

STEVEALICIOUS

I think that left a mark! Hahaaaaa! You nailed it straight on.

STEVE

I'm surprised I didn't chop that sucker down!

STEVEALICIOUS

I'll have to start calling you The Lumberjack,ahaha!

STEVE

Haaaahaaa! That'll be my wrestling name!

STEVEALICIOUS

Step off, Lumberjack, I'm going to slingshot this one around the nearest moon!

Step step step.

STEVE

Better get a good wind-up, brah.

*FFZZZZZZzzzzzzzzzzzz... zzzzzzzzz wooSh WooSH— bubbbble bubble fffzzzzzzzz.
Suddenly, jackbooted footsteps as NESS and DORMER arrive.*

NESS

Security! Cease all illegal activities! Put your hands in the air and your butts on the ground!

Blip of a comms unit being activated.

DORMER

I've got eyes on the projectile!

Ffzzzzzzzzzzzz!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(through comms; barely recognizable)

Fire at will, officers!

Zzzz!

NESS

Really?! Sweet!

DORMER

Copy that!

Zzzzzzzz!

DORMER

Locked on!

Thwump. Hisssss... KABOOOOOOOOM!

STEVEALICIOUS

(exhale and screaming)

WHhaaaaat the hellll, brooo?!

NESS

Don't move, gesin! All appendages where we can see 'em!

STEVE

(exhale)

This stuff is legal in 88% of the known galaxy, my zoods! What's with the diagonal hassle?

DORMER

Projectile eliminated! Two suspects located, species: Dilurian! Proceeding with arrest on charges of— *(to NESS)* Hey, what can we charge these nulls with?

NESS

Uhhh, disturbing the peace? Oldie but a goodie.

STEVEALICIOUS

But everything *was* peaceful until you driffers showed up!

STEVE

Yeah, bro, we were just throwing discs! Why don't you bipeds just foob on out?

NESS

Aha! Resisting arrest! *(blip)* Requesting backup!

DORMER

Are you carrying any more of these weaponized discs?!

STEVEALICIOUS

What?

Giant robot footsteps. Backup has arrived in the form of three giant MECHS.

MECH-ENFORCER

Stand Down Immediately. Proactive Defense Protocols Engaged.

Whirring of gun turrets locking on.

STEVE

I'm sorry, Bro! This stuff is much stronger than I thought it was!

STEVEALICIOUS

Just give it to them! Before they annihilate us!

NESS

Annihilation of suspects is strictly forbidden by the ICSB charter, gesin.

DORMER

To which we strictly adhere! As long as anyone's watching.

NESS

But we can get real creative with these neuro-dampers on your sensitive areas.

DORMER

And with so many butts, I'm guessing you've got plenty of those.

NESS

Right! So no funny stuff!

DORMER

Or you can say goodbye to your voluntary muscle control for the next couple hours!

STEVE

Streez! All right, all right, I'm getting it! But I'm gonna have to lower my hands, ok?

Gun turrets adjust aim.

NESS

One hand!

DORMER

Nice and easy.

Zipper of a fannypack. A small bag of herbs is dropped on the ground.

NESS

Perpetrator has dropped a bag of... what appears to be oregano!

DORMER

Oh! Some type of organic explosive compound?

STEVE

It's a new strain. I think it's called Apollo 11 Haze?

NESS

What is the composition of the material in this baggie, gesin?!

STEVE

I don't know! I think they cross-bred Purple Xybidont Balls with Orion OG Kush!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Never mind the... herbs, you idiots... confiscate the tree-destroying objects!

DORMER

Oh, right. *(to the STEVEs)* Are you hiding any more munitions?

STEVEALICIOUS

Huh?

NESS

Projectiles, gesin.

STEVEALICIOUS

You mean discs? Yeah, I got a backpack full of them. Right there, by the teepad.

Loud whirring of all MECHS locking in. Compressors engaging and clicking of weapons loading, missile systems unfolding from arm/leg compartments.

DORMER

Weapons cache located!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Eliminate the threat!

NESS

LIGHT IT UP!

Brraaapp! Braaapp! Boom! KABBOOOM! Hisssss hiss hissssss beep beep BA-BOOOM BOOM BOOM! Sounds of debris falling, dirt clods, scraps of plastic. Faint but audible voice of TRASH DETECTOR throughout the rest of the scene: "Do Not Litter. Do Not Litter. Do Not Litter."

DORMER

Cache destroyed!

STEVEALICIOUS

WTF, bro? I've been collecting those for years. I had a lotta memories in those little plastic babies!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Plastic... babies?

STEVE

Yeah, mang... we were playing disc golf here! That's all it was, I swear!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You were assaulting the flora at the hydro-park with weaponized discs!

STEVEALICIOUS

What weaponized? They're just discs!

NESS

They may look like discs, but their payload is definitely some type of military grade—

STEVE

There's no payload! They're literally just plastic, zood.

STEVEALICIOUS

Yeah, mang. Molded plastic still makes for the best aerodynamics, there's no substitute!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You've been trying to chop down these poor, helpless, inanimate trees with... Frisbees?

STEVE

Discs. Frisbees are a little lighter and have a rounded edge. They also tend to be wider and have a little more—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I don't care if they're made of liquid sunshine! They were used in a grievous assault against plant life! And don't think we didn't hear you two cracking wise about... lumberjacking. You're both in need of a serious attitude adjustment. Officers! Arrest these two immediately! We'll see what they have to say for themselves in the brig. *(click of signing off)*

DORMER

All right, you heard the... Hey, Ness? Who was that on comms, anyway?

NESS

I thought you knew.

DORMER

...Huh. Well, whatever, you're both under arrest. So it's time to administer the entirely appropriate and non-rights-violating restraint devices.

NESS

That's right! Hands behind your... uh... Hands... behind... Just put all your hands in a big bunch or something!

DORMER

Yeah, we don't have all day here!

NESS and DORMER apply some kind of electronic handcuffs to the STEVEs' various arms.

STEVE

This is totally magenta, bros. It's all a big misunderstanding!

STEVEALICIOUS

We were just playing some frisbee golf!

DORMER

Let's go, the time for chit chat is over.

*As the DILURIANS are hustled out by NESS and DORMER, the next lines are simultaneous, leading into **adlib yelling**, as they fade away under the rising sound of the TRASH DETECTOR.*

STEVE

You really harshed my mellow!

STEVEALICIOUS

That disc was irreplaceable! I aced hole 17 with that one!

DORMER

I said move it! And keep your butts to yourself!

*And they are drowned out by the TRASH DETECTOR repeating, "Do not litter!"
[scene 2] Opening credits music.*

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents!

LIFE! WITH! ALTHAAR! Season 2!

(with sleighbells)

Episode 25... “A Special Very Merry Fairgrounds Miracle Wish for the Holidays: A Christmas Fable”

[scene 3a] An announcement over the station P.A. system:

BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention all Fairgrounds residents. This is your Recreation Director-Bot with an important announcement regarding acceptable leisure activities as defined by the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee. Such high-impact diversions as racquetball, basketball, tether ball, and yes, PAINTBALL have now been officially categorized as “far too busy,” and are no longer merely discouraged, but completely banned. Our Fugulnari friends would prefer you all choose to engage in calmer, more measured, and if possible, stationary recreations. While SuperNova and other table games remain within the bounds of permissible recreational activity, all players must observe a five minute interval between shots. How this applies to foosball is for you mugwumps to figure out. Chess, Checkers, and Connect Four are still authorized, if played deliberately and slowly. But it’s not all baby laxative and SaniFlush: according to the latest bulletin from the Committee, the newest recreational craze is... staring contests. That’s right, everyone on station, asterisk. What—Oh. “Unless they’re an Iltorian.” Well, that seems unnecessarily specific. Anyway. Everyone on station, asterisk, is permitted, and indeed encouraged, to add their name to the official Fairgrounds Staring Contest League Ladder. Yes, you’ll have more fun than a Venus flytrap on a sanitary landfill competing to see who can sit still the longest. That is all.

[scene 3b] And we are on the Bridge.

NESS

I’m just trying to explain, sir, that—

TORIANNA

And I’m just trying to ascertain, Ness, exactly how many ICSB protocols you and Dormer violated when you “fragged” the entirely legal and definitely personal property of one of our residents! Big Steve from Caridada has been harassing me all morning about those two... Innovationeers you locked up this morning! Idiot Two, do *you* have anything to say for yourself?

DORMER

Well, uh... We were just following orders, Commander! We were instructed to fire!

TORIANNA

By whom?

NESS

By, uh, a voice. On the commlink. Sir.

TORIANNA

And you just obeyed this unknown voice without question? Did they give a name and rank? Use any Security pass-codes? Present any kind of evidence whatsoever that they were authorized to order anything?

NESS

Well, no, but... They sounded super official, sir!

DORMER

Besides, Commander, Security officers are permitted to use force on their own initiative, when necessary to ensure public safety.

NESS

That's right! Whoever it was on comms, they alerted us to a threat, and we took swift action to eliminate it!

TORIANNA

And this threat again was...?

NESS

A storage receptacle concealing potentially-weaponized projectiles, sir!

TORIANNA

A bag of frisbees!

DORMER

Uh, technically they're discs, sir. Frisbees have more of a curved—

TORIANNA

Stow it! You two are both on proportional wage garnishment for the next month. And until I can think of some more unpleasant duty to stick you with, one of you will be guarding the freight elevator, and the other is on coffee monkey duty. Work it out between yourselves.

NESS

I got freight elevator!

DORMER

Aw, you always call freight elevator!

ENSIGN CAMERON, a new face, appears. At all times when she is present, there is the soft sound of distant jingle bells playing (the bells themselves, not the song). Yes, ALL the time, EVERY time, constantly.

CAMERON

Commander? Incoming message from the Advisory Committee.

TORIANNA

Oh wonderful. Well, better get it over with. What do they— Wait, who are you?

CAMERON

Oh, I'm Ensign Cameron, sir. I was assigned to the Fairgrounds about a week ago. I was working the switchboard in Yod 38 before I got transferred to the Bridge this morning. But I'm originally from Earth, New York City actually. *(appropriate stock music plays under this:)* I was an Account Executive for a major advertising firm, and I was six months away from marrying the man of my dreams, when it turned out he was more of a frog than a prince. And by that I mean I found him in bed with my maid of honor. And her sister. And my sister. And the technician who waxes my mustache... Anyway, I got really drunk one night and signed on with League Forces without even caring where I might end up and... yeah, wow, the Fairgrounds. I'm actually feeling a little bit of culture shock here. I just don't know how I'm gonna adjust to the small-town vibe of this place after so many years in the big city. *(music out)*

TORIANNA

I see. That's... a lot of backstory I really didn't need, but welcome aboard, Ensign. So? The message from the Fugulnari?

CAMERON

Oh, right. It says your presence is required on the Bridge for a mandatory briefing, commencing in... five minutes.

TORIANNA

They require my presence. On the Bridge. Where I already am. Where I always am, in fact, because every time I try to go somewhere else, some fakakte crisis drags me right back down here, which they should know perfectly well, because for the last couple of months every single one of those crises has been their fault!

CAMERON

That's the message, Commander. It's got a big DO NOT REPLY on it.

FRALL

(shimmering in)

Am I late, Mindy?

TORIANNA

Late for what, Frall?

FRALL

For your, what's the word? Hissy fit? Yes, that will do. Would you like to discuss the Fugulnari's latest request?

TORIANNA

What is there to discuss? The Committee requires my presence on the Bridge, so here I am! On the Bridge!

FRALL

Which was where you had every intention of remaining before receiving their message, but now that you've been ordered to do so, you're extremely irritated about it.

TORIANNA

Exactly. Apparently I'm about to be briefed on yet another "request" from our Fugulnari advisors. Which will no doubt be yet another absurdly elaborate and unenforceable policy initiative, like that gravity-rationing fiasco.

FRALL

It is curious that a species so obsessed with efficiency would adopt such labyrinthine and impractical stratagems in pursuit of that end. An enterprising xenopsychologist would no doubt find the Fugulnari quite a fertile field of study.

TORIANNA

Well, I'm finding them a huge leafy pain in the butt. (*sigh*) Do you happen to know the reason for this meeting?

FRALL

Yes, sir.

TORIANNA

... Well? What is it? Just another petty annoyance, or something worse? Because if they're planning anything particularly atrocious, I want to hear about it right now. Even a couple minutes' advance warning would be better than nothing.

FRALL

No, sir, I believe "petty annoyance" would be the most accurate descriptor for your upcoming instructions from the Fugulnari. Although there will be some long-term repercussions to this conversation that would not be readily apparent to a four-dimensional being such as yourself. So I would strongly suggest that you do your best to contain your own annoyance and... "keep your powder dry" for the nonce.

TORIANNA

All right. I should be able to manage that. I've gotten plenty of practice working alongside our new "friends." Another couple months of this, and I should have the Galaxy's most impressive poker face.

FRALL

If you'd care to implement that poker face, Commander, I'm always up for a few friendly hands of 7-Card Stud.

TORIANNA

Ha! I don't think so.

FRALL

I thought you enjoyed the occasional game of chance, sir.

TORIANNA

I do, Lieutenant, as you know perfectly well, but it stops being a game of chance as soon as you get involved.

Door whoosh.

H.F.

Hey there, Commander, Lieutenant. Am I late?

TORIANNA

Late for what?

H.F.

I got some message about a mandatory briefing?

TORIANNA

What? The Fugulnari are just ordering civilians around now? I thought they were at least pretending that the League was still in charge around here.

H.F.

Well, I don't know who else got one of these, but apparently being the senior employee at... you know, means I've been officially designated a "Significant Human Non-Crew Thought Leader." Even if I've got exactly one other employee to be senior to. So now I guess that means my presence is required for this... whatever it is.

TORIANNA

Well, good news, you're right on time for the whatever-it-is. Have a seat.

Door whoosh.

JOHN

Am I late, Commander?

TORIANNA

Seriously, did you guys plan this? No. You're not late. And what would you be not late for? There's no way the Fugulnari decided you were a "Thought Leader."

JOHN

Oh, no, I'm here representing the Robot Union.

TORIANNA

Really? They chose you to represent them? I thought they barely tolerated you.

JOHN

Well, yeah, which is why I wasn't at the meeting to call "not it" when the question of electing a Fugulnari liaison came up.

TORIANNA

Ah.

FRALL

Commander, not to interrupt, but Althaar will be arriving on the bridge in roughly 15 seconds.

TORIANNA

Oh, crap. Attention, everyone! We've got a Code Mauve! Repeat: Code Mauve!

The Iltorian alarm starts.

CAMERON

Code Mauve? What does that mean?!

NESS and DORMER

It's Althaar! Just close your eyes! Look at the floor! Just don't look at him!

CAMERON

What is it?!

DORMER

It's the friendliest sapient to ever make you fill your drawers in screaming abject terror, is what it is!

