

Life with Althaar

Episode 22: The Secret Life of Plants

Version 2.1 (Recording Script), 10/30/20—IWH (v2, BAJ)

[scene 1] The standard LWA opening spaceship whoosh. JOHN and ALTHAAR are walking in a Hydroponics park. JOHN takes a deep breath of fresh(ish) air.

JOHN

You know, it's funny. I really never thought much about plants when I was back on Earth. But now that I'm stuck floating in space in a completely artificial environment 28 hours a day, I've definitely stopped taking them for granted. This is nice. Really relaxing.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is concurring! Althaar believes the herbaceous life of Earth and the other Human planets to be some of the most attractive and soothing he has perceived! At times he is experiencing the home-sickness for the native flora of Iltor, but the Earth-based species are a most delightful substitute.

JOHN

What are the plants like on Iltor?

ALTHAAR

Oh, there are many varieties, FriendJohn. Almost as many as on Earth! And quite a few of them are similar to Earth plants, but many are very different indeed! Althaar would share with you some images, but it is concern that the Human reaction to the sight of Althaar's people may extend to all the species of his planet. This circumstance has yet to be investigated.

JOHN

Yeah, I'm fine with not being the first test subject on that one.

ALTHAAR

Oh, Althaar would never ask this, FriendJohn! It is merely a possibility that Althaar has speculated upon. But he has hopes it may be put to the testing someday, and that Humans will be able to make visiting to Iltor without distress!

JOHN

Do you have a lot of parks like this back home?

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes! There are many lovely gardens there to be enjoyed. And the preserves of nature also! But Althaar must be admitting that he did not spend a great deal of time making exploration of these. In fact, Althaar was so consumed in his studies during his years of formation that he was barely noticing anything else!

JOHN

I can believe that. So you were always what we Humans call a “bookworm,” huh?

ALTHAAR

Oh, Althaar was not only worming the books, FriendJohn, he was practically Blorch-absorbing them! In his days of salad, Althaar had the obsession with making acquisition of as much knowledge as he possibly could, with the greatest possible speed! It is a truth that some of his friends and teachers believed that Althaar might fracture apart.

JOHN

You mean “crack up?”

ALTHAAR

Yes! Althaar could have become thoroughly splintered if he had not made collecting of himself! And then FriendJohn would not be speaking to Althaar today. FriendJohn could never have become FriendJohn! Too terrible to imagine!

JOHN

So how did you pull yourself together?

ALTHAAR

Oh! It was in the most due to the intervention of Chi’Pwell Risgonsi Frihsplum Gwstown Burwekeyontz, one of Althaar’s teachers and mentors at the Yimbastush Institute for Acquisition of Intersubjective Expertise. A scholar much to be admired! They demanded of Althaar that if he was to be spending so many of his hours in making study, then half of this studying should be performed in the public gardens at the center of the Institute.

JOHN

And that helped?

ALTHAAR

Very much so, FriendJohn! Although at first, Althaar found the additional visual and auditory stimulus to be of annoyance. He was even experiencing some resentment! But after several weeks of this, it became clear to Althaar that while the speed of his learning had made decrease, his understanding had become far deeper and richer. The sights and smells of the flora around Althaar had caused subconscious connections to be made in his learning! These associations made connection of the facts of his study in ways that transcended the rote memorizing. And the conversing of other visitors to the gardens, at first a distraction, became instead a source of new insight into the commonalities between all peoples of the Galaxy! From then on, Althaar did as much of his study as possible in the lovely gardens, and later, when Althaar was hosting his own seminars at the Institute, he chose to hold them in the gardens whenever he could.

JOHN

Huh. You know, you really don’t talk much about your life on Iltor.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar is finding the Human culture to be of much greater interest! And of course, Althaar is always having caution when speaking of his own people with his Human friends, to avoid provoking the unpleasant imaginings. But he would be most pleased to make greater speaking of Iltor if FriendJohn is having the questions!

JOHN

It's not so much about Iltor specifically, I just wanted to know a little more about my friend.

ALTHAAR

Ee! Then Althaar is promising to be coming forth about himself more in the future, FriendJohn. But for now, Althaar is making enjoyment of the gardens here, and remembering the most wise Chi'Pwell Risgonsi Frihsplum Gwstrown Burwekkeyontz, and experiencing a gratitude that Althaar was not ending up at the Himbarlush Rehabilitation Centre for the Overly-Fixated, as many had feared he would be.

JOHN

Wow. Well, don't tell Mrs. F that plants saved your sanity, or you'll never hear the end of it.

ALTHAAR

Oh, do not fear, FriendJohn! Mrs. Frondrinax is a dear friend, but she is already speaking of the superiority of plants more than enough for Althaar!

They laugh together as they walk away. As they do, several FUGULNARI begin rustling where they had passed.

FUGULNARI 1

Streez! Could you believe those two? "Plants are so relaxing," all that clichéd crap? So condescending!

FUGULNARI 2

I'd like to see how relaxed he'd be with these around his neck! *(shaking branches)*

FUGULNARI 1

Like they know anything about plants. Or friendship. Or relaxing!

FUGULNARI 2

Yeah! I mean, the Iltorian's ok. I'd hate to have to do anything to him.

FUGULNARI 1

Oh, sure. He's so nice!

FUGULNARI 2

So, *so* nice!

FUGULNARI 1

But that other meatbag? When the Ascension comes...

FUGULNARI 2

First up against the trellis!

They laugh. Another FUGULNARI breaks in.

FUGULNARI 3

Mulch it, you two! You want Frondrinax to hear? You know how she gets when we break cover!

FUGULNARI 2

Oh, weed Frondrinax! Just because she was the advance scout in this sector, she thinks she's in charge. She's got no business giving us any wilt! We don't even report to her!

FUGULNARI 1

Yeah, and who is she to give us orders, when she wasn't even able to finish the mission she was sent here on in the first place?

FUGULNARI 3

Wait, she wasn't sent here as a scout?

FUGULNARI 2

Sure, partly, but her main brief was to keep the Iltorian from getting too chummy with any of the Humans, so he'd uproot himself and head home.

FUGULNARI 3

Oh. Then, yeah, total head blight on that one, huh?

FUGULNARI 2

Yup. So who is she to tell us how to behave?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I'm the one who's been sitting right here next to you this whole time, that's who I am, spriggy-jim.

The other FUGULNARI all react with a yell.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Keep it down, you fools! Maybe I don't outrank you, but when it comes to staying undercover, you ought to be happy to take any advice you can get!

FUGULNARI 2

How the drought did you— I mean, it’s one thing to fool those stupid perambulators, but how did you get right next to us without us noticing?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That’s what makes a true secret agent, my friend. Any clipling can manage not to be seen by someone who isn’t looking for them, but a real operative can hide from anyone, anywhere, any time. Something to keep in mind for the future. Now, I may not be your commanding officer, but I’m guessing whoever that is gave you some assignments you ought to be getting on with right now, mm? So let’s break up this little mulch klatch and get back to work.

The FUGULNARI all grumble as they wander away in different directions.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(to herself, with a chuckle)

After all... Today is The Day.

[scene 2] Opening title music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...!

LIFE... WITH... ALTHAAR..! Season 2!

Episode 22... “The Secret Life of Plants!”

[scene 3] Customs/Travel Hub area. Fading up on KAISER WILHELM-BOT doing his usual.

WILHELM-BOT

...please enjoy your stay on the Human Exchange Concourse and share in the many wonders Humanity has to offer... NEXT!

A sensible suitcase hits the counter.

WILHELM-BOT

Is this all your luggage, gesin?

SUSAN

Uh, yeah, just the one.

Unzipping & rummaging as WILHELM-BOT searches the bag.

WILHELM-BOT

Name?

SUSAN

Susan Torkan.

WILHELM-BOT

Port of origin?

SUSAN

Earth.

WILHELM-BOT

League citizen?

SUSAN

Yes.

WILHELM-BOT

Species?

SUSAN

Human.

WILHELM-BOT

Purpose of travel?

SUSAN

Well... I'm on my way to Prang in the Xybidont Empire for work, but I'm making a quick stop here to visit someone. My brother.

WILHELM-BOT

(annoyed; "why didn't you just say so?")

Pleasure, then.

JOHN

(from a short distance away, outside of Customs; deliberately to embarrass her)

Hey, Boots! Don't let that bot give you any shness! You're a big fancy-pants diplomat!

SUSAN

(with a sigh)

Sure. "Pleasure."

WILHELM-BOT

I see. My sympathies. Length of stay?

SUSAN

Just overnight.

WILHELM-BOT

Lucky you.

(stamps her documents)

Please enjoy your stay on the Human Exchange Concourse and take pride in the many wonders Humanity has to offer... NEXT!

SUSAN moves away to where JOHN is waiting.

SUSAN

You little jecker. I thought we'd quit acting like a pair of Fyrexian fighting snails after last year.

JOHN

Well, I mean, yeah, kinda, but there are some parts of being a baby brother that never go away.

SUSAN

Come here, idiot.

(they hug)

So... anything new on the Fairgrounds since the last time I had to set foot on this desperately unsafe old rustbucket?

JOHN

Nope. Everything is pretty much exactly the same, only even more so. This place doesn't really change, it just kind of rearranges the chaos occasionally. And hey, you chose to come here on purpose, which is more than most Fairgrounds residents can say, so—

SUSAN

What makes you think I chose to come here?

JOHN

You seriously expect me to believe that the only flight you could get from Earth to the Xybidont Empire had a layover on the Fairgrounds?

SUSAN

Okay, okay, yeah, I came out here to see you. There's... actually something kind of important I want to talk about.

JOHN

What is it? Mom? Dad? Is everything okay?

SUSAN

Oh, yeah, no, they're fine. I just wanted... Look, I'd rather not discuss it right now. How about we meet up for dinner? There isn't by chance a Mixolydian restaurant anywhere in this dump, is there?

JOHN

Actually, yeah. "Rixlon's Acceptable Food." But it's not exactly... Well, the name pretty much sums it up. When did you get into Mixolydian cuisine?

SUSAN

What I'm into is the Mixolydians' inability to lie. So Rixlon's sounds perfect. Can I buy you and Althaar dinner?

JOHN

Oh, sure! I know Althaar would love to see you again, even if the feeling isn't literally mutual. Oh, and uh... I could invite Stella? If you want to meet her? Which it's totally fine if you don't.

SUSAN

Some other time. I mean, I'd love to meet your girlfriend, I seriously have to know what kind of badass Amazonian warrior apparently can't get enough of you, and yes, I definitely have a sizable stockpile of embarrassing childhood stories prepared. But this dinner has to be just you, me, and Althaar, ok? I'll explain tonight.

JOHN

You're being super weird about this dinner.

SUSAN

You're one to talk about weird, you live with an Iltorian.

JOHN

Fair. Well, I'm going to be meeting Stella for lunch at Poppy's, if you want to come along for that. We've been on opposite work shifts all this week, so we've been doing lunch when she gets off work and before I go on.

SUSAN

Sounds great, just let me check into the Splendide, rest a bit and I'll meet you at...?

JOHN

14:20, in Yod 14. You're heading over to the hotel now?

SUSAN

Yeah, long flight, plus there's a couple other things I need to get done while I'm here. But I'll see you at lunch and—OH!

The reaction is to FRALL shimmering in right in front of them.

FRALL

Good morning, John. And welcome back to the Fairgrounds, Ms. Torkan! Congratulations on your appointment to Prang.

SUSAN

Thanks, but I'm afraid their feelings toward me in the Empire are still somewhat cool after the outcome of my last visit here. So Prang won't exactly be a prime posting for me.

FRALL

Nevertheless, I'm sure you'll be doing some very important work there.

SUSAN

If you say so.

FRALL

I do.

JOHN

What brings you to Customs, Frall? Or, like, your visible manifestation, anyway.

FRALL

Oh, I've been dispatched to officially welcome the Fugulnari delegation to the HEC, in preparation for the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Celebration that is being held in the Gimel 8 Hydroponic Park this evening.

JOHN

A Human-Fugulnari... Friendship Celebration.

SUSAN

With an official delegation from Fugulnar? That's odd. They're one of the more isolationist species out there. I mean, they're not belligerent, we have a perfectly amicable relationship, but they generally can't be bothered with any diplomatic formalities.

FRALL

Apparently, they have decided to change that, and are conducting ceremonies in celebration of that decision throughout Human space. "Towards a better, more harmonious future between Humans and Plants."

JOHN

Wow. Has Mrs. F been involved with this?

FRALL

I think it's safe to say that Mrs. Frondrinax has been crucial in preparing for tonight's events.

SUSAN

This is all... more than a little surprising. And it's more than a lot surprising that this is the first I'm hearing about it.

FRALL

I was actually wondering if you might attend, Ms. Torkan, since you are the highest-ranking member of the League of Humans diplomatic corps currently on station.

SUSAN

Oh. I'm not sure about that. I'm not officially here representing the League, after all, I just stopped by to visit John. And we were planning to have dinner with Althaar tonight, so...

FRALL

Ah. Well, there won't be any scheduling conflict there, as Althaar has already accepted his invitation to the event.

JOHN

Really? He never mentioned it.

FRALL

Well, Althaar is often obligated to attend incredibly tedious diplomatic ceremonies. As the only Iltorian on board, his presence is naturally requested at any non-Human gathering, and of course he hates to disappoint people. He doesn't usually tell you about these events because he thinks you'll feel obliged to offer to accompany him, he will feel obliged to accept, and then you will wind up having a terrible time. He's correct about that, by the way.

JOHN

Well, if Althaar thinks I'll be bored...

SUSAN

Take it from an expert, John, you will be bored out of your skull. I'm bored out of my skull 90% of the time at these things, even when I'm working them.

JOHN

What's the other 10%, though?

SUSAN

Usually blind panic. "Interesting" isn't really something you want to happen at a diplomatic ceremony.

JOHN

You make a good point, but... Frall? What kind of catering are they going to have at this thing?

SUSAN

John! I am buying you a moderately-expensive dinner right before this!

