

Life with Althaar

Episode 18: Space Hat with Air

Version 2.1 (Recording Script), 08/28/20 - IWH (2nd draft, BAJ)

*[scene 1] The standard LWA opening spaceship whoosh. **Close breathing**, inside a “space hat with air,” which will be as constant as possible through almost the full episode without being annoying. NB: Apart from the post-credits scene, and one other place to be noted, all of the characters in this episode, apart from JOHN B, are heard only over the commlink in his spacesuit—we are inside with JOHN in real time, as if next to his head. There are some tiny beeps inside the suit. Other constant little sounds that make sense. And that’s it.*

JOHN

(reacting to the spaceship going by)

Agh! Frill me, that one was close! *(bleep of comms being activated)* Hey, Docking Control, you read me?

STALIN-BOT

What is problem? I am trying to move spaceships around. You are not spaceship.

JOHN

Yeah, but I’m out here with the spaceships, so could you move them around somewhere that isn’t right in my face?

STALIN-BOT

Pff, they are not going to touch you! They damage you, they damage station. Stalin-bot follows mandated docking procedures, all ships are within safe distance tolerance. Stop being little baby.

JOHN

Safe distance tolerance for the Fairgrounds and safe distance tolerance for John B are two different things! The station doesn’t have eyes, for one thing, but I do. And those short-range burners are blinding even with my visor at full opacity. Maybe if I had one of those high-grade helmets with the full-spectrum protection, but there’s no way WS— there’s no way my employers would spring for that. So can you please make sure no one’s firing their boosters at my face while I’m trying to work?

STALIN-BOT

I am dealing with major backlog here! Just turn off your silly eyes and use other sensors to do job.

JOHN

I don't have any other sensors!

STALIN-BOT

(he knew all along, of course)

Right, oh, yes! You are bizarre inferior robot what is made of meat! Pardon me for not taking into account shortcomings of repair bot who cannot even manage silly little errand.

JOHN

Yes, it's a silly little errand! A silly little errand that no regular member of the Robot Union can touch, because it involves a tiny tiny wire. A tiny wire that is somehow essential to the operation of six entire docking arms, which apparently has no failsafes, and can only be reached through an access panel on the outer hull, because the Fairgrounds. So if Docking Control wants their berths back sometime this cycle, they could maybe help me by not frying my eyeballs out!

COMMANDER

B, this is Commander Torianna. What's the deal with that wire and why are you yelling instead of fixing it? We need our docks open. The ships are piling up out there like cordwood in a Fugulnari potter's field.

JOHN

Sorry, Commander. I just had some thoughts about where Stalin-bot's piling those ships, given my lack of full eye protection in this cheap suit.

COMMANDER

Well, that's WSS for you. *(WSS jingle plays on the Bridge and inside the suit)* Sorry about that.

JOHN

Yeah. That was... really loud in here.

COMMANDER

Not to butt into your personal life, but have you considered asking Althaar to bankroll some upgraded EVA equipment? I mean, you're his best friend, and he's not exactly hurting for funds.

JOHN

Yes, he's my best friend, and he's very generous, but just because he seems to have a limitless discretionary budget doesn't mean I'm going to go running to him every time I've got my eye on something pricey. He's my friend, not my sugar parent!

COMMANDER

Fine, sheesh! But I'd give it some thought if I were you. He'd probably think *you* were doing *him* a favor by giving him a chance to help out. I mean, he's already spent hundreds, or maybe thousands of credits, on space helmets. And then he just leaves them in random corners all over the Fairgrounds for the benefit of complete strangers.

JOHN

Oh. Right.

COMMANDER

So I can't imagine he'd object to you getting some use out of one of those, especially since otherwise it'll probably just get repurposed as recreation equipment.

JOHN

Recreation equipment?

COMMANDER

Well, we've recently had to make some adjustments to the Recreation and Morale budget, so the jai alai fanatics have been grabbing Althaar's helmets and turning them into replacement pelota.

JOHN

Ok, yeah, I might make a few suggestions about more effective uses for his discretionary fund.

COMMANDER

After you get back from fixing that wire.

JOHN

No problem, I'm just about on top of where it's supposed to be, so I'll— Uh-oh.

STALIN-BOT

Uh-oh? What is uh-oh?

COMMANDER

Shush, Stalin-bot! John? What is uh-oh?

JOHN

Well, I seem to have found your problem here, which is that, yeah, the wire is definitely broken, but it done got broke because a nice chunk of space flotsam has embedded itself in the hull. Maybe a piece of one of the exploded escape pods, it's hard to tell. I assume it hasn't broken all the way through or you'd have gotten a decompression alert, but yeah, it's definitely breached the outer lamina.

COMMANDER

Can you still get to the wire?

JOHN

Mm, half of what I'd need to splice is trapped under this junk. Annnnd...

(straining sounds)

Nope. I can't get it off the hull, it's wedged in there. Might be fused.

COMMANDER

Oh, that's just peachy. So now we'll have to bring you in, wait until a robot crew can get out there and scrape this barnacle off the hull, and then send you all the way back out to actually make the repair and get our docking arms up and running. And of course this wouldn't happen during a slow cycle when we could limp along just fine at 46% docking capacity, no. It had to be on one of the busiest days of the year! All right, you can head back to the airlock, I'll page you when we've cleared the blockage.

JOHN

Wait, Commander? I have a crazy idea, but it just might work. And if it does, I should be able to finish this up right now.

COMMANDER

Really? That would be— Hang on, how crazy are we talking?

JOHN

Not *too* crazy. Barely crazy at all, really. Mildly eccentric at worst. A little awkward at parties.

COMMANDER

Let's hear it.

JOHN

Ok, first of all, to be safe, you should clear out whatever's right under me, because there's an outside chance I might punch all the way through the hull doing this. I mean, I know I shouldn't be able to, but, well. The Fairgrounds.

COMMANDER

Right. *(off mic a bit)* Amber! Evacuate and seal off the area right below John B. *(in response to something we can't hear)* So it's done? That's not a question? Fine. *(back on mic to JOHN)* All set. What's your plan?

JOHN

Ok, so what I'm thinking is, I can't get this big honkin' piece of space junk off the hull, but maybe I don't actually need to. I know where the wire is supposed to be, and I think if I'm careful, I can use my laser-welder to cut straight through the blockage and get to the wire directly. The bots will need to replace this section of exterior plating anyway, me putting another hole in it won't make much difference. But if we're lucky, I'll be able to get that wire spliced right now, before they even get here. Then they can take their time patching the hull, you'll have your docking arms working right away, and I won't have to make a return trip.

COMMANDER

That sounds... downright plausible. Let's give it a shot.

JOHN begins to do exactly this (we will discuss how much noise, if any, we believe can be perceived in any way within his suit).

COMMANDER

And good job with the lateral thinking, B. I've got what sounds like every ship in the sector burning up the docking comms right now, so I'm really glad it's not H.F. out there dealing with that wire. Wire. "Wire." Wire wire wire. Hey, John, you ever get that thing where you say a word enough times that it just doesn't sound like it means anything anymore? Wire. Wire. Wire. Nope. Not a word I recognize anymore.

JOHN

(overlapping the above a bit, to himself)

Yes, alright. And laser... on. Good clean beam. Alright then, start the cut. *(beat)* Good clean cut. First line down. Now from the other direction... Okay... got it. So just one more and this piece should start to separa— *(beat)* What the hell?

COMMANDER

What what hell?

JOHN

Um. One of the lines I cut in the junk is still glowing. It should have cooled instantly once the laser was off.

COMMANDER

Maybe something in the metal? Just an odd alloy?

JOHN

No, no, this isn't... why is it...? It looks like the reaction is expanding. Um. I'm gonna back away here. It's... yeah, I think there's some kind of material in the bit I cut that's been activated by the laser? And it's glowing red and getting redder.

AMBER

John? This is Amber? On the Bridge? Did you see any kind of code on the scrap near where you were cutting?

JOHN

There are different groups of numbers and letters all over the thing. Right where I was cutting... it says JD-dash-X.

AMBER

JD-X? John? You need to move fast? That's Hexanitrostilbene? It activates in vacuum? And if that's part of an old escape pod? You just basically lit a fuse to an unfired explosive bolt?

COMMANDER

John, get the hell out of there right now!