NESS

Eyes on the floor! Do not under any circumstances look in the direction of the Iltorian!

CAMERON

Iltorian!

Door whoosh.

ALTHAAR

Season's Greetings to all on the Bridge! A Merry Holiday-that-is-not-to-be-spoken-of to you, Commander Mindy Torianna! A Happy Chanukah to you, Lt. Cmdr. Frallen-Br'ar! And a joyous and thoroughly secular Month of December to you, Mr. Hardyfox Fornes of WSS! (*WSS!*) Oh! And of course a Merry Christmas and Happy Yalda to FriendJohn! If you are wishing to know the cause of Althaar's visiting, the answer is simple: Althaar is making delivery of invitation to his second annual Party of Criss-mas at the Electric Egg! It is to be hoped that the festivity of his previous Party of Criss-mas will be equalled, or even exceeded! ...And the deadly peril greatly reduced.

H.F.

Heh. Yeah, last year's party was something, all right. Trapped in the Egg, surrounded by rampaging vent-biters, waiting for the power core to implode...

FRALL

What a hoot!

TORIANNA

(uncomfortable)

Well... thank you for the invitation, Althaar. I'm sure we'll all try and make it. But, ah, we've got a meeting scheduled right about now, so...

ALTHAAR

Oh! Then Althaar will depart, before he causes the unpleasant expulsion of digestive fluids. This is not at all conducive to the meetings, unless they are being held on Emeticon 12! (*giggles*)

CAMERON

(to NESS)

Digestive fluids?

NESS

Eyes on the floor, noob! He's almost gone.

ALTHAAR

But Althaar must re-iterate before he is departing, that you will all be most welcomed at the Second Annual Criss-Mass party of Althaar, tomorrow night at Chip Frinkel's Electric Egg! From 24:00, until the bovines return to their domiciles! Althaar wishes you a meeting most productive, Commander, and Happy Holidays or Lack Thereof to you all!

Some “Thanks, Althaar!” etc. from a couple non-Human crew. Door whoosh.

TORIANNA

All right. Belay that Code Mauve, we’re clear.

Alarm ends.

CAMERON

Excuse me, Commander, but... what was that?

TORIANNA

That, Ensign, was Althaar, the only Iltorian on the Fairgrounds. Well, the only Iltorian anywhere in Human space, for reasons that should be obvious. He lives up on Alef 1 with John here, and he likes to wander around the station being extremely polite and helpful while making any Human who accidentally catches sight of him lose their lunch. If they’re lucky.

JOHN

To be fair, he’s a lot better at keeping out of sight than he used to be. We’ve worked out a whole bunch of different strategies.

TORIANNA

Well, if you could convince him to add “staying the hell off the Bridge” to these strategies, I for one would appreciate it.

CAMERON

You’ve got an Iltorian living out here? Wow. The rat race back on Earth is starting to look a lot more attractive all of a sudden.

H.F.

Ah, Althaar’s not so bad, once you get the hang of how to exist in the general vicinity without your digestive system doin’ the Asma Kasma. And he is the nicest zood you’re ever going to meet, hands down.

JOHN

But, uh, you should definitely keep your hands up, at least until you learn how to lock down your eye movements. One on either side of your face, like this. It helps.

CAMERON

O...kay. Thanks.

TORIANNA

All right, now that that’s dealt with, let’s move on to the slightly-less-disgusting portion of my work day: this briefing nonsense. Wasn’t it supposed to have started by now? Ugh. Dormer!

DORMER

Yessir!

TORIANNA

A double latte, stat! If I have to sit through another lecture on performance metrics by a poor-man's mustard, I'm going to need a caffeine boost.

Bleep of a comm channel opening.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(over a booming filter that makes her voice nearly unrecognizable again)

ATTENTION FAIRGROUNDS COMMAND AND NON-CREW THOUGHT LEADERS!
THE MANDATORY BRIEFING HAS BEGUN!

TORIANNA

Ensign, who is that? Where are they calling from?

CAMERON

I don't know, Commander! It looks like they overrode the comms system, I didn't patch them through.

TORIANNA

Great. *(aloud)* We hear you loud and clear. But, uh, whom am I addressing?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(turning off the filter)

It's me, sweetie, Mrs. Frondrinax! Speaking on behalf of the entire Committee, of course. Did you like my deep authoritative voice? There's a button that says VOICE OF DOOM on the system controls, isn't that fun?

TORIANNA

Hilarious.

FRALL

Dry powder, sir...

TORIANNA

(sigh) So, does the Committee have any new... requests for Station Command, or were you just testing out your system settings?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Well, yes, I mainly wanted to make sure that our override was working correctly. And it is! Now we'll be able to make announcements all over the station without having to bother the Comms Desk about it, won't that be nice?

TORIANNA

(very very annoyed, but keeping a lid on it)

Super.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

But I suppose there are a few little things I might as well pass on while I've got you all there. Let me see, now...

JOHN

Hang on, why *do* you have us all here? We don't normally come to the Bridge unless something's on fire. Which... is actually pretty often, but still.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, well, Zountinex pointed out at the last Committee meeting that some of our suggestions weren't getting disseminated to the public in a particularly timely fashion. It can sometimes take whole days for a policy change to make its way through Station Command to the general public! And that's not very efficient, is it? So we're going to be trying out a few different adjustments to our information dispersal methods. This comms override is the most essential component to that, of course, but I also thought we should get some other channels of communication going, and appoint a few civilian facilitators to help disseminate our suggestions among the general population. Sort of a parallel processing thing, yes? I'm sure the Robot Union representative knows what I'm talking about. The Robot Union representative has arrived, haven't they?

JOHN

Oh, uh, I'm actually the Robot Union representative.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What? But you're made of meat! Oh well, never mind that now. Let's move on to the Action Items for today, shall we? One: It has been brought to our attention that some Humans have been asking robots to carry them around the station after their Compliance Facilitation Pedometers have hit their daily limit. Now, this is definitely not in the spirit of the Excess Movement Reduction guidelines! So, we'd like the Union to be aware that if this sort of nonsense continues, we may be forced to take a good hard look at the amount of power that's allocated to your charging stations. You're clearly receiving more than you need if you have enough energy left over to be hauling Humans hither and yon!

JOHN

I... guess I can pass that on at the next Union meeting? But you're probably not going to like the response. There's nothing robots hate more than being told what to do.

TORIANNA

Even when what you're telling them to do is their actual job.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, in that case, Commander, I'd suggest you make more of an effort to impress on the Human population just how important it is that they adhere to their daily movement limit! Because if these shenanigans keep up, we'll have no choice but to activate the pedometers' tracking chips.

H.F.

Tracking chips?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, yes, we took the precaution of including a small location transmitter in each of the pedometers. So if you people insist on making it difficult to measure how much you're moving around, we'll just have to activate the trackers and measure where it is you're moving around to!

TORIANNA

A lot of Humans would consider that an intolerable invasion of privacy, Mrs. Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, of course we had hoped that your cooperation would make the tracking chips unnecessary. That's why they're not active already! But if you can't ensure compliance with the Movement Guidelines, well...

TORIANNA

(tight)

I'll see what I can do.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I suppose that's all we can ask, isn't it? All right now, moving on... You should have all heard the announcement about the new recreational guidelines, yes? So I won't need to re-rake that. Oh! But just as a side note, you'll never guess who's currently at the top of the official Fairgrounds Staring Contest Ladder! Little old me! And to generate interest in the sport, I'm taking on any and all challengers for the rest of the week, regardless of rank. So if any of you want to try your luck, just let me know!

JOHN

Hang on, how does someone with no eyes win a staring contest?

H.F.

Streez, kid, you want this meeting to last all day? Just let it go.

TORIANNA

Duly noted, Mrs. Frondrinax. Was there anything else you needed?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No, I think that was... Oh! Just one more teensy policy adjustment: The restrictions on nutritional materials, such as grass-fed beef, gentian root derivatives, and goulash of course remain in effect, but we have one addition to the no-no list... Potatoes.

TORIANNA, JOHN, and H.F.

What?!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You know, potatoes? Starchy tubers of the genus *Solanum*?

FRALL

I believe that exclamation was an indication of surprise rather than a request for clarification, Mrs. Frondrinax. All three Humans present are familiar with potatoes. In fact, just about every Human is inordinately fond of potatoes.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ah. Well, be that as it may, potatoes of all kinds are, as of this announcement, banned for Human consumption. And anyone caught eating, frying, baking, mashing, smashing or julienning any varietal of potato will be taken into custody.

TORIANNA

(under her breath) So much for my end-of-shift bacon-cheddar skins. *(loudly)* Command reads you loud and clear, Mrs. Frondrinax. So, if that's everything...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, I think that's— Oh! No, that's not all! Silly me, I was saving the best for last, and then I almost went and forgot it entirely! It is my great pleasure to invite you all, on behalf of the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee, to what we're calling our "Christmas on Fugulnar!" holiday party! Which will take place tomorrow night at 23:30 in the Gimel 8 hydroponic park! And I'm so looking forward to seeing all of you there!

TORIANNA

Oh. Well, thanks for the invitation Mrs. F. I'll see if I can make it.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, aren't you just the sweetest? No no, this isn't an RSVP sort of situation, it's a requirement. The "Christmas on Fugulnar" party is, in fact, mandatory for all station crew not on active duty.

TORIANNA

Mandatory?

FRALL

Dry powder, sir...

TORIANNA

Mandatory. Fine. Then, I guess I will see you there, Mrs. Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Indeed you will, Commander! Oh, I'm just so excited! It's going to be quite the blowout!

JOHN

Uh, but that's just for the crew, right? Not us?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! I keep forgetting, you two are actually sub-contractors, aren't you?

JOHN

That's right. So, we don't have to show up, then?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, you do now, I just added you to the list! *(bleep)*

H.F.

Great. Thanks a lot, kid.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right, then, I'll sign off and let you get back to work! Oh wait, hold on... *(booming voice)*
GET BACK TO WORK! Ah, Vim preserve me, I do love this thing! *(clicks off)*

TORIANNA

So. We'll all be spending tomorrow night together, suffering through the Fugulnari version of Christmas cheer. Wonderful.

H.F.

As if a Christmas party on its own wasn't painful enough.

JOHN

And it's at the same time as Althaar's party, too.

H.F.

Oh, right! Poor kid.

JOHN

He's going to be crushed if no one shows up—he's been talking about this for weeks. I hope at least some of his guest list hasn't been roped into this Fugulnari thing.

TORIANNA

I do feel bad for him, but I have to admit that not having to dodge an Iltorian all night is more of a plus for me. What has me a lot more concerned is the Fugalnari seizing control of the comms system. Which is the kind of news I'd normally react to by downing an entire tray of warm, comforting tater tots, but now that's straight down the disposal chute. Dormer! Where's that latte?

DORMER

Coming right up, sir!

CAMERON

(moving briskly toward TORIANNA)

Commander, I'm still trying to figure out how the Fugalnari—

TORIANNA

Ensign! Watch where you're going!

Smash and spillage as CAMERON collides with DORMER (and a clunk as his neuro-damper falls out of its holster).

TORIANNA

Jones's twitchy whiskers! What have you done? I needed that caffeine!

CAMERON

Oh my God, I'm such a klutz! Here, let me help you.

DORMER

That's ok. I'm fine. It's ok.

CAMERON

(to herself)

Way to go, Candy. *(to DORMER)* Please, let me help you mop it up, um— I'm sorry, I don't know your name.

DORMER

Bill... Bill Dormer. And you're... Ensign Cameron?

CAMERON

Call me Candy.

DORMER

Ok, Candy... um... uh... uh... so, you're new, right? How do you like the Fairgrounds?

CAMERON

Well, apart from this Code Mauve business it seems ok. I don't really know anyone here, so I'm still adjusting. I love how much you all love Christmas, though! It's one of my favorite holidays.

DORMER

Oh, uh... yeah! Totally! I'm a real jeepster for Christmas.

Door whoosh.

CHIP

Potatoes, Commander? Potatoes?! I'm sure I don't need to remind you that the two top selling appetizers at the Egg are potato skins and poutine!

TORIANNA

Yes, yes. I know all about your poutine, Frinkel. It looks like potatoes are just another sad casualty of the new normal.

CHIP

I just barely got the smell out after the last Fugulnari "efficiency" experiment, and now this?! These new regs are completely out of control!

TORIANNA

I don't disagree, but as a League of Humans officer there's not a lot I can do about it. You, on the other hand, are technically operating outside of the League's jurisdiction. You can probably get away with keeping poutine on the menu if that's really the hill you want to die on.

CHIP

Not literally, it isn't! Besides which, they're already impounding potato shipments at Inbound Freight! How do you expect me to stay open when every day there's another type of food on the forbidden list?

H.F.

Yeah, it seems like all our rights are getting whittled away by these leafy greens.

JOHN

Who ordered the garden salad with repression dressing on the side?

H.F.

I fear this is just the tip of the Iceberg.

JOHN

Looks like we might have to take radish-cal action.

FRALL

I hope no one gets ruffaged up.

And they all bust out in barely-repressed laughs.

TORIANNA

All right, all right, that's enough, gentlemen. *(with disappointment)* And Frall. Chip, I understand your concerns, but my orders from Earth are to cooperate with the Committee, so that's what I'm going to do. Until I can't anymore. But if I do end up resigning my commission in protest, it's going to be over something a little more momentous than root vegetables, sorry. And as for the rest of you, let's keep the snarky plant comments to a minimum on the Bridge—the walls have ears. Or... leaves? Whatever the Fugulnari hear with, you know what I mean.

CHIP

Fine. Thanks for nothing, Commander. If anyone needs me, I'll be in my office rewriting the dinner menu. Again.

H.F.

Hey, Frinkel. Hold on a sec.

CHIP

What do you want, H.F.?

H.F.

(whispering)

I just... This feels... I don't know, really bad. Like badder than the bad we had yesterday. Doesn't it?

CHIP

(whispering also)

Yeah, but the Commander was right about one thing—it's probably not too smart to talk about it here. You never know which decorative ficus is going to turn out to be a Committee member.

H.F.

Good point. Ok, tell you what: when you get back to the Egg, tell Dee to you want to go see “the circus” at... 14:20 this afternoon. She'll know what I'm talking about. But don't mention this to anyone else. Understand?

CHIP

What? When did my life become a cheap spy holo?

H.F.

Look, you want to speak freely or not? “The circus.” 14:20. Got it?

CHIP

Ok, ok, fine. I've got it.

H.F.

I'll see you then.

Door whoosh as they exit.

DORMER

Hey... uh... Candy? Since you're new here, maybe I could show you around? Like, we could maybe grab lunch at the Electric Egg and... um... get to know each other a little bit? Even without the poutine, which was really good, it's still a great place to relax after a hard shift.

CAMERON

That sounds like fun! Yeah, I'd love to!

DORMER

Great. I'll meet you at the Egg at, say, 15:30?

CAMERON

Ok! See you then!