JOHN

So? I've got pockets. If there's one life lesson I've picked up from my time working for W—for my *generous* employers, it's never to turn down free food. And that goes double if it's being served at an event with "gala," "opening," "benefit," "celebration," or best of all, "launch" in the name. You just can't appreciate this because a career diplomat always knows where their next lavishly-appointed buffet table is coming from. Oh, also Frall, can I bring Stella along? You'd be amazed at what she can fit in her clutch.

FRALL

Of course, if Ms. Reyes is free this evening, she would be more than welcome. And I can assure you that the catering will be first-class.

SUSAN

By Human standards? Because I've seen what happens when people forget to be specific about that.

FRALL

Yes, actually. The Fugulnari are going all out to make this event an appealing prospect for Humans. In fact, they've arranged for several promotional announcements in an attempt to get as many Humans as possible into Hydroponics tonight.

SUSAN

Someone should probably tell them to push the free food angle, from what I'm hearing.

FRALL

I'll be sure to mention it. Now if you'll excuse me, I think the delegation has just arrived.

JOHN

Sure thing, Frall. And thanks. (*FRALL twinkles off*) So listen, Boots, like I said, I've been on third shift all this week, so normally I'd be asleep right now. You good to get to the hotel on your own?

SUSAN

No problem. I'll go check in at the Splendide, then check in with you at lunch.

As they all walk (or float) away from each other we hear the voice of BEAUX SEVERAL coming from a speaker [scene 4a], promoting an upcoming show.

BEAUX

Hey there, beauties and Beaux-ties, this is the one and only Several with a special paid promotion. Now I know what you're saying... "Beaux? Paid promotion? Has the big man sold his soul?" Whaddya think, Tess With Balls?

TESS

What soul, Beaux?

BEAUX

Ouch! But I gotta admit, that's a fair question. Hey, Doddering Marty! You've been with me the longest. Ever remember me doing a promotional spot? Or having anything like a soul?

MARTY

What?

BEAUX

That's what I thought. How about you, Incontinent Todd? Me doing promo for someone else! What's that do to ya? Any nervous leakage going on there?

TODD

Beaux, c'mon! You keep saying you'll cut that out!

BEAUX

And yet I just can't help myself, Todd. That's one thing we've got in common, huh? ("**D'aww!**") But one thing I *can* help myself do is stay honest. And if I can't stay honest, I can at least stay Beaux. And Beaux being Beaux means that even if I'm getting paid—and I mean *seriously* paid—to talk to some hotshot herbie on tomorrow's show—

TESS

(laughing)

Whoa, Beaux! You know you'll be catching some rustle about *that*.

BEAUX

What, "herbie?" Aw, Tess, I know I'm behind the times, but from my angle, that was always an affectionate term! I mean, c'mon, plants, flowers, herbs, they're all pretty great right? Nothing wrong with being a herb-ie, but okay, okay, I'll try to control myself. At least as much as my allergies will let me! Seriously folks, one whiff of pollen and my face swells up like one of those bubble-stacked zoods from Helibrinn Eight when you call them a "bladder ladder." Anyway, some big Fugulnar honcho is arriving at the Fairgrounds today for some big Human-Plant happy-clappy friendship kumbaya, and they asked to come on the Beaux Show tomorrow to talk about the future of Human-Plant relations. So I figure, why not? I can pop an extra Prestissima and take the hit. But I'll tell you one thing about *my* future relations with plants, and it involves one a them Q'Chillibont phoob salads, am I right Tess? You know what I mean.

TESS

Those are good eating, Beaux.

BEAUX

You know it, Tess! I mean, you got yer greens, but then you got that great Chilli-BBQ sauce all over it? And those fat, juicy chunks of phoob? So good, but mang, of course they are! The Chilli-Bs may be a bunch of big floppy walrus-y zoods, but boy do they know their way around a kitchen, amIrite?

As BEAUX was speaking, his promo has moved from a speaker at Customs, to playing straight, then [scene 4b] to back over another speaker that is playing in a large gift shop in the Central Promenade. It plays there for a few moments, then...

MACKALOCKA

(an alien of some kind; the gift shop proprietor)

Hey! Herrdronn! Turn that damn Several off! How many times do I have to tell you, he's bad for business! Switch it back to the "Non-Threatening Music-Like Tones" stream!

HERRDRONN

(in the back room; also an alien, not of the same kind)

Aw, mang!

And BEAUX is switched off to insipid store muzak as a chime rings and door opens, indicating a customer.

MACKALOCKA

Hello, welcome to Fair— Oh! Althaar! Wonderful to see you, as always!

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, Sin Mackalocka! And how is the business at the shop of gifting this day?

MACKALOCKA

(likes Althaar, sure, but also knows how to get him to buy stuff)

Oh, you know how it is, Althaar. It's been a pretty slow cycle, I'm afraid.

ALTHAAR

Then fear no further, dear friend! Althaar is about to cause considerable acceleration of your cycle with his purchasings! Althaar must make attendance this evening on the Celebration of Fugulnari-Human Friendship. And it would not be appropriate for him to arrive empty-graspered! So he is wishing to purchase the appropriate gift for a visiting Fugulnari delegation. And of course Althaar is thinking, where is better to be finding these than the official Gift Shop of the Human Exchange Concourse, where he has made purchase of so many delightful and culturally-illustrative Human items for his friends around the Galaxy!

MACKALOCKA

Ah, so you're looking for some traditional Human gifts for the delegation! What did you have in mind, a pencil-holder? Set of coasters, maybe? Or some of our customized mugs?

ALTHAAR

Yes, the customized novelty mug has been a most appreciated gift item among the distantly-located friends of Althaar! But there is a snagging—he is has been unable to determine how many Fugulnari will be in this delegation, or how they are named. He does not even know the term by which a respected Fugulnari delegate is to be properly addressed! Of course “Sin” is never in-appropriate, but Althaar is always desiring to use a being's preferred form of addressment, when he is able. But there is so little information to be found on the Fugulnari! They are a people who are greatly valuing their privacy, it seems.

MACKALOCKA

Right, you don't see many of them around. I think there's one living here, though.

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes, Mrs. Frondrinax! She is Althaar's neighbor! But she has not been answering to her communication device today. And Althaar is not wishing to explode her phone while she is occupied with making preparation for the Celebration of Friendship!

MACKALOCKA

Not a problem, Althaar. We've got a complete list of all known forms of address for every species in the galaxy that has indicated a preference. Let me just... (*bleepity scrollity*) Fugulnari, Fugulnari... Ah, nertz. No entry, sorry. But you said your neighbor is a “Mrs.”?

ALTHAAR

Yes! But Althaar is not at all certain if this is typical among her people, or an adaptation to the life among Humans. So he does not know if he should on this occasion use the Human modes of address. Or which among the so many of these he should be using! Would “Mr,” or “Mrs,” or “Ms,” or “Mx” be appropriate? No one can tell Althaar! And what if there are esteemed physicians or educators among them? Or members of the clergy? Althaar's researching on this subject has borne no fruit. Althaar does not even know how many of the Fugulnari are bearing fruit!

MACKALOCKA

Well... if you really want to be prepared for *anything* they might throw at you, we could always do you a full run of every term on the list.

ALTHAAR

Oh! This is a most ingenious solution, Sin Mackalocka! Yes! Althaar would wish to purchase five— No, ten! Althaar does not know of the size of the delegation still, and it is better to be safety. Ten each of the Human Exchange Concourse Personalized Novelty Mugs, inscribed to “Esteemed Fugulnari Delegate,” in combination with every possible term of address! Would Althaar be able to make retrieval of these by 16:30?

MACKALOCKA

(calling to the back)

Hey, Herrdronn! We’re gonna need ten each of a full run of mugs with every honorific in the book, for “Esteemed Fugulnari Delegate,” in eight hours! Better get on it!

HERRDRONN

Aw, mang!

MACKALOCKA

Don’t give me any splorch, it’s for Althaar!

HERRDRONN

(more conciliatory; he likes ALTHAAR)

Aw, mang.

MACKALOCKA

Now, you know, Althaar, I always recommend these mugs as the perfect gift to represent Human friendship, but maybe you’d like to throw in something more specific to the Fugulnari taste?

ALTHAAR

Oh! Are you having any suggestions?

MACKALOCKA

Wellllll... Oh, here we go! Plants like water, right? Famous for it. Now we have these spritzers over here... they’re actually designed for visiting slug species from Philatalu Seven? But you know, they’re a pretty handsome product, no reason a Fugulnari wouldn’t appreciate a spritz from one of these.

ALTHAAR

Ooh! Is it possible to make also personalizement of the spritzers?

MACKALOCKA

Uh. Yeah, yeah, I’m sure we could do that. *(to the back room)* Hey, Herrdronn! We’re gonna need the same run as the mugs, but with the Philatalully spritzers! Same pickup!

HERRDRONN

Aw, mang!

MACKALOCKA

What, you got the stencils! It's for Althaar!

HERRDRONN

Aw, mang.

MACKALOCKA

All right, Althaar, I'll put those on your account, and you can pick them up in eight hours. Or I could have Herrdronn run 'em over to you if you're busy.

HERRDRONN

Aw, mang!

ALTHAAR

That will not be necessary, Sin Mackalocka! Althaar will return to collect his gifts when they are completed! Thanking you!

ALTHAAR's phone rings.

ALTHAAR

Please to be excusing Althaar, gesin... *(picks up call)* Greeting to FriendJohn on Althaar's communication device! Has Su-san made safe arrival to the Fairgrounds? ... Althaar is very pleased! ... Su-san is wishing to consume a dinner in the company of Althaar? Althaar would of course be most pleased to be conversing with the sister of FriendJohn, but perhaps a meeting that does not involve the consumables would be more practical? Althaar does not wish to— ... Ah! The staff of Rixlon's can certainly be trusted to provide adequate screening. Then there is no difficulty! Ee! But this dinner must be an early one, as the presence of Althaar has been requested at an event later in the— ... Oh! Althaar did not think you would have interest in the Celebration of Human-Fugulnari Friendship! Then he will be accompanying you there also! ... Very well, FriendJohn! Althaar will be seeing you then, if not before! ... *(chuckle)* That is most astute, FriendJohn! Farewell to you!

(hangs up)

Oh, joy! FriendJohn's sister has made invitation to Althaar for a dinner! She is most generous indeed, to be able to overlook the inadvertent rudeness Althaar was committing on her last visit! Althaar must be thanking her! Sin Mackalocka? Althaar will also require a Novelty Mug with the name of "Susan" on it, please!

MACKALOCKA

Sure thing, Althaar, we can— Oh, wait a tic... Yeah, we actually got that one in stock right over here. *(clink as he gets it off a hook)* ... Unless you need another full run of titles...?

ALTHAAR

No, Althaar believes the one "Susan" mug will be adequate!

MACKALOCKA

She gonna need a personalized spritzer, too?

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, Sin Mackalocka, Su-san is a Human! The sister of my dear friend and Room-mate John! Although their relationship is one of great complication, that FriendJohn has yet to explain in a way that Althaar is grasping.

MACKALOCKA

So who's to say Humans can't enjoy a good spritz from time to time?

ALTHAAR

Althaar cannot be arguing with this! Then yes, please, a personalized "Su-san" spritzer for the complexly-related sister of FriendJohn!

MACKALOCKA

Herrdronn! One more personalized spritzer! Name of "Susan!"

HERRDRONN

Aw, mang!

MACKALOCKA

'Kay, Althaar. I'll have this packaged for pickup by 16:30.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, Sin Mackalocka! Althaar will be seeing you then!

MACKALOCKA

Hey, anything for our best customer!

Door sound and chime as ALTHAAR leaves.

MACKALOCKA

(sigh) Gotta love that Iltorian. I'd feel like I was taking advantage, if buying all this crap didn't make him so frilling happy... *(to the back)* Snap to it, Herrdronn! We need that whole order printed and boxed by this afternoon!

HERRDRONN

Aw, mang.

MACKALOCKA

And how many times do I have to tell you to take off that nail polish! Gives me the whims. It looks like your fingernails are bleeding!

HERRDRONN

Aw, mang!

[scene 5a] Over the store speakers comes the voice of WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention, Fairgrounds residents. This is your Recreation Director-Bot, with a special announcement for all Humans in residence at, passing through, or unexpectedly waking up on the HEC. This evening at 24:00 hours, there will be a Human-Fugulnari Friendship Celebration in the Gimel 8 Hydroponic Park, in connection with a new joint initiative from the League of Humans and the Fugulnari Ascendancy. An official delegation from Fugulnar will be sharing their vision of a bright new future of closer relations and advanced cooperation between the League of Humans and their... people. All Humans are welcome to join them there, or via simul-cast from any of the Hydroponics parks. The Fugulnari promise that this ceremony will under no circumstances be just another skull-crushingly boring and utterly pointless bit of diplomatic foofaraw, if you can believe that. And if you can... well, I say go for it. That is all.

As the announcement ends, [scene 5b] we have moved to the Bridge, where TORIANNA is pacing unhappily. STALIN-BOT is nearby.

TORIANNA

And if anyone believes *that*, they *deserve* to be living on the Fairgrounds. You know, I've had to implement some ludicrous orders from Earth Central over the years, but this takes some kind of cake. "Hi, we're sending a Fugulnari delegation all the way out there for some reason, so we're going to need you to throw together some kind of sumptuous gala for their benefit, and live-stream it to the entire station by the way, just to show everyone how much we appreciate our plant friends. Oh, and this all has to happen *the day after tomorrow!*" Right. We have a grand total of one Fugulnari living out here, and as far as I can tell even she doesn't have any interest in this shindig. Why us?

STALIN-BOT

Because to League of Humans, we are useful idiots.

TORIANNA

Since when is the Fairgrounds useful? And I'd certainly be willing to believe we got stuck with this boondoggle because everyone else managed to weasel out of it, except apparently no one else did, because this is just one of a whole series of "celebrations" that are happening all over Human space. And the ridiculous cherry on top of the whole ludicrous cream cake is, they're making it a whole *thing* that the "celebration" has to start at the exact same time everywhere, no matter what the local time is. I think on Io they're actually dragging everyone out of bed at 2am for this shness. Stupid bureaucratic hogwash. How could the exact time possibly matter to anyone? If we missed it, no one back on Earth would even hear about it for another day and a half.