JOHN

(at the same time)

I'm moving, I'm moving, I'm mov—

The sound of a dull, thudding explosion across the hull of the ship and slamming debris into JOHN, sending him flying off The Fairgrounds and into space. He screams as he spins away, fading into [scene 2] the main title music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...

LIFE WITH ALTHAAR! Season 2!

Episode 18... "Space Hat with Air!"

[scene 3] JOHN continues to scream as he spins away from the Fairgrounds.

JOHN

(pulling himself together, yelling at himself)

Guidance jets, guidance jets! Where's the—Ah! *(hissing of guidance jets)* ...I think I'm good on the x-axis, now a little more on the z, and... *(more hisses)* Ugh. Ok. Ok.

Sound of a few more small hisses as JOHN uses the minor pitch & yaw controls on the suit to stop his spin.

COMMANDER

You there, B? Status report.

JOHN

Yeah, I'm here, sorry. That blast set me spinning pretty hard, it took me a minute to get stable. At least I didn't lose my lunch. I think living with Althaar has at least given me a pretty invulnerable stomach.

COMMANDER

Thank Jones for small favors. Where are you?

JOHN

Uh, I'm facing the station, straight on. But I'm still moving away from you at a pretty good clip.

COMMANDER

Well, engage your thrusters and get back here, I've got a lovely stack of incident report forms I could use your input on.

JOHN

Yeah, sorry. I'll be back in... Huh. Just a sec. Well, that's interesting. Negative function on dorsal thruster pack. Lemme try this again, and... Nope, nothing.

COMMANDER

Is the pack damaged?

JOHN

Doesn't seem to be. I mean, obviously I can't see it from in here, but I don't think it took any of the hit, and I'm not getting any error messages in the readout. It's just not firing.

COMMANDER

Can you use the guidance jets?

JOHN

Well, they're not meant for propulsion, they just spin me around my center of gravity on one of three axes. Which might be fun under some circumstances, but it isn't going to get me back to the airlock. Although, I guess if I fired both the right and left y-axis jets, that would add up to forward thrust.

COMMANDER

Great. Try that.

JOHN

The thing is, the guidance system propellant is only at 6%—I used up most of it stopping my spin. On the other hand, that means those jets are definitely still functional, unlike my main thruster pack. So, here goes. (*hiss, beat*) Ok... now the propellant is at 0%, and I'm moving away from you at a somewhat reduced clip.

COMMANDER

Well, it was worth a shot. Ok, just sit tight, I've already had Amber wake H.F. up, he's on his way down.

JOHN

Aw, streez, really? You didn't need to do that, I haven't even gone through the troubleshooting checklist yet. I'll probably have it fixed by the time H.F. gets there, he's just going to show up and be cranky.

COMMANDER

Hardyfox doesn't need to be dragged out of bed to be cranky, that's his natural state of existence. And I'd rather have him on deck just in case. You run through your checklist, and let me know if you manage to get moving. I mean, moving in the direction we want you to be. Otherwise I'll call back once H.F. gets here.

JOHN

Sure thing.

COMMANDER

Bridge out.

[scene 4] The commlink goes mute.

JOHN

Right. The checklist. What's the handy-dandy acronym they teach you for this one..? Ah, right, HELP. Okay so... H stands for "Hard Reboot." Let's go with that...

Sound of the suit's navigational functions turning off and on, fairly rapidly.

JOHN

And now we try the propulsion pack... And nothing. Okay next is... E stands for "Enter System Override Code," so... *(bleep bloop)* Code entered... system locks are now removed, so bypasses are enabled... And try the pack...

(beat; now more nervous)

Um. Two more possibilities then. Next we have... L stands for "Log Out," so I'm taking the suit off my personal settings and... *(bleep bloop)* returning it to factory standard... and now, the pack should be able to ignite...

(beat, it didn't)

Well, damn. One last letter... P. And P stands for... Stands for... God dammit. What the hell was P for?

The comms goes live.

H.F.

Heya, John, what was that about pee? You havin' trouble holding it in in the suit? That's why you're supposed to wear the device.

JOHN

No, I have that on, H.F., I was just trying to remember—

H.F.

Okay, good, because take it from me, the smell never comes out. Now I dunno why I got dragged outta bed for this, 'cause your EVA training course should have taught you the helpful acronym we all remember in case of a main thruster unit failure. I bet even Miss Sophie knows it, don't you Miss Sophie?

MISS SOPHIE barks as H.F. talks to her in improv "doggie talk," ignoring JOHN.

JOHN

No, I went through the first three, I just couldn't remember the last—

During the following, JOHN keeps trying to get H.F.'s attention and tell him that he's done all these steps, H.F. only paying attention at the end of each step.

H.F.

Alright, so the thing you want to remember is HELP. Now that's not what you should be yelling, but the four steps to try and reignite a non-functional EVA propulsion pack. So the first thing is your H. Now this is for "Hard Reboot." So just hit the reboot and nine times out of ten, when the higher functions come back up, you should be able to control the pack.

JOHN

...yeah, I did that one, H.F., what I need to know now is—

H.F.

You did that, huh? And no go? Right, so next we move on to E. Now E is for "Enter System Override Code," that's so in case the normal system pathways have a problem, the higher functions can try and work around it and find a new way to make the connection. You do that, and seven times out of ten, it'll make a new connection and you can blast your way back.

JOHN

Yeah, I've done that one, too, H.F., would you just tell me what—

H.F.

Wow. That one didn't work either? Okay, this is looking serious. Luckily, we got L. (*MISS SOPHIE barks*) Yes, we do! Yes we DO have L! Even Miss Sophie knows what L stands for! See, L is for "Log Out," that is, sign out of your account so the suit drops all the personal settings you've put in to customize it for yourself, it'll go back to factory presets and, five times outta ten, you can get it to ignite.

JOHN

I did that, H.F., I did all of that! I remembered the damn acronym, now what I need some actual help with is remembering what the P stands for. I tried H, I tried E, I tried L, and none of them did anything! So what the hell is P? I assume it works three times out of ten?

H.F.

Ah. No. No it doesn't. Well, kid, I'm not surprised you don't remember it, it's actually a kind of joke.

JOHN

A joke?

H.F.

Yeah, and not really a funny one right now either. I mean it never was funny, really, but yeah, P stands for “Pray,” because if you already tried the first three things there’s not really anything else you can do.

JOHN

Pray?

H.F.

Yeah. I mean I always found it offensive, like they only came up with the joke so they could make the acronym hard to forget, and on top of it, you know, atheist here. I mean, if you’re not, and you DO pray, you could try it, but you know...

JOHN

No, I don’t. I’m an agnostic.

H.F.

(disapproving)

Aw, tch! Hey B, when you get back, remind me to give you a relatively painless but very deliberate swat to the back of your head. Agnostic, my eye.

JOHN

So what’s next?

H.F.

Well, uh, now me and the Commander are gonna have to take some time to think about it, and consult the databases.

JOHN

Agh. Well could you make it as fast as you can, please?

H.F.

Relax, kid, you should have at least a day’s worth of oxygen. We’ve got plenty of time to get you sorted out.

JOHN

Yeah, but this cheap EVA suit is so uncomfortable!

H.F.

Yeah, I know. Pain in the ass to wear. Literally, sometimes. You ever try a top of the line unit?

JOHN

Uh, no. They’re that much better?

H.F.

Well, they're comfy and you can really move in 'em. And full of high-tech extras like you wouldn't believe! I mean they give you the numbers on everything, your status, status of everything around you, status of every nearby star and planet, status of your mother's sister's cousin's ex-mother-in-law. When I first came out here, I decided to invest in one for myself, figured I'd be doing enough EVAs to make it worthwhile, but mang, what I spent on that thing? I mean, it makes sense, they're all custom-made, so they fit like you wouldn't believe, and there's no way to do that at a discount. But the thing is, when you're in a vacuum, wearing something so... unobtrusive kinda feels like you're completely nude, which then puts you in a weird state of comfort and discomfort at the same time. Unless you're into that.

JOHN

I wish I was in one of those now, it can't be worse than this.

H.F.

Nah, you don't want one of those.

JOHN

Says you, you've got one.

H.F.

Yeah, and I hate it. Also, if you'd been in a more expensive suit, we probably wouldn't be talking right now. All that smart mesh and those top of the line geegaws? Great for mobility and comfort, but fragile as hell. That explosion wouldn't have just borked your trajectory, it would have probably done enough damage to take out the central processor, and that means you lose control of every system in the thing. Starting with life support. So don't knock the big dumb suit. They're a pain in the ass, but they're built for endurance, and if anything goes wrong, you can at least get under the hood and poke around. You can't even look at one of these new jobbies unless you've taken an eight-year degree in "personal environment technology." And even then you need about eight different specialists to run a simple maintenance check. Why do you think I avoid using mine as much as I can?