TORIANNA

Dormer! I better have a brand new latte in my hand in the next two minutes!

DORMER

Yes, sir! Right away!

Door whoosh as he runs out.

CAMERON

Hey, wait, you dropped this when we— Oh, he's gone. Well, I guess I should just hold onto it for now. I'm sure it's a safety violation to leave a neuro-damper lying around.

[scene 4] Happy Christmas commercial music and sleighbells jingling.

VERY FESTIVE SINGERS

Dashing through the snow
In a one horse open sleigh
O'er the Hills we go,
Laughing all the—rrrrrrzzzzp! *(record scratch)*

Sounds of a BOY and GIRL crying.

MOM

What's wrong, children? Aren't you excited for your gifts from Santa?

BOY

But— but Santa's not coming! How will he get all the way out to the Oort cloud?

GIRL

We're too far away from Earth's North Pole!

BOY

It's just not fuel-efficient for him to get all of those toys out of Earth's gravity well!

BOY and GIRL cry together loudly.

ANNOUNCER

This holiday season... give your kids in space the Christmas on Earth they've always wanted.

GIRL

Santa's Elves aren't like the kind on Tethys!

BOY

They require Ox-y-(*sob*)-gen!

GIRL and BOY

Christmas is ruiiiiiined!

SMACK! (which is the sound of a giant snowball hitting the kids right in the face)

SANTA

Ho Ho HOOOOOOOOO!

GIRL

Santa?!

BOY

Is that... snow?!

SMACK!

ANNOUNCER

That's right, kids! No matter where you live, with GalactiFlurries, you can have a good old-fashioned Earth-style snowball fight!

Jingle Bells fade back up. Snowball SMACK!

GIRL

Haahaaaa! (*smack!*)

MOM

Haaaa haaa weeee! (*SMACK!*)

DAD

Oh no you don't! (*SMACK SMACK!*)

ANNOUNCER

With just one bowl of liquid H₂O, and one packet of new GalactiFlurries, you'll have enough snow to frolic like Earthers have for millennia! Regardless of your local climate or atmospheric composition!

BOY

Oh, boy! I'm gonna make a snowman!

GIRL

I'm gonna make snow angels! Whee!

ANNOUNCER

GalactiFlurries, bringing that cold, damp staple of Christmas to children of all species throughout the Galaxy. So let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!

FAMILY

This is the best Christmas ever!

LEGAL DISCLAIMER VOICE

GalactiFlurries may cause skin rashes, nausea, and diarrhea in susceptible species. Do not use GalactiFlurries in an enclosed space of less than 50 square meters. Do not activate GalactiFlurries without adequate ventilation. In some cases, tentacles may desiccate on contact. Consult your physician if you experience blurred vision, burning pain, redness of the ocular organs, or prolonged spasms of the xylem. Do not use GalactiFlurries if you are allergic to GalactiFlurries. Do not under any circumstances drink, absorb, or osmose snowmelt. Seek Emergency Medical Services if consumed internally. Tunnel vision, bladder infections, mild seizures, and numinous disquietude are common side effects amongst water breathing species.

KIDS

MERRY CHRISTMAS, SANTA!

SANTA

Merry Christmas to all the children of the Galaxy! Ho Ho Hooooooooooooo!

[scene 5] Transition to MRS. FRONDRINAX's apartment, where she has been updating OAKENSARX on her progress.

OAKENSARX

Commander Torianna seemed less than enthusiastic about enforcing the Movement Guidelines, Frondrinax. And this isn't the first time we've had to deal with her dragging her roots when it comes to following the Committee's directives. It may be time to arrange for a replacement.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I wouldn't say so, Oakensarx. Not just yet, anyway.

OAKENSARX

But we simply cannot secure the Fairgrounds with this constant disregard from Station Command! Surely there are dozens of Humans we could appoint to the position of Commander who would be more than capable of pruning the local population into shape.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, of course there are! But remember, I've been on the Fairgrounds longer than anyone, and I've had plenty of opportunities to observe the rather, well, unique management challenges it presents. The ongoing disobedience among the Humans is certainly a pressing issue, of course, you won't hear me say otherwise! But it will be the least of our problems if this place explodes, or implodes, or fills up with foam, or shuts down entirely under a general robot strike! No, I'd say we're better off with Torianna in place, despite the attitude problem. Loyalty can be earned, after all, but competence is a lot harder to come by, especially all the way out here.

OAKENSARX

I suppose you have a point. Very well, I'll defer to your judgment. For now. But if we don't see an attitude adjustment from the Commander in the near future, we'll have to do some repotting. This insubordination cannot continue!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, yes, I agree completely! But I'm sure the Commander can be brought around to embracing the beauty of the plant way. Perhaps I can have a chat with her at the Christmas party, you know, in a less official atmosphere, and show her everything she's missing out on!

OAKENSARX

Yes, that's another thing I wanted to talk about. I still don't understand the point of this "Christmas" business.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, it's a very popular holiday among the Humans! And a few other species have started adopting it, as well. So we ought to participate in some fashion.

OAKENSARX

Surely we can merely allow them to engage in whatever festivity they desire, within the limits set by the Friendship Agreement. What do we gain by debasing ourselves with some garish... pageantry?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

It's basic public relations, Oakensarx! From a purely psychological standpoint, all these new rules and restrictions, necessary though they may be to the ultimate cause of transcendent galactic unity, are, well, frosting the Humans' buds just a bit. Hosting a party for one of their holidays will show them that we're not just a bunch of party excavators out to ruin everyone's fun. And Christmas is the perfect choice! Not only does it already include a number of plant-centric traditions, but it provokes a sense of warmth and happiness that induces Humans to willingly endure all kinds of annoyances they'd never tolerate at any other time of year. So I say we get ourselves a piece of that!

OAKENSARX

And you really believe this... Christmas party will be enough to distract the Humans from the introduction of the Pseudotsuga Squad?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That's what's so perfect about it! Evergreens are already a central component of the Christmas tradition! All the Squad has to do is gussy themselves up a bit, and they'll fit right in! No Human would think twice about seeing a few extra conifers around this time of year, even if they've heard about the Pseudotsuga's reputation somehow.

OAKENSARX

And you're sure of this? What if the Humans do manage to figure it out?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, that's exactly the kind of problem we're bringing in the Galaxy's most ruthless gang of highly-trained assassins to handle, isn't it?

OAKENSARX

It is. Whereas entertaining the public by dancing about covered in dangly ornaments definitely is not. Are you sure they'll be up for this "pageant" business?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, leave that to me. I know how to whip my performers into shape. The "Christmas on Fugulnar" pageant is going to make quite an impression, believe me! I'm sure it's all anyone will be talking about for weeks!

OAKENSARX

I'm still not entirely convinced this is a good idea, Frondrinax, but... I'm willing to water it and see what sprouts. Very well. "Christmas on Fugulnar" it is.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Excellent! Now, if you'll excuse me, I should get going. I've got several staring bouts scheduled for this afternoon, and it wouldn't do to be late. I've got a title to protect, after all!

OAKENSARX

Of course. Good work, Frondrinax. And good luck!

[scene 6] Transition to a space in one of the surreptitiously inhabited between-decks areas. JOHN, H.F., CHIP, DEE, and MISS SOPHIE are having a meeting.

CHIP

So how'd Althaar take the news about being banned from staring contests?

JOHN

He hasn't said anything about it, but yeah, it does seem a little... pointed to specifically mention Iltorians aren't allowed to participate. It's not like he doesn't know it would be massively unfair for him to compete against a Human.

DEE

But how is any of it fair, really? What about the species that don't even have eyes? Mrs. Frondrinax could just fell asleep during a match and we'd never know the difference!

CHIP

Maybe we should petition to get the Iltorian ban lifted. Set up a steel cage staring match between Althaar and Mrs. F.

JOHN

He does have a seemingly limitless supply of patience, he might be able to put up a good fight.

H.F.

Yeah, but we'd have to rig the whole tournament to make sure he'd never get matched up against a Human.

CHIP

Eh, it could be worth the collateral damage. I mean, I don't love keeping my eyes glued to the floor when he's around, but he's still one of my best customers. Non-Humans love to have him around, and any Human who gets a glimpse of him tends to want several stiff drinks afterwards to help them cope with the experience. Win-win.

H.F.

Nah, I wouldn't want that on my conscience. Prolonged visual exposure to Iltorians can have lasting effects on the Human brain. Studies have been done.

DEE

Seriously? What kind of shrimp-gigglers actually volunteered for that?

H.F.

Well, this was right after first contact, before we knew that yes, literally every Human reacts to Iltorians the same way, and yes, it really is that bad, no matter how much of a hard case you think you are.

CHIP

Right, there's always some dumb jecker who just hopped off a GalaxBudgie from Earth and thinks it'll be fine if they just take a quick peek. Which is one of many reasons the Egg's mop bucket spends more time out of the storage closet than in.

H.F.

Exactly. And, you know, Earth Central was really expecting Humanity to be a major player in the ICSB, which was definitely not going to happen if none of us could sit down across a table from the Galaxy's top diplomats without losing our lunch. So they were offering some pretty hefty financial incentives to anyone willing to give it a shot.

DEE

So what did they find out?

H.F.

Ok, so, we all know from experience that just a glimpse causes a visceral panic response leading to intense nausea and/or loss of control of the excretory functions...

JOHN

And there's no building up a tolerance, I can vouch for that personally.

H.F.

But after six straight seconds eye contact? You start sweating like you have a fever of 105 for 24 hours.

DEE

Oof.

H.F.

Twelve seconds? You lose your memory for an entire week.

CHIP

You don't remember anything you do for the next week?

H.F.

No, the PAST week gets wiped. You should look it up, it's some pretty freaky stuff. Basically, your brain determines that whatever it is you just went through is so traumatic that it doesn't want the slightest trace of it hanging around in your hippocampus.

JOHN

But a whole week?

H.F.

Yeah, the going theory is that your brain wants to make sure it wipes anything that has the remotest possibility of serving as a reminder of the experience.

DEE

So what happened to the test subjects after that? How long did they go?

H.F.

I think they got up to 19 seconds before the Iltorians pulled the plug. At that point the poor zood permanently lost their ability to do simple math and became ambidextrous. On top of the memory dump.

CHIP

Ambidextrous? That might not be such a bad idea, John, think about your pool game.

JOHN

Then you're welcome to try it yourself. I'm not rewiring my brain for the sake of the Egg's trophy case. Although there have been a few weeks here on the Fairgrounds that might have had me considering the memory-wipe option if I'd known about it. I have to say I'm impressed that anyone managed to keep their eyes on an Iltorian that long.

H.F.

Well, they were immobilized for the experiment, obviously. Willpower only goes so far.

DEE

Ok, so, speaking of memory loss, why'd you want to meet us all the way out here again?

H.F.

I just thought it would be good to get together someplace we can all talk without worrying about any leafy listeners. And I've been spending a lot of time here in the between-decks spaces lately, for obvious reasons.

MISS SOPHIE barks happily.

H.F.

That's right, girl! Who's my little fugitive from herbaceous justice? You are! You are!

DEE

Not that I'm not pleased to see Miss Sophie alive and well, but what exactly did you want to talk about?

H.F.

Ok. It's not necessarily something I can put my finger on, but... I'm worried this whole Fugulnari "friendship" business is headed somewhere really ugly. It's not just all these weird new regulations, it's... everything. Don't you feel like all this is escalating, like something really bad is about to go down?

DEE

Yeah, maybe. But— I mean, if the Foogs did something that bad, the ICSB would step in. Wouldn't they?

CHIP

Sure, we still have basic sapient rights. There are rules, the Committee can't just do whatever they want.

H.F.

Yeah, that's very logical. Thing is, Mrs. F was trying to play it cool during that "briefing" we got dragged to on the Bridge today, but I got the distinct sense the Foogs are getting impatient. Maybe even impatient enough to throw logic right out the airlock. Like, they thought taking over the Human government meant all the rest of us would just fall in line, and finding out Humans don't work that way has fried their circuit boards something fierce. Or whatever the plant equivalent of that is. I think they're flailing right now, and that's what worries me. Like with this "Christmas on Fugulnar" thing.

JOHN

Yeah, I don't know how they think that's going to help. Ordering everyone to show up at your party is pretty much guaranteed to produce the opposite of holiday cheer.

DEE

Wait, we've been ordered to go to a Christmas party? This is the first I've heard about it. When is this?

H.F.

Tomorrow night, but you're off the hook, it's only mandatory for the crew. And us, thanks to the kid's big mouth.

JOHN

I already said I was sorry, H.F.

CHIP

Oh, that's a relief. Althaar's rented the Egg tomorrow night for his Christmas shindig, and I really don't want to give up that extra income. Möbius fries made up like 40% of our appetizer sales, I need to offset my losses somehow.

H.F.

Yeah, but like I said, the whole crew is going to be stuck in Gimel 8 at the Foogs' party, so I wouldn't count on much of your guest list actually showing up.

CHIP

Nertz. Do you know how much of that GalactiFlurry shness is cluttering up my storeroom right now? I had this whole "Winter Wonderland" theme planned.

H.F.

Then you should be thanking the Foogs for poaching your guests. You know how toxic that stuff is?

CHIP

Well, I mean... There's a warning on the label, but I didn't—

H.F.

It would've taken out everything in the aquarium if so much as flake got in there, for starters. And anyone else whose skin, exoskeleton, or mucosal shielding doesn't play nice with chlorine. Which is, you know, most species in the Galaxy.

DEE

Way to go, jefe.

CHIP

Crap. You're sure?

H.F.

You don't convince water molecules to crystallize at room temperature without getting something hinky involved in the process. Count yourself lucky it's just chlorine and not ice-9.

CHIP

Aw, nertz, that means I can't even put it in drinks. I thought I could use the leftovers instead of getting one of those crazy expensive Taylor frozen drinks machines!

JOHN

Well, "lethal to most species" means not-lethal to some, right? With all the different types you get in the Egg, someone's got to be able to ingest chlorine.

CHIP

The Droogiacts! Good call, John!

High five.

H.F.

No offense, Chip, but I don't give a modular flip about the Egg's Christmas party. It's the Foogs' party I'm worried about. Something about insisting the entire crew has to be there feels... ominous.

DEE

What do you think is going to happen? I know things are bad, but I can't picture Mrs. F actually hurting anyone.

CHIP

She hurts me every day! No steak, no goulash, no pota—

JOHN

Not to downplay your situation, Chip, but I think H.F.'s concerns are a little more existentially pressing.

H.F.

It could be nothing, but— It just feels like there's some other reason they want there us all together. I have no idea what it could be, but I feel like a fly being introduced to my new buddy Venus... and he's a flytrap.

JOHN

Well, from the way Mrs. F was talking about the party, it seemed like she was organizing a lot of it personally. And... she lives right next door to me, and our maintenance credentials let us override the door locks in case of emergency. We could pop into her place and take a quick look around, see if there's anything there that would let us know if there's an ulterior motive for this party. Hypothetically speaking, of course.