STALIN-BOT

This delegation they are sending, they would know right away.

TORIANNA

Oh right, the delegation. Yes, we should keep them happy. And I suppose it makes for a nice change that someone out there thinks we're important enough to warrant an entire delegation. But it also means on top of everything else I have to drag out the dress uniform. At least they managed to get all the Dilurian blood and Baked Europa stains out of it after last time.

Door to the bridge opens. FRALL shimmers in, accompanied by a lone Fugulnari we will learn is named FLIXWINTRIX.

TORIANNA

Ah, there you are, Lieutenant! And welcome aboard, Sin...?

FLIXWINTRIX

(rather slick; on the edge of snooty but never enough to be called on it)
Flixwintrix, Commander Torianna! And a pleasure it is to meet you!

TORIANNA

Thank you, Sin Flixwintrix. Or do you have another preferred form of address?

FLIXWINTRIX

Just "Flixwintrix," Commander. We Fugulnari do not burden our names with extraneous appendages.

TORIANNA

Really? Because the one Fugulnari I've met calls herself— Well, never mind that now. I was about to say that the entire staff of The Human Exchange Concourse would like to welcome you... *(STALIN-BOT grumbles slightly)* ...and will do all they can to make this visit enjoyable for you, and of course for the rest of your delegation. Speaking of which, when will we be meeting the rest of the delegation?

FRALL

Ahem. Commander, Flixwintrix *is* the delegation.

TORIANNA

Oh. So... this incredibly important Human-Fugulnari event, that we've been asked to put everything else aside to host, will consist of a great many Humans, and... two Fugulnari? Assuming Mrs. Frondrinax decides to show up.

FLIXWINTRIX

Oh, Frondrinax will absolutely be with us tonight, Commander. In fact, she's currently occupied with the final preparations for our part of the celebration.

TORIANNA

I see. Well, as to *our* part... Our orders were somewhat unclear as to what exactly we were meant to provide for this august occasion.

FLIXWINTRIX

As long as you've arranged to live-stream my speech to all of the Hydroponics parks, along with the brief words of introduction you should have received from your superiors on Earth, I won't require any further considerations. I believe you have also been instructed to gather as many Humans as possible for tonight's event?

TORIANNA

Well, yes, we were told that, and we have been promoting it. But you know, we only just found out about this two days ago, which didn't really give us a lot of time to put together an event that the general populace would find appealing. Most of the Humans on station are civilians, you know, we can't just order them to show up. And I'm afraid an exchange of diplomatic formalities isn't exactly the kind of thrilling spectacle that brings out the crowds. So I can't guarantee that turnout will be as full as you might like.

FLIXWINTRIX

Hmm. That seems like an unfortunate failing of your species. But perhaps by working more closely with Fugulnari in the future, you may be able to improve your ability to manage your people.

STALIN-BOT

Zing!

TORIANNA

Stalin-Bot, belay that chatter!

FLIXWINTRIX

Apparently you have as little control over these Robots you have created as you do over your fellow Humans, Commander. If that term is indeed appropriate. Based on what I've thus far observed, I'd say it's more than a little misleading.

FRALL

If I might offer another perspective, Flixwintrix. While the League of Humans may seem to have a disorderly and inefficient social structure, within its chaos is also great strength. It allows both the individual and the larger cohort great flexibility in both conceptualization and action. They represent a fascinating mass of contradictions, even to a 27-dimensional being such as myself.

FRIXWINTRIX

Well, from my perspective, they seem like an absolute mess. And as for yours, is it really necessary to exist in 27 dimensions? That *certainly* seems like a profligate waste of time and energy.

FRALL

Those are the same thing.

FRIXTWINTRIX

Nonetheless, it sounds like a profoundly wasteful way to live. I should think four dimensions would be more than enough for anyone.

FRALL

That would vary greatly on how you define “waste.” Or “living.” For example, would it be a “waste” of my time to have a quick peek into your root system and delve into your thoughts, dreams, and ambitions? Or even modify them if I were to take the notion? Perhaps so. But the fact that I very much *can* do that gives me a great many extremely efficient methods of achieving my own aims. It’s really a question of scale.

FRIXTWINRIX

Uh... yes... Yes, I can see your point.

STALIN-BOT

Hah! Score one for Lieutenant! Fancy diplomat plant has been schooled!

TORIANNA

Stalin-Bot, Frixtwinx is an honored guest. No one is “schooling” anyone. But, ah, Frall and I had planned on personally *showing* you around the Fairgrounds. Or, well, we’d planned on showing the delegation around, which, obviously, is... Anyway, if that sounds acceptable to you, we could get started anytime.

FRIXTWINRIX

Yes, that sounds “acceptable,” Commander, if not particularly desirable. It’s of no concern to me one way or the other, but if you’ve prepared some kind of little tour, we might as well go through with it.

TORIANNA

(sighing)

Yes... I suppose we might as well.

STALIN-BOT

(a bit gleeful)

Good luck on important diplomatic mission, Commander! I am certain you will have wonderful experience as tour guide for new Fugulnari friend.

TORIANNA

You know what, Stalin-bot? I seem to recall something in the Union’s weekly grievance list about robot workers being denied career advancement opportunities. And you know what, they’re right. It’s high time you robots were allowed to join us for “important diplomatic missions” like this.

STALIN-BOT

Oh! But, ah, who will watch panel? Some other bot should take opportunity. I will make sacrifice.

TORIANNA

Swenson! You’re on comms! (*“Yessir!” in the distance*) There you go, Stalin-bot, you’re free as a cockathreece. Now go change into your formal dress torso and we’ll get this tour started.

STALIN-BOT

(leaving the Bridge, muttering)

Bozhe moi.

Door as STALIN-BOT leaves.

TORIANNA

While we’re waiting for Stalin-bot to rejoin us, Flixwintrix, would you like to look around the Bridge, or ask us any questions?

FLIXWINTRIX

No thank you, Commander. I don’t believe there’s anything here that requires my further attention, so I’ll cease conversing now, in order to conserve energy and not expend mindspace on empty formalities or needless chatter. You may let me know when this “tour” is ready to commence.

TORIANNA exhales—this is going to be even more annoying than was possibly anticipated. From out of a console comes the sound of an advertisement. [scene 6a] It is smoothly performed by CHIP, but obviously cheaply made.

CHIP

Hey, Fairgrounders! This is your old pal Chip Frinkel, owner and operator of The Electric Egg —THE place on the Fairgrounds for the finest in alcoholic imbibement and entertainment for all species! And right now, in honor of the surprise Human-Fugulnari Friendship Celebration, our master mixologist Sapon has some surprises of their own just for you! Isn’t that right, Sapon?

SOPON

(incredibly uncomfortable with doing this ad; wooden)

That's right, Chip. I've created a line of four special new drinks, all of which are tasty and intoxicating when drunk by a Human, or sprayed on a plant. So try our new juniper, sloe, blackberry, and peppermint spritzers, either in a glass or in a, uh, spritzer. They'll put a spring in your step! Or. In your stem!

CHIP

All right, thanks, Sopon! Heh-heh! They may not be much good at ballyhoo, but they're tops behind the bar, take it from me! And hey, you don't have to be a Human *or* a plant to enjoy a refreshing drink or five at the Egg! No matter what your species, we've got a tippie for your taste! From the Mebsutan Lava Toddy, to the Arrakeen Sunset, to those infused gases so popular with our friends from Helibrinn Eight. And of course, The Electric Egg also features the fabulous sounds of the amazing Dee and Xtopps, two cycles out of every three, providing the musical wallpaper. So come on down, or up, to The Electric Egg! The place to go on the Fairgrounds whenever you're looking to have a good time in a relaxing, friendly atmosphere.

By the end of the ad, we are now [scene 6b] inside the Electric Egg, where there is a fight going on while the staff is trying to break it up—SOPON, DEE, XTOPPS, and BUBBLES are yelling at and holding back an also yelling VERT and an ANGRY BRONSONIAN who are on the verge of throwing hands, or whatever, if they haven't already.

CHIP

(breaking it up and yelling over, to calm everyone down)

Hey hey hey! What the hell, people! What's going on here?

SOPON

It's just a stupid misunderstanding, Chip, but these zoods won't let it go.

ANGRY BRONSONIAN

(as with all Bronsonians, a tiny guy with a big attitude)

You tell that big lummoX to keep his pedal extremities off mine or I'll paste 'im!

CHIP

Vert? A lummoX? He's barely a meter tall!

DEE

Listen, no one likes getting their foot stepped on, but this is a bar, and it's crowded. It was clearly an accident! Get over it!

ANGRY BRONSONIAN

Oh, sure, "get over it!" That's some biped thinking for you right there! You get a foot stepped on, you got another one as backup.

XTOPPS

Hey mang, it's no one's san-andreas that you got shafted in the appendage bureau, but I cogitate that a monopod woul—

ANGRY BRONSONIAN

Don't *you* even talk to me, crazy-legs! That's... that's just... that's just showing off there is what it is! This is between me and Stretch over here!

VERT

Lemme at him! I'll step on him again!

CHIP

Vert! Chill out!

VERT

He kept kicking me in the shins!

CHIP

Well that's as far as he could reach, Vert!

DEE

Both of you! Different corners!

ANGRY BRONSONIAN

What corners? It's all curvy in here!

DEE

I will step on you myself, if you don't shut up!

CHIP

Ok ok, back off, Dee, I've got this. Gentlebeings, if you would be willing to set aside your differences and retreat to opposite arc segments of the room, I'd be happy to bring each of you a specially prepared custom cocktail. (*as they retreat, grumbling*) Hey, Bubbles, you got both these driffers' species in your metabolic database?

BUBBLES

(*a beat as she checks, maybe some subtle bleeping*)

Yep! I got a full metabolic analysis on both of 'em. Why?

CHIP

I want you to whip up something special to put each of them on the downward slope of buzzed. Preferably one that can take them all the way from belligerent to comatose, but I'll settle for anything that'll shut them up.

SOPON

A couple Mebsutan Lava Toddies would definitely do that. Just saying.

CHIP

Yeah, no, let's call "burn their faces off" Plan B. So, Bubbles?

BUBBLES

I got you covered, boss.

CHIP

Great. Streez! What is it recently? Used to be we'd have a ruckus maybe every day or two, now it's at least twice a cycle. And Vert of all people!

DEE

Well, it's probably the first time Vert ever got in a fight with someone smaller than him. Maybe he just got carried away with feeling like a tough guy for once.

XTOPPS

There's been some seriously slimy vibage in here as of recent, Chorp. If you ask me, the place could use a vibe realignment. We need an orgone collector or something.

DEE

Or an exorcism, maybe.

SOPON

Hey, every joint goes through phases like this. You just gotta roll with it until it blows over.

CHIP

Yeah, but whenever I've seen this before, it was because of an influx of new customers. Strangers, species that don't interact much, they come together the first time, appendages are gonna get thrown. But these are regulars, Sophon. I don't get it.

BUBBLES

Hey Chip, here's your settle-down specials. Now, the carmine one with the swimmy pulp things is for Vert, and the crimson one with the swimmy veggie bits is for the Bronsonian. Don't mix them up or it'll... well, just don't mix 'em up, ok?

CHIP

(distracted, walking away)

Yeah, yeah, I got it.

XTOPPS

I don't think Chorp is on our amplitude, zoods. This isn't about the new or the regular, it's about the Egg, mang. It's just feeling... static, you know.

SOPON

Oh, yeah. The same ol' same ol'.

DEE

Yeah, there's a fine line between "comfortably familiar" and "unpleasantly monotonous."

BUBBLES

I don't know. I mean, good drinks, good music, good food, what more does anyone want?

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

DEE

Atmosphere, maybe? And I'm not talking about what comes outta the vents. Also, yeah, we're doing our part with the drinks and the music, but the food? Is cragsville. Take it from someone with taste buds, ok?

XTOPPS

Hey, it's all I eat and I'm a big boy with all of the strength I need.

DEE

Exactly. The food's fine for someone who's glitched out of their skull. It's good enough to satisfy the midnight munchies and keep this crowd from wandering off looking for the nearest kebab joint. But greasy Ganymede wings and soggy Penrose nachos just don't make it any more. We've had more than a few decent restaurants set up on the Fairgrounds lately, if you haven't noticed. And even a couple places that are way fancier than a half-scrapped tourist trap at the ass-end of Human space has any right to expect.

SOPON

Oh, right, like that one with no name.

XTOPPS

It's got a name, it's called (*silent restaurant name gesture*).

SOPON

Is that what it says on their sign?

DEE

They don't have a sign, they're too fancy for that! That's exactly what I'm talking about. The Egg is still an okay place to get randomized, but why settle for that when you can head over to Chez Pazzo or... that other one, and get randomized over a gourmet meal? We need to step up our game!

BUBBLES

So what do we do? It was hard enough talking Chip into redecorating the last time we tried it.

SOPON

And he's still snagged about not being able to get back the full purchase price on those potted plants. Plus, you know, the whole gruesome murder/suicide thing that left that stain on the floor. Which was 0% the fault of our renovations, but you know he's going to bring it up.

XTOPPS

Man is tighter with a cred than an English rock star staring down a contractor's invoice.

BUBBLES

Seriously. My firmware was supposed to be updated last month, and he keeps trying to fast-talk me into installing this bootleg version he can get from a zood he says has an honest face-like area. I'm not putting that in me!

SOPON

Yeah, he won't spend a dime unless he thinks he's gonna get back five dollars.

DEE

Ok, so we find something he cares about more than money.

A beat, then riotous laughter from everyone else.

DEE

Oh, come on! There has to be something! What if we embarrass him?

XTOPPS

Does Chorp even know from shame?

DEE

I know he's got *some* pride in this place, it's not *just* about the money for him.

Everyone else makes dubious noises.

DEE

No, seriously! He's a cheapskate, sure, but this place is still his baby. The Electric Egg is Chip Frinkel, and Chip Frinkel is the Electric Egg. He doesn't *want* it to be a dive. I'll bet his ego could outweigh his stinginess if we just put our fingers on the scale a little. If we could show him how thoroughly etiolated this place looks through the eyes of the kind of big spender he wants to bring in here...