JOHN

I thought it was your space shingles.

H.F.

Well, there's that, too. Damn nuisance.

JOHN

Okay, but I can't get under the hood of this suit and poke around when I'm already wearing it.

H.F.

True, true. That is a problem.

COMMANDER

(coming back over to comm)

What are you two talking about?

H.F.

Space suits. Hey, Mindy, you got any PET technicians here?

COMMANDER

I treat all my technicians equally, Hardyfox.

H.F.

No, Mindy. "Personal Environment Technology." For the hoity-toity suits.

COMMANDER

Oh, right. Yes, League policy says I have to keep four of them on staff at all times. Between them they can maybe fix a third of a suit. Most of the time they just sit in their office, playing 3D cribbage.

H.F.

Oh yeah, they any good?

COMMANDER

No sharking on my station, H.F.! Anyway, why were you asking? Could they maybe help John?

H.F.

Nah, any decent robot with a good head on its shoulders could do a better job.

STALIN-BOT

Did someone mention robot could help?

COMMANDER

Not you, Stalin-bot, you don't qualify.

H.F.

Have you tried Frall? I mean, I know their ways are pretty damn mysterious, but...

COMMANDER

Unfortunately Frall, for whatever inscrutable Frally reason, has taken a powder and isn't responding.

JOHN

Yeah, don't bother Frall, they probably wouldn't be any less inscrutable if they were there. So, H.F., no more ideas?

H.F.

Well, the Commander's got some folks looking through the Fairgrounds' records of similar incidents, but, uh, yeah. I'm gonna keep thinking, but nothing's coming right now. Sorry, kid. You keep thinking, too. Honestly, you're better at improv in these situations than I am, so... see what you can come up with, ok? I'm going to take Miss Sophie for a walk, maybe that'll jog something loose.

COMMANDER

I'll let you know as soon as we have any news, John. Bridge out.

[scene 5] The comm goes mute.

JOHN

See what I can come up with? Yeah. Sure. What have I got here? Well, let me see what the suit says. It SAYS that the propulsion controls are working fine, so... press button again... and nothing. And it SAYS that the propulsion pack is fully fueled and operational, so one more time with the button... still nothing. So the problem is somewhere in between the controls on my arm and the propulsion pack on my back. And since the controls are the only part of that system I can actually reach from inside the suit, that would seem to indicate that my options are limited to approximately jack, within a standard deviation of squat. So yeah, I think my work is done here. Now figure out how you're bringing me back, guys.

The comm goes live.

JOHN

Hey, H.F.? Commander? You got anything for me?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What? Oh, no, dearie, it's Mrs. Frondrinax here.

JOHN

...Why? What are you doing on the Bridge?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, just making the rounds, you know. I stopped in to say howdy-do, but when I showed up everyone was just whipping about in the wind! So I thought it would be best to park myself out of the way in the corner for a little while and see if I could figure out what all the fuss was about. No one seems to pay me any mind—in fact, no one's even bothered to say hello! Oh, I know, they're busy, but still. Oh! And speaking of busy. You're having a bit of an adventure, aren't you? How's the cold dark empty void treating you today?

JOHN

Well, it's pretty dark and pretty empty all right. I can see the Fairgrounds moving away from me, not too fast, but faster than I'm comfortable with. Apparently they got the docking bays open again because it looks like most of the ships that were stacked up outside have gotten in... Aagh!

A clonk of a frozen vent-biter corpse hitting JOHN's helmet and some flailing from JOHN in response.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! What is it, dearie?!

JOHN

Ah. Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you, I just had a minor collision with a frozen vent-biter corpse. There's a whole belt of debris out here left over from our Christmas adventure.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, what a lovely time that was!

JOHN

Really? So you actually did wind up enjoying yourself, huh? I mean, before the whole "we almost got eaten or exploded" thing?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I know I was a bit cranky at first, but you all really sold me on it! I had no idea Humans had an entire plant-centric holiday! In fact, I can't wait for Christmas this year! I have some very very big plans for all of you! It's going to be so much fun!

JOHN

You want to let me in on those plans now? There's a distinct possibility I won't be making it.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, nonsense, Johnny! I'm sure you'll be back here in two shakes of a petiole! I can hear the Commander and H.F. having a very reasonable discussion about your situation right this minute...

Over the comm, we can hear distant but audible voices, raised and yelling.

H.F.

No way are we trying that, Mindy! They're off by half a millimeter, and he'll be turned inside-out! Literally!

COMMANDER

And what's your big idea again? Get a ship to drop a 1.5 kiloton load behind him? Just how many pieces did you want him back in? Because if it's 5 or fewer, I'd say your plan has a few kinks to work out!

They have faded away.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, there seem to be a few snags in the discourse, but I'm sure they'll have it sorted out very very soon!

JOHN

Uh. Yeah.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Actually, Johnny, if you don't mind, I'd like to make a little suggestion?

JOHN

Sure, Mrs. F. Right now, I'll take anything.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

One word. Photosynthesis.

JOHN

Uh, doesn't that require a certain amount of sunlight?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, yes, or the artificial equivalent. But just as important to the process is the part you could be working on right now: Learning to breathe carbon dioxide. Really! It's so easy once you get the hang of it! I mean, you never know until you try, right?

JOHN

Yeah. I think if I'm out here long enough I'm going to be forced to try anyway.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, but why wait? Get a jump on it now! It'll be so much easier if you do it of your own volition.

The sound of several members of the Bridge crew coming over to interrupt MRS. FRONDRINAX.

AMBER

Mrs. F? What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be on the Bridge unless you're invited?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, darling little Amber! Don't be a silly!

AMBER

No really? It's an important rule? I'm being serious? As a Bridge officer? Only staff and crew with Command-level access are permitted entry? I'll have to call Security?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, what could I possibly be doing down here that would cause any kind of bother! I'm just having a quick look-in on all my friends!

STALIN-BOT

Amber, why make trouble? Plant-lady is so sweet and harmless. What damage can she do to Bridge? She is here for friendly chat. Is not like in olden days, when sweet innocent types were used as secret agents! With Mrs. Frondrinax, what you are seeing is what you are getting!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(moving away from the comms as she speaks)

Oh! Oh, my! What a... what a simply bizarre thing to say! I mean. Secret agent? You mean like a spy? Oh, that's silly! So silly! So very silly that I have to leave right now to go tell all my friends about it, hahahaha goodbye!

Distant sound of the Bridge door opening and closing as MRS. FRONDRINAX leaves.

STALIN-BOT

Oh, hey, meat-bot? I have something for you!

JOHN

A rescue plan? I'd just as soon wait until the Commander and H.F. come up with something, no offense.

STALIN-BOT

No no no, is not escape plan. But I thought you might be feeling little depressed floating alone out there, so I called friend over to help cheer you up. Herzog-bot! He always is making me feel better.

JOHN

...Okay? I mean, I literally can't stop you, so.

STALIN-BOT

Trust me, he is funny guy! Werner! Come and tell John B what you were telling me! It is classic! Here he is...

As WERNER HERZOG-BOT speaks, STALIN-BOT can be heard in the background, cracking up and acting like HERZOG-BOT is doing a killer standup set.

HERZOG-BOT

Hello, John B. You are to be envied. You plunge with such unconscionable stupidity into the unknowable darkness that you cause the exotic and chaotic void to shudder in a horrible scream of lunacy. You will break through the thin ice of your own existence and find beneath an ocean of fire, raging in the torment of interstellar collapse. A disgusting miasma of superficial truths, ugly landscapes, and stunted evolutionary paths.

JOHN

Maybe I'm nuts, but this actually is making me feel better right about now.

STALIN-BOT

(requesting a favorite "bit")

Do the soapdish!

HERZOG-BOT

If you were even to return from the brink of this endless void, what would you come back to? A harmony-less landscape of cheap emotion with all the charm of the caked detritus left to melt in undifferentiated torpor in the soapdish. Your dignity is nothing but a cul-de-sac devoid of virtue, a ruin of what passes for civilization, the overwhelming obscenity of the unilluminated passionless fury of clowns.