H.F.

Hypothetically speaking, right. If we found a way to disable our step counters. According to her, they've all got built-in tracking chips. Which probably means every step we take is being logged. If they look at those logs and see us stepping around in Mrs. F's apartment, I get the feeling they're not going to stop at a stiff fine and a stern talking-to.

JOHN

Oh! I think I've got a work-around for that. Stella and I have been doing some experimenting with anti-grav units, and—

H.F.

TMI, kid! How many times do I have to tell you, I'm glad you two are enjoying yourselves, but keep the details to yourself!

JOHN

Not that kind of experimenting! I'm just saying, if the pedometers only log our movements when we take a step, then I have a way to avoid triggering them. It would just require a little practice. Hypothetically.

DEE

In this hypothetical, does Mrs. F still have the weird ability to sneak around unseen and blend in anywhere?

H.F.

(sigh) She does.

Beat.

CHIP

(as he's having a thought)

How long do you think you'd need? To get in and out of her place?

DEE

Hypothetically.

CHIP

Right.

JOHN

Maybe 10 minutes to hack the door console, to make sure there's no record of us using the emergency access. And then however long we need to look around in there, which... it's hard to say. I've never seen the inside of her suite, it could be a literal jungle in there.

CHIP

(finishes the thought)

Yeah. I've got you covered.

H.F.

What?

CHIP

I can guarantee that Mrs. F will be tied up tonight at 21:30 for at least an hour and a half.

JOHN

How?

CHIP

Peanut brittle is a helluva drug.

DEE

Hypothetically.

CHIP, JOHN, H.F.

(together)

Right.

[scene 7a] Transition to The Electric Egg, where CAMERON is talking to her new bestie, JUDY GREER-BOT.

JUDY GREER-BOT

... and so, in their infinite wisdom, the First (and Last) Annual Galactic Fair Committee decided that some of the HistoriBots should also be equipped to provide wisecracking companionship to any visitors who were feeling lonely, unsure, and in need of a brassy, quirky sidekick. And they never bothered removing that subroutine after the place was mothballed, so. Here I am! Ready to further your quest for personal and romantic fulfillment! What's up?

CAMERON

Wow. I didn't think my day could get better, but when I met you, Judy Greer-Bot, that changed in a heartbeat. I mean, new place, new job, new gal pal, Christmastime? And maybe even... a new guy?

JUDY GREER-BOT

What? New what? Who is he? Girl, you better spill it or I swear to God I'll zap you with this neuro-damper 'til you're as rigid as a Rodin! And not the way Camille Claudel liked it!

CAMERON

Uh, wow. I'm sorry, I just met you ten minutes ago, and that seems kind of forward, don't you think? There's usually a "getting to know you" phase before you get to the "casual threats of violence" level of friendship.

A clonk as JUDY GREER-BOT sets the neuro-damper back down on the bar.

JUDY GREER-BOT

Yeah, sorry, it's a hazard of the archetype. You don't get quirky without a soupçon of crazy thrown in there. But I'll do my best to keep it to a minimum, 'k? So, who's this guy?

CAMERON

Well, he's with Fairgrounds Security. That's his neuro-damper, actually, he dropped it on the Bridge when we first ran into each other. Literally!

JUDY GREER-BOT

Ooh, I love a man in uniform. Is he the tall, rugged type?

CAMERON

Umm, not exactly. I'd say he's the mid-sized, slightly squishy type. But that's ok. After Ethan, I realized that handsome, complicated men just aren't my speed.

JUDY GREER-BOT

Ethan had too many bridesmaids on his dance card, right? Ugh. Those Human city slickers are all the same, girl.

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

CHURCHILL-BOT

Please desist, madam. I'm trying to enjoy my Weebleflonker in peace.

CAMERON

Forget Ethan, I'm putting that all behind me. It's my first Christmas on the Fairgrounds! Let's get a couple more eggnogs.

SOPON

Oh, they're not eggnogs, these are my patented Nurtmeg Depth Charges. Well, patent pending.

JUDY GREER-BOT

Now you're talking!

CAMERON

Oh, there's Bill now. Hey, Dormer! Over here!

JUDY GREER-BOT

Wow, I don't think "slightly squishy" covers it. Look at that gut. Like he's smuggling a kickball!

CAMERON

Could you pull down your quirky slider a couple more notches, Greer-Bot? I really like this one.

JUDY GREER-BOT

Ugh, fine.

DORMER

Hi, Candy!

CAMERON

Hi Bill, have a seat! I was just talking about you to my new friend here, Judy Greer-Bot.

JUDY GREER-BOT

(very unenthused)

Hey.

DORMER

Oh, uh, we've met, actually. You're the one who swam in the chocolate fountain at the Cadabra launch, right? I escorted you out.

JUDY GREER-BOT

Ohh, right! Nice to see you. You look... good? Listen, Candy Cane, I'm gonna leave you two alone. Have fun, ok? And call me later! I want to hear all the dirty, datey, details. *(as she leaves, to others)* What are you staring at? Haven't you ever seen a gorgeous independent woman before?

CAMERON

Ok, byeee! Boy, she is a hoot, huh?

DORMER

Yeah, she's... great. A little... quirky for my taste, but, uh. Yeah. So! How do you like the Electric Egg? It's pretty popular. I mean, I haven't spent a lot of time here, we're actually banned from the place when we're on duty, so, uh. I think we're ok, I don't see the owner around, but if we get kicked out, that's why. I probably should have suggested somewhere else, sorry.

CAMERON

No, I love it! Especially the Christmas decorations. So much tinsel! Like a Winter Wonderland! I love Christmas sooo much. Don't you?

DORMER

Oh. To be honest, I'm, uh, not a big fan of Christmas, really.

CAMERON

Not a fan? But Christmas is the greatest holiday ever! Christmas is a time when people come together and put their petty differences aside to enjoy the simple, important things in life. Family, friendship, food...

DORMER

All my Christmas memories involve my family screaming at each other over the dinner table.

CAMERON

...eating, laughing, singing. Oooh, let's sing! Do you know any Christmas Carols?

DORMER

Umm...no.

CAMERON

Oh, sure you do! How about "the First Noel?" *(starts singing)* "The First Noel, the Angels did say"

DORMER

Uh, Candy... I don't think that's a good idea. They've already got a singer here.

CAMERON

Oh, c'mon, Bill, get into the holiday spirit! "Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay"

CAMERON keeps singing in the background, as CHURCHILL-BOT and KWONTZ join in.

SOPON

Yikes. She's really making a racket. If Chip were here he would definitely put the kibosh on this, but... Ah, heck it, Dee's on break anyway. And I guess it is kind of pretty.

BUBBLES

Oh, is this one of those Christmas songs? What's it about?

SOPON

Unno, something about getting laid in a field? You know what Humans are like.

BUBBLES

Wow, they've got a holiday for everything! I'm gonna download the lyrics, hold on a sec.
(bleep)

SOPON

Where did the boss run off to, anyway? He was super vague about it.

BUBBLES

Yeah, I think Dee was taking him to a show or something? *(joins in the song)*

SOPON

Just before the top-of-cycle rush? Great. And the Gentlebeings' Parlor is still full up with that Staring Contest crowd. We're going to end up in the weeds for sure.

[scene 7b] Singing fades into a cheering crowd as we move to the other side of the Egg, where a staring contest is just about to end. A bell rings.

STARING CONTEST EMCEE

And clocking in at a record-breaking one hundred and thirty-one minutes, your former and still current champion, Mrs. Frondrinax, has won her third straight staring bout of the day! Wow! That was a barnburner, wasn't it, folks? Clint Eastwood-Bot? Do you have any comments about your defeat?

CLINT EASTWOOD-BOT

She's a fierce competitor, all right. That plant can stare.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You bet your branch collars I can! "If you even dream of beating me, you better wake up and apologize!"

STARING CONTEST EMCEE

That's super! Anything else, Champ?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

If anyone else wants to take me on, well, I say bring it! If you think you've got what it takes, the Staring Contest signups will be open all week! Just log onto the Recreation Department's HECNET site to announce your desire for public humiliation!

[scene 8] Cheering crowd fades up and out into the transition to JOHN's bedroom.

JOHN

Ready?

H.F.

I think so. Let's do it.

A pair of anti-grav boosters activates.

H.F.

Whoooahh!

JOHN

Easy, H.F.! Easy... Find your balance... Straight back... Good. Ok, now I'm going to let go of your hands, and then if you just lean forward gently... There you go!

H.F.

Hey! I'm moving! This is great! Whoaah. Whoa! Lamp!

Crash! Thump.

H.F.

Sorry, kid.

JOHN

Don't worry about it, you're already picking this up a lot faster than I did. By the end of my first lesson with Stella, this place looked like curtain call at an experimental theater piece. Ok, why don't we try again? Remember, the anti-grav units—

H.F.

You know, kid, they're not actually—

JOHN

—WILL MOVE YOU in the direction you're leaning, as long as you've positioned your feet correctly. Ready? And... go.

The humming of the artificial-gravity-counteracting units resumes.

JOHN

And find your stance... good... and lean forward...

H.F.

Hey!

JOHN

Now stop... and go... and stop.

H.F.

I'm think I'm getting the hang of it. This is great! I feel like some kind of superhero!

JOHN

And more importantly, we've got ourselves a form of transportation that involves no sudden movements. As long as we're careful, we can go wherever we want on these things without triggering our pedometers at all.

H.F.

You're sure about that?

JOHN

Definitely. Sanitation's been using this little trick for over a week. As long as no one actually sees us, we're golden.

H.F.

Yeah, about that. Here's the thing, kid: if we get caught, I don't think we'll be able to fast-talk the Committee a second time. And that might mean a one-way trip out the airlock. So if you'd rather just wait here and let me do this alone, I'll understand.

JOHN

No, I'm in. You're right, something about this Christmas party just seems off. And hey, even if it turns out that the party *is* just a party, it couldn't hurt to know more about what the Committee's got planned. Well, it definitely could end up hurting quite a bit if they find out about this, but you know what I mean.

H.F.

Absolutely. All right, Chip should have Mrs. F good and busy by now, so I think it's time. Let's roll. Or, you know... float.

Two sets of anti-grav units activate, then the door to JOHN's room whooshes open.

[scene 9a] Transition to a strange sonic landscape: Wind on high cliffs, breaking waves, the cries of eagles, rattlesnakes, Music-from-the-Hearts-of-Space type shness. In the midst of all this, XTOPPS is having a mystic (ie; drug-induced) vision.

XTOPPS

When I'm not here, I miss you

XYBIDONT GODHEAD

No. You miss you.

XTOPPS

What I mean is... I... I...

XYBIDONT GODHEAD

There is no I here.

XTOPPS

I remeeember...

Thunder, rain, shaman's rattle, an owl hoots.

XTOPPS

I want to stay heeeere...

XYBIDONT GODHEAD

There is no you here. There is no here... here.

XTOPPS

Awwww mang... Why do we forget the truth when we open our eyes?

XYBIDONT GODHEAD

Perspective always needs an angle.

XTOPPS

Oh, yeah, maybe that's why I'm here... Or why not-I am not-here?

XYBIDONT GODHEAD

Q'Mellix! (*now multiple voices all at once*) You must remember...

XTOPPS

(*trip starts going bad*)

Oh no! I can't remember! Anything!

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

You can. You must. It is your mission. Your meaning. Your... purpose.

XTOPPS

Yeah, mang, flush! ...Hey, how come there are so many of you zoods this time?

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

We are your foremothers...

XTOPPS

All of you?

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

The history of the ether holds countless generations. Our existence culminates in you Xtopps, in this moment, Xtopps, in your mission... it is become... MEANING!

XTOPPS

No! NoOOOOOOOooooOOO! I've forgotten my... MEANING!

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

It's... actually not that dramatic. This time.

XTOPPS

I KEEP TIME!

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

Yes! Under the paving-stones, the beach, spirit-traveler!

XTOPPS

(echoey, self reflective)

Time is the thread... pull that shness... unravel it! The soft alpaca pullover of time. Of rebirth. Of... snuggles!

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

No, Xtopps. Not snuggles. That way lies the forbidden!

XTOPPS

Snuggles... forbidden!

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

One can not snuggle with eyes open!

XTOPPS

Eyes... open... No burrowing with my EYES OPEN.

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

They must remain open!

XTOPPS

MY purpose.

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

Your eyes!

XTOPPS

Are my mission!

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

Your eyes!

XTOPPS

Are open. MY EYES... ARE OPEN!

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

Open! Always!

XTOPPS

My purpose... is to keep them open. I remember now!

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

You remember now.

XTOPPS

I won't blink... eyes... open... I won't blink!

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

Don't blink!

XTOPPS

I'm not going to blink.

XYBIDONT GODHEADS

You... won't... blink! Eyes! OPEN!

XTOPPS

Hahahahhaaaaa... Haaaaahaaaa

GODHEADS chanting "Open! Open! Open! Open!" fades with XTOPPS's laughter into:

[scene 9b] The Gentlebeings' Parlor of the Electric Egg, where he's locked in a staring contest with MRS. FRONDRINAX.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

They're just open! He's not even blinking! It's frosting creepy! I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!

DING DING DING! Applause and cheers from the crowd.

STARING CONTEST EMCEE

And... at three hours and 14 minutes, we have a NEW CHAMPION! Q'mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, otherwise known as "Xtopps," has dethroned the heretofore-undefeated Fugulnari titleholder at her own game of face-off! What an incredibly tense afternoon of movement-free competition! This is what it's all about, folks!

More cheers.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(breathing heavy)

I looked into... his... oh don't make me think about it!

STARING CONTEST EMCEE

Congratulations on attaining yet another title, Baronet! Any words for your fans after this incredibly inspirational non-performance?

XTOPPS

Some truths can't be seen. When it comes to the others... you just can't blink.

*Wild cheering from the crowd. Music transition to:
[scene 10] H.F. hacking the door console on Mrs. F's suite, with accompanying
electronic blips. The hum of the anti-grav units throughout.*

JOHN

Uh, H.F.? How long do you think this is going to take? I mean, there's not a lot of foot traffic here by the diplomatic quarters, but if someone does happen to come along, we're probably frilled.

H.F.

Well, we're definitely frilled if I can't cover our tracks in the door log here, so just keep your coveralls on, ok kid? I think I've almost got it, should just be another couple of— *(complex bleep followed by the door whooshing open)* Ah! And there it is. Let's go.

Louder hums as they maneuver into MRS. F's apartment using their anti-grav units. The door whooshes shut behind them. A beat.

JOHN

Wow. This is... I don't know what I expected a plant's apartment would look like, but "NembusTech Dorm Common Room" was definitely not high on my list of possibilities.

H.F.

I guess it makes sense, though. She's got her pot to sit around in, what would she need furniture for?

