth as well. We're here now for a different, and most urgent, reason.

COMMANDER

We'd be happy to help in any way that we can, Rex. What do you need from us?

REX

We are here to recover the Arc of Retrieval. It has been lost for generations, and we have been tasked with bringing it home. Per the terms of Fang Treat Campfire, it is vital that you return the Arc to us. We must, I'm afraid, insist. Most strenuously.

Quiet but distinctly menacing growls from a few Fidorians.

COMMANDER

A Fidorian relic? Here, on The Fairgrounds? Are you certain?

REX

Very certain.

COMMANDER

All right, then, I'll take your word for it. What does this Ark look like? How can we track it? The station's layout is... complex, so the more we know about what we're looking for, the more helpful we can be.

REX

It is the Arc of Retrieval. I--I don't know what to say about it. It begins, and it is rare in its beauty. It is mystifying, and perfect, and whole. The Arc is a journey, and a vessel of travel. It is the Path, and the Power of the Path. When it comes to rest, it is filled with the promise of another trip.

COMMANDER

Right. Uh, I don't suppose you could give us a description of a less... metaphysical nature?

REX

I have said what there is to be said, Commander. The Arc is in your hands, and you must return it.

COMMANDER

Ok then. What do you think, Frall? A "vessel of travel"? Could it be a shuttle, or some kind of survey probe? Or maybe a container, like the Ark of the Covenant. If it's a shuttle, we could find out what it uses for propulsion and scan for traces. Noah's Ark was a giant boat, but that's more an allegory than anything else.

FRALL

If you say so, sir.

COMMANDER

Don't you know that one? Noah's Ark? Two by two he called them, and what about the mosquitoes? Obviously there wasn't a real Ark, I mean what would they do with the poop? It's an allegory.

FRALL

Not so much.

COMMANDER

Not so much what?

FRALL

That was a hell of a storm.

COMMANDER

You're telling me a Human actually built a giant wooden boat and--

FRALL

Oh, not a Human, no. Or a boat. What would they do with the poop? Nonetheless, there is a grain of truth to the story. Curious how your people got ahold of it.

COMMANDER

...Lieutenant, can we talk about this later?

FRALL

You did bring it up, sir. But yes, later. Assuming that “later” is a valid proposition, in this case.

COMMANDER

...Species extinction, right. So, we need to get the Fidorians back their Ark. Say, Frall? This isn’t one of those things that you already know the solution to but no one has actually asked you so you haven’t told us, is it? Because if it is, this is me asking.

FRALL

I’m not sure how to reply to that, Commander. We would need to define a number of concepts very precisely, especially given your somewhat blinkered understanding of the concept of “already,” before I could begin to translate my answer into terms that you would find intelligible. I could get you a rough and ready ballpark yes or no in about 48 minutes, but that would be just over four minutes after other negative outcomes which would render the answer moot.

COMMANDER

So you may or may not know, but you can’t tell me what you know, and either way we’ve got 44 minutes on the clock before the shooting starts.

FRALL

More or less. Regardless of whether the question can be answered or not, though, I can state fairly confidently that you would hate any answer that could be determined to exist.

COMMANDER

I could have guessed that much myself. Ok, well, since we don’t have any other nigh-omnipotent crew members, we’ll have to find this thing by more conventional methods. How about we--

Intermittently during the preceeding, JOHN has been faintly heard in the background talking to H.F.

JOHN

Commander? Uh, Rex? Probably you should hear this. Ok, H.F., you’re talking to everyone now. Everyone, H.F. is my boss, and he’s down in the decommissioned floors of Resh Sector.

H.F.

Hi everyone. Oh hey, kid, did you get me any olives?

REX

Olives? I hate olives. Ewww.

A bit of sympathetic whining/yelping from the other Fidorians.

H.F.

I'll take that as a no. Never mind. So I was tracing some of the water feeds down here--Resh has been empty for a while--and I ran into some unusual vacuum damage. Nothing too serious, the bulkheads closed the way they're supposed to, so there was just a little blistering. But weird, especially from such a small breach. So I'm checking the lockdowns, and I run into someone who shouldn't be here, which, again, is anybody who's not me or the kid, because the sector's closed.