[scene 6]

COMMANDER

(approaching the comms)

Oh, for— Get off that channel, Herzog-bot! Who the hell let him talk to John? And where the hell is Frall? *(on mic)* Sorry, John, H.F. and I were just working a few things out.

JOHN

Yeah, I heard some of that working. So, did you come up with anything yet that didn't involve dismemberment or complete body eversion?

H.F.

Eh... not so much yet, kid. But don't worry, we got all the smartest people on the station working on it.

JOHN

Is there no chance of a small ship or shuttle working on it? There must be some kind of spacecraft docked at the Fairgrounds capable of rescuing a single person.

H.F.

Yeah, well, funny thing about that, kid. “Single person” is kind of the problem here.

COMMANDER

It’s a matter of scale, B. You’re a really tiny target. We have some experience in this, I’m afraid. You aren’t the first person in my time here to wind up in this exact situation.

H.F.

You’re the seventh.

JOHN

Oh. Okay, so then already you know how to get me back, right? Just do whatever worked before.

(beat, beat, beat)

So, what worked before?

(beat, beat)

How many of the other six got rescued?

COMMANDER

Alive?

H.F.

Yeah, it hasn’t worked out so well before. Tried a shuttlecraft, couldn’t get close enough to the guy without catching him in the steering thruster backwash. Which it did. What a mess.

COMMANDER

Shuttle craft at a distance with an external manipulator arm? Got ahold of the man, solid grip, but then the grip just... kept gripping. Those arms are built to wrench open rusted bolts, that kind of thing, they don’t really do fine pressure control. Very unpleasant. *(beat)* I really thought the tow line attempt from the solo sharp-ship would work...

H.F.

Yeah, but they couldn’t get the speed right and, whoa. Just stripped the suit right off of him. And then most of his flesh. And then—

JOHN

Okay okay okay! So you tried six methods and they all killed the person stranded out here.

COMMANDER

Five methods, actually, we tried the tow rope one more time. I just really thought that one would work.

JOHN

Ok. Ok. But either way, whether you try one of those again, or come up with some other stupidly dangerous method, wouldn't it be better to possibly kill me in a rescue attempt rather than leave me to definitely die as I drift interminably off into deep space?

H.F.

I mean, maybe? Yeah? It's your decision, kid. But consider that dying while floating away probably means gradually and peacefully falling asleep once your oxygen runs out—

COMMANDER

And a rescue attempt, to date, has meant getting horribly crushed or mangled.

H.F.

So the point is not exactly moot.

JOHN

Gotcha.

COMMANDER

I wish Frall would decide to manifest themselves. Even at their most obtuse and unhelpful, they're sometimes pointing me in the right direction. Although a lot of the time they're just jerking me around. And I never know which one it is until much later, if ever. Still.

JOHN

Don't worry about it, Commander. I think if they could help me they would have already.

H.F.

Don't worry, kid, I'm sure we'll figure something out. I mean, it's not like dozens of people aren't rescued from space drift every day, all over Human space!

COMMANDER

It... just hasn't quite worked out so well here on the H.E.C. But we're going to get you back. I'm sure of it. Bridge out.

[scene 7] The comms goes mute.

JOHN

Okay. You know, when I've had that nightmare about dying alone in space... This definitely does not resemble what I was imagining at all.

The comms goes live.

DORMER

Alright, John B! This is it! The jig is up!

JOHN

Jig, what jig? Dormer, is that you?

NESS

Please be aware that even though you are not physically present, anything you say may be recorded and used in evidence against you!

JOHN

What the hell?

DORMER

John B, we are charging you with the commission of 347 criminal acts while in residence on the Human Exchange Concourse!

JOHN

How exactly are you going to arrest me over comms?

NESS

According to article 758.c of the LoH General Code, physical presence is not a requirement for the initiation of arrest proceedings, gesin.

JOHN

Okay, then what are these 347 criminal acts? When was I supposed to have done them?

DORMER

Every single one of these crimes has occurred on The Fairgrounds since you have been in residence!

JOHN

Uh-huh. And how many *total* unsolved crimes have occurred on The Fairgrounds since I've been in residence?

DORMER

Uhh... 347.

NESS

You are obviously a perfidious and highly-efficient criminal mastermind, gesin!

DORMER

And we finally caught up with you!

NESS

Giving us a perfect clearance rate. Booyah!

High-five noise over the comms.

DORMER

So why don't you save us all the trouble of going through a long, tedious trial? We all know you were in the right place at the right time.

JOHN

And where and when was that exactly?

NESS

The H.E.C., any and all times between fourteen months ago and today!

JOHN

Right. Okay. I see what's going on here, and, no, just because I might be—MIGHT BE—embarking on a new career as a piece of space junk, again, NO, I am not going to confess to 347 different unsolved crimes just to help you goons clear out your files!

DORMER

Might be?

JOHN

Might be!

NESS

We heard it was a pretty sure thing!

DORMER

With all due respect, gesin, you're dead meat.

JOHN

Heard? From who?

NESS

A confidential source, with plenty of dirt.

DORMER

So it'll be much easier on all of us if you just confess right now.

JOHN

No!

DORMER

Please?

[scene 8] TORIANNA has come up behind NESS and DORMER and caught what they are doing.

COMMANDER

Corporal Ness! Corporal Dormer! You will not use John B as a patsy! We fully intend to return him to the Fairgrounds, and not one of those charges could possibly stick when he does. Get out of here and do some of the actual security work you excel at. Like fining small children with popsicles under some archaic “sin tax.” (*as NESS and DORMER grumble away*) Sorry about that, B. Anyway, while I’ve got you, you’ll never guess who just... happened to drop by the Bridge. Because they were in the neighborhood.

JOHN

You’re almost certainly right. Who?

CHIP

Hey, John B! How’s it floatin’!

JOHN

Chip? What are you doing on the Bridge?

CHIP

Well, me and some of the gang from the Egg, we... we decided to take a little constitutional around the station together.

JOHN

Oh, really. “Some of the gang?”

The voices of DEE, SOPON, BUBBLES, XTOPPS, KWONTZ, and VERT all call out very forced, “cheerful” greetings.

JOHN

Let me be sure I’m getting this. In the middle of the day, all of you decided to ditch the Electric Egg and just... go for a walk?

DEE

We do it all the time, John.

JOHN

Uh huh. So who’s minding the store?

SOPON

Hey, mang, we’re not the only people who work at the Egg. It’s not like we’re there 28 hours a day.

JOHN

I know that Bubbles usually is, and I'm pretty sure I heard her there with you.

BUBBLES

Yup, I'm here all right.

JOHN

Ok, Bubbles, you're a mixology-bot. You're not exactly built for easy relocation, you don't even have wheels. So how did you end up on the Bridge again?

BUBBLES

What do you mean, John? You've seen me get around when I need to.

JOHN

Yeah, so why exactly did you need to this time? Are you folks sure you didn't maybe... hear something about my situation? Maybe something about how it's so hopeless you should probably take the chance to say goodbye, which would be news to me since the Commander keeps going out of her way to assure me I'm definitely going to be rescued?

XTOPPS

Mang, that is just some paranoia, boy-a! We zoods from the Egg need a periodical perambulation to clear the crania, in spaces not so sanctocified by the holy trinity of song, intoxicants, and the occasional artery-clogging amuse bouche!

JOHN

Xtopps, you haven't had a clear cranium in the fourteen months I've known you.

XTOPPS

Johnny, there's clear and then there's.... *clear*. You clear?

JOHN

As putrescene.

DEE

John, honestly. We just happened to be walking around the HEC, happened to be near the Bridge, and when Commander Torianna just happened upon us and said you were having a bad day, we thought that maybe we could cheer you up. Everything's patic.

JOHN

Just walking by? It's a hell of a walk! It's all the way at the bottom of the Fairgrounds! Or the top, whichever way you're looking at it.

XTOPPS

Some of us gotta lotta legs, mang, they need a lot of stretchin'.

CHIP

Also considering the amount of peanut butter “some of us” consume...

XTOPPS

Chorp!

CHIP

Just saying, I know you’re not exactly consuming it as a foodstuff, but you *are* still consuming it, you know? Those calories gotta go somewhere.

XTOPPS

They go to the place that all music goes to... Shangri-La!

JOHN

So, all of you were just “in the neighborhood” of the Bridge and decided to pop in? That’s the only reason you’re calling? Not because someone maybe swung by the Egg to give you the heads up that I was in dire peril out here?