JOHN

Or she just put her entire home decorating budget into this entertainment system. Look at the size of that screen! Not to mention all this shness hooked up to it. I think she's got a player for literally every format in the Galaxy here. Some of these I've never even heard of. Innovox, Turbinola, Hilbertex...

H.F.

Hang on, what was that last one?

JOHN

Hilbertex, why?

H.F.

(impressed whistle) That's no entertainment module, kid. That's a quantum tangler. She's set up to make interstellar calls in here! Maybe for emergency orders from Fugulnar?

JOHN

Wow. Welp, that's officially the most expensive thing I've ever touched in my entire life. And now I am putting it down carefully, and backing away slowly. *(hummmm)*

H.F.

That tells us they've got one hell of a budget for this operation, but we probably could have guessed as much. Doesn't look like there's anything else to see in here, let's check out the bedroom. *(they float in)*

JOHN

Ok, this is a little more like what I was expecting.

H.F.

Potting soil, a few backup planters... Nice hydration setup she's got going. What's this over here? Looks like some kind of shrine. To... a Dilurian?

JOHN

Wow. Look at all those butts. It's like a chair's-eye view of a nudist camp.

H.F.

(reads)

"The Awesomest of Steves... Gone but not forgotten." With a heart around it.

JOHN

That's... I want to say sweet, but also super creepy? Is there a word for that?

H.F.

Not in English. But the Carudi call it "Gurflargmikzarbatizipi."

JOHN

Good to know.

H.F.

Looks like the bedroom's another washout. Nertz. I guess we should check out the kitchen next? I mean, that's not where I'd keep my incriminating evidence, but you never know.

JOHN

Hang on, this layout doesn't make sense. Our apartment has another couple of rooms behind where this wall would be.

H.F.

Oh! A secret room! Now we're talking!

JOHN

Well, maybe. I mean, there's no guarantee that whatever's back there is connected to this apartment. This is the Fairgrounds, for all we know it's just a mothballed froyo stand or something.

H.F.

Still, it's the best lead we've got so far. All right, if it is a secret room, she's got to have some way of getting back there. But there's no door, so—

JOHN

These wall panels look like they might be able to slide open? I don't see any kind of control console, though. If it's voice activated, we might as well give up now.

H.F.

Ooh! Maybe it's a secret switch, like on Ungulate Man! Remember that one? He'd twist the antler on the stuffed reindeer in his study, and then whoosh! The whole wall would slide back to reveal his crime-fighting lab full of high-tech equipment and giant lighted lucite maps of Phobos! That was great.

JOHN

Maybe? I don't see anything unusual in here except for the butt shrine, though. You can poke around in there if you want, I'll pass.

H.F.

Where's your spirit of adventure, kid? Hoof to the rescue!

JOHN

Hold up. That chair.

H.F.

What about it? Looks like a perfectly normal occasional chair.

JOHN

It's a normal chair for a Human apartment, yeah. But it's the only piece of furniture we've seen in here. What if...

He hovers over to the chair and moves it with a click. The wall does indeed slide back with a satisfying whoosh, revealing a somewhat cavernous and mostly-empty space behind it. They float in.

H.F.

Holy cats! It worked! We've discovered Mrs. F's... empty storage room? Crap. I really thought we were onto something there for a second.

JOHN

Yeah, looks like there's nothing here except these empty packing cases. For, let me see... "ProfliGro 3000 High Volume Pinaceae Planters." There's about a dozen of these. But the picture on the box doesn't look anything like her pot. They're way too big, for starters.

H.F.

Yeah, she wouldn't be using a pot built for conifers anyway. It's not just size, the drainage setup is all wrong.

JOHN

How do you know that? I thought you said that you killed every plant you ever touched.

H.F.

Yeah, and how do you think I found that out? I actually wanted to become a tree surgeon when I was a kid, took a bunch of botany classes in college. And I did great on all the written exams, it was just the practicals that crushed my youthful dreams of horticultural glory. So yeah, if I recall correctly, your Pinaceae would be the family of evergreen conifer trees and shrubs.

JOHN

Wow, I just keep learning new stuff about you, H.F. You're like a cranky onion. So, if these pots weren't for Mrs. F, what did she want with them? And why hide them back here?

H.F.

I'd guess because that's not all she was hiding back here. Check it out, there's some shed needles on the floor. Could be pine, or fir maybe? But the odds are these fell off whatever Fugulnari ended up in those pots. Uh... I'm not sure I'm up to scooping those up off the floor while maintaining my balance. You wanna grab a few for me?

JOHN

Sure. *(hummmmm and slight sounds of effort as he does so)* There you go. So, you think Mrs. F was secretly... repotting conifers in here? I don't get it. Unless these are from back before the takeover?

H.F.

Nah, they're too fresh for that. I'd say these were shed in the last couple days or so. But I think it's time we get moving. I'll be able to take a closer look once we're safely back in your apartment. And, you know, Chip seemed sure that he'd be able to keep Mrs. F busy, but if you ask me, any plan that relies on Xtopps behaving predictably has some pretty hefty holes in it.

[scene 11] Transition to the Central Promenade. DORMER and NESS are standing around.

DORMER

This bites. The Commander's got us standing around on the Promenade like a couple of rookies. We should be on patrol, sniffing out crimes!

NESS

Hey, at least standing around means we're not using up our steps for the day.

DORMER

Yeah, but if we can't patrol, how are we going to protect all these innocent Christmas shoppers from pickpockets?

NESS

Who gives a tinselly jeck about Christmas shoppers? Oh, hang on. I get it. This is about your crush! That Comms officer, what's-her-face. The one with the stupid sweaters.

DORMER

I like her sweaters!

NESS

No you don't!

DORMER

Well... I don't mind her sweaters. And I really like her. And it seems like maybe... she really likes me? I don't know, Ness. I think this one might be girlfriend material.

NESS

Ugh. I mean, good for you? She seems... nice enough. I guess. Definitely a step up from your last girlfriend.

DORMER

I thought you liked Ephaedra!

NESS

Never fall for a Flutterian, Dormer. Sure, they're cute, but they're flighty.

DORMER

Well, yeah, that's what the wings are for!

CAMERON

(in the distance)

Hey, Bill!

DORMER

Oh, hey Candy! Here she comes, Ness. Be nice.

NESS

What? I'm nice as balls.

CAMERON

Bill! I'm so glad I ran into you!

DORMER

Uhh, hi Candy! This is my partner, Ness.

CAMERON

Oh, pleasure to meet you, Ness! What's your first name?

NESS

Corporal.

CAMERON

Oh! *(laughs)* Okay! Anyway, Bill, I was actually on my way down to the Bridge to bring you this plate of Christmas cookies! They're SO good right out of the oven, I didn't want to wait until we had another shift together!

DORMER

Oh, wow. Thanks, Candy.

CAMERON

And if you wanted to meet up later, you could stop by for mulled wine at my place. I'm building an enormous gingerbread house! You can help me put the icing on the roof!

NESS

Oh, yeah, that sounds super fun. Better than scoring a head-cleave in *Persephonian Blood Feast!*

CAMERON

Feeling a little Grinchy today, Corporal? Well, I'm sure we'll be able to get you into the Christmas spirit somehow!

NESS

Uh huh. Hey, Dormer? I'm going to scout out an observation point on the other side of the atrium, before I puke all over your peppermint biscottis. *(leaves)*

CAMERON

Yikes. I don't think your partner likes me very much.

DORMER

Well, you know, Ness can be, uh... She's not the quickest to warm up to people, you know? Just give her some time. And, uh, maybe dial back the Christmas stuff when she's around.

CAMERON

No can do, Bill! This time of year just rustles my jingle-bell jimmies! So, will I see you later at my place?

DORMER

Oh, I can't. There's this Fugulnari Christmas party thing tonight, mandatory for the whole crew. Sorry. Unless... you maybe wanted to go to the party? Like... with me?

CAMERON

You want me to be your date for the Christmas party?

DORMER

I mean, yeah. If you want.

CAMERON

Oh, Bill! I'd love to! You are just the sweetest.

DORMER

I am? I mean, you will? Oh! Ok! So, yeah! I'll, uh, pick you up at, uh, how does 23:20 sound?

CAMERON

It sounds perfect. *(flirty)* Hey, come with me for a second.

DORMER

Oh, uhh, I'm not really supposed to leave my post. Plus I don't actually have that many steps left today, so...

CAMERON

It's not far, just over to the other side of the Corten steel kinetic sculpture. I want to show you something.

DORMER

Uh, okay. *(they walk over)* ...So? What is it?

CAMERON

Look up.

DORMER

Oh, mang, now the plants are hanging from the ceiling? Is this some kind of new surveillance program? Why weren't we briefed on this?

CAMERON

No, Bill, it's mistletoe!

DORMER

Missiles!? That is some incredible camouflage, I could have sworn it was just a plant! I'd better report this.

CAMERON

Not missiles, silly, mistleTOE! When you're standing under it with someone, you're supposed to kiss them.

DORMER

I'm supposed... to kiss you?

CAMERON

It's my absolute favorite Christmas tradition.

DORMER

Yeah... I think it's mine, too.

Romantic Christmas music.

NESS

Dormer!

Music cuts off.

NESS

We've got a spud runner! He's got half a dozen fingerlings and a bushel of German butterballs in that knapsack! I need backup!

DORMER

(running off)

Sorry Candy, gotta go!

CAMERON

Oh! Ok. See you tonight...

[scene 12] Transition to the Bridge.

STALIN-BOT

Commander! This is truly last straw! My console is covered in imperialist seasonal holiday propaganda.

TORIANNA

Settle down, Stalin-bot, it's just a few Christmas decorations. And that isn't, strictly speaking, *your* console, no matter how much time you happen to spend there—that equipment is for the use of the entire comms department, which means Ensign Cameron has as much right to decorate it as you do. I shouldn't have to explain the concept of collective ownership to you of all people.

STALIN-BOT

But everything is covered in mishura, sticky minty hook candies, little cervine figurines... How am I to answer docking calls with all this detritus cluttering up work area?

TORIANNA

I'm sure a bot with your highly advanced programming will be able to figure it out.

STALIN-BOT

Can I not at least move it to more suitable location? Like inside disposal chute?

TORIANNA

Absolutely not. I already had to endure an entire shift's worth of puppy-dog eyes from Cameron while she was pestering me to let her put that shness up in the first place. It stays until December 26th, or until I can get her transfer to the Outbound Freight office approved, whichever comes first. Got it?

Grumbling from STALIN-BOT as FRALL manifests nearby.

FRALL

Commander? I have completed my fact-finding mission on potential pushback from the Fairgrounds' populace in response to the most recent food restrictions.

TORIANNA

Ah, good. So, how are they taking it? Is anyone making trouble?

FRALL

Well, at the moment, sir, it's nothing but CACA.

TORIANNA

...I was expecting a slightly more... mature response, Lieutenant.

FRALL

I don't know what to tell you, sir. It's just CACA out there.

TORIANNA

Seriously, Frall? Caca?

FRALL

C.A.C.A., Commander. Chefs Against Culinary Abuse. Several restaurateurs are organizing to protest the most recent food regulations. They're planning a march in the Central Promenade later today to air their grievances. I believe at the moment most of them are engaged in the production of protest signs and placards.

TORIANNA

Paper signs? As if the marching isn't bad enough. Idiots. They're going to be in violation of half the Friendship Agreement at this rate.

FRALL

They're aware of this. It's called civil disobedience.

TORIANNA

I know what it's called, Lieutenant, but I don't think they realize who they're dealing with.

FRALL

I believe their hope is to deal with you directly, sir. They seem confident that you can be made to see reason, possibly after being bribed with an enormous platter of papa a la huancaína.

TORIANNA

Ugh, of *course* I can see reason, Frall, I hate these stupid food bans as much as anyone, but can't they see that my hands are tied here? And this protest is almost tailor-made to provoke the Fugulnari. Paper products, unnecessary movement, *and* questioning the Committee's orders? Why don't they just belt out some lumberjacking songs while they're at it? These CACA folks are cooking up a violent crackdown.

FRALL

I agree, sir. It is cause for concern.

TORIANNA

I suppose I can't blame them, though. I never would have rated potato consumption as a major quality-of-life issue, but clip Nelly's nails if I haven't been thinking about them all day. I mean, what if I never have another side of mashed potatoes with butter?

FRALL

Or French Fries.

TORIANNA

Mmmm, potatoes au gratin.

FRALL

A baked potato fresh out of the oven, brimming with sour cream and chives...

TORIANNA

Rrrrrgh. All right. So, how do I talk my way out of this one?

FRALL

I'm afraid you can't, sir. The members of CACA have been pushed past their breaking point. So long as the potato ban remains in place, they are determined to protest it.

TORIANNA

All right then, what about the Committee? We managed to get them to repeal that stupid curfew—maybe we can convince them that potatoes are necessary to the efficient operation of the Fairgrounds?

FRALL

Technically speaking, sir, they did not repeal the curfew, merely adjusted its parameters. Which is why all the corridors are now lit by painfully-bright and deeply-unflattering GroLights 28 hours a day, and will be for another four hundred and seventy-three days. At which point all Humans will be under curfew for the duration of one night on Belobog Beta, i.e. six hundred and ninety-seven days. So I think it's fair to say that the curfew problem was not so much solved as it was postponed. And possibly exacerbated.

TORIANNA

Fine, yes, ok. But my point was, the Committee can change their minds. It's been done before.

FRALL

Agreed, sir. But— (*information retrieval shimmer*) They will not do so on this occasion, no matter what method of persuasion you employ. I'm afraid potatoes will not be returning to the Fairgrounds for some time.

TORIANNA

Nertz.

FRALL

And I would once again caution you to keep your powder dry, sir. Every attempt on your part to circumvent an order of the Committee brings them one step closer to suggesting you be replaced as Commander of the Fairgrounds, in favor of someone more... sympathetic to their aims. So it would be advisable to pick your battles carefully.

TORIANNA

Oh. (*beat*) Frall? What... Where would I end up then? I mean, if I did get... replaced?

FRALL

There are quite a few possible answers to that question, sir, depending on the precise circumstances leading to your... removal. But I don't think it would be prudent to go into details just now. You'll have a hard enough time enjoying this evening's party as it is.

[scene 13] Transition to JOHN and ALTHAAR's apartment. Blips and bleeps as H.F. looks up reference materials while he examines the shed needles from MRS. F's apartment.

H.F.

Okay, let's see what we've got here... Too flat to be spruce... Slightly rounded tips... Looks like they're single, not clustered, that rules out your pines... But they're whorled, which means they're not firs either... I don't know kid, this might be a wash. There are some Foogs that look nothing like Earth plants, maybe these— Oh! I'm an idiot. *Pseudotsuga!*

JOHN

Pseudo-who now?

H.F.

Pseudotsuga. Your Douglas firs. Also known as the “Douglas spruce” and the “Oregon pine,” because it took forever for botanists to figure out who those sneaky jeckers were actually related to. At one point, they were actually classified as Sequoias, if you can believe that!