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

I of course was not surprised to find myself here, on a disused level in an empty sector. Sherlock Holmes speaking. Such spots regularly fall within my purview. Furthermore, I adhere to the Blackmoose Theories of Event Potential, so it is neither surprising that I was here, nor that we met here by apparent chance.

FRALL

Ha!

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Ha? You are amused? Blackmoose postulates in pertinent part that events happen where they can, where they must, or where they will. If curious unknown events occurred in populous spots, everyone would know about them, and though they might be Curious they would not be Unknown. Thus my regular stops at Resh 37, Suite Ç-cedille, and similar locations.

FRALL

Oh, I'm quite fond of the Blackmoose postulates. When considered from a 27-dimensional perspective, they're absolutely hilarious. Great light reading. But do go on, please.

H.F.

Ok, so the other funny thing, besides this guy hanging around, is that the vacuum? Was actually caused by a window. A broken window. After all the times the Robot Union said they wouldn't respond to hard vacuum calls in case there was an open window, what are the odds we get one where they were actually right?

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT and FRALL

One hundred percent.

FRALL

Plus or minus.

COMMANDER

And this is a matter for command staff why? Broken windows are WSS's responsibility, Mr. Fornes. I have some rather more pressing matters on my plate at the moment.

H.F.

Hell, Commander, I know that, but this guy insisted on showing you--

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Commander, if I may but elucidate, I believe all will shortly become clear. Some many years ago I was here in the course of my perambulations, and--as we would expect, from Blackmoose's Laws--I observed the vacuum drop when the ill-fated hull plate was freshly punctured. The leak was quite minor, and the automatic repair cycle had already commenced. From my observations of the scene, it was clear that the damage had been caused by a small spherical object moving at sub-payload speeds. This very object here, if I may hazard an opinion, which I suspect may be of interest to your current guests.

THE FIDORIANS

Look! No! Wow! Holy nibblers! What!

REX

The Arc of Retrieval! You've found it!

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

All in a day's work for Sherlock Holmes--

VERONICA

And I'm here too! (*H.F.: What the--?*) Gardens, Veronica Gardens. Holmes & Gardens, Detectives. Just wanted to get that in. Deductions and deducings at reasonable rates! Ciao!

THE FIDORIANS

It's the Arc of Retrieval! They found the Arc of Retrieval! Wondrous! Amazing! Incredible! Disable the weapons systems! Power down the forward targeting array!

JOHN

OH!--Arc with a C. It's a BALL. That you THROW.

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Yes, a ball, and from the radial char pattern on the rear curves, one that was fired from a spacefaring torpedo tube. Distinctive traces of rifling effects suggest one of the forward tubes on a Light Cruiser of alien manufacture. The ball's speed was sufficient to break a vacuum-facing window, but not enough to breach interior compartment walls, so it was an incident of jest or prankery, and not a hot shot in some cold war. Analysis of the surface distress patterns on this ball indicated that it was worried affectionately by a toothy race of a predatory disposition. From this general pattern of facts, I surmised that the ball was a treasured possession of a Fidorian bloodline, and took the liberty of dispatching an anonymous message to Fido II by supra-luminal post. When I heard that the *Fetch* had docked here at The Fairgrounds, I knew my deductions had borne fruit.

VERONICA

Also, it says “PROPERTY OF FAMILY REX FIDO II IF FOUND PLEASE RETURN” on the back, with the number of a postal-relay drop box.

SHERLOCK HOLMES-BOT

Yes, quite so. This served to confirm my hypothesis. Come along, Gardens. We must return this wayward MacGuffin to its rightful owners before retiring to our digs in Vav 41.

H.F.

All right, I’m closing this ticket. The water fountains are functional in Resh, so Systems can run its assessment and get Animal Control in to track down the monkeys. John, you sure they don’t have any olives?

JOHN

Just chew toys, sorry.

H.F.