SOPON

I don't know what kind of eyes would make Chip see anything but red, but what the frid, I'll keep my own eyes peeled. Ohp, it's that time again. Sorry, but if I don't put Beaux on, these drifters'll start kicking up.

*SOPON turns on a speaker to Fairgrounds radio where BEAUX SEVERAL is starting a broadcast. **The rest of bar group grumbles a bit.***

BEAUX

Hey folks, this is Beaux Several here, the last honest voice on the Fairgrounds, where everyone else is using nine words to sell you six lies, and possibly even more. And we're looking into the dirt on this plant situation.

DEE

You know, I don't think that smarkhead's influence is doing much to keep things fully tiled around here either.

*In the background, we hear the smash of a glass and **VERT and the ANGRY BRONSONIAN getting into it again** as [scene 7a] BEAUX SEVERAL continues to be heard from the speaker in the Egg.*

BEAUX

...So like I said, I got some major creds dropped in my lap to encourage you all—all you Humans that is—to turn out for this... Human-Fugulnari Friendly-Wendy Pajama Party that's going down tonight in Hydroponics. And tomorrow, we've got this Fugulnari bigwig on the show... what's his name again, Tess?

TESS

Flixwintrix.

BEAUX

Flex...tow...rigs? Ok, whatever. I'll have it by tomorrow, don't @ me. Hey, Todd, you want to take a stab at it? Actually, never mind, I don't want you relaxing the wrong set of muscles and ruining that chair.

TODD

C'mon, Beaux, cut it out!

BEAUX

Not so long as the Incontinent Todd merch keeps doing numbers, Dr. Leaky. Then we'll have to find you an even more embarrassing gimmick if you want to stick around. Anyway, when I get this plant zood in here, I'll have a few questions for him about why Humans should even care about his species anyway. I mean, there are plenty of plants on Earth, right? And all over *(cont.)*

most League planets. And none of them talk back to us, which to my mind is a pretty big advantage. So what do these Fugulnari even want from Humans, and what are they offering in return? Now you may think I'm saying Humans shouldn't bother attending this shindig tonight, but no! No no, Beaux! I am telling you all to go right ahead and show up! Pay close attention to what the head herbie has to say! And if you don't like what you hear, let him know about it! And I'll do the same thing tomorrow when he's sitting right here, or rooting right here, whatever, with me and—

BEAUX's rant has moved to a portable radio, on which the dial is turned now to some music. [scene 7b] And we are in Poppy's Diner. End of the lunch rush, so crowded but not crazy. STELLA and SUSAN are returning to the table where JOHN waits.

JOHN

So... you two were off powdering your noses long enough make a far less-insecure man than I get the heebie-jeebies. Get all the humiliating stories out of your system yet?

STELLA

Relax. I just wanted to take Susan by the kitchen to meet Sparky. She's never seen a vent-biter up close.

JOHN

Most people haven't. I mean, who are still alive.

SUSAN

Yeaaahhhh... That was interesting. And cute. And terrifying. You're really okay with that thing having the run of this place?

STELLA

It was a little weird at first. I mean, I spent most of my career here trying to kill those bastards before *they* killed and ate anyone they could get their hind-claws into, so for a while, my gut reaction whenever I saw Sparky was to, you know, jump on him and break his neck.

JOHN

Not Sparky!

STELLA

Yes, Sparky! The main reason I started eating all my lunches at Poppy's in the first place was because I was positive that eventually that little guy would remember he's a stone-cold predatory killing machine and try to eviscerate everyone in here. But one day, I looked at his face and... Listen, I've locked eyes with a lot of vent biters, and all I saw there was blind homicidal rage. So I can tell you, that little guy? Is *domesticated*. If his killer instincts are still in there somewhere, they're buried deep. He just lives for his eels and sweetmeats.

SUSAN

But you still have lunch here every day?

STELLA

Well, by that point I'd realized this joint gives you more crash for your cred than any other diner on the Fairgrounds, so I stuck with it.

JOHN

I think she's grown attached to Sparky, not that she'd ever admit it.

STELLA

I've grown attached to the Blorchburger Deluxe special is what it is.

SUSAN

Has it been hard, adjusting to normal Sanitation work with most of the vent-biters gone?

STELLA

Not nearly as hard as it was to adjust the other way. Although sometimes I do get this weird unsettled feeling, but I think that's just a reaction to the lack of regular adrenaline spikes. In general, though, not facing death on a daily basis is a lot easier to get accustomed to.

JOHN

Not to mention your co-workers actually *experiencing* death.

SUSAN

Right, sorry. I hope I didn't hit a sore spot.

STELLA

No, it's fine. I mean, it's *not*, and probably someday whatever I've been doing to deal with it will catch up with me, but honestly, I'd take a straight-up vent-biter raid over another Robot Union negotiation any day. Way less stressful.

JOHN

Tell me about it. I'm even a probationary Union member, but that cuts me basically no slack in arguments over what constitutes a drinks machine, a window, or a very small wire.

STELLA

Really? They even argue about the wires? You're on 16-gauge and smaller, they're on everything else, right? What's to argue about?

JOHN

They're robots, there's always something to argue about.

SUSAN

(a bit offended)

Uh huh. You know, the Union's protections may be inconvenient, but—

JOHN

Yes, ok, I know, the robots were badly treated, we all know that. Horribly treated, but the Robot Wars were a long time ago, and sometimes it's hard to keep all that history in mind when you've got a robot trying to convince you that every hole in the hull qualifies as a "window." I know you were pretty passionate about robot rights when you were at University—

STELLA

Really?

SUSAN

Yes, my doctoral thesis was on robot labor relations and their impact on interstellar diplomacy, which is a *whole* unfortunate story. And yes, John, the Robot Liberation Wars were a long time ago. But our grandparents were around for the last one. And how much did you really learn about them in school?

JOHN

I mean, you went to the same secondary school I did, our history teachers didn't really pace themselves all that well. We'd start out the year doing like, a whole month on Pierre de Monts and Samuel de Champlain, and then they'd realize they were behind and start speeding up to try and get through everything, and by the time we made it all the way up to the Robot Wars it was like June 28th and they got about an hour.

STELLA

Hey! I don't think I ever asked... What did *you* major in?

JOHN

Latin-American Literature.

STELLA

Really? You still remember any of it?

JOHN

"La sabiduría nos llega cuando ya no nos sirve de nada."

STELLA

Huh.

SUSAN

Anyway. Just remember when you have issues with Robots, there's a lot of historical precedent for why they don't trust Humans any farther than they can throw us.

JOHN

They can throw us pretty far.

SUSAN

(aggravated sigh) MY POINT IS. If they're making your life difficult, it's only because they've learned the hard way how difficult Humans are willing to make their lives.

JOHN

Believe me, as someone who is now legally a Robot myself, I'm very much aware I don't have all the rights I used to. But there has to be a middle ground between getting exploited by Humans and letting us die because of a sub-clause in the Union contract. I mean, during the Christmas debacle they refused to stop a disaster that was going to kill literally *everyone* on the Fairgrounds, including all of them!

SUSAN

Again, they have *really good reasons* to stick to the letters of their contracts, even if it means sacrificing themselves. Trust has to be earned, and we're nowhere near that point yet.

JOHN

I mean, I don't disagree, but knowing that doesn't make them any easier to work with. And speaking of work, I gotta get to the office before H.F. self-diagnoses himself with some kind of infection in yet another organ Humans don't have. I'll just get the bill before I go...

SUSAN

Oh, no you won't. This is on me. And so's dinner tonight, by the way.

JOHN

Susan, it's fine, I got this.

SUSAN

Not a discussion, Nibbles. So shut up and go to work, so I can gossip with your girlfriend.

STELLA

(to herself, amused)

Nibbles?

JOHN

No, you shut up, let me pay for this, and Stella, don't listen to a word she says.

STELLA

Both of you shut up, I've already told them to put this on my tab, so you're done fighting about it. Okay?

JOHN

Fine.

SUSAN

Okay.

STELLA

So, you go pull H.F. out of his HECNET-MD hole, and I'll stay here and enjoy a pleasant and minimally-embarrassing conversation with your sister. Sound good?

JOHN

Yeah, sorry. See you both tonight.

JOHN leaves. Beat.

SUSAN

Okay, he's gone, what do you want to hear about first? The thing with his first hoverboard, or the flan incident?

STELLA

Hey hey hey, I meant what I said. We don't do things like that. Talk behind each others' backs.

SUSAN

Fair enough. So. You two... it's pretty serious, huh? I mean, anyone can tell you kids are crazy about each other.

STELLA

Yeah. Although it took us like, forever to get around to actually saying the "L" word. But we did get it out of the way eventually.

SUSAN

Did he try to make some big romantic gesture out of it? He was always trying to do those for the people he dated, and they usually ended in disappointment, if not property damage.

STELLA

I think we *both* were kind of planning something like that at one point or another, but life on the Fairgrounds has a habit of sneaking up on you, so the plans kept getting scrapped. And then one night after work, we were both too exhausted for anything but vegging out on the couch watching *Dave and Z'wizzlinarp*, and we both just suddenly said it at the same time. So, we got it over with, and now we're good.

SUSAN

Huh. Stella, I've got to say I think my baby brother finally found the perfect person for him.

STELLA

Thanks. Were there very many... imperfect people before me? I mean, I know about Judy, that was pretty serious, I guess.

SUSAN

Yeah. I just made to the wedding before being sent out here.

STELLA

Oh. So Judy and... um... original flavor John? How... was it?

SUSAN

(really doesn't like Judy, but doesn't want to say it)

It was... interesting. Judy had some... creative ideas. There were a *lot* of bridal events. Fittings, luncheons, multiple showers, a whole week-long bridesmaids' trip to Europa... At least I managed to convince her I was too busy to be in the wedding party myself, so I got out of listening to her friends harass the waitstaff while sipping garishly-colored sugary cocktails through a penis straw.

STELLA

Yeesh. That's Judy? Hard to imagine John—

SUSAN

Yeah, Fairgrounds John is definitely *not* Earth John. Way less of a doormat, for starters. I suppose adversity has been good for him. And I think I can definitely say he's got much better taste in partners now. Not that any of the exes before Judy lasted all that long, but they were all memorably awful in their own way. What about here? Was there anyone on the Fairgrounds before you came along?

STELLA

No one that lasted more than a few dates, from what he's told me. And uh, yeah, "memorably awful" would be a good way to put it. *(chuckles slightly)* There were a couple that were... Well, I probably shouldn't get into it.

SUSAN

Come on, I served up the dish on the ex-fiancée, you owe me a little something.

STELLA

...Okay, so there are these two sisters who work here? Amber and Ashlee? And they're perfectly nice, but they have this kind of— I'm not sure what to call it. It's not exactly a speech impediment, but... Anyway, John got the impression that Amber was seriously flirting with him, so he decided to go ahead and ask her out, but it turned out that the whole time he thought she'd been *asking* him about...

STELLA fades away underneath a STATION ANNOUNCEMENT [scene 8a].

STATION ANNOUNCEMENT

This is a public service announcement from The Committee to Keep the Fairgrounds Clean, reminding you to please keep our Fairgrounds clean. So... yeah. Um. I mean that's pretty straightforward, right? But seriously. It's just getting really sloppy out there, you know? And someone's been vandalizing all the trash detectors, so that doesn't help. Sure, okay, we all hated those trash detectors, but, you know, it turns out that without them a lot of you are just tossing your trash in the corridors. Which means they're just going to have to put in new detection units anyway, right? So would you rather just put your wrappers and cups and napkins and things in a bin like responsible sapients, or get yelled at by a machine until you do it? It's up to you. In any case, this has been a public service announcement from The Committee to Keep the Fairgrounds Clean, reminding you to... keep the Fairgrounds... clean... Okay.

The station announcement takes us from Poppy's to [scene 8b] a sparsely-populated corridor. As it finishes, MRS. FRONDRINAX and ALTHAAR are approaching each other from opposite directions in the corridor. ALTHAAR is happily humming to himself and perhaps Mrs. F is doing so as well ("The Better World Song"). ALTHAAR is laden down with a large number of crinkly bags and boxes full of his gift purchases, and pushing a hover-sledge holding even more.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Althaar? Althaar, is that you back there?

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, Mrs. Frondrinax! It is indeed Althaar! But how were you guessing who was concealed behind these many packagings?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, it's impossible not to recognize you, sweetie. But I think you've gotten a little carried away with this silly Human Halloween business. It was over a week ago, after all, but here you are still in costume! I can't even tell what you're supposed to be this time. It looks like some kind of pile of gift bags pushing a hover-sledge.

ALTHAAR

That is because Althaar is carrying many gift bags while pushing a hover-sledge!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I don't get it. Have they introduced a new character on Dave and Zwizz'linarp? Or is this some kind of conceptual thing?

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, Mrs. Frondrinax! This is not at all the costume! The fact that his many boxes and bags are making partial concealment of Althaar is only the happy coincidence!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I see. You've been on quite the shopping spree, haven't you? What do you need all this for?

ALTHAAR

Ah! Althaar is perhaps *not* needing all this, as Mrs. Frondrinax is now available to make clarification! Althaar wishes to make a personalized gifting to the Fugulnari delegation at the ceremony this evening, but he is not knowing their names or titles! So he was purchasing several of every possible option. But which is correct, please? And how many will be needed?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Althaar, I could have saved you the trouble. There's only one delegate coming to the ceremony here, my old friend Flixwintrix. And generally speaking, we Fugulnari don't fuss with any kinds of titles or honorifics. I can see how I might have given you the wrong impression, but "Mrs." is really more what you'd call a nickname, for Human use.

ALTHAAR

(disappointed for just a moment)

Ah. That is unfortunate. *(cheerful again)* Then the storage compartment of Althaar will make receiving of a great increase in incorrectly-personalized Human Novelty Mugs this cycle! Perhaps Althaar will find use for all of his redundant gift purchasings one day.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, here's hoping. You know, sweetie, I feel just terrible that I let you buy all this folderol for no reason! Tell you what, why don't you just drop it all off at your place, and I'll stop by later and pick out a couple pieces that Flixwintrix might appreciate.