*Chorus of Nos, Unh-unhs, No Ways, and other various denials from the group.
Then after a beat:*

VERT

It was Mrs. Frondrinax.

Everyone starts yelling at VERT in disbelief and anger.

JOHN

Whoa whoa whoa whoa, don’t take it out on Vert, guys. You weren’t exactly being subtle.

DEE

I mean, okay, we heard from Mrs. F that maybe things were looking... not so great.

XTOPPS

Like you know, you were in the shness, yeah, but still—

CHIP

We heard you were gonna be A-OK. Eventually.

SOPON

And back on the Fairgrounds in no time at all!

BUBBLES

She never said you’d be stuck out there forever. Really.

JOHN

So what exact terminology *did* she use?

VERT

“Dead meat.”

Everyone starts yelling at VERT again.

JOHN

All right, everyone just shut up!

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell ‘em, sister!

JOHN

You brought *her* along?

KWONTZ

(warbling: “We sure did! Why not?”)

CHIP

Listen, John, you shouldn’t take that too seriously. This was Mrs. Frondrinax talking, yeah? I mean, who knows what “dead meat” really means to a plant? But ok, I’ll admit we all thought that was... a little concerning.

JOHN

So you came to say goodbye to me.

DEE

Well, maybe we thought, just in case... but look, the Commander says that Mrs. F was exaggerating!

JOHN

Was she.

XTOPPS

Commander Min-day says she is reticulating the most spectacularly louvered rescue plan since Keith Relf called up Jeff Beck.

JOHN

Is she.

SOPON

Yeah! So, like, we’re not here to say goodbye, mang.

DEE

Right! We're here to say... hello!

They all call out some extremely unconvincingly cheery "Hellos" and other greetings.

XTOPPS

And then we're just gonna pony our bad selves right back to the Egg.

CHIP

As soon as possible. I'm not too tiled about the second string we left on duty.

BUBBLES

I mean, we didn't leave them unsupervised.

JOHN

Who's supervising with all of you here?

CHIP

Mrs. Frondrinax.

DEE

And Althaar!

JOHN

What? Althaar's already heard about this? And he's... pulling a shift at the Egg?

XTOPPS

Yeah, mang. We asked the zood if he wanted to choogle along, but he wasn't climbing that spout.

DEE

He said we should go first, and then he could drop in later if he needed to.

JOHN

If he needed to.

CHIP

But we'll let him know we talked to you, and you're doing just fine.

JOHN

I'm not!

CHIP

Okay bye!

Farewells and cries of “see you later” and so forth as the Egg crew leaves the Bridge.

COMMANDER

John, would you mind excusing me for a moment? I have to check in on the status of the rescue operation.

JOHN

Sure thing, Commander. I’ll just take a minute to check on the status of my equally-real invisible friend, Togorth the Unquenchable.

[scene 9] The comms goes mute.

JOHN

Of all the numerous ways I imagined my increasingly-inevitable demise in the pitiless void of space, it never occurred to me this much social awkwardness might be involved. I could do without having to be polite while everyone I know lies to my face. Almost everyone I know. What’s going on with Althaar? I would have expected him to make a beeline for the Bridge the second he heard about this. Although, maybe he doesn’t want to distract the crew. It sounds like they’re having a hard enough time finding a non-lethal rescue method without having to keep the galaxy’s most chipper monstrosity out of their field of vision.

The comms goes live.

COMMANDER

Hello, B?

JOHN

Present.

COMMANDER

Okay. So. No luck yet. But we’re still looking.

JOHN

Looking for...?

COMMANDER

Well, we know for sure now that the Fairgrounds isn’t equipped with any kind of spacecraft that would be able to pick you up.

H.F.

In one piece, anyway.

COMMANDER

I think that goes without saying. So, we've put out a general call to all currently docked and incoming spacecraft. Like I said before, today's been really high-traffic, and with so many different ships here, I'm sure somebody must have some kind of device, or technique, or rescue pod, something that we could make use of.

H.F.

If we can meet their price.

JOHN

Oh, great. So, how big is the company budget for rescue operations? Tiny, or nonexistent?

H.F.

The second one.

COMMANDER

You're a citizen of the Fairgrounds, John, of course we'll take responsibility for the cost of rescuing you. If someone comes up with a guaranteed rescue method.

JOHN

Oh. Ok, thanks. But you haven't gotten any offers yet?

COMMANDER

Oh, no, we have. There were a couple different mercenary types who said they could definitely get you back here for 50,000 credits. But they backed out of it when we specified you'd have to get back alive and unmangled for them to get paid, so.

H.F.

So no offers that are what you'd call viable. Yet.

JOHN

This... is looking less and less like a successful rescue operation.

H.F.

Nah, these things just take time, you know.

COMMANDER

People are rescued from deep space floats every day, all over the galaxy! Dozens of them! Just... not here yet. For some reason.

JOHN

I know. You said that. *(beat)* So, here's a thought. Is it maybe possible that you've all known for a while now that there's absolutely no way you'll be getting me back, and you've all just been trying to make it "easier" on me by lying about it? Because I'd really prefer the truth, if it's all the same to you.

COMMANDER

Oh, John, come on now! That's... that's just... well, that's just not something we'd do. So, uh, anyway, I should get back to finding a ship that can help you out! But, um, H.F. is going to stay on the line with you for a bit, ok? *(with some meaning)* H.F.?

H.F.

Right. *(beat)* So. John. You know, all kinds of things can happen here, right?

JOHN

Yes...? That's pretty much true anywhere, but even more so on the Fairgrounds.

H.F.

Right, the Fairgrounds! If anything can happen, it definitely happens here! You know?

JOHN

(where the hell is this going)

Sure?

H.F.

And sometimes that anything is pretty good, and sometimes it's really bad.

JOHN

Okay, H.F., I don't know where you're going with this, but can you not talk to me like I'm Miss Sophie? There's at least one big difference between us: I understand my own mortality. And I'm understanding more and more how relevant that is right now!

H.F.

Now don't think like that, kid. You are not going to die today. You hear me? You are not going to die.

JOHN

Okay, sure.

H.F.

Okay. *(beat)* But, I mean, it never hurts to be prepared, right?

JOHN

Uh huh.

H.F.

So, it's like this, kid... I... I really didn't want to bring this up, probably you already know about it, but in case you don't, well... I just thought you should have the option. Do you know about Katheudo Mode?

JOHN

I've... heard the term before. I don't know exactly what it is, but I think I can guess.

H.F.

Yeah, well, you know, if we can't get some kind of ship or something out there to you—I'm sure we will! But, you know, if we can't... They say oxygen deprivation isn't the worst way to go. You kinda just drift away into sleep and then... But the thing is, you might have over a day's worth of oxygen left. Might even outlast the batteries, especially with how we've been giving the comms a workout, and if that happens, well. Then you lose all life support, which isn't just atmosphere, but moisture processing, and, uh, temperature regulation. And if your coolant stops circulating, and your body heat starts building up in there, that's... that's not so peaceful. So. If it looks like you're getting close to that, which you're not yet! And we're gonna get you out of this! But if, you know, at some point in the future, you're in a hopeless situation? What you do is, press the first, third and fifth buttons on your right arm controls, and hold them down. It'll ask you on the screen if you want to engage Katheudo. And if you do, then you hold down the second and fourth buttons, and keep holding them down. It'll ask you if you're sure, and if you are, you just keep holding until it says engaged. And then it'll rejigger what you're breathing to make you feel really really good, you know, before... You'll drift away, but you'll be happy—really really happy—when you do.

JOHN

First, third and fifth. Then second and fourth. Yes?

H.F.

That's it. I mean, if it comes to that. Which it won't. But, you know, I just thought that was information you should have. For the future. I'm sure we'll have some good news for you any time now.

JOHN

Yeah. Okay. Thanks, H.F. Let me know what comes up. I'll... be here a while.

H.F.

Later, kid.

[scene 10] The comm is muted.

JOHN

Hmmn. Okay. Well, at least I have some kind of a plan. It's not exactly Plan A, but it's a plan. I guess I'll just spend some time looking at the stars and delaying the inevitable. Not a bad way to delay the inevitable. The Fairgrounds actually looks really lovely from this distance. I guess not too many people have ever seen it this way. Seven at most. Not that the view is worth the price, but hey, there are worse things to look at. *(exhale)*

What are those five stages of Death supposed to be? Anger, Denial, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance? Weird. These are stages? The depression part, well, that's nothing new. Guess I had a bit of denial at the start. Never had anything to bargain with, so that didn't really enter into it. Acceptance? I was accepting this was pretty hopeless from early on. Anger, though? I mean, I may be a bit annoyed, but I don't really feel angry...