Feh. All right then, your shift’s almost over, no point coming back to the office. See you tomorrow. Thanks everyone. WSS out.

Bloop. Disconnected.

COMMANDER

Monkeys? By Hephaestus’ sooty ankles. Please tell me all of station maintenance is not on a code alert, rewatering a derelict sector and sending out response teams, just because some idiot dropped his brine shrimp down a vent. Please tell me that.

FRALL

Commander, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that all this *mishegas* in Resh has coincidentally ensured that our visit from the Fidorianians will not precipitate a shooting war. The bad news does indeed concern brine shrimp.

Sound of an Iltorian rousing from slumber. It is gross.

ALTHAAR

ALTHAAR IS AWAKE! Althaar is paying very attention!

JOHN

It’s all over, Althaar. Let’s go home.

Transition to The Electric Egg. The conversation between DEE and XTOPPS is interleaved over and among the announcements playing on WHEC in the background. Announcements start first to set the tone, fade out on the list of cancelled shows and then loop as needed.

RADIO DJ BOT

Hey out there to my daytime nighttime all-the-righttime rock and rockier rocks, rockets, and rockettes. Key the ignition on this transmission, I know you were wishin' for explosive fission in tonight's Britpop frisson show by The Small Faces, unseen and seldom heard in this spiral arm since the before sun set on the British Empire. Happenstance is a hard road, and today we've been run off that road. The Small Faces will not be appearing tonight at the Electric Egg, due to circumstances that make "out of control" look like lightning in a bottle. In place of the Faces the Electric Egg is proud to present Dee and Xtopps in a tribute show to the band, their music, their times, and their talents. Itchycoo, babies, itchycoo. Roll into the Egg wayward, on the Sha-La-La-La-Lee side. Don't fade away, come on in and get some shelter, and rock on down the road with us tonight to tomorrow.

Tonight's show by the Small Faces is cancelled. All dates by Led Zeppelin are cancelled. All upcoming events listed in the Psyched and Sizzlin' Concert Listin' are on hold pending confirmation of a new schedule. Any rumors you may have heard that Del Star Dot Star will be performing at the Electric Egg are not true. Matinee and evening performances by Tom and the Oddities are cancelled. All shows by Bastard Mojave have been cancelled. Shows by Frédéric Chopin have been cancelled, including both Early Music Brunch events. All Those Jennifers will not be appearing at the Electric Egg. The Who is not currently touring in human space. Elvis Presley has left the building. With regrets, The Fallopien Hair has cancelled all shows on The Fairgrounds. Due to management and union issues, KERP will not be performing at the Electric Egg.

All announced dates by Sister Ernie are confirmed. Sister Ernie will be performing all dates at the Electric Egg. Also confirmed: Most-Nightsly House Chanteuse Dee Mallory will front her one-Xyb wizard backing combo "Xtopps" until the music stops, at a quarter to never. Drei viertel niemals, with breaks for beverages and biology. Dee and Xtopps will perform tribute shows to many of the bands that couldn't make it out to The Fairgrounds this month, so Restez Tuned, pick a flavor, and as always, add nuts.

DEE

I can't believe any of this, Xtopps. I was looking forward to working with you--and this, you know, first you took my bookings away, and then you weren't even bringing the bands you said you were bringing. You took my shows, and you were just selling air. Not even good air. Just hot, empty, smelly air.

XTOPPS

I don't know what to say. Like, I don't mean this like it sounds, but I wouldn't even be here if you hadn't twisted my arms. Wish it hadn't happened, but you know.

DEE

You don't mean it like it sounds? How *do* you mean it?

XTOPPS

Nah, jeck that, it's exactly like it sounds.

DEE

Ok, I know I backed you into a corner, but you're getting something out of this too, remember? I've got your back when Security's looking to make a chunk-style bust.

XTOPPS

Yeah, you know I'm on the legume, Dee, but you don't really chom what that means. I got a Kernel on my back.

DEE

A Colonel on your back? And what, a General in one of your butts? They tell you to run scams like this, these Army guys?