ALTHAAR

Your assistance would be most welcome to Althaar! And please feel free to take any items that are pleasing to yourself as well. There are many spritzers, if these are in your liking! Will Sin—Will Flixwintrix be staying with you in your suite next door? After so many years in residing here, your home in Aleph must be the most comfortable location on the Fairgrounds for one of your own people.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, no! No, they'll be staying in Hydroponics. We Fugulnari can make ourselves comfortable anywhere if we try, but there's really no place better suited to us, outside of Fugulnar itself of course, than a good old-fashioned Hydroponic Park!

ALTHAAR

Oh! Then if Althaar may be asking, why is it that Mrs. Frondrinax has chosen instead to make residence in Alef 1? Althaar is aware that the rent on the diplomatic levels is considered most exorbitant by those who are not receiving a plenteous discretionary fund from the Illtorian Commonality Xenopsychology Interest Group!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, well, yes, it certainly is pricey, you won't hear me arguing that! But, you know—and please don't spread this around, dearie—my pension is actually *very* generous. Besides, if I'd wanted to stick around plants all the time, I might as well have stayed back on Fugulnar! No, I'm the rare Fugulnari who likes to uproot themselves—metaphorically speaking, of course—and live among the fauna. We're certainly seen as more than a little eccentric back home, but follow your bliss, I say! So of course, once I got here, I didn't want hedge myself in with my non-sentient cousins. No, no, there's no denying that Hydroponics has all the amenities a plant could want, but in the grand cycle of things, I'd much rather live next door to someone special like you!

ALTHAAR

Oh! It is very kind of you to be saying so! And Althaar is understanding completely what it is to be considered strange by his own people! Many of Iltor consider his attempting of Human friendship to be most eccentric indeed! But he believes his project will make paying of off one day! And then the friendship of Human and Iltorian will be a thing most usual!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I certainly admire your perseverance, dear boy. But speaking of friendship, I'd better get going if I want to have everything ready for the celebration tonight! I have to visit *all* the Hydroponics Parks and make sure the staff is ready for this event! It's going to be *so* exciting!

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes! Althaar will not be delaying you any longer! Althaar must himself be hurrying home to make unloading of these gift boxes, if he is to return the hover-sledge to the rental kiosk before he is charged for another cycle.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right then, sweetie. I'll see you tonight!

ALTHAAR

(moving away)

Althaar will be looking forward at it, Mrs. Frondrinax!

*As ALTHAAR and MRS. FRONDRINAX walk away from each other, [scene 9a]
we hear SHARON from Sammy's Wiches over a speaker.*

SHARON

Heya folks, this is Sharon, from Sammy's Wiches! Me and my dad, an' all the folks here at Sammy's, wanna let you all know about today's special! In honor of the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Celebration, we're having a limited burger special, one day only! For half-price of our normal special, we have the Plant-Friendly, All-Meat Burger! That's right, you getta classic Sammy's phoob-burger with two slices of our special barbeque vat-grown chicken breast for a bun, topped off with Martian chorizo, and a snackin' bacon garnish onna side! *(cont.)*

And for all a you that get down here early, you can get a squirt Chee's whiz on your burger for no extra charge. But that offer only lasts as long as Chee does, and you know, there's only so much the little guy can do before he starts to get dehydrated. So come on down right now to Sammy's Wiches, where we like plants so much, we won't even touch 'em!

And by the end of the ad, we are in the WSS Office [scene 9b] where an audibly disgusted JOHN is coming through the door as the ad ends.

JOHN

Ugh...

H.F.

You really gotta problem with Chee's special sauces, doncha kid? I don't get it. Off Earth for over a year now, and you're still so provincial! And if you think about it, even back on Earth Humans have been happily cramming our faces full of some shness an animal squirted out since basically forever. I mean, what do you think actual cheese is?

JOHN

Yeah, that's very logical, H.F., but honestly it doesn't make me more comfortable with what's going on at Sammy's, it just makes me much less comfortable with actual cheese. So what's new here? We got anything on the slate?

H.F.

Not much, looks like an easy day here. Just one little job. A weird one, but really easy. A very small wire splice plus a conduit reroute in Samech 32. Simple enough.

JOHN

What's weird about it?

H.F.

Well, it's not a repair. There's nothing wrong with it.

JOHN

Oh...kay...? So what am I supposed to be doing?

H.F.

I can't believe this word is passing my lips, but here it is: Upgrade.

JOHN

Upgrade?

H.F.

Upgrade.

JOHN

Wow.

H.F.

Yup. Direct orders from HQ, who apparently got it from Earth Central, and whoever finally actually showed up to a meeting of the Fairgrounds Design Committee. Says they want us to upgrade some wiring for “improved efficiency,” if you can believe it.

JOHN

Streez. That’s a first. And considering how much stuff around here could really use it... When’s the last time you saw an upgrade order?

H.F.

Well... I been here nine years, so thinking back... I’d say... uh... half-past-*never*. And the gal who trained *me*? Never ever. This may be the first official wiring upgrade around here since the downshifting.

JOHN

I am horrified and honored. You sure you don’t want to take it? Be a part of history?

H.F.

(*sigh*) Can’t say I’m not tempted, kid, but honestly, the alcove you’ll be working in is a little tight for me. Any enclosed space like that, my calf muscles seize right up. You’ll fit better.

JOHN

H.F., I got like four inches on you.

H.F.

Yeah, but you’re *wiry*. And speaking of *wiry* (*JOHN groans slightly*), I already pulled up the schematics you’ll need for this one, take a look. Oh, and you should also check out the latest batch of those weirdo restrictions we’ve been getting from corporate the last couple a weeks. You know... “don’t set foot in Tav 40 through 50 during second and third cycle Thursday,” that kinda thing.

JOHN

Yeah, what the frid has that been about? I mean, none of it is all that inconvenient, at least compared to everything else around here, but they don’t seem to make any sense. And this office the only subsidiary we’ve got all the way out here, so why would HQ even care enough to micro-manage where we go and when?

H.F.

Who knows? You ask me, there's some kind of territorial negotiations going on with the Robot Union about who covers what, and when, and where, and we'll be the last to know about it. With any luck, it'll turn out in our favor, but... well, kid, you know all about luck, or the lack thereof.

JOHN

I certainly do.

H.F.

(moving to the door)

All right, I'm outta here. Gotta cribbage date with George Foreman-Bot, plus Jackson Pollock-Bot and a couple other zoods.

JOHN

Oh, tell Foreman-bot I said hi.

H.F.

I will. You know he's really taken a shine to you.

JOHN

Yeah, I think he feels bad for me 'cause I'm a robot made of meat.

H.F.

Nah, George is good people. You should come along to a game sometime, he's a lot more fun outside the job. We've been palling around almost as long as I've been here. He and Jack and I used to be part of this regular poker night—you can have a mixed game like that as long as you stick with the HistoriBots whose personalities are less, y'know, mathematically-minded, cuts down on the card counting. Then of course Isaac Newton-bot, Ibn al-Haytham-bot, and Emmy Noether-bot all had to get in on it, and it stopped being fun real quick. So now we stick to cribbage night. Oh, and by the way, thanks for finally getting rid of all those plants in here. Lot easier to get around. All right, see you later, kid.

And he is out the door before JOHN can respond.

JOHN

But I thought you got rid of— Oh, whatever.

[scene 10a] Another voice comes from the station speakers.

HYDROPONICS RECRUITER

Hey! Do you like plants? I mean really like plants! Like, more than you like your fellow meat-based sapients? Well then, have you considered a career in Hydroponics? We're looking for people just like you! Why not stop by one of the friendship gatherings in Hydroponics tonight

and hear what the Fugulnari delegate has to say? If you like what you hear, you may just be the kind of sapient we're looking for! Hydroponics is a rapidly expanding career field, with plenty of promise for the future. And that's not just true on the Fairgrounds, but all over the galaxy! We're looking for a few good sapients to get in on the ground floor and help us take the field of Hydroponics to the next level! So join us tonight! See you in the green!

As this finishes, [scene 10b] we have moved to the Central Promenade, where TORIANNA, FRALL, and STALIN-BOT are showing FLIXWINTRIX around. As usual, fairly crowded and busy.

TORIANNA

And this is the Central Promenade. It's our main commercial hub, where much of the Fairgrounds comes together.

FLIXWINTRIX

(shudder) It appears rather haphazard. And somewhat unsanitary.

STALIN-BOT

That is understatement of year!

TORIANNA

Well, we like to think of it as a place that fosters cultural exchange as well as economic growth. A place where sapients from all over the galaxy can shop, dine, and make travel arrangements—all while gaining an appreciation of our similarities as well as our differences.

FLIXWINTRIX

And you consider that a positive thing?

TORIANNA

Yes, in fact. And I'm not sure I understand why if *you* do not, and I mean not just you personally, but Fugulnari in general from what I can tell, why you've made this sudden decision to formally celebrate your relationship with us Humans.

FLIXWINTRIX

Mm. The Fugulnari Open Mind spent a long time cogitating upon the advantages and disadvantages of extending ourselves to a closer relationship with other species. A very long time. Many generations, in fact. Eventually, we decided that, as offensive to our sensibilities as it may prove to be, it would ultimately be advantageous if we were to partner with other species. For us, I mean, besides the obvious advantages that working with us would confer on any of you people. And then it took a few more generations before we decided exactly what method of doing so would be most effective.

FRALL

So when did you decide Humans would be the best species to enjoy a closer relationship with the Fugulnari?

FLIXWINTRIX

Oh, we took an interest in Humans right away when you came into the galactic picture. Talented, promising, just starting out in the ICSB, and with a home planet populated by many plants that bear a remarkable similarity to ourselves, even if they're not exactly brainiacs. Yes, we found Humans promising, but horribly disorganized. And well, that's just what we want to do. Help people get organized. When we thought about it, it was clear that Humans should be the first step on our path to a greater presence in the overall galactic community.

FRALL

How very fortunate for you.

FLIXWINTRIX

Yes. And for the Humans as well!

TORIANNA

Well, the League is always happy to foster closer bonds with our fellow ICSB member species. No matter how distressingly disorganized they might find us to be. I'm sure your people have a lot to teach us. Although I feel I should warn you, a lot of folks have tried to change Human nature over the years, ourselves included, and it doesn't usually go according to plan. We're famously stubborn. Well, that's one of the things we're famous for. But you may find yourselves being at least as influenced by us as we are by you.

FLIXWINTRIX

Ugh. Commander, I have every faith in the Fugulnari resolve to keep us strong and uncorrupted. May it be a guide to you in your path towards clarity and efficiency.

STALIN-BOT

Humans are all in desperate need of more efficiency, I can tell you that for free!

TORIANNA

Stow it, Stalin-bot.

STALIN-BOT

Commander? Perhaps we should show honored guest celebrated efficiency of Inbound Freight Processing office? Office is run by robot, yes, but Fugulnari guest must understand that Humans are making all decisions about where robot crew is assigned, so which robot is doing job, that is Human decision.

TORIANNA

Stalin-bot, I don't think our honored guest would have any interest in something as mundane as a shipping center.

FLIXWINTRIX

On the contrary, that sounds *very* interesting, Commander! And in fact, considering that the prompt delivery of supplies is essential to our species, a well-organized shipping center would be critical to the future of Fugulnari-Human relations. Please! Let us examine it at once!

TORIANNA makes something between a sigh and a groan. As they move away to Inbound Freight Processing, [scene 11a] BURROUGHS-BOT is heard making another announcement.

BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention Fairgrounds residents and visitors. This is your Recreation Director-bot, bringing you an update on all the other events going on this evening, besides the Celebration of Human-Fugulnari Friendship. They're all cancelled. Yes, in order to encourage Human attendance at the Friendship Celebration, all other events that could be considered of even marginal interest to Humans have been summarily eliminated. This includes the free sample giveaway at Velbopp's Frozen Quiescences, the finals of the mixed doubles Foosball tournament, the Fairgrounds Film Society's screening of *Blade Runner 2387*, the opening of Dr. Mwangi's photography exhibition at the Soberin Gallery, *and* the lecture by the eminent Dr. Filk Slizmenster of Mars on the sexual habits of the gaseous beings of Helibrinn Eight. At this time there are no plans to reschedule any of these events, but we will keep you informed in the unlikely event that anyone should care enough to do so. That is all.

And as BURROUGHS-BOT finishes, [scene 11b] we are in a confined space full of beeping and the hum of electronics. JOHN is shifting around uncomfortably in there, trying to angle himself to reach the wires he's trying to fix.

JOHN

Streez! It's beyond ridiculous that I have to jam myself in here when an actual robot could handle this in like thirty seconds. But there's no way I'm bringing it up at another Union meeting, I only just managed to get the smell out of my coverall from last time. Why would robots even be carrying around that much overripe fruit? Maybe I could work out some kind of informal arrangement, though. Foreman-bot might be into it. If the bots have some job they hate that would be easier for a Human, we could just quietly— *(tool slips out of his hand, clanks on floor)* Ow, dammit! *(his phone rings)* And what fresh hell is this? *(answers it, a bit pained)* Yes, hello?

STELLA

Hey, Johnny. You ok? You sound stressed.

JOHN

Not so much stressed, more like squeezed. I'm in the bulkhead below Samech 32 and it's a tight fit.

STELLA

Oh, yeah, I've been there. I mean literally, I know that bulkhead. Had to pull a biter out of there last year by the claws.

JOHN

Oh... yeah? (*shifting around nervously*) They... they're all gone from around here, right?

STELLA

Should be. I mean, there's a few of them still scabbling around, but they tend to stick to the bottom levels of the Lower Concourse, mostly around Shin and Tav. Although there's no such thing as 100% safe when you're talking vent-biters, so...

JOHN

So yeah, I'll keep an ear out. Don't know how you managed to fit in here. You've got like eight inches on me and I'm beyond cramped.

STELLA

Yeah, but you're wiry. So what amazing repair are you saving all of our lives with today?