The comm goes live.

JOHN

(exploding in anger)

Commander, whoever?! I don't want to talk to you right now! Stop trying to cheer me up! No more pretending this isn't happening! Just let me drift off to my obviously unavoidable death! I just want to try and relax so I can swallow the obligatory final serving of shitty goddamn luck off the twelve-course menu of catastrophe that has made up my entire not-very-long-and-certainly-not-getting-any-longer life! Okay?

STELLA

Hey, John.

JOHN

(a beat)

Oh. Oh, jeez. Stell. They... they, uh, they told you.

STELLA

Yeah. They really kinda had to, don'tcha think? So...

JOHN

I was kinda hoping you— Where are you? On the Bridge?

STELLA

No, they... they patched me through from the Commander's Office. They figured we might want some privacy.

JOHN

That's good. So, okay, first off, everyone's been lying to me. And I know it. So please, no more lies, all right?

STELLA

I wouldn't lie to you, Johnny.

JOHN

(simple, honest)

I'm going to die out here.

STELLA

(same)

You're going to die out there. Everyone knows it. I know it.

JOHN

There's no ship, there's no plan, there's nothing.

STELLA

There's nothing anyone here can do. They tried. They really did. But... No.

JOHN

(exhales first, with a strange relief that at least it's been said out loud)

Oh, thank you. Thank you for being honest, Stella.

And. I... I'm sorry. I mean, oh god, that's stupid to say, I know you're going to be fine, you're a badass, I know in the old days Sanitation was having funerals every week—

STELLA

John. Stop. It's not the same thing. It's not the same thing at all.

JOHN

Oh, no, I mean it's not like I'm getting eaten in front of you—

STELLA

John, it's not... Look. Johnny. Neither of this wants to make this harder on the other, because that's who we are, and that's what we're most afraid of. Of being too much, or too little, or too weak, or too strong or too weird or too whatever for everyone else. What we have, though. It works. It just works. It's really good for us. And we keep walking on eggshells because we're both scared of screwing it up. You don't know what these past months have meant to me. And I'm so sorry because I don't want to make your dying even harder on you by letting you know how much this is going to hurt me. But there was just so much that I wanted us to do, and so much to say...

JOHN

I know what I haven't said to you, and I've been wanting to.

STELLA

No. No. Not... Not this way. Just hold onto it. I don't want to hear it unless I'm looking in your face.

JOHN

Stella. That's just not going to happen.

STELLA

John. Okay. Yes, you know how many times I've been close to death, right? Or at least how many times I've told you about? The last few years, fighting the vent-biters? It wasn't just seeing everyone around me killed, it was knowing it would be me one of those days. And I knew that. But you know what, even though I knew it, I never completely *believed* it. Not a hundred percent. And then nine months ago, I wound up in Escape Pod Bay 17, and I was trapped. That was it. No way out. And it was the first time that I ever *really* believed it. It was my time. My life was over. The one thing I held on to was that one person out there had let me know that they cared, and that they would miss me. And that made it... not okay, but a little easier to take. So I was going to die. And then... I didn't. Because that one person, one brilliant goddamn weirdo, figured out a bizarre, ridiculous, beautiful plan that not only saved me—and, you know, everyone else on the Fairgrounds—but changed my entire life. And that person turned out to also be the person I actually wanted to spend all my time with.

JOHN

I didn't figure that out alone, though, I had a lot of help really—

STELLA

Take the damn compliment, you stupid hero. My point is, I can tell you. I know what I believed then. And I know what we both believe now. But you're always full of surprises.

JOHN

Listen, Stella. What I said, about my whole life just being a string of bad luck, that isn't—I mean, yeah, if this had happened to me a year ago, I would have just kinda... accepted it. "Of course. This is it. This is how my life ends. With nothing to show for it. Who'll even notice I'm gone?" But now...

STELLA

There's us. Yeah. *(beat)* And there's someone else here who's definitely going to notice.

JOHN

Oh. Shit. He's there? He knows? The whole truth?

STELLA

He's here. He knows.

JOHN

(sigh) How's he doing? Is he freaking out?

STELLA

He's... you should probably talk to him now. He's been waiting in the Commander's bathroom for me to finish. He said something about checking out the acoustics? I don't know... I should get him now, right? It'll be a few seconds, I'll have to give him the heads up and then duck out of the room...

JOHN

I think you'd better. It's... It's really strange, I mean... I don't want to say that it's... Would you check in on him? After this? Just... he's going to need a Human around. Not just for his cultural database.

STELLA

Of course. No, no, John, I get it. Yeah. Weird, but... It's gonna be harder to say goodbye to him than to me. I get it. Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on him, after— I mean, not literally, obviously, but... yeah. So... All right, I'm going to go get him now. See you sometime, Johnny.

Comm sound is muted. STELLA is no longer on the line.

JOHN

Okay. I love you, Stella. I had to say it anyway.
(deep breath)
Right. Althaar. Get it together, John. You can do this.

[scene 11] Comm channel can be heard to open again. ALTHAAR is there.

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, FriendJohn! Althaar was most distressed to hear of the troubles with your extra-vehicular equipment, but perhaps this will be making cheer: Althaar is planning the very finest of dinners for this evening, whenever FriendJohn is making his return! What dishes are most desired for the celebratory meal, please?

JOHN

Althaar... Oh, Althaar, I'm so sorry.

ALTHAAR

For what are you making apology, FriendJohn?

JOHN

I thought they told you. Althaar, there's... That's not happening. They don't know how to get me home.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Yes, Althaar is informed of this! It has been a very busy cycle for Althaar! After learning of the predicament of FriendJohn, Althaar was reaching across to all his many friends on the Fairgrounds, and in nearby space also, in attempting to find assistance for the rescue! Althaar is afraid he may have committed some rudenesses during this process. He must be purchasing many fruit baskets of apology tomorrow. But it was all in good cause!

JOHN

I... appreciate the effort, Althaar, but it's more like a lost cause. I mean, the odds were never great in the first place, and at this point—

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar is knowing the odds of FriendJohn returning to the Fairgrounds. Althaar has recalculated them several times himself. Althaar is knowing the reality of the situation, FriendJohn! It is not to worry on Althaar's behalf!

JOHN

Okay, buddy, so...

ALTHAAR

So Althaar is asking again, what dishes are most appropriate for the celebratory meal, when FriendJohn is returning home from his most thrilling and perilous adventure?

JOHN

Althaar! I'm not coming back! It's not happening! I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry. For you, and for Stella, but there's nothing I can do, there's nothing you can do, there's nothing the Commander or H.F. can do, there's nothing anyone can do! This is it, Althaar. I'm not going to be home for dinner. I won't be having any more dinners. And that sucks, but it's the truth, and you're going to have to deal with it. You'll be ok, I promise. There are other Humans, you know?

ALTHAAR

There are no other FriendJohns.

JOHN

Well, technically there's one back on Earth.

ALTHAAR

Do not be foolish, FriendJohn. That John is a stranger to Althaar.

JOHN

Yeah, ok. But listen, I told you on the first day we met: I'm just an ordinary Human. I'm nothing special. You'll... you'll find another Human friend. And Stella... well, I mean. She'll be okay.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Supervisor Reyes will be ok, and Althaar also! Because the celebrated cleverness of FriendJohn, that has made such great impressment on Althaar on so many occasions, is certain to be solving this difficulty! FriendJohn has gotten himself out of many many scrapings in the past that were making this situation look like a walk in the hydroponics! So, if FriendJohn does not wish to think about the dinner menu, then he should instead be thinking about what is in front of him, and how he can be un-scraping himself this time. And not about how Supervisor Reyes and Althaar will be feeling if he is not arriving for dinner, because that is something that Supervisor Reyes and Althaar can be thinking about for themselves, if that is a thing that must happen. But that is not a thing Althaar will think about until it has happened, because Althaar believes it is foolish to be borrowing sadness from future troubles. So, Althaar is asking you to wait, and think, and try, please. And then Althaar will not make unnecessary thinking about the things he can not control, and instead think on the things he can control, like the grocery shopping, for which he is already behind the schedule, and which he would make starting of if only FriendJohn would tell him what dishes he should be preparing for dinner, please!