XTOPPS

Kernel with a K, mang. Planter's Pride. I ride the peanut butter knife, and it rides me. I already hipped you, Xtopps flies solo. Never known any other way. Human music is my thing, I've been living that sound since before my first molt. It's more home than home. I thought I could bring it and fly it and make it all sing. So I bought the codes, right? Play the system, and I can play my way. But I couldn't think it through. You know. You know why. When I'm Papa-Bravo, everything is all in my soul at once, and I rule it. I ride it. I'm in it and it lights me up like a fire of stars. I can squeeze it out like joy, like living joy, out of my xtopps and into the room.

DEE

Papa-Bravo? You mean when you're high?

XTOPPS

Yeah. Papa-Bravo. On my nut. Spread out. Stuck to the roof. But it's all just about that second, that instant, that spark. No future. And I know it seems craggy, and you got every right to be zarked, but it's always been a ride for one. I don't know how to take on passengers, mang.

DEE

It's never too late to learn. I thought you were worried about your spiritual development, zood. You're never going to get anywhere if you just hide out in your comfort zone getting sticky.

XTOPPS

I'm... ah, nertz, Dee. I did you wrong. Chip too. Wish I could retcon that stupid plan.

DEE

At least that Union weasel was willing to cut you a break on the fine in exchange for the deets on that bookings hoarder. Otherwise you'd be completely frilled.

XTOPPS

Too true. Listen, Dee, no shness, I'm sorry about all this. What do you say, are we flush?

DEE

Sure, we're flush. But listen, Xtopps. No more scheming, ok? I really need someone to have my back here. I'll be playing the Egg for a long haul, whether I like it or not.

XTOPPS

So that's both of us. But yeah, I got you. And hey, listen, zood: I still got the rights to cover all that material, even if we gotta use our own names--we should put some of those tunes in our sets, you'll kick 'em silly and I'll play 'em hard.

DEE

Sounds like a plan.

XTOPPS

Two voices, and fourteen hands. Hey, one other thing. I got a new review, can we put it up on the marquee?

DEE

A review? Already? I guess. What did they say about you?

XTOPPS

"Might be amazing." It's kind of... can we use it?

*Radio fades up & transitions to **business as usual on the Bridge**. The alert that is about to happen is sudden, organized, and serious. The crew, even Amber, is actually very competent when they need to be. **Brief background mutter**, and then a klaxon. A **pre-recorded voice repeats "Collision Alert!"***

COMMANDER

Status!

COMMS OFFICER (STALIN-BOT)

Ship lines nominal. All on board and green.

TACTICAL/TRAFFIC OFFICER

Lanes are good. It's not a ship, Commander. Reading a single small object inbound toward the Upper Concourse, impact in 8 seconds. Can't get a profile on it.

COMMANDER

Kill that alarm. *(someone does)* Can we intercept?

TACTICAL/TRAFFIC OFFICER

Negative. Velocity too high to engage. Impact in 4 - *(continues counting down under the following)*

COMMS OFFICER

General alert, Commander?

COMMANDER

Negative. No time to evacuate the sector. Automated vacuum response should be able to handle it.

TACTICAL/TRAFFIC OFFICER

Impact. No detonation.

COMMS OFFICER

Systems nominal.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Velocity on impact was sub-sonic? We're showing a vacuum breach in Alef 59, strictly non-structural damage, bulkheads isolating the leak now? No casualties indicated?

COMMANDER

Redirect a sweep sensor off the traffic lanes, backscan along the collision trajectory for other incoming.

TACTICAL/TRAFFIC OFFICER

Yes, Commander.

COMMANDER

Frall? Where's Frall?

Arrival shimmer.

FRALL

I'm here, Commander.

COMMANDER

We could have used you just now. We had a minor incident, unknown object strike in Alef 59. Where were you?

FRALL

Here.

COMMANDER

Where were you before?

FRALL

Here. I'm aware of what you're asking, sir. Best to let it be.

TACTICAL/TRAFFIC OFFICER

Trajectory clear, Commander.