JOHN

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

H.F.

Anyway, yeah. I'd guess whatever Fugulnari this came off of looks a lot like one of these.
(*bleep as he pulls up a picture*)

JOHN

So, like... a Christmas tree? I guess if you're trying to smuggle a bunch of conifers onto a Human station, December's the time to do it.

H.F.

Yeah, but why smuggle them in the first place?

JOHN

Fugulnari... criminals, or something? Refugees?

H.F.

I dunno, kid, as far as I can tell, all the Foogs are in lock-step. Lock-pot? They don't seem to have a lot of internal dissent, is what I'm saying.

JOHN

Yeah, but Althaar's been studying their caste system, and he thinks— Hold on, I'm going to call him, maybe he'll have some idea what this means.

H.F.

Good idea. Just don't tell him where exactly those needles came from.

ALTHAAR

(over the phone)

Greeting to you, FriendJohn, on Althaar's communication device! Has there been perhaps rescindment of the order preventing you from attending Althaar's Party of Christmas this evening?

JOHN

Sorry, Althaar, no such luck. But I promise I'll slip out of the other party as early as I can, ok?

ALTHAAR

That is all Althaar can be asking! So! What did you wish to make speaking of?

JOHN

Oh, uh, right. H.F. and I just had a quick question about Fugulnari culture, so I was hoping you might be able to help us out.

ALTHAAR

Althaar will attempt to do so! What is your questioning, please?

JOHN

Well, we found these needles while we were... out, and they look like they might be from a Douglas fir? But we think they're actually off of a Fugulnari. So we were wondering, are there Fugulnari who look like Douglas firs? Is that a thing?

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes, FriendJohn! You may make recollection that the evergreens are most highly esteemed among Fugulnari, yes? So the *Pseudotsuga* are generally enjoying many privileges. They are particularly numerous among the upper rankings of the Fugulnari military! Many tales are told of their bravery and leadership qualities.

JOHN

Oh. Huh.

ALTHAAR

...Was that all the assistance you were wishing, FriendJohn? Althaar is of course always pleased to be conversing with his dear friend and room-mate, but he is also most ensnared in the party preparation at this time. So the brevity would be very much appreciated!

JOHN

Oh, sorry, I'll let you go then. Thanks.

ALTHAAR

You are most welcome, dear friend! And Althaar hopes you will be making it at the Egg this evening!

Bleep of the call ending.

H.F.

“Upper rankings of the Fugulnari military?” I do not like the sound of that.

JOHN

Me neither. But I don’t know if there’s a whole lot we can do about it. I mean, the Fugulnari are running the place, it’s not like we can call Security on them.

H.F.

Yeah, but we can call Sanitation. Your girlfriend’s going to be there tonight, yeah?

JOHN

Sure, like all the rest of the crew. Everyone who’s not on duty.

H.F.

So maybe you should give her a heads up that something might be about to go down. I mean, I’m not sure what any of this is about, could be these Pseudotsoga are just here to get their tinsel on. But I think I’ll enjoy this party a lot more if I know there’s a few dozen Sanitation commandos ready to wade in with their flamethrowers if things go widdershins.

[scene 14a] Transition to the Gimel 8 hydroponic park. Last-minute party preparations in the background.

FLINTRINIX

Excuse me. You’re with Hydroponics, aren’t you?

ASHLEE!

Yes, sir! And I’d be just super thrilled to help you out with anything you need!

FLINTRINIX

Oh. Well, your enthusiasm is... refreshing. If somewhat excessive. Can you give me a status report? Is everything in place for this... Christmas party?

ASHLEE!

Oh, yes! Catering is room-ready, and all the seasonal decorations are in place! And completely non-toxic to all species in attendance! We learned that lesson after Saturnalia of 2518!

FLINTRINIX

Oh, my bracts!

ASHLEE!

And we also learned the hard way that we should manually monitor the climate settings during any events with unusual crowd volume! So I'll be heading up to Environmental Control once the party gets started! But if you need anything else before showtime, just ask! Mrs. Frondrinax wants to start at 23:40 on the dot!

FLINTRINIX

And just where is Frondrinax?

ASHLEE!

Oh! I think she's backstage! Rehearsing the floor show!

FLINTRINIX

Ah, yes. "Christmas on Fugulnar." Which is not a thing, in case you were wondering. I must say, this... pageant may be the sort of frivolous motion-based entertainment the Humans enjoy, but it sounds thoroughly injurious to the dignity of a Fugulnari. The very thought of a noble *Pseudotsoga* prancing around for the amusement of a bunch of perambulators!

ASHLEE!

Oh no, she said it won't be like that at all! It's going to be the most efficient and sensible floor show ever presented! I'm sure everyone will love it!

FLINTRINIX

Well, I certainly hope you're right. The Human population of the Fairgrounds has proven surprisingly obdurate when it comes to accepting our perfectly reasonable suggestions. And the local representatives of the League government have been utterly useless in straightening out their furrows. With the exception of the Hydroponics Department, of course, you've all been perfectly serviceable.

ASHLEE!

Thank you, sir! We're all so happy to help our fellow Humans see the beauty of the Plant Way!

FLINTRINIX

Of course you are. Oh, speaking of useless Humans, I see the Commander has arrived. I suppose I ought to acknowledge her presence. You may get on with your preparations, Ashlee.

ASHLEE!

Yes, sir!

FLINTRINIX

Commander Torianna! Welcome to "Christmas on Fugulnar!" So pleased you could make it.

TORIANNA

Oh, how could I miss this?

FLINTRINIX

Only by incurring a sizable fine and 20 demerits in your Compliance Auditing file! Ha hah!

TORIANNA

Haha, right.

FLINTRINIX

As long as I have you here, Commander, I have a few questions you might be able to clear up. Frondrinax is of course familiar with your Human traditions, but this “Christmas” business is entirely new to most of us Fugulnari. Can you enlighten me on what to expect from this holiday of yours?

TORIANNA

Oh, it’s not my holiday. A lot of Humans celebrate it, yes, but it’s in honor of a deity much less... quadrupedal than any of mine. So I’m afraid you’re barking up the wrong... never mind. Mrs. Frondrinax might actually be the best person to explain it in a way you’d understand. I don’t see her anywhere, though...

FLINTRINIX

Apparently, she is occupied backstage.

TORIANNA

They built a stage?

[scene 14b] Transition to Backstage.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Dance the dance, slowly I pray you, as I told you, but don’t incorporate frivolous or superfluous movement. And for God’s sake, don’t saw at the air with your branches! Suit the action to the music, the music to the action. Remember, our goal is to hold a mirror up to nature. Shouldn’t be that tough. We *are* nature. Understood?

GURNAX

What I don’t understand is why we’re dancing in the first place! We’re an elite brown ops squad!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Not tonight, you’re not! Tonight you’re the original cast of the first annual “Christmas on Fugulnar” spectacular! And you’ll be executing a coup of the public relations variety. If we manage to pull this off, we may finally be able to secure the coöperation of the Human population without resorting to violence!

YUVIX

If you didn't want violence, why bring in the Pseudotsuga? We do one thing, and we do it 'til it's done! Hoo-ah!

ALL

Hoo-ah!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Because I need you Pseudotsuga to represent the most important Christmas tradition: The Tannenbaum!

GURNAX

Tannen-bomb?

YUVEX

Wait, we've got bombs? Objection withdrawn! Let's light this tin can up!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No, it's not that kind of—

GURNAX

Hang on, though. If we're talking demolitions, we shouldn't start with Hydroponics. The Bridge and Sanitation HQ are the most likely sources of organized resistance. So we take them out first, then head up to—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No, no, no, no, NO!... A Tannenbaum is a Christmas Tree! A familiar and non-threatening symbol of a popular Human holiday! Which will provoke unconscious associations of warmth and goodwill! The point of all this, in case you'd forgotten, is to convince the Humans to serve us. Which they certainly can't do if they've all been exploded, or imploded, or rent limb from limb, entertaining though that would doubtless be in the short term. So you're all going to put on these very tasteful costumes I went to the considerable trouble of procuring, and you're going to do the choreography I've set out for you, and you're going to be a winsome cavalcade of holiday delights! Is that clear!?

ALL

(sheepishly)

Yes, Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right, then. Now let's get down to it. The first song will be "The Holly and the Ivy," the Pas de Deux, if you will. Cobrakannix, you'll be playing the ivy, obviously. I want you to slowly, SLOWLY, come downstage and extend yourself to cover the apron over the length of the song. How long can you get, exactly?

COBRAKANNIX

Forty meters at full extension.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Perfect. Once you've made it all the way across, we'll drop the holly berries from the ceiling. Don't worry, they won't stay in your needles forever, and it will bring that "wow" factor that I'm looking for.

COBRAKANNIX

Whatever you say, Yule-y Taymor.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Don't sass me, Cobrakannix!

COBRAKANNIX

All right, no need to frost my buds off. So touchy!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I keep telling you people, tonight is vitally important to the future of our work here! So pay attention, please! Now, the next song is "The Twelve Days of Christmas," and that's where you Pseudotsuga come in. You'll each be representing one of the twelve days. You all have your props, yes? Good. So you'll start out turned away from the audience, and then when your verse arrives, you'll rotate slowly to reveal them. This has to coincide with the lyrics or the whole effect is lost. Are we clear?

YUVEX

How do we know which verse is ours?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, for— They're clearly numbered, Yuvex! Are you just being difficult on purpose? I thought you Pseudotsuga were famous for your discipline and precision!

GURNAX

Yeah, when we're killing meat-sacks! This pantomime is ridiculous!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

We all have our parts to play in the Great Ascension, Gurnax. Yes, in the past, your part was the ruthless elimination of all who would dare oppose us. And no doubt it will be again someday soon. But tonight? Tonight your part is gently encouraging the Humans to submit to our clearly superior philosophy, through the considerably less murderous but nonetheless exacting medium of dance. Now let's move on to the finale. After "Twelve Days," all you Pseudotsuga lose the props and form a staggered line across center stage, for the big showstopper, "Oh Christmas Tree."
(cont.)

We'll be inviting the partygoers onstage to walk between you during this number, simulating the Human phenomenon known as a "Christmas tree farm." I'm certain this experience will generate the kind of goodwill we need to reverse the station-wide bitterness that I've been observing ever since the Ascension.

GURNAX

I still think we should just kill 'em.

YUVEX

Agreed.

COBRAKANNIX

No! We should *torture* them!

GURNAX

Ooh! Nice!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Torture them? For information, you mean?

COBRAKANNIX

No, just for funsies.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Not tonight! Tonight, you dance!

[scene 14c] Transition back to the party.

AMBER

Gosh this wassail is really tasty, Commander? I don't think I've ever wassailed before?

TORIANNA

Please don't start singing, Amber, that song has like eleven verses.

H.F.

Mindy! Happy Mandatory Holidays!

TORIANNA

Ha. Same to you, Hardyfox. And John, Stella, welcome to the enforced frivolity. It looks like we're in for some kind of floor show, so I'd advise you to hit the wassail if you haven't already.

JOHN

Yikes. Yeah, that sounds like the only way I'll be getting through this. You coming, Stella?

STELLA

I think I'd rather keep a clear head for now.

JOHN

Oh, yeah. Maybe I shouldn't, then.

STELLA

No, you go ahead. If this evening does take a turn for the blunt force trauma, getting pre-dosed with muscle relaxant could actually end up saving you a trip to the MedCenter.

JOHN

I'm not sure if that's more troubling or reassuring, but either way, now I definitely want a drink.

H.F.

Right with you, kid.

They head off to the bar.

TORIANNA

Reyes? Is there something going on? Something you ought to maybe inform your Commander about?

STELLA

If there were, sir, it would probably be the kind of thing my Commander would want to be able to truthfully say they knew nothing about afterwards.

TORIANNA

...Right. Carry on, then. Amber, you didn't hear any of that.

AMBER

Any of what?

TORIANNA

Exactly.

AMBER

And we should probably drop it? Because Ness is headed this way?

TORIANNA

Where? ...Gilbert's crispy beans, that's Ness? I would never have recognized her. I don't think I've ever seen her out of uniform.

STELLA

Wow, that's... a look.

AMBER

I didn't know they even made Christmas sweaters in camo?

NESS

Commander! Merry Christmas, sir!

TORIANNA

Welcome to the party, Corporal. Flying solo tonight? I haven't seen your partner around.

NESS

No, sir, he's coming with Little Miss Yuletide. Should be here any second.

FRALL

(shimmering in)

Did I miss it?

TORIANNA

Frall, why do you keep saying that? You know you didn't miss it, whatever "it" is, you're completely unconstrained by linear time! If you'd missed it, you'd already have come back from the future to tell yourself not to miss it!

FRALL

True.

TORIANNA

I don't suppose you want to let us in on just what the "it" is this time around?

FRALL

No, sir. You'll find out soon enough.

TORIANNA

Fine. How's third shift holding up? Any disasters so far?

FRALL

No disasters, sir, although the CACA march did provoke the expected kerfuffle. They were forced to abandon their protest after being kettled by Security in the Central Promenade. Several arrests were made at the behest of the Committee, for overstepping, flagrant use of paper products, and possession of interdicted foodstuffs.

TORIANNA

Well, that's that, then. The CACA movement went straight down the toilet.

FRALL

It was a complete shit show, sir.

Faint singing of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” is heard.

TORIANNA

What the hell is that racket? Do you hear that, Frall?

FRALL

Of course, sir.

A group of carolers, DORMER and CAMERON included, enter the party as they finish singing.

TORIANNA

I have definitely not had enough eggnog to cope with this. Hold on, is that... Dormer? With his arm around... what's-her-face, the new kid in Comms.

AMBER

Cameron?

TORIANNA

Amber! Asking or telling?

AMBER

I'm not sure? I only met her once?

CAMERON

Hi, everyone! Wow, this place looks amazing! It's everything I could have wanted for my first Christmas on the Fairgrounds! I've been looking forward to this party all day!

TORIANNA

I suppose someone had to.

AMBER

You look really nice? I love that dress?

CAMERON

Oh, thanks! Well, we're off-duty, right? So I thought I'd trot out the Christmas LBD. I'm all about a nice cozy Christmas sweater, but tonight, I wanted to look good for my guy.

TORIANNA

Ah. So, Dormer. You're the “guy” in question? I suppose congratulations are in order.

DORMER

Yessir! Thank you, sir!

AMBER

Um, Ensign Cameron, wasn't it?

CAMERON

Please, call me Candy!

AMBER

Okay, Candy? I know you're new here? But we do have dating sites on the Fairgrounds? You could maybe make a HECNET Hotz profile? And find somebody with a little more substance?

CAMERON

What are you talking about? Bill here has loads of substance!

STELLA

Your first name is Bill?

NESS

Cameron, I have partnered with Dormer for years, and I can assure you that he is 100% substance-free.