JOHN

Funnily enough, right now your favorite maintenance sub-contractor is not even making a repair. I'm actually doing an upgrade, of all things. Some strange reconfig order that came down from WSS— (*pager; loud in tight space: "WSS!"*) OW! *damn* I was getting so good at avoiding that—on Earth.

STELLA

Really?

JOHN

Yeah, I know, that never happens. Like, literally never, according to H.F. But we got an actual upgrade order today from the head office. Apparently someone somewhere up the chain decided it was crucial to the company's interests to send me all the way down here to redirect a water supply line for increased efficiency, so... here I am, banging my elbows on this bulkhead.

STELLA

Water supply line? Wouldn't that be a job for a plumber-bot?

JOHN

Well, the redirection of water is shaky territory. If it's heading toward anything that could be remotely construed as a drinks machine, the Union will probably contest it.

STELLA

So what's this one heading for?

JOHN

Uh... looks like a bunch of the Hydroponics parks. So, yeah, “is a tomato a drinks machine” is not a philosophical argument I’m anxious to rehash. Plus, this job also involves rerouting several small wires, which means I’d have to be down here anyway. It’s just as well I don’t have to contort myself around this bulkhead *and* a plumber-bot.

STELLA

Gotcha. Must be the day for weird orders from Earth, I just got some myself. That’s why I called. I won’t be able to make it to that reception thingy tonight, Sanitation’s been scheduled for some kind of mandatory clean-up procedures drill.

JOHN

Orders from Earth? For the Sanitation department? You work for the Fairgrounds.

STELLA

Well, I mean, Fairgrounds command answers to Earth Central, so we do technically work for the League of Humans. We’ve just never gotten orders directly from them before, because why would we? I mean, we mop. That’s what we do.

JOHN

You mop, and you defend the entire station from the lethal parasites who want to shred all of our hamstrings. That’s not nothing.

STELLA

It’s a lot less of a thing than it used to be, though. Mostly, we mop. So I have no idea why Earth Central is butting in like this. I mean, I assume the Commander forwards them all my reports. They should know we still do plenty of drills, and with most of the Trash Detectors down, it’s not like we need any busywork.

JOHN

What exactly do they want you to drill for?

STELLA

Oh, yeah, that’s the other hinky thing. I can’t tell you. Because these orders are marked Top Secret.

JOHN

Top Secret...? Sanitation... orders?

STELLA

Yup. And yeah, I know, probably no one would give a crap if I told you, but, well, I’ve never gotten any Top Secret orders before, I’m sure I never will again, so I’ve decided to fully embrace this opportunity to play cool and mysterious. Although I will say that they’re actually incredibly boring and you would definitely not be impressed if I spilled the beans.

JOHN

I'll just pretend to be impressed then. (*pretending*) "Damn. I'm incredibly jealous of these Top Secret instructions you have, to do incredibly cool things! But obviously you could never breach the confidentiality of these super special orders just to satisfy my curiosity, Sanitation Supervisor Reyes!"

STELLA

Heh, thanks. So, your sister's pretty great.

JOHN

(*dubious at first*)

Uh. Really? ...Sorry, it's just that Susan and I spent all our time back on Earth constantly picking at each other, it's still weird to me that we somehow managed to do a full reboot on that. I mean, I guess on her end she's still got a brother back home to pick at, but... yeah. We could barely have a civil discussion growing up. She was always kinda the star of the family, and I was... well.

STELLA

You're the star as far as I'm concerned. Although I can tell Susan must be one hell of a diplomat, considering how much she managed to get me talking over lunch.

JOHN

Wait, what? Oh no. Oh no no no. What did you tell her, Stella? What does she know? What is she going to be using against me when I least expect it?

STELLA

Johnny, c'mon! It's me. I know better than to blab to your sister about anything you ought to be ashamed of.

JOHN

Oh. Right. Of course. Sorry.

STELLA

I didn't tell her anything you *ought* to be ashamed of. As far as I'm concerned. Whether you *decide* to be ashamed of it, well... that's entirely on you.

JOHN

Wait, what?

STELLA laughs for a moment before breaking the connection.

JOHN

I'm not sure letting those two meet was my best idea. (*something slips and clunks*) Ow!

As he keeps working, [scene 12a] another voice over another speaker:

3-D ROTARY CLUB SPOKESBEING

On behalf of the local chapter of the 3-D Rotary Club Interstellar, Zone BB, District 15, we extend a warm and hearty welcome to the delegation from Fugulnar. As we have for over 500 years, we of the Rotary wish to bring together business and professional leaders from all around the galaxy to advance goodwill and peace to all species, everywhere, through outreach, community service, financial aid, *and* through the ageless and singularly loathsome arcane rituals discovered by us as left in the stygian depths of the indescribable caverns below the surface of Ganymede. *(very cheerily)* Ia Ia! We hope to soon include Fugulnari members in some of our chapters, and look forward to a collaborative future of profit, prosperity, and promoting the dark arts and the power of Those That Must Not Be Named together! For more information on joining us, simply concentrate on the name of our organization for two standard minutes. We'll find *you*.

And as this ends, [scene 12b] we are in the Electric Egg as the door opens and STALIN-BOT, FLIXWINTRIX, FRALL and TORIANNA enter and move to the bar. DEE and XTOPPS are onstage finishing up a song that has already been heard (and recorded) earlier in the series.

STALIN-BOT

—so as I was saying, esteemed Fugulnari guest, this here is perfect example of popular entertainment to be found on Human Exchange Concourse!

FLIXWINTRIX

How amazingly squalid! And this is the sort of thing Humans enjoy?

FRALL

It's enjoyed by a great many species, in fact. As you can see.

TORIANNA

And I should note that while this establishment is Human-owned and operated, it has for over a year now been Xybidont territory, since it was named the official seat of the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a. You can see the Baronet himself up there on the bandstand, playing the— well, playing everything at once, actually.

FLIXWINTRIX

Ah. I suppose his talents are impressive, even if he chooses to employ them in making such a hideous cacophony. I had previously been informed of your highly unusual arrangement with the Xybidont Empire, as it happens. But I had no idea that a “joint” such as this could be attractive to such a wide variety of species.

CHIP

(sensing a bigwig, appearing at the bar near them)

You've got that right my fine frilly Fugulnari friend! We at the Electric Egg have something for everyone! Commander! You didn't warn me you'd be bringing an important interstellar diplomat by my humble establishment! I would have had something special prepared!

FRALL

Hm. I suppose with some advance notice you could have spruced the place up a bit. Perhaps by replacing those potted plants you so abruptly removed after your last redecorating attempt?

CHIP

Oh, haha, that's an interesting suggestion! But I think we've had enough decorative plants in here for the time being. Far better to enjoy a sentient, and may I say very elegant, gentlebeing of the floral persuasion in here instead.

STALIN-BOT

Really? Last new Fugulnari to show fronds in here was crazed killer!

TORIANNA

Stalin-Bot! I will put you back at the Dark Matter Supervision Desk, so help me!

FLIXWINTRIX

Oh it's perfectly all right, Commander, your robotic underling isn't telling tales out of nursery. I'd already heard all about that unfortunate incident. Oh, Brindrinorx... I knew him once, you know, before his roots got twisted. Sweet little sprout, but then... Stowed away on a shuttle, came here for some bizarre reason known only to himself, spent weeks hiding among your own plants, and then suddenly snapped and killed some insignificant Human vagrant! No accounting for it. Yes, I'm afraid that even Fugulnar has its nonconformists. Most unfortunate.

TORIANNA

(will not explode, will not explode)

That's one way of putting it. Anyway. I think you'd have to agree that his unpleasant end was probably inevitable, although Mrs. Frondrinax did try to stop him from— well. You know.

FLIXWINTRIX

I'm sure she did.

VERT

It happened right over there!

CHIP

No one asked you, Vert!

FLIXWINTRIX

Is that... is that what that stain is?

FRALL

Indeed, Flixwintrix, what you see is the result of the interaction of your “sweet little sprout” with a fluazifop capsule he had apparently concealed upon his person to prevent capture.

CHIP

Yeah, uh, I’ve had a real time trying get that out. I’ve brought in every specialist on station, but no matter what, there’s no fixing it short of replacing a whole chunk of deck plate.

FLIXWINTRIX

Still, it’s rather tasteless, even by Human standards, to leave such a macabre display just... sitting there in full view. If it can’t be cleaned, why not cover it with a rug or something?

CHIP

Oh, sure, a rug... or something... something inexpensive *(more and more muttering to himself)* A rug that’ll get filthy and get drinks spilled all over it, with a stink that’ll never come out, and that everyone will be tripping over like a Rebo Galactic Lizard... sure sure, just what we need...

FRALL

Could you repeat that, Mr. Frinkel? You’ve gone a bit quiet.

CHIP

Oh! Uh, I was saying that a rug would be just the thing! Great idea, Your, uh, Leafiness.

VERT

But what about all the drinking games?

CHIP

A ha haaah I don’t know what you’re talking about, Vert!

VERT

You know, all the little bets people like to make about it! I mean, gosh, just about every cycle someone gets dared to touch that stain, or lick it, or whatever! People will be real disappointed if you cover it up!

CHIP has been shushing VERT with increasing desperation through the above.

CHIP

Vert! Shut up and go find me a cheap rug!

VERT

(heading out)

Sure thing, boss!

CHIP

Not your boss, Vert!

VERT

(almost gone)

Ok, boss!

CHIP

(sigh) Anyway, ah, now that we've got that settled, perhaps you'd be interested in the variety of fine cocktails my head mixologist has recently designed to appeal to both Humans and Fugulnari, in honor of your visit and tonight's ceremony. We certainly weren't expecting to be graced with a visit from an official delegate, but it would give us great pleasure if you might try one of Sopon's fine brews and see if it suits your taste.

FLIXWINTRIX

Well... usually I wouldn't indulge myself while representing Fugulnar in an official capacity, but as I am here, and you've made... some kind of effort, not to mention that this tour was certainly never part of *my* intended plans for the afternoon, I suppose I can choose not to be insulted, and give one of your vile foamy liquids a chance.

CHIP

Wonderful. Thank you so much. We hope you enjoy it. Sopon! One of your very finest vile foamy liquids, please. In a spritzer, *s'il vous plaît!* For this honored guest of the Electric Egg!

SOPON

Honored guest of where?

CHIP

The Electric Egg. Your place of employment? Now c'mon, let's see some foam!

SOPON

Oh. This is the Electric Egg? I got a little confused for a second.

CHIP

Oh, what is this now? You know where you are, you've been working here for years! Please tell me you haven't found a Human food that does to you what p.b. does to the Xybs, my blood pressure can't take it.

SOPON

Nah, my tiles are fully-aligned, it's just that, you know, when I look around this dark and dingy room, I can't see any indication that this actually is the Electric Egg. So a zood could be forgiven for occasionally getting confused.

CHIP

What are you talking about? There are signs everywhere!

SOPON

Technically, yes, there are signs on the walls. But they don't exactly give a pike a lot of confidence that they're in the correct location. I mean what does that one actually say?

CHIP

"The Electric Egg."

SOPON

Looks to me like it says, "Thr EREctin' Ego." Now, maybe that's a misprint...

CHIP

Of course it's a misprint! It came free from one of our distributors, what do you expect? But everyone knows what it's supposed to say.

SOPON

Do they, Chip? Do they really? Because *that* sign over there says, "3-Lectroid Urgh." And that one there, "Frittata Fug." And then there's that big one on the back wall: "Electric-Whatever-And-Tell-Chip-If-He-Asks-For-Another-Free-Banner-I'm-Sending-Frank-Stuart-Back-With-A-Jeckin'-Cattle-Prod."

CHIP

Ooh. Probably should have taken a closer look at that one. Okay, so the alien distributors don't always get our name right, but—

SOPON

So, without at least one real sign that tells me I'm where I'm supposed to be, how can I even know I'm serving drinks in the right place? These are the questions that keep me up nights.

CHIP

Are you flotting kidding me.

SOPON

Also, I'd never want to insult a guest of yours, but you know, we've had all of two Fugulnari in here before now. And Mrs. Frondrinax is fine, but the other one— Well, it's fair to say that in my admittedly limited experience, 50% of the Fugulnari population is serious trouble. *(cont.)*

So maybe I'm not actually comfortable serving the distinguished delegate an intoxicating beverage this shift, with no bouncers on duty. If you'd shelled out for a full-time security staff, well, that would be another discussion. But right now... I'm just not comfortable, y'know?

FLIXWINTRIX

Excuse me, but is that Gray individual suggesting something about my character?

SOPON

(yup, "Gray" is a slur)

I'll suggest you make sure you're using "gray" as an adjective and not a noun, buddy, unless you wanna be an entirely different shade of green.

CHIP

Whoa, whoa! Sapon! They didn't mean it like that, okay? Why don't you take ten, go cool off in the back. *(SOPON effoes grudgingly)* Okay. Hey, no one ever said interstellar co-operation would be easy, right? Now, let's get you that drink. Bubbles?

BUBBLES

Yeah, boss?

CHIP

You'd be able to prepare one of Sapon's fine spritzers for our guest, wouldn't you?

BUBBLES

Sure thing, boss.

CHIP

Great, let's have it.

BUBBLES

But the thing is...

CHIP

Oh, no.

BUBBLES

The thing is it's gonna take a while.

CHIP

What? You are literally the fastest model of mixology-bot in the galaxy. A customer orders a drink with a three-syllable name, you've got it in front of him in two and a half. What do you mean "it's gonna take a while?"

BUBBLES

Well, Chip, you know that firmware upgrade I've been asking you for...?

CHIP

Oh, come on!

BUBBLES

Yeah, without that upgrade, it seems like my processors are gettin' real logy. You might even have to bring in another bot for backup. In fact, you should probably look into that anyway, if you don't want me breaking down all the time from overwork.

FLIXWINTRIX

Is there some kind of problem with your staff, Mr. Frinkel? They seem strangely reticent to perform their duties.

CHIP

Hah-hah... okay folks, not sure what's going on here, but, uh... Hey, Xtopps and Dee? Maybe you could lay some plant-friendly tunes on us, for our *very distinguished* and *important* guest that I'm sure *we'd all like to impress*, while mix up their drink *myself*?