COMMS OFFICER

Commander Torianna, I've got a coded transmission from the *Fetch*, three hours outbound on course to return to the Fido system. They're still in local space, going SuLu in--correction, sir, they've gone supra-luminal and have left comms range.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Decoded?

COMMANDER

Yes, Amber. Let me know when you've got it cracked.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Right, Commander, "decoded"?

COMMANDER

Yes, as soon as-- Oh. Right. What does it say?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

It says, "From Rex: Did you catch it, did you catch it? Now throw it back"?

FRALL

Oh goody!

Music transition to:

TELEPATH CLUB ANNOUNCER

(on P.A.)

Attention all telepaths. A mixer is being held for all beings with Esper ratings over 8.3 sometime in the next several cycles. If you do not already know the exact time and location for this event, you do not qualify to attend. Deal with it.

JOHN and ALTHAAR back at home, after a long long day. Well, Althaar has had a normal day (and a long nap), JOHN is beat. Sound of a closing curtain.

ALTHAAR

Althaar has closed the Privacy Curtain in the Room of Living. Room-mate John may look about with complacency!

JOHN

Thanks, Althaar. And thanks for bringing me along to that... whatever it was with the Fidorian. That was something else. They seemed really nice, if... freaky on a lot of levels.

ALTHAAR

It is a saying of Iltor: all peoples are freaky to the observation of others. Indeed, the rest of the Galaxy finds your Human response to the Iltorian appearance of a great freakiness! But Althaar appreciates deeply the company of Room-mate John! And his presence at the historic celebration of Fang Treat Campfire! And there was no Distress! Only itchy in the Trousers of Discomfort. Which Althaar has now removed, with great joy and enlightenment!

JOHN

About the Distress this morning, Althaar. I want to apologize again for that. I know I frightened you, and I'm sorry. I didn't handle that well. I'm not at my best when I wake up in the middle of the night.

ALTHAAR

It is not a worry, Room-Mate John. It is very much better to be prepared for Distress that does not occur, than unprepared for Distress that does! May Althaar ask what was the reason for the loud waking up from sleep? It is not the usual method Althaar has observed. Often the waking up has loud noises, but they are from the God Damn It Alarm Clock, yes?

JOHN

Yeah, uh-- it's just "alarm clock," but otherwise you've got the idea. Well, I was--this is a little embarrassing, sorry, but... I was having a dream, Althaar, and you were in it. You were coming into my room, and you were wearing these yellow and blue pyjamas, and it was, well. I mean it wasn't as bad as it would be in real life, I don't think my subconscious is capable of that, but anyway, it was scary enough to wake me up.

ALTHAAR

Room-Mate John was... dreaming of Althaar?

JOHN

Yes. Sorry about that. I know it's weird.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is. Althaar is very moved, Room-Mate John. May Althaar ask a question that is perhaps of the proboscis?

JOHN

Proboscis? Oh--nosy. A nosy question. Of course, Althaar. Go ahead.

ALTHAAR

Room-Mate John, Althaar does not accuse, but Althaar must seek the understanding. Is this Room-Entering Dream a part of Human mating rituals? Because Althaar likes very much Room-Mate John as a Room-Mate, but Althaar was assured this did not require the actual Mating. There are not Mating feelings within Althaar.

JOHN

Oh--oh no. No, Althaar, there is no mating happening here. Not--no, no. There are different kinds of dreams, this is not part of a mating ritual. Oh, Good Lord no. No no no.

ALTHAAR

A great relief to Althaar! Althaar also has no Mating feelings for Room-mate John! So there will be no uncomfortable problems! The famous Human enthusiasm for Mating and Romance is of great interest to Althaar, but to study only, please! (*a brief Iltorian chuckle, which is also gross*)

JOHN

Ok, I know we've got a reputation, but Humans do think about other things besides mating.

ALTHAAR

Oh, Althaar is very aware of this! And Iltorians are the only species to which a Human has never suggested the Mating! So it would be of great surprise to Althaar if Room-mate John wished to perform it! But Althaar must ask, because one time Althaar was unprepared for a conference with a representative of the Prandux Assemblage. There was much strangeness, and confusing talk, and then Althaar discovered that in the society of the Prandux, sharing meals creates expectation of a nature that is nuptial. It was very unhappy to explain the mistake.