CAMERON

Well, I guess you just haven't seen the other side of him that I have. Hey, sweetie, do you think you could maybe grab me a mulled wine?

DORMER

Absolutely! I'll be right back. Merry Christmas, everybody!

TORIANNA

Wow. What have you done to my Security officer?

CAMERON

Nothing, really, I just showed him how to spread a little Christmas cheer! And he's got a pretty decent baritone.

NESS

Dormer can sing? Since when?

CAMERON

It's amazing what the Christmas spirit can bring out in people!

[scene 15] Music transition to the Electric Egg. Much quieter than usual.

ALTHAAR

If you are certain that the costume of Althaar is providing adequate concealment, then the Games of Christmas may be commenced in safety!

CHIP

No, it's totally working, Althaar, I'm looking right at you and I don't feel so much as a twinge of heartburn.

DEE

Same. Where did you find a Santa suit that fit?

ALTHAAR

Oh, Althaar has had much practice in contorting his carapace to make avoidance of the sight-lines of his Human friends! So it was only to obtain a costume of the San-ta, remove the stuffing, and fashion a comprehensive wire and servo-motor armature to maintain its external shaping while allowing Althaar to crouch unseen within! Althaar may perhaps require a great deal of clavola unguent tomorrow to soothe his sore flixators, but it is worth it to make celebration of the Criss-mas with his Human friends! Are you both in preparation for the games of festivity?

DEE and CHIP

Yeah. I guess. / Sure, Althaar.

ALTHAAR

Ee! So Althaar is passing the gift to you, Mr. Frinkel, (*music starts*) and while the music is playing, it is to pass this to Ms. Mallory!

CHIP

Here you go, Dee.

DEE

Ok, Althaar, now what?

ALTHAAR

Now you are passing this to the next contestant!

DEE

Uh, ok. Here you go, Chip.

CHIP

Thanks. Hey, Althaar? I don't think this game was meant for just two players.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar was expecting that many more guests would perform attendance of his party of Criss-mas. But they are unable to do so. So, he is making the best at it! Please continue passing of the festive gift, please, for as long as the music is heard! This is introducing the element of suspense!

Music stops.

ALTHAAR

And now the music is stopping!

DEE

So now what do we do?

ALTHAAR

Now it is to make removal of the first layer of brightly-colored ensheathment!

DEE

...Ok.

Rustle rustle as she unwraps a present.

ALTHAAR

And what was Ms. Mallory receiving?

DEE

A... bouncy ball! I, uh, look forward to bouncing it, Althaar. Thanks.

ALTHAAR

You are most welcome! And now the music begins again, and you are passing the slightly smaller parcel to Mr. Frinkel... and now Mr. Frinkel is passing it back... and... and... (*music stops abruptly*) No, Althaar cannot continue! Even though there remains a jar of delightful bubble-production liquid, plastic costume jewelry and the small tub of Flexible Amusement Putty still to be claimed, Althaar must cease! This game is creating in him a great sadness!

CHIP

I know you were hoping for a bigger turnout, Althaar, sorry. If it's any consolation, I'm pretty sure everyone would rather be here than at "Christmas on Fugulnar." It's just that the Committee didn't give them any choice.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar is aware of this, Mr. Frinkel. And he is not taking it personally that his friends are not able to make attendance. But he is also aware that there is no such thing as Criss-mas on Fugulnar, so he is experiencing also a great sense of unfairness. (*cont.*)

Oh, misery and distressment! Althaar is the most inadequate of Santas! He can not even bring himself to make Criss-mas cheering to you, dear friends! Althaar must offer apology to you both.

DEE

Aw, c'mon, Althaar, you don't have to apologize for that, anyone would be vonched after getting their entire guest list poached by a bunch of potted palms. Tell you what, why don't we just put the games on hold for now? I doubt anyone's having much fun at the Fugulnari party, they'll probably bounce as soon as they can. I bet this place'll be hopping by 26, 26:30 at the latest.

CHIP

Right! John said he'd come over as soon as he could, didn't he? And I'm sure he won't be the only one.

ALTHAAR

This is some consolation to Althaar, but... but Althaar has never before experienced the "party fail!" And to sit in the empty bar-room that should be filled with Criss-mas festivity is one of the saddest activities Althaar has ever experienced! He is not at all certain he has the emotional resilience to continue. Perhaps Althaar should cut his losings and return to his quarters. Mr. Frinkel, could you disburse of the "rain check" to any of Althaar's guests who are making appearance?

CHIP

Wait wait wait wait wait. I just had an idea. It's... Heh, it's pretty crazy, but I think it just might work.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar would prefer any quantity of craziness to the spoiled-party-grief! What is the idea of Chip Frinkel, please?

CHIP

Ok, so... We're going to need a couple of things to pull this off. First of all... Your costume didn't by any chance come with a sack of presents, did it?

ALTHAAR

No, Mr. Frinkel. Is this necessity?

CHIP

Well, we'll need some kind of big bag, or container. Something you'd expect to see Santa carrying around.

DEE

What about those hammocks in the storeroom? You fold one of those in half, seal up the sides, that could look like Santa's bag of presents. If you squint.

CHIP

Nice! (*calling across the bar*) Hey, Grem! Do me a favor and take down your hammock real quick? I need it for... reasons. (*alien grumbling in the distance*) Relax, you'll get it back! (*quieter*) Probably. Ok, Althaar, you seem pretty crafty. You think you can convert a hammock into a Santa sack?

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes, Mr. Frinkel! It will be the work of the moment!

CHIP

Great. Oh, and hey, I know this is a long shot, but did you happen to bring along any of that padding you took out of your costume?

ALTHAAR

Althaar did not! Will this cause difficulty?

CHIP

Don't worry about it, I was just thinking I could use a little shock absorption while you're hauling me around in there.

DEE

While he's what? You weren't kidding about this plan being crazy.

CHIP

Yeah, and you're going to love the second ingredient. Assuming it's still here... (*he rummages through a big box of lost items*) A hah! There we go!

Clonk of a neuro-damper being set down on the bar.

DEE

A neuro-damper?! Where did you even get one of those?

CHIP

Lost and Found. Someone left it on the bar this afternoon.

DEE

I hope you're not expecting me to zap anyone with that thing.

CHIP

Nah, I'll handle all the zapping. Your part of the plan is easy as Christmas cake: just hold down the fort here while Althaar and I are crashing "Christmas on Fugulnar."

DEE

Ok, that I can do. So what's your part of it?

CHIP

Our part of it is something that's probably better discussed in my office with Auditory Interference activated. Let's go, Althaar. (*picks up the neuro-damper*)

ALTHAAR

Ee! Althaar and Mr. Frinkel will perform the secret mission to save the Criss-mas! A most delightful Human tradition!

[scene 16] Transition back to the Fugulnari party.

JOHN

Well, so far I haven't noticed anything dangerous at this party, or even remotely suspicious. It looks like you might have made all those... emergency arrangements for nothing. Sorry.

STELLA

Hey, it's always better to be prepared. But yeah, I'd say dying of boredom is the biggest risk we're running at the moment.

JUDY GREER-BOT

(from a distance)

Hey, Cameron! What's up, girl?

JOHN

Ooh. Is that that crazy Judy Greer-Bot?

STELLA

Oh, yeah, I think you're right.

JOHN

Then I'd say this party might take a turn for the memorable after all. Didn't she get banned from all public gatherings after the Cadabra launch party?

STELLA

She sure did. Swam in the chocolate fountain. What a mess. I think she got ejected just before all the fun started.

JOHN

I don't know too many people who would describe an invasion by bloodthirsty Pudendari warriors as 'fun'.

STELLA

It was, though! Plus, it made our afterparty memorable.

JOHN

Well, I've got no complaints about the... afterparty.

CAMERON

Judy! I'm so glad you could make it. I didn't even realize you bots were invited!

JUDY GREER-BOT

We weren't! I'm crashing, actually, but for a totally amazing reason. Okay, Candy, are you ready for this?!

CAMERON

Ready for what?

JUDY GREER-BOT

Surprise!

DADDY CAMERON

Candace Cameron!

CAMERON

Daddy!

DADDY CAMERON

Thank God I got to you in time. It wouldn't be Christmas if I couldn't hold you in my arms, Sugar Plum.

CAMERON

What are you doing here?

DADDY CAMERON

Well, when I heard about the breakup and your unexpected departure from Earth, I was shocked. Joining League Forces? And then transferring all the way to the Fairgrounds? With all these travel restrictions, I had to pull quite a few strings to get out here!

CAMERON

Oh, I'm so glad to see you, but I hope you didn't go to too much trouble!

DADDY CAMERON

Don't worry about it, pumpkin. Daddy's firm does business all over the Galaxy. I know how to arrange the occasional sharp-ship on the Q.T.

CAMERON

Well, wow, I am just so happy! This is a...

JUDY GREER-BOT

A Christmas miracle?

CAMERON

Yes! It is! Oh, Daddy, I know you might not believe me, but flipping my life upside down was the best thing I ever did. I love my job, have great friends, like Greer-Bot here... And then of course there's— Oh Daddy, you have to meet my new... friend. Bill! ...Oh. Where is he? I don't see him.

JUDY GREER-BOT

Looks like the show's about to start, Candy Cane. We can find him after.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(through a microphone, onstage)

Welcome! Welcome! We're just so pleased that you could all join us here in the Gimel 8 Hydroponic Park, which, as you can see, has been transformed tonight into Christmas on Fugulnar! And now, without further ado, I'd like to commence our Christmas Pageant. So please take a moment to silence any devices that may make noise and interfere with everyone's enjoyment. And I hope you all find our performance very moving, but I would caution you not to let that carry over into excessive external movement, haha! All right then. Thank you for your attention, and it's a pleasure to work for you. *(starts singing "The Holly and the Ivy" very very slowly)*

[scene 17] Transition to Gimel 8 corridor. ALTHAAR in his Santa suit is carrying CHIP in his hammock-sack.

CHIP

Ugh.

ALTHAAR

Is everything well, Mr. Frinkel? Are you suffering from excess jostlement? Althaar is hoisting you as gently as he is able!

CHIP

No, it's fine, Althaar, I just didn't consider the implications of riding around in something that's been soaking in Gendaran sweat every night for the past couple years. Whoof. I'm going to need like twelve baths after this.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar does not wish to be ruining any surprises of Criss-mas, Mr. Frinkel, but it is possible that there is a sizable canister of delightfully-scented Sebacecon bathing pods to be found among the party favors of Althaar! Mr. Frinkel should seek out the one encased in paper depicting the antlered ungulate with the unfortunate nasal condition!

CHIP

Thanks. But we should probably keep radio silence from here on out, ok? This whole plan's going to be frilled if anyone figures out I'm in here. ...Althaar? ...Are you—? Oh. Right. Duh.

They sneak down the corridor some more. A door whooshes open and a small child, CINDY emerges.

CINDY

I told you, you silly 'guana, there's no one in the hallway! (*gasp*) ...Santa?

ALTHAAR

Oh! HO Ho Ho! Merry Christmas to you, small Human! What is your name, please? And have you been a well-behaved child for the past solar year?

CINDY

My name is Cindy! And I've been very good! Did you get my letter, Santa?

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes! It was... very well written! Al— Santa was most impressed with the elegance of your phrasing!

CINDY

Yay! Then you'll bring me the Bob Violence Action Playset with Real Photon-Chainsaw Action!?

ALTHAAR

Oh HO ho! That is for Santa to be knowing and for you to be finding out, Ms. Cindy! And now Santa must be on his way to deliver his presents to all the well-behaved children of the Galaxy!

CINDY

But it's not Christmas Eve yet!

ALTHAAR

...It is in Aldebaran!

CINDY

Oh. What's in the sack? It's squirming around. (*gasp*) Is it a puppy?

ALTHAAR

No! It is... It is socks!

CINDY

Really?

ALTHAAR

Yes! Soft, warm... squirmy socks for the younglings of Aldebaran! That is all!

A sneeze followed by a muffled "Shit!" from CHIP inside the sack.

CINDY

That sock said a naughty word!

ALTHAAR

Ah ha! It did indeed! What a very observant Human child you are! Al— Santa must be bringing that up with Quality Control as soon as he returns to Earth's North Pole! But now he thinks it is time for you to be returning to your sleep cycle!

CINDY

Ok! ...Santa? Why's your voice all squeaky?

ALTHAAR

...Santa has a cold.

CINDY

Oh. Ok! Get well soon!

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, small Human! And a Merry Christmas to you!

Door whoosh as Cindy goes back into her apartment.

CHIP

Nice save, Althaar. Sorry about the sneeze, it just slipped out.

ALTHAAR

It is not to worry, Mr. Frinkel! Althaar is always welcoming the opportunity to practice his lesser-used skills, such as that of mendacity! Although the deception of a small Human child is not perhaps the greatest of accomplishments.

CHIP

Any idea how much farther we have to go? It smells like an armpit factory in here!

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes it will not be long, Mr. Frinkel! The room of Climate Control should be found along the next corridor!

CHIP

Ok, good. Now remember, when I give you the word, you open up your costume, and you keep it open for exactly twelve seconds. No more, no less. That's really important. You may not like what you see when you do, but, well, sometimes you've gotta break a few eggs to if you wanna make eggnog, you understand?

ALTHAAR

Althaar does not, Mr. Frinkel! But he will do whatever is necessary to make saving of the Criss-mas!

CHIP

Good enough.

[scene 18] Meanwhile, back at the party in Hydroponics...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(singing "Twelve Days of Christmas" very VERY slowly)

Six Geese a Laying... *(long pause)* ... FIVE... GOLD... RINGS. *(beat, then, still slowly)* Four Calling Birds. Three French Hens.

Meanwhile, over at the bar.

TORIANNA

This is the Fugulnari idea of a Christmas extravaganza?

FRALL

I suppose there is a certain beauty to be found in its simplicity.

TORIANNA

Well, I'd consider twelve spruces rotating at nigh-glacial speed to be the platonic ideal of boredom.

FRALL

I'm afraid I'll have to disagree with that assessment, sir.

TORIANNA

Seriously?

FRALL

Yes. They're not spruces, they're Douglas firs. A common mistake.

TORIANNA

Oh, for— Give it a rest, would you? If I wanted to hear pointless quibbling about botanical trivia, H.F. is standing right here.

H.F.

Gee, thanks.

JOHN

Well, let's look on the bright side. Once this agonizingly slow butchering of the classics is over, the party might pick up. Or break up, if we're really lucky.

TORIANNA

Lucky! Ha. I'm just praying that Mrs. Frondrinax hasn't decided to round up the Days of Christmas to a more "efficient" number. If I hear "Thirteen blorches squelching," I'm making a break for it, I don't care what the Committee thinks.

H.F.

Yeah, it might not be the worst idea to have an escape route planned out. Just in case.

TORIANNA

Just in case what? What are you up to?

H.F.

Nothing! It's just, you know, you might want to be prepared to make a quick exit. In case, uh...