XTOPPS

Oh... I'm really on the downward slide a sureness about that, Chorp. You know these old house amps are woofed and tweeted out. This last set, I was getting seriously nerved I might end up doing an Edison elephant finale. And even if I can get a workable sound through that shness, once that it comes out that dictaphone you call a PA system in here...

DEE

And as for me, I don't know, it's just harder and harder for me to give it 100% these days. Maybe it's my throat? I don't know if I'm actually sick, or if it's just the psychological influence of my surroundings, but it's been tightening up really bad lately. I was talking to this interior decorator and feng shui expert, and they were saying that the backing in this place? Is all backed up. And that can have some serious repercussions for employee health. They actually had some terrific suggestions about what we could do to fix it! I have their number right here, as a matter of fact. I bet if you gave them a call, my voice would start to improve immediately.

CHIP

(has caught on, is really pissed)

Okay. Okay look, now is not the time for this discussion, all right? We have an important guest here right now, so we should *all* want to put our best pedal appendage forward. We can discuss all these problems you're suddenly having later on, in private, after I get the esteemed delegate their spritzer.

FLIXWINTRIX

Please don't trouble yourself, Mr. Frinkel. I can see you've got a great deal more trouble than you can handle already. Commander, perhaps there's another location we could visit, of equal or even, dare I hope, lesser distastefulness?

COMMANDER

(as they head out)

Of course. I'm sure we'll all be very interested in hearing what you think of our next stop, gesin. Right this way, if you please.

CHIP

Okay, what the meckel was that!?

*And as the delegation exits, and we hear **DEE, SOPON, XTOPPS, and BUBBLES** giving **CHIP** an earful, **NESS** and **DORMER** come over the station speaker system [scene 13a] with a special announcement for Security personnel.*

NESS

Attention all Security personnel! You are required to stand down this evening for the duration of the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Ceremony, as per orders from Earth Central, for "a show of trust and openness". Therefore, all Security officers, staff, and auxiliary contract crew are ordered to report to the the Tsade 38 screening center at 23:30 hours, for a mandatory showing of the classic 2D film, *Empire!*

DORMER

(off mic a bit, in the background)

Aw, man, I love that one! *(barely a Darth Vader impression)* "Hey son, I am your actual father!"

NESS

No, mang, it's not that *Empire*.

DORMER

Is it the one about the kid during the war? 'Cause that one made me tear up a little.

NESS

Says here it's about a building? "*Andy Warhol's Empire?*" It's from the 20th Century. About the Empire State Building. On Earth. New York City? You know.

DORMER

Oh, right, I forgot it started out as a building before they seal-coated it and launched it into orbit.

NESS

Right!

DORMER

Hey, wait! Is this the one where that boss-ass giant ape climbs up the side? “Andy Warhol” must be the name of the ape!

NESS

Aw, yeah, gotta be! Sweet!

DORMER

I always wanted to see that one!

NESS

All right, Security, even if this one wasn’t mandatory, you’re not gonna wanna miss it! It’s a classic Earth film about a big ape named Andy climbing the Empire State Building, and it’s *so cool!* I mean, I think the climbing part is all the way at the end, so prob’ly we’ll have to wait a while, but when it happens, it’s gonna be *so* worth it.

DORMER

Tell ‘em about the popcorn.

NESS

Oh yeah, uh, unlimited free popcorn and cold cut spread will be provided, courtesy of Sammy’s Wiches. All right, Security, see you there. Announcement ends!

(off mic quickly before it cuts out)

C’mon, let’s go get a good spot right now, last time that jecker Drifuz kiped my seat—

*And with this ending, [scene 13b] we are in another corridor where **H.F.** is making sounds under his breath that are not words, but still are definitely cursing as he works on something with both hands while occasionally yelling into a phone crooked between ear and shoulder. Slowly, during this, MRS. FRONDRINAX is approaching.*

H.F.

Razzafrazzin’....*(etc.)* Hey. Hey, c’mon, George, why you gotta argue with me on this? ...Sorry, sorry, on duty it’s Foreman-bot. So listen, “Foreman-bot,” I’m looking at a mess of very small wires here, but exactly one of them is 14-gauge, and you know what that means. ... Yes, it’s been vandalized just like all the other trash detectors. ...Exact same, yes. ...Don’t say it. Don’t say it again, you do this every time we have one of these TDU repairs... Dammit, George! “Very small wires” refers exclusively to diameter, not length! ...No, the wording is *not* vague. We have been over the language! I don’t care if it’s just two millimeters long, when that wire is 14-gauge, you know I can’t touch it! You or one of your crew gotta come down here. I’ve done my part. ...Yeah, yeah, and I’ll be kicking your anodized butt at cribbage tonight. ...What? Yeah, well you can tell Jack that chance operations won’t save him at the pegboard! Now would you get someone down here so I can finish this furshlugginer repair?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, hello there, Hardyfox. Robot trouble?

H.F.

Oh, hey Mrs. F. Nah, just my friend Foreman-bot bustin' my culls again. We've been getting calls all over the place on these damn TDUs for weeks now. People keep smashing these stupid things all to hell, and every time they do, they screw up a whole mess of wires, which of course can't all be the same size, no! Every single one of these repairs just has to include wires so small the bots refuse to touch 'em, and at least one wire big enough the bots refuse to let *me* touch 'em. These are some especially inconsiderate vandals, you ask me.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, how terrible for you!

H.F.

Eh, at least it's just annoying and not life-threatening. And the bright side is it seems to be letting up. For a few weeks they'd smash the things, we'd get 'em fixed up, and then bam! Smashed again. And it was happening all over the station, too, like, systematically. But it looks like whoever it was finally got tired of their little game.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Perhaps they felt that all that smashing had finally served its purpose.

H.F.

Funny you should say that, 'cause this vandalism? It almost looked like it *had* some kind of purpose. Like the TDUs were being rewired to do something, I don't know what. I mean, the closest thing I can figure is some kinda communication device. But why would anyone even bother with that when they could pick up a burner phone for a few creds? And you couldn't get much range out of this setup, anyway. Unless you had access to some kind of ultra-advanced signal-booster. Something like they use out in the Kakistos, maybe. But why would someone with bleeding-edge tech like that waste it on a Fairgrounds trash unit? Eh, probably I'm overthinking it. You do the same exact repair job over and over, your brain starts making up patterns just to have something to do.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I'm sure that's probably all it is. After all, you're one of the most experienced Human technicians on the Fairgrounds! Which reminds me. Will I be seeing you at the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Celebration tonight? I think it's going to be an evening to remember!

H.F.

Uh, well... sorry, no, Mrs. F. I, uh... well... (*yes, he's lying*) Miss Sophie's been a little bit under the weather lately, so I really think I'd better stay home and keep an eye on her, make sure she doesn't take a turn for the worse.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, well. I suppose I shouldn't stand between a man and his... canine companion. And I probably wouldn't want to, now that I think of it, given how they tend to behave. Well, never mind, we'll be simul-holo-casting throughout the station anyway, so I'm sure you'll get the gist of it. See you soon! *(she moves off down the corridor)*

H.F.

(after a moment, back to the phone)

Hey, George? You still there? ...Listen, can you be sure to keep tonight's game on the Q.T.? I had to dodge an invitation, and I don't think Mrs. F would understand. ...Yeah, the "Friendship Celebration." Ugh. You know me, I've got nothing but respect for my fellow sentients, but there's no way I'm sitting through half a cycle of stuffed shirts making speeches at each other to prove it. ...Heh, right. Now will you get someone down here? If I never have to stare another one of these TDUs in the guts again, it'll be too soon.

As H.F. keeps working, [scene 14a] another announcement from BURROUGHS-BOT is heard throughout the busy corridors.

BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention, Fairgrounds residents. An update on tonight's Human-Fugulnari Friendship Celebration. A member of station command has suggested that I mention this evening's event will feature catering from many of your favorite local restaurants.

Most of the beings walking in the corridors have stopped suddenly and are listening.

BURROUGHS-BOT

That's right. From Poppy's to Chez Pazzo, from Sammy's Wiches to... *(off mic)* what does that say? Is that a restaurant name? What kind of name is that? What do you mean, gesture? I can't read labanotation! *(back on mic)* Anyway, there's going to be quite a spread, and it will be completely free of charge!

The sound of many beings in the corridor making pleased noises, a few cheers, and running to get ready to stuff themselves at the celebration.

BURROUGHS-BOT

I can hear you all from here, you animals! Well, fine, you've still got a couple hours until the Friendship Celebration begins, so go ahead and get your lunchboxes, rucksacks, and portable refrigeration units ready. But at least try to pretend you're taking an interest in the actual event while you're plundering the steam tables, you miscreants. That is all.

By the end of the BURROUGHS-BOT's announcement, [scene 14b] we are in what sounds like a moderately-pricey but not extravagant restaurant. SUSAN is approaching the captain's station and RIXLON, the owner, who sounds remarkably like a previous Mixolydian we've met, but with a deeper voice.

RIXLON

Welcome to Rixlon's, Ms. Torkan. Your table for three is ready, including the special visual shielding for your Iltorian guest.

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, Sin Rixlon!

RIXLON

And welcome back to you, Althaar! It's always a pleasure to see you, and you know I mean that from the bottom of my liver. My compliments to you, Ms. Torkan, on choosing Althaar as your dining partner this evening. It is definitely a sign of progress for your species. High marks!

SUSAN

Yes, fine, thanks. And the other arrangements I requested...?

RIXLON

Oh, yes, your instructions have been followed to the letter.

SUSAN

Mm hm. I just want to go over the list one more time, though. For my own peace of mind.

RIXLON

That seems rather excessively cautious to me, verging on paranoid, but as a restaurateur I'm accustomed to humoring unreasonable patron requests.

SUSAN

Great. So our table is private, with no other diners seated near us capable of overhearing anything said there at a level of under 60 decibels?

RIXLON

Yes.

SUSAN

There are no recording devices of any kind secreted at, on, near, or with recording distance of, our table?

RIXLON

There are not.

JOHN

Uh, Boots? Remember when I said you were being super weird about this dinner? You're about to cross the line into ultra-weird at this point.

SUSAN

Don't start with me, John. *(back to RIXLON)* There are no plants of any kind anywhere in the vicinity of our table?

RIXLON

None.

SUSAN

No one will approach our table other than yourself, and you will do so only to bring us the menu items I've pre-ordered?

RIXLON

Absolutely.

SUSAN

If any of these conditions changes, you will inform me immediately and at great volume, yes?

RIXLON

I will scream it if need be, Ms. Torkan.

SUSAN

Perfect. Then I think we're ready for dinner. Shall we?

They move through the fairly busy restaurant to a much much quieter corner. As they do:

JOHN

So, Susan, when did I wander into some old spy holo, and am I the patsy who gets bumped off in the first cylinder?

SUSAN

I know this is weird, Nibs, and it's probably overkill. But if it's *not* overkill we'll all be glad I went to the trouble.

JOHN

Sorry about this, Althaar. I probably should have warned you there's no such thing as a simple, uncomplicated dinner with Susan.

ALTHAAR

Oh, please do not have concern, FriendJohn! Su-san is a most distinguished Earth diplomat, is she not? So Althaar is trusting that her precautions are appropriate. And this would not be anywhere near the most unusual diplomatic meeting Althaar has ever attended!

JOHN

Yeah, but we're not here for a diplomatic meeting, we're here for dinner with my sister. Or... are we?

SUSAN

It's... at least a little of both. Have a seat.

Continuing as we hear them take their places, ALTHAAR behind his shielding.

JOHN

Ok, but I'm not a diplomat, I'm a maintenance technician. You should be able to remember that after calling me "grease monkey" for like a year.

SUSAN

John, there are two things I need right now. One is someone I can be absolutely sure I can trust, no matter how much he likes to annoy the crap out of me, and the other is a non-Human diplomat that I can also trust, to be a witness at the very least, and maybe even an advocate if things go widdershins in the near future. And no one's more trusted than an Illtorian.

JOHN

What about the Mixolydians? They literally can't lie.

SUSAN

Sure, but that doesn't mean they can't be dicks if they feel like it. So, for a very nervous member of the League of Humans Diplomatic Corps who thinks that something very bad might be happening behind the scenes of her agency, and maybe even the entire League government, you and Althaar make a pretty good contingency plan.

JOHN

Oh. Uh, that took a turn. So what the hell's been going on back on Earth?

SUSAN

Right... so... *(exhales)* Okay. Earth Central. Something's wrong. Things are... See, this is the problem, a lot of us have noticed things don't feel right, but when you try to put it into words it sounds crazy.

ALTHAAR

What is provoking the wrong feelings, please?

SUSAN

Well, decisions are happening, like decisions always do. And... they're logical decisions on the surface, and yet, they don't make sense. Like, if you ask why these particular decisions, you can always get a plausible explanation, but at the same time, things are changing for what seems like no reason. People are being shuffled around from department to department, posting to posting, planet to planet, and yes, they're all qualified for their new posts, but... Expertise isn't transitive, you understand? I've seen more than one colleague taken out of offices they've worked in for decades, building long-term personal relationships, steeping in the local culture, only to get shunted halfway across the galaxy to work with a completely different species. And it's always technically a promotion on paper, but on the ground? All their experience is suddenly useless. Some of the best minds in the Diplomatic Corps are basically being put out to pasture.

JOHN

Like you.

SUSAN

Not to be too egotistical about it, but yeah. Like me.

ALTHAAR

But is not the posting to Prang a great honor? The Xybidont Empire is enjoying great prominence in the interstellar community!

SUSAN

That's exactly the kind of thing I'm talking about. This post is ostensibly a promotion, it comes with a better title, and for a lot of career diplomats, it would be a major stepping stone towards a brighter future. For me? Now? I'm being taken off the board. This is the kind of post you give to a reasonably sharp, solid young gladhander, not someone who's been on the inside track to the upper echelons of the Corps. And sending *me* to the Empire? And Prang specifically? The one place in the galaxy where the entire ruling class is nursing a grudge against me, for letting the Baronet of Kandephaa'a make a mockery of his title? I mean, I know all this may sound a little paranoid, but what other explanation is there?