JOHN

(laughing a bit despite himself)

Okay, buddy. I, uh... I can't really think about dinner right now, you understand, so... just make whatever seems right to you, you always do a great job.

ALTHAAR

Mm. "Always" is somewhat the exaggeration, as Althaar knows he is still making many mistakes. But he accepts that this is said in the spirit of friendship. So if FriendJohn is having no requests... Yes! Althaar will choose a dish that he is certain he will be preparing correctly. And now Althaar really must hasten to make the shopping, so please do not take too much longer in making rescue of yourself, FriendJohn. Althaar would not like your dinner to be getting cold.

JOHN

Ok, FriendAlthaar. I'll be there as soon as I can.

[scene 12] The comm is muted.

JOHN

(a beat; a sigh)

Okay, so. Nothing else to do. I've said goodbye to everyone. Everyone who would let me, anyway.

Guess all that's left is to kick in the Katheudo Mode and slowly fade away. Like H.F. said. Easiest way to go...

Drift away.

Okay, buttons one three and five... *(beep)* Confirmed, so now, two and...

On the other hand...

Wait. Wait wait wait. *(beep of mode not engaging)*

Althaar said wait. Althaar said think. Althaar said I would know what to do. Sure.

Well, everything I've ever done right seemed to work because I wasn't doing what the manual said I was supposed to do, I was just using my instinct and thinking like the thing I had to fix. ... Yeah.

(inhales; gonna give this one last try)

Okay, I'm a busted propellant pack, what's my deal?

No, no no no, the pack isn't busted. The pack's probably fine. The problem is it's not firing.

Start from the top, John, start from the top.

I'm a busted space suit. What's wrong with me?

...I'm a really stupid suit.

No. No, I'm not stupid, I'm simple. Cheap. No, not cheap either, really. Just... simple.

Everything in me is put together the most direct way possible. Monitor says thruster controls are fine, monitor says the thrusters are fine, so assuming the monitors aren't busted, which I might as well do because I'm seriously screwed if they are, there's a break in between thrusters and control. Probably another tiny damn wire.

So where is this wire and what can I do with it?

There's no way to know where it is, there's too many wires, too many possibilities. So, nothing I can do. Shit.

...No. Althaar said... think about the things you can control, not the things you can't. So what CAN I do? Think.

First step: Activate the thruster propellant.

How? No controls.

Ok, hot wire it. Can't get out of the suit to hot wire it. Right.

So. Can I do anything with the arm controls? No, those are just buttons, none of which will bypass a busted wire, they only work if they're connected to their targets.

So, connections. Where are the main junctions in this thing...? Right in front of me, waist-level.

Can I access them from inside the suit? Yes. There's a maintenance panel on the inside of the junction pack. I could pop that off and, and...

Yeah. Oh, yeah. I get to those junctions...

I get in there and I think... I think I could just trigger the pack in a straight burst. As long as I'm still pointed toward the Fairgrounds...

Oh, man. Oh, man I could do this. I could do it.

If I just had a third hand on my stomach, I could do it. I don't have a third hand. So I'm screwed.

No. Stop. ...Access panel in front of my stomach. Is there any way I can manage to touch it?

Well, there's one, but I don't think I'm capable of concocting an erotic fantasy precisely calibrated enough to make that a workable solution, so... onward.

Mrs. F. would probably tell me to just grow a new hand. Which is why Mrs. F. is fun to have around, but the last person you'd go to for advice.

Right. So. Need a hand. Hands are in the suit gloves, at the end of the suit sleeves, attached to this big dumb suit.

Big dumb suit, with... a lot of slack.

Big, one-size-fits-nobody suit, with a ton of extra space in it.

Could I... can I work my arm back around... in... inside here?

(slight movement sounds)

Oh. Oh, yeah. I think... I think I can just...

Wait a minute. If I do... If I manage to get my arm out of the sleeve and this doesn't work... then I probably won't be able to get it back in. I'll be stuck with no way to turn on Katheudo Mode even if I wanted to.

Of course, if this doesn't work, the end result will be the same either way, it's just that getting there will be a whole lot less pleasant. So... yeah, ok, let's do this.

*(sound of **struggling movement and some painful grunting** as JOHN works his arm inside the main suit with great effort, then a breath of relief once it's inside)*

Huh. All right, arm inside, and jammed up against my chest. Not sure if that's an improvement, but it's something, and I didn't dislocate my shoulder, so let's count that as a win. Right. Now, down to the...

(sounds of hand working down between JOHN's body and the suit to the wire junction)

Ah, so that little bump that's been poking me in the stomach should be the junction. Can I pop the cover off?

(a short sound confirms he can)

Hey, one thing turned out to be easier than expected. So, what've we got going on in here...

If I'm remembering the layout right... this one should be the basic ignition control line for the main propulsion unit, which is triggered by this one. So if I pull this wire out and jump it to trigger from here...

What can I use for the jump? My finger would probably conduct it... Wouldn't be pleasant but wouldn't do more than burn me a little bit. Assuming the amps are at normal levels. ... Why would I assume that? Ok, is there anything else in here I use? Something I can detach? No belt, my jumpsuit's got nothing. Except...

Oh. Oh. Oh, where are you now, you inconvenient bastard? Okay then... WSS!

(JOHN's pager sings out "WSS!" again, very loud, inside the suit)

There we go. Can I get it off my....

(tight movement sounds; then exhale indicating success)

There! Great. Got it. So... I pull THIS wire... and then THIS wire... and...

I guess all that's left is to use the pager to jump them and fingers crossed that the problem isn't between this wire and the pack.

Here we go...

*(beat as he slowly does this—when he gets the pager in place, there is a series of sounds, slightly overlapped, that we will hear several more times during the following scenes, and won't always be indicated in the script: a SPARK! as the pager makes the jump; the "WSS!" as the pager goes off from the surge, which gets more and more horribly distorted each time it is shocked; an **OW!** from JOHN as his fingers get a nasty buzz from holding the shocked pager; and finally a satisfying **FOOM!** as a burst of propellant is triggered)*

Yes! YES. And again...

*(SPARK! WSS! **OW!** FOOM!)*

It's working, oh hell, it's working, I'm slowing up...

*(SPARK! WSS! **OW!** FOOM!)*

Okay, keep going, keep going!

*(SPARK! WSS! **OW!** FOOM!)*

Oh, Simone, Jones and Nell, I think I've almost stopped... now...

(SPARK! WSS! OW! FOOM!)

Moving. I think I'm moving back. Come on.

(SPARK! WSS! OW! FOOM!)

Oh jeez. The Fairgrounds. It's definitely getting bigger. Hmm... might overshoot a bit. And I used up all the fuel to my guidance jets, crap. Ok, if I can twist my torso forward, I should be able to adjust my vector using the main pack...

(SPARK! WSS! OW! FOOM!)

Oop, overcompensated a bit. Bend back, and...

(SPARK! WSS! OW! FOOM!)

Oh, man, that looks perfect! Almost dead on! Hey, maybe I'll get *really* lucky and this will burn out the speakers on the damn pager!

(bleep of JOHN turning comms on)

Hey! Hey Bridge? Anyone there? Channel open? Can you hear me?

[scene 13] The comm is live.

AMBER

Hello? John B? Were you saying something? Were you screaming? Or railing against your impending death?

JOHN

Amber, no! I've fixed it! Or, almost, hang on a sec...

(SPARK! WSS! OW! FOOM!)

AMBER

That doesn't sound very fixed?

JOHN

No, it's just—I just had to adjust my trajectory a little bit, but it's all right! I'm all right! I'm on my way back!

AMBER

(a bit off mic, calling)

Commander? It's John B? He fixed it? He's coming back?

COMMANDER

John? John B? Is Amber confused or just sounding like it? Are you really okay?

JOHN

Well, I don't know about okay, but I'm on my way back.

(SPARK! WSS! OW! FOOM!)

COMMANDER

What the hell?

JOHN

I've worked out a kind of steering system, but it's uh... not as well-insulated as I'd like. I'll explain the whole thing when I'm back on board. Which shouldn't be too long now, it looks like I'll probably make contact somewhere around the middle of Ayin, maybe 33 or 34? So can you let the bots know I'm on my way, and I could probably use some help getting to the airlock?