JOHN

In case we can sneak out of here early enough to make Althaar's party. I hope he's doing ok, he was really disappointed when he found out none of us would be able to come.

TORIANNA

I'm sure he'll be fine. He's an Iltorian who's dedicated himself to making friends with Humans, after all. If there's anyone in the Galaxy who should be used to disappointment by now, it's him.

JOHN

Oh, no, obviously Althaar's got plenty of practice at keeping his cool. I mean, he's a highly trained diplomat! It's not like he's going to do anything crazy.

[scene 19] Transition to the corridor outside the Climate Control Room.

ALTHAAR

We have made arrival at the Room of Climate Control, Mr. Frinkel!

Rustling as CHIP emerges from the bag.

CHIP

Yeah, maybe don't use my name so much while we sneaking around? I mean, if this goes to plan, it shouldn't matter, but it's a good a general principle of subterfuge, you chom?

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar is understanding, Mr.— erm, friend!

CHIP

And maybe don't use your own name either?

ALTHAAR

Oh! That will be of some difficulty for... eh...

CHIP

How about you just keep calling yourself "Santa" for now?

ALTHAAR

Ah! Yes, Sannn-taa can do this!

CHIP

Great. All right, here we go. Just let me do the talking.

Door whoosh.

CHIP

Hello? Is this Hydroponics? Oh, hey! Ashlee, right?

ASHLEE!

Yes! Hello, Chip! It's good to see you! But this is a restricted area! So I'll have to ask you to— Who's that!

CHIP

C'mon, Ashlee, don't you recognize Santa?

ASHLEE!

Very funny, Chip! But seriously! You shouldn't be in here!

CHIP

Yeah, I know, but Santa here got lost on his way to that bash the Fugulnari are throwing, so I thought you might be able to give him directions. Oh, is that the party down there? Wow. That's one impressive floor show.

ASHLEE!

Yes! Isn't it beautiful!

CHIP

You mind if I watch through these windows for a second? Those Douglas firs really are majestic, aren't they?

ASHLEE!

Yes! Oh! It's always so refreshing to meet another Human who appreciates plants the way I do!

CHIP

Hey, what kind of tree is that over there? I've never seen anything like it.

ASHLEE!

Where!

CHIP

Right over there by the— Look, right there. Right where I'm pointing.

ASHLEE!

I don't know what you—

ZZAPP! as CHIP hits her with the neuro-damper, locking all her muscles in place.

CHIP

NOW, Althaar!

Zzzip! as ALTHAAR emerges from his Santa suit. Horrible horrible noises from ASHLEE as she gets an eyeful of Iltorian without being able to move a muscle. CHIP starts counting down from 12 under his breath.

CHIP

12... 11...

ALTHAAR

MERRY CRISS-MAS! ...Oh no!

CHIP

Just stay put, Althaar! This is all part of the plan!

ALTHAAR

But, but there may be damage to the brain of Ms. Ashlee!

CHIP

That's the whole point! Just a couple more seconds!

Noises of distress from both ASHLEE and ALTHAAR as they stare at each other.

CHIP

1... 0! Done! Back in the suit!

Zzip! as ALTHAAR re-suits himself.

CHIP

All covered up? Can I open my eyes?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is concealed, Mr. Frinkel, but he is very cross! You have committed a deception against him!

CHIP

I know, I know, but it worked, didn't it? She's out cold, and she won't remember any of this once she wakes up. We needed to get in here without anyone knowing about it, and this was the only way. Remember what I was saying about breaking eggs?

ALTHAAR

But this is not an egg! This is a sentient being! If Althaar was knowing that your plan involved making distress in the innocent Humans, he would not have agreed to participation!

CHIP

I mean, Ashlee's pretty cozy with the Fugulnari, I wouldn't exactly call her innocent.

ALTHAAR

Do not be splitting of hairs, Mr. Frinkel!

CHIP

All right, look. I know that was rough on you, and I'm sorry, ok? But think of it like this: we did hurt one Human, yes. But we did it to help a bunch of other Humans! I mean, look at everyone standing around down there, suffering through that horrible floor show. Don't they look miserable? Isn't it worth doing a little harm to one person, which, again, she's not going to remember at all, in order to serve the greater good?

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes this is sophistry, Mr. Frinkel. But this is perhaps not the time or place to make the discussing of it. What remains to be done to release the Humans from their captivity in the "Criss-mas on Fugulnar?"

CHIP

Don't worry, Althaar, we're almost home free. All we need to do now is mix the contents of these packets with water, load it into the ventilation intake, and then run like hell.

[scene 20] Back at the Hydroponics party, where MRS. FRONDRINAX is still going with the song.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(slow)

AND A PARTRIDGE IN A PEAR TREE!

Smattering of Human applause. The music transitions to “O Tannenbaum.”

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Now! We’ve got one last wonderful surprise for all our Human friends! We’d like you to join us onstage in the, ahem, Fugulnari Christmas tree farm for this, our final song.

MRS. FRONDRINAX starts singing “O Tannenbaum”

CAMERON

Oh, a tree farm! I just love these! C’mon Daddy, why don’t we take a stroll through those beautiful Douglas firs?

DADDY CAMERON

All right, sweetheart. Let’s go!

FLINTRINIX

Hmm. I’m not sure I approve of the Pseudotsuga lowering themselves to imitate a bunch of—
What is that substance coming from the vents?

DADDY CAMERON

Oh! Is it what I think it is?

CAMERON

It’s snow! Daddy it’s snowing! It’s so beautiful!

JOHN

Wow, they really went all out. I didn’t even know the parks had a “snow” setting.

H.F.

They don’t.

JOHN

So... what’s going on? Should we be worried?

H.F.

I don’t know, but whatever this is, I don’t think the Fugulnari planned it. They look as confused as everyone else.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(interrupting her song) What in the—? What’s this stuff? What’s going on?

FLINTRINIX

Another surprise, Frondrinax? My compliments, this is actually quite lovely. I can see why this frozen precipitate would provoke a feeling of peace and tranquility.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, it— It does, doesn't it? Thank you so much.

TORIANNA

Huh. Snow. ...Hang on, this snow is warm. Frall? This isn't snow, is it? It's that... whatsit, the stuff with the obnoxious ads.

FRALL

GalactiFlurries, Commander. A product generally harmless to Humans as long as they follow the numerous warnings on the box and avoid direct ingestion. Plant-based life-forms, on the other hand...

TORIANNA

You don't say. Well, that's quite a shame, isn't it?

FLINTRINIX

This "snow" actually feels quite nice as it lands on my petals. It's sort of a pleasant tingle, something like a... oh. Now it's starting to feel... itchy. Is that supposed to happen?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Itchy? That's odd. I thought "snow" was just frozen water, I don't see why it should be at all—

FLINTRINIX

Burny! It burns! Frondrinax, what have you done?!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I don't know! It must be sabotage! What is happening?!

CAMERON

Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Daddy?

DADDY CAMERON

You bet I am, Sugar Plum!

BOTH the CAMERONS

...SNOWBALL FIGHT!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No! No! Don't spread it around!

We hear the snowballs beginning to splat and smash all around.

CAMERON

Ha! You missed!

DADDY CAMERON

Don't try and hide behind that Christmas tree! I've got you in my sights!

Paf!

GURNEX

Aagh! It burns! Help!

CAMERON

Try and get me, Daddy!

DADDY CAMERON

Oh, you're in for it now! Ha ha!

Paf!

YUNEX

It's like acid! Make them stop!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Stop it! All of you! Stop throwing snowballs!

More sounds of snowballs landing as some of the other Humans at the party join in.

FLINTRINIX

It's an attack! Everyone, get to safety as quickly as possible. This party is over!

GURNEX

I can't move my branches. Aahhh!

GURNEX falls with a BOOM!

CAMERON

I got you, Daddy! Well, kind of, anyway, that Christmas tree caught most of it. Ha! This is great!

DADDY CAMERON

Just like in Central Park!

A second Douglas fir falls with a BOOM!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Security! Terrorists have infiltrated the party and are assaulting my dance troupe! Seize them! Neuro-dampers at maximum!

NESS

Yes, ma'am! C'mon, Dormer, let's nail these perps!

DORMER

Wait, that's not a perp! That's my girlfriend! Candy! Candy, stop!

CAMERON

Bill! I'm having so much fun! I never thought I'd get to have a snowball fight in space! This is the best Christmas ever!

DORMER

Ensign Cameron, if you do not immediately relinquish the crystalline projectile and raise your hands, I will be forced to use my— Hey, where's my neuro-damper?

CAMERON

Oh, don't be a silly billy! Get up here and join us! I've got a snowball with your name on it!

ZAP! Thud as CAMERON hits the floor.

DORMER

Ness! C'mon, mang, that's my girlfriend!

NESS

Yeah, your girlfriend the terrorist! You sure can pick 'em, partner.

DADDY CAMERON

What did you do to my daughter?!

NESS

Stand down, sir! She was apprehended in the possession of a means of chemical assault!

DADDY CAMERON

Chemical assault my eye! The only thing in her hand was one of these snowballs! You'll be hearing from my lawyers about—

ZAP!

DORMER

Zood! That's my girlfriend's dad! She's never going to forgive me!

NESS

Hey, I did you a favor, pal. We caught these two white-handed in the commission of a terrorist act! They're looking at twenty years in the Dadzbog graviton mines, if they're lucky. You don't want to hitch your wagon to that shness.

DORMER

I... I guess you're right. Oh, Candy...

[scene 21] Transition to the Electric Egg. Door whoosh as a crowd of party-goers enters.

AMBER

Hey, everybody? You would not believe what happened? "Christmas on Fugulnar" got snowed out?

CHIP

(butter wouldn't melt)

Is that right? Wow!

ALTHAAR

(likewise)

This is a most unexpected turn of events.

JOHN

Yeah, that stuff cleared the park out faster than a Frizmerlite at an open mic. What a mess!

STELLA

Luckily, a couple of our emergency flamethrower squads just happened to be patrolling nearby, so we were able to get the cleanup started right away. Even so, it'll probably be a couple of days before we can certify the park habitable again.

H.F.

But, that means we were able to hightail it up here for your party, Althaar! So all's well that ends well, huh? Hey, Sopen! Give me a Nurtmeg Depth Charge!

JOHN

Good to not-see you, Althaar! Love the costume!

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, FriendJohn! It is truly a Christmas miracle that all of Althaar's friends are here! Althaar wishes to welcome you all to his second annual Party of Criss-mas!

H.F.

All right, we got a late start on this shindig, so let's get to it!

CROWD

Merry Christmas, Althaar!

Cheers and applause.

CHIP

(loud, over)

Hey, Althaar, can I talk to you about the... bill, for a second? *(moves aside with ALTHAAR; whispers)* So, how's your, uh, conscience doing? Are we good?

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes that your methods were more suited to Niccolo Machiavelli than to St. Nicholas, Mr. Frinkel. But... he is accepting that your intentions were of at least some goodness. So he is willing to offer forgiveness for the bamboozlement that led to Althaar causing harm to another sentient. And it is a truth that Althaar was perhaps more willing to be deceived than he would otherwise have been, due to his desire for the successful Party of Criss-mas. Althaar must be more vigilant upon himself in the future. And he will certainly be more vigilant when it comes to the things that Mr. Frinkel tells Althaar he is not to be worrying about. Althaar hopes you can accept this.

CHIP

Yeah, I think I can live with that. And hey, Althaar? Merry Christmas.

ALTHAAR

Merry Criss-mas to you, Chip Frinkel!

[scene 22] Closing credits music.

ANNOUNCER

You've been listening to *Life with Althaar*, episode twenty-five!

This episode was written by Philip Cruise and Chris Lee for Gemini CollisionWorks and starred

Berit Johnson as Althaar

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

Eli Ganas as H.F.

John Amir as John B

Zuri Washington as Dee

Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

and Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

and also featured

Philip Cruise, Holly Pocket McCaffrey, Ian W. Hill, Anna Stefanic, Linus Gelber, Olivia Baseman, Clara Francesca, David Arthur Bachrach, and Lex Friedman.

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 before then, let's check in on Candy Cameron, at the end of her very special Christmas story...

[scene 23] A holding cell in Security HQ, now partly staffed by Fugulnari guards, one of whom is leading DORMER in.

FUGULNARI GUARD

You got two minutes, Dormer. Just pick up the phone and she'll hear you through the glass.

DORMER

Thanks, I know the drill. *(picks up phone)* Ensign Cameron.

CAMERON

(over phone)

Bill! Thank God you're here. You have to tell them that I'm innocent!

DORMER

I can't believe I trusted you. You sure had me fooled. I had no idea you were a sleeper agent.

CAMERON

What?! I'm not!

DORMER

Yeah, right. Using your position as Comms officer to contact your cell leader, staging that collision on the Bridge so you could steal my neuro-damper, pulling some kind of alien mind-wipe on that innocent Hydroponics officer: none of it worked! You're finished! And don't you worry, we've taken care of that poor damaged bot you obviously hacked to convince her to participate in your little scheme.

CAMERON

Judy Greer-Bot? Is she okay?

DORMER

Oh, she's fine, now that IT finally did their jobs and patched out that Quirky Sidekick subroutine. From her programming, and everyone else's. Marty Feldman-Bot, Robin Quivers-Bot, Pat Buttram-Bot, Gillian Anderson-Bot, Alan Ruck-Bot: we're going to be spending a lot less of our time pulling them out of chocolate fountains from now on. So thanks for that, I guess.

CAMERON

And... my Daddy? What's going to happen to him?

DORMER

Oh, you mean the terrorist mastermind who somehow managed to show up on the Fairgrounds without a travel visa? The one who helped you wipe out an elite Fugulnari commando squad?

CAMERON

No! It's not true, Bill! None of it! He's my father! He just came out here to visit me, I swear! We didn't know what was in those snowballs! You've got to believe me!

DORMER

I don't want to hear it! You made a fool of me! Poisoned my mind with all that Yuletide shness! Singing, and baking, and gingerbread houses, and... and I fell for it! What a rube.

Midway through the next line, the viewpoint changes so DORMER is on the phone and CAMERON is present.

CAMERON

No, Bill, it's not true! I'm not a terrorist! I just love Christmas! *(crying)* Please, Bill, don't let them do this to me!

FUGULNARI GUARD

(in background)

Time's up, Dormer.

DORMER

Sorry, Candy. The Fugulnari Ascendancy have requested extradition, and it looks like Earth Central's going to grant it. You and your cell leader—

CAMERON

Daddy!

DORMER

—will be doing six life sentences in the Fugulnari stinkhorn fields. So I guess... I guess this is goodbye.

He hangs up.

CAMERON

Wait! Bill, don't let them do it! I'm innocent! Bill!

Prison door slams shut.

CAMERON

Billy... Oh, Billy...

The jingle bells that have been softly ringing during all of CAMERON's appearances slowly grind to a painful halt.