JOHN

Wow. Sounds like that would be really hard to deal with.

ALTHAAR

No, Room-Mate John. It was not hard at all! It was rather... squishy. Yes, squishy.

JOHN

Oh God.

ALTHAAR

But there is nothing squishy with Room-Mate John! Althaar is content that there is no mating expectation. Althaar is not even sure how that would work.

JOHN

Let's definitely not think about it.

ALTHAAR

Yes! There is a good feeling in Althaar of warmness, and Room-Mate John has the dreams of Althaar, which is the indication of importance of Althaar to Room-mate John, yes? It makes the pedipalps tingle! There is much Aristotelian affection in the relation of John and Althaar.

JOHN

Oh, it's actually Platonic, Althaar. We have a Platonic relationship.

ALTHAAR

No, Althaar has made study of Human philosophy. Aristotelian is the word Althaar is choosing.

JOHN

Oh, ok.

ALTHAAR

...Room-mate John? May Althaar ask another question?

JOHN

Sure.

ALTHAAR

...May Althaar now address John as “Friend-John”? To honor the closeness between John and Althaar?

JOHN

Friendly closeness, right? With no expectations of, what was it? Nuptial nature?

ALTHAAR

Yes! The friendship of Iltorian with Human. This would be a great honor and accomplishment. ...Is John the friend of Althaar?

JOHN

I guess I am. Yeah, I’d say we’re friends.

Beat.

ALTHAAR

...Althaar thanks you, FriendJohn. *(brief happy noise, quickly stifled)* Jubilation! Althaar and John are first-friends! All of the Iltorian Commonality will rejoice! And Althaar has hopes that there will someday be many Human friends to Iltor as kind and wise and generous as FriendJohn!

JOHN

Thanks, Althaar. I’m glad to be your friend--

ALTHAAR

Squeeeeeeeee!

JOHN

Maybe don’t do that so much. So, uh, this sounds pretty official. Is there anything else we need to do? Like, a friendship ritual? Or is just saying it enough? Do I have to wear a special hat, or anything?

ALTHAAR

It is enough that we know, FriendJohn. But Althaar has enjoyed your special hat! It is blinky.

JOHN

Ah, right. I’m never getting past that hat, am I.

ALTHAAR

“Friend-John!” Althaar is filled with joy! Would FriendJohn like to celebrate with a Ba Na Na? It is--

ALTHAAR and JOHN

Yellow and delicious.

JOHN

I know it is, Althaar. Sure, I’ll get myself a celebratory banana. Uh, would you like this chew toy? {}

Credits music.

ANNOUNCER

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

This episode was written by Linus Gelber

featuring

John Amir as John B

Berit Johnson as Althaar

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Eli Gantias as Hardyfox Fornes

Christopher Lee as Chip Frinkel

Zuri Washington as Delilah Mallory

--- as Xtopps

{etc. with other parts}

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

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

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.

This has been an audio production from Gemini CollisionWorks.

Tune in again in two weeks for our next episode, but until then, let's check in on the green room at the Electric Egg, where Dee and Xtopps are composing a strongly worded letter...

The green room at the Electric Egg.

DEE

Voice-to-text, please. (*bloop*) Letter format. Address: Mo Stolber, Musicians' Union, Temperance City Music Union Building, Deimos, Solar System. Body text: Dear Sir. It's Arthur Conan Doyle, you muffin. Not Arthur C. Clarke. And you have all the hidden depth of graphene mesh. Indignantly Yours, Delilah "Dee" Mallory and Q'Bonzo "Xtopps" Abacab, Electric Egg, Fairgrounds. End letter.

Hmmm... Needs more contempt. What's the most obnoxious font I can possibly use for this? Comic Sans? Papyrus? New Ionian Condensed?

XTOPPS

Copperplate.

DEE

Yesssss.