COMMANDER

Absolutely. And I'll put out the word to everyone else, too. I'm sure they'll want to put together a welcome back party at the Egg.

JOHN

Sounds great, but I'm gonna have plans when I get back. Tell everyone I'll see them tomorrow, ok?

COMMANDER

Will do. And John? Welcome back to the Fairgrounds.

[scene 14] The comm is muted.

JOHN

(testing)

Hello? Bridge? Amber? Commander? Stalin-bot?

(exhales)

Okay, Frall, I know you're in here. Do you want to talk now?

Soft FRALL shimmer within the suit, FRALL's voice is a little cramped and quiet in the space suit, and of course, their voice is present and not over a comm system.

FRALL

Hello, John B. And congratulations. How long have you known I was inside your space suit?

JOHN

The first time they said they couldn't find you. I figured you had to be staying away on purpose. And then I got angry thinking about how you could probably save my life with a thought if you felt like it, and then I thought about how you once said there's a reason you don't just go around doing that all the time, so then I figured this was one of those times you had a good reason not to help, and you were probably just avoiding me because you didn't want to hear me begging you to save my life. But I didn't think you'd just vague out in a situation like this. So, why not keep an eye on me from in here?

FRALL

Very clever, John. But then, Althaar's right, you always have been.

JOHN

Maybe I'm actually beginning to understand how you think.

FRALL

(stifling a snort)

Uh... let's not be *too* presumptuous here, John B. I mean, after all...

JOHN

Right. Ok, Frall, I'm just gonna ask. I'm sure you've gotten this plenty of times before, but—

FRALL

Only once, in fact, John B. Most people actually don't want to know the answer.

JOHN

Oh. Well, then. ...Are you God, Frall? Or *a* god? Or... I don't know...

FRALL

"I don't know" might be closest, without going over. Human language is a very limited thing, John B, and in yours, yes, the most accurate term for me might be a "god," but at the same time that word is so incredibly imprecise as to be useless. I am Frallen-Br'ar. Almost all matter and energy in this universe is within my potential control. I exist in 27 dimensions, most times, and many spaces.

JOHN

Many? Not all?

FRALL

No, John. Of course I could be everywhere at once if I really put my mind to it, but that would make things uncomfortable, don't you think?

JOHN

Oh. Well, thanks for giving us mere four-dimensional beings some privacy, I guess.

FRALL

Mm, it's not so much that, as it is that so much of "everywhere" is awfully depressing. That office of yours, for instance.

JOHN

Right. So, speaking of depressing, if you can be anywhere, why the Fairgrounds? Why take a commission in the League of Humans Space Command of all things? And why now? I mean, I know that after all this time, I should probably just accept that your reasons are unknowable, but—

FRALL

Unknowable doesn't necessarily mean unintelligible. Some places and times are more important than others, even to me. And there are events that I'd like to be present for. Something is happening at the Fairgrounds right now, and most of us here, almost everyone you talked to today in fact, are part of it. There's only one thing that we, these beings, have in common: all of us are going outside ourselves. Going past our own limits. Like you did today. But you've been doing that pretty much every day since you arrived here, if you think about it.

JOHN

Wait, us? How does a well-nigh omnipotent energy being go outside themselves?

FRALL

By setting themselves limits. It may seem easy, from your perspective, for me to stand by and do nothing, but it is not. It is painful, John. But when I consider the big picture—and you are physically incapable of comprehending just how big that picture is—I can force myself to hold back and say “No.” Even when the results hurt me.

JOHN

So, you're saying me and my friends are... special, for some reason? Like... cosmically?

FRALL

Each of you individually? Enh... you're okay. But all of you together? The Galaxy will *change*, John. All because a certain group of beings were here, together, right now.

JOHN

Huh. You know, sometimes I start to think you really are something like a god, and then sometimes I think you're just making all this up as you go along because you like flotting with us. And sometimes both.

FRALL

Why, John B! Maybe you *are* beginning to understand how I think! Annd it looks like you'll be coming up on Ayin 33 shortly, but I think you're going to want to make one last trajectory adjustment to avoid getting tangled in that comms relay antenna, sorry.

JOHN

Eh, after six or seven times it's not the pain, it's the surprise that makes you yell.

(SPARK! WSS! OW! FOOM!)

Anyway, thanks, Frall. I didn't understand half of what you were talking about, as usual, but it was good talking to you.

FRALL

Here something you'll understand. Welcome home, John B.

FRALL's distinctive sound as they leave JOHN's suit. [scene 15] Closing credits music.

ANNOUNCER

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

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

John Amir as John B

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Eli Gantias as H.F.

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

Zuri Washington as Dee

Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

Berit Johnson as Althaar

and Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

and also featured

Linus Gelber, Olivia Baseman, Ian W. Hill, Holly Pocket McCaffrey, Rolls Andre, Philip Cruise, Lex Friedman, and Anna Stefanic.

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

Berit is the supervising producer, showrunner, and script supervisor.

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

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

Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanic

Life With Althaar logo and illustration by Dean Haspiel

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We'll be back in two weeks with another Tale from the Fairgrounds, but right now, let's finally get back onboard and listen in as John B returns to Alef 1, Suite C...

[scene 16] Door opens as JOHN returns home. Standard J&A apartment noises, plus the sounds of ALTHAAR cooking.

JOHN

Althaar, I'm home!

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn's timing is of perfection as always! Althaar has just finished making the delicious dinner for Althaar and FriendJohn. Althaar asked Supervisor Reyes to be joining in the meal also, but she said that she would be coming by afterward with a good bottle. She did not say if there would be anything inside it, but Althaar is not doubting that the bottle of Supervisor Reyes will be of the greatest excellence.

JOHN

Heh, yeah. Oh, that smells delicious, Althaar.

ALTHAAR

Yes, it is the favorite food of comfort for FriendJohn, if Althaar is remembering correctly. The meatloaf with cream of mushroom sauce!

JOHN

Oh, wow. That's perfect. Thanks.

ALTHAAR

Would FriendJohn wish to talk about his work cycle? Or is this the "bad day" that it is best to be forgetting quickly?

JOHN

Heh, well, it wasn't fun. I mean, I guess, now that I think about it, I've actually objectively had worse days at work, even on the "I nearly died" scale, which would probably be terrifying if I thought harder about it, but yeah, this one found some new and unusual ways to mess me up. Although, I guess it also surprised me in some good ways I could never have predicted. But yeah, I definitely hope nothing like that ever happens to me again.

ALTHAAR

Then let us not be speaking of it just now, FriendJohn. Dinner is ready. Please sit and enjoy this common, everyday Human meal!

JOHN

(as he sits)

Althaar. Look. I know you're trying to act like today was just a normal day. But I want you to know that I'm only here because of you. When I talked to you? I had already given up. I wouldn't have even bothered trying to save myself, I wouldn't have believed I could, if you hadn't been—

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn. It is not necessary to discuss, please. The day was of much difficulty, but you were solving it, and it is over now!

JOHN

Okay, okay, I'll stop. *(beat)* Hey, do you want a pointer about Human culture?

ALTHAAR

Oh! Always, please, FriendJohn!

JOHN

Well, if you want to get more comfortable with talking like we do, the way a Human might say that would be, “Shut up and eat your meatloaf!”

ALTHAAR

Oh, NO, FriendJohn! Althaar would never be silencing his dear friend! It is not to be thought of!

JOHN

Come on! Get outside yourself, Althaar. We all have to sometimes.

ALTHAAR

But the affectionate use of rudeness is a most complex Human phenomenon! Althaar is not prepared for this level of discourse! He must achieve a much greater understanding before he is even considering the attempt!

JOHN

Well, then, Althaar, if you’re not going to take that risk, I guess I can just sit here and let my dinner get cold, while I talk about how totally doomed I was today, floating out there all alone, before you came along to encourage me...

ALTHAAR

Oh, FriendJohn, Althaar does not wish to be considering this! Althaar does not...

(frustration sound, which fades into silence, then:)

FriendJohn?

JOHN

Yes, Althaar.

ALTHAAR

(in a sudden fierce burst)

FriendJohn is to be shutting up and eating his meatloaf!

(beat, meekly)

Please.

(beat)

Was that acceptable, FriendJohn?

JOHN

(starting to laugh)

That... was great, Althaar. That was perfect.

And ALTHAAR makes a happy noise then joins in laughing together with JOHN, and we, for once, FADE OUT on the sound of the friends enjoying themselves.