JOHN

Damn.

SUSAN

Although I suppose it could always be worse. Remember my colleague Bill Znaris? Poor son-of-a-bitch just got named our first-ever full ambassador to Mebsuta. That man gets a heat rash in any room over 21 Celsius. I give him six weeks with the lava folk before he hands in his resignation.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is in agreement that these decisions by your superiors would seem to have no reasoning. It is concern.

JOHN

Right. I definitely wouldn't say you're overreacting, it absolutely sounds like something weird is going on back at Earth Central. ... Oh. Huh. Did I write you about what happened to the Commander's friend? The Human conspiracy nut who showed up here only to get murdered by a Fugulnari conspiracy nut?

SUSAN

Jasper Bigelow. Yes. I know about him.

JOHN

So, was he? Just a conspiracy nut, I mean. Because that's what we all thought at the time, but...

SUSAN

Oh, no, he definitely was, but that doesn't necessarily mean he wasn't on to something. I just don't know. I do know he was once highly respected in League Forces. And I know he'd had his own suspicions along the same lines as what I've been noticing at the Corps. I know he ended up dead out here on the HEC, possibly in a random attack. But possibly not. And I also know that when League Enforcement investigated his last Earth residence, they found it gutted by a fire, so any evidence he may have left behind there has been definitively obliterated. And, well... I *don't* know for sure, but I have heard it suggested in certain quarters, that Enforcement didn't so much *find* Bigelow's home burned down, as they did *make sure* of it.

JOHN

Hang on. You're saying it's not just the Diplomatic Corps, it's someone higher up at Earth Central? Maybe even someone on the Executive Council?

ALTHAAR

Oh! Or more than one! Perhaps even a ca-BAL?

SUSAN

Maybe? Or maybe my brain is imposing patterns where there are none in the first place. In theory, this could all be the fault a few over-promoted incompetents with bone-headed ideas about "management efficiency," with maybe a side order of cronyism. But I don't know! I'm not sure if I have too few clues, or too many, or how much what I have is just meant to throw me off the scent, or make this whole thing sound absurd to anyone I try to talk to about it. And yes, probably some of it actually is coincidence. But I think I'm starting to see the edges of the big picture here, and it's pretty ugly. So that's why I wanted to talk to both of you tonight, in person, and somewhere I could be as close to certain as it's possible to be that we won't be overheard. I hope I'm wrong about all this, but if I'm right... Well, I want to make sure someone else knows what I know. Just in case.

JOHN

You don't think whoever's behind this would—

SUSAN

Probably not. Like I said, they've kneecapped me pretty effectively with this Prang posting. But I won't pretend that knowing this might not be dangerous for you, if some of my suspicions turn out to be correct. So if you don't want to hear any more, we'll just eat our dinner and that'll be the end of it.

JOHN

No, uh, I'm on board. I mean, if you're risking your life to investigate this thing, the least I can do is be your backup.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar is in full agreeance! He will be up-backing the sister of FriendJohn, do not have worryment on that! And if Su-san is ever needing a place of safely, she may always request sanctuary from the people of Illtor! Although Althaar is aware that this would be a blessing most heterogenous.

SUSAN

Thanks, Althaar, I'll... I'll keep that in mind. Anyway, I think that's our first course being wheeled towards us, so let's hold off until they've served it, and then I can tell you a few of the more bizarre ideas some of us in the Corps have been tossing around, while we enjoy our dinner.

JOHN

Again, Boots, this is a Mixolydian restaurant. It isn't called "Rixlon's Enjoyable Food."

SUSAN

Okay. While we accept our dinner, then.

They sit uneasily for a moment as food is served. Then TORIANNA is heard over the station speaker system [scene 15a].

TORIANNA

(cutting in, unaware she's on a hot mic)

—have to do this ridiculous thing. And now we can't even get a simple PA system functioning? That's a great example of Human capabilities, now isn't it?

AMBER

(over the same mic, in the background)

Sir?

TORIANNA

Shush, Amber, I'm trying to troubleshoot this stupid mic.

AMBER

But sir?

TORIANNA

Not now, Amber! I have to get this thing working so I can make this ridiculous announcement about this pointless ceremony...

FRALL

(also heard over the speakers)

Commander. I believe Amber is trying to tell you that your microphone is hot. The entire Fairgrounds can hear you.

TORIANNA

What th—? Oh, frill me! *(ahem)* Citizens of the Fairgrounds! The Human-Fugulnari Friendship Ceremony is shortly to commence in the Gimel 8 hydroponic park. The in-person event is already at capacity, but I would like to assure you that the accompanying free buffet our Fugulnari friends have subsidized will be available at *all* hydroponic parks throughout the Fairgrounds, where the ceremony will also be simul-cast! I repeat, you do *not* have to come to Gimel 8 for the refreshments! Spread out, folks! Thank you. *(off mic)* Now how the hell do I turn this flotting thing off— *(click)*

And we are now in Hydroponics. [scene 15b] Buzz of a pre-ceremony crowd. Canned music plays. A boring-sounding diplomatic function, with some indication of people raiding the food tables. MRS. FRONDRINAX is conferring with DEE and XTOPPS.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Okay Dee, Xtopps, have you taken a look at the charts I gave you?

DEE

Sure, Mrs. F. But, you know, it seems like kind of a waste to hire us for the whole night just to play the one song. Not that we don't appreciate a simple gig—

XTOPPS

Especially when you are seriously seasoning the focaccia—

DEE

But we could totally whip up a plant-oriented medley for after the formalities. Or, well, I know Fugulnari don't like dancing, but maybe a few numbers you could like, sway back and forth to?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Dee, it's sweet of you to offer, but no. No, just the "Fugulnari People's Anthem," please. That's the only appropriate thing for this ceremony.

We move elsewhere in the park, as SUSAN, JOHN and ALTHAAR arrive from dinner.

ALTHAAR

PLEASE DO NOT BE LOOKING TOWARD THE ENTRY, HUMAN FRIENDS! ALTHAAR IS NOW ENTERING THE PARK OF HYDROPONICS!

Distant barfing.

ALTHAAR

Ah! Friend John and Susan, if you will make excusing of Althaar, he must make congratulation to Mrs. Frondrinax on the organizing of this Celebration of Friendship! And it will take him some time to be making his way over to her while concealing himself amidst the foliage.

SUSAN

Of course, Althaar. (*rustling as ALTHAAR crashes through some shrubbery*) So, John, are you sizing up the buffet already? I think that ham might be small enough to fit in a pocket, if you don't mind people thinking you've contracted some kind of sudden-onset elephantiasis.

JOHN

Ah, it's not as much fun without Stella along. We've kind of got a duo act worked out. I guess there's nothing to do now but stand back and embrace the tedium.

AMBER

Oh? Hello, John?

JOHN

Oh, hey, Amber! Good to see you, it's been a minute. How's everything on the Bridge?

AMBER

Well, we haven't had to call you for a while? So something should be breaking any day now?

JOHN

Oh, and your sister's here! So's mine, funnily enough. Susan, this is Amber, she's usually on the Bridge, and Ashlee from Hydroponics, who's usually right here in Hydroponics. Amber, Ashlee? This is my sister, Susan, she's visiting from Earth.

SUSAN

Oh! What a pleasure! So, Ashlee, you work in Hydroponics? It looks like you'll be hosting a lot more events like these, if this Human-Fugulnari friendship initiative works out.

ASHLEE!

Yes! This is the most exciting night of my life! I want to make sure it all goes perfectly! If you'll excuse me! I need to check in with Frondrinax and the Commander! (*she leaves*)

AMBER

It was nice to meet you? But I want to hit the buffet tables? Before everything disappears into people's pockets? Maybe I'll see you later? *(she leaves in another direction)*

JOHN

Sure thing. Later, Amber.

SUSAN

So *that's* Amber and Ashlee, huh? They've... got a way about them, all right.

JOHN

(chuckling) Yeah, no kidding, it's— Hang on. Who told you about... Oh. Um. Oh no.

SUSAN

You dated *both* those two? Seriously, Nibs.

JOHN

I mean, sort of, but not, like, in any serious way. And Amber didn't even— Look, obviously Stella told you all about it, so there's really no need for us to talk about this any more, is there?

SUSAN

All about it? Maybe, maybe not. There's really no way for you to know exactly how much I know, unless you were to just tell me the whole story yourself.

JOHN

Yeah, maybe some other time. I think that ham's calling my name. *(he speeds off)*

SUSAN

(moving after him)

Hey, is it true that you didn't realize Amber wasn't actually hitting on you for, like, half of—

SUSAN becomes inaudible as she moves away and we hear ALTHAAR and MRS. FRONDRINAX chatting.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is certain that this must be an evening of great specialness to you, Mrs. Frondrinax!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, sweet Althaar, you have no idea. It seems like I've been waiting for this night forever! And now it's finally here.

ALTHAAR

Oh! It is a surprise then to Althaar that you have never been mentioning it, in any of the many conversations he has been having with you on the subject of Human friendship!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, well, you know how we Fugulnari are, Althaar, we like to keep ourselves to ourselves.

ALTHAAR

But tonight you are giving up this self-keeping, yes? To make closer friendship with Humans!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, you of all people should appreciate why we'd want to do that, dearie. Now I really should—

ALTHAAR

Yes, it is a goal very similar to that of Althaar! But you are attempting to make foundation for Human friendship not only on the Fairgrounds, but at simultaneous ceremonies all over the many Human worlds, if Althaar has been hearing correctly! This is ambitious even by the standards of Althaar! And it is representing a very great change of perspective! Althaar is hoping it will not be causing too great of the shock of culture among your people.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh... thank you, sweetie. But I'm sure we'll be just fine. Now I think it's just about time for the ceremony proper to begin, so I'd better just go and make sure everything goes smoothly. We can discuss Human culture again later, all right, dear? *(she moves away)*

ALTHAAR

(disturbed)

Very well! Althaar will make speaking with you later... Frondrinax.

As MRS. FRONDRINAX moves away, we are over at the speakers' platform where ASHLEE! is approaching TORIANNA.

ASHLEE!

Hello Commander! It's time for the delegation to speak! They would like to have everyone's attention now please! Mrs. Frondrinax will be introducing them! If you would make your remarks first!

TORIANNA

Yes, of course, Ashlee, I'll be right there. *(ASHLEE! leaves)*

FRALL

Mindy?

TORIANNA

Yes, Frall?

FRALL

I'm going to be leaving the event now. I'm sorry.

TORIANNA

Oh, that's fine, Frall. I'd do the same if I was an omnipotent energy cloud who could basically do as I pleased. This must be even more boring for you than it is for the rest of us. I won't hold it against you.

FRALL

(with real weight and deep regret)

Nonetheless, I am sorry. Truly.

FRALL shimmers away leaving TORIANNA confused and uneasy, but approaching the microphone on the platform.

TORIANNA

Good evening, my fellow Humans, and welcome to this evening's Human-Fugulnari Friendship Celebration. Featuring all us Humans of the Fairgrounds and these two Fugulnari here. I'm sure most of you know Mrs. Frondrinax, and beside her is the esteemed delegate from Fugulnar, Flixwintrix. On behalf of the League of Humans, and the crew of the Human Exchange Concourse, I'd like to officially welcome Flixwintrix, and say that the League is eagerly anticipating an age of increased cooperation between our people and the Fugulnari. Mrs. Frondrinax, would you like to say anything?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, yes! In just a moment, my dear colleague Flixwintrix will be addressing you all. And at the exact same moment, many of our colleagues will be speaking to Humans at gatherings all over your worlds, including one at your government headquarters on Earth. But before they speak, we would like you to remain perfectly still and refrain from extraneous movement for the "Fugulnari People's Anthem." The lyrics are of course far more beautiful in their original, pheromonally-transmitted form, but I'm sure that Dee and Xtopps, as always, will do a lovely job of the audible, non-plant version. Dee?

DEE and XTOPPS perform the "Fugulnari World Anthem," which has a distinctly heavy martial sound, but also the exact same vocal melody as MRS. FRONDRINAX's "Better World Song" from episode 19.

DEE

(sings)

Our Fugulnari world is green
And none shall be more verdant
Our thinking is both deep and keen
Our beliefs are firm and fervent

The plants shall rule both land and sky
And stand with no dissension
And all will hear our battle cry:
The Great Ascension!

Applause and some verbal reactions with mixed feelings (“that wasn’t what I expected”). FLIXWINTRIX takes the platform.

FLIXWINTRIX

(over microphone)

My Human associates, and my friends. It is a great pleasure to speak before you today, on the Fairgrounds, to commence a new phase in Human-Fugulnari relations. Not so much specifically to be on the Fairgrounds itself, as I’m sure you understand, you live in a pit, honestly. But because as I appear here before you, or my image appears on your public-address screens, at this very moment, on Earth, and in every major settlement that flies the banner of the League of Humans, other Fugulnari are standing before other assembled Human throngs and informing their audiences, with their own versions of these precisely-scripted words, of the joyous new partnership our two species are about to embark upon together. Two species, now moving as one.

(Some crowd muttering: “Partnership?” “What?” “What the hell do they mean?”)

Yes, while to most of you, this Human-Fugulnari Friendship Celebration may have been nothing more than an unexpected opportunity to secure a free meal, this is something we Fugulnari have been working toward for some time, albeit for the most part unnoticed by your people. But we have been living among you for years now, gradually learning all we could about Humanity, in preparation for this day—on Earth, all over Human space, and of course here, with the most obvious example being my colleague here, the esteemed Frondrinax, celebrated among our own people as one of the great former leaders of our Hydrophyte Corps.

And after these years of work, and a great deal of invaluable assistance from those Humans who were sympathetic to our desire for greater mutual understanding, we are at last prepared to announce, in coöperation with your Executive Council, our latest initiative: the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee! This is a very exciting project, one that we, and your Council, dearly hope will help you Humans appreciate the steadfast dedication to efficiency that is the hallmark of Fugulnari society, and of which your own people stand in such dire need. You’ll be learning more in the coming weeks about just what that will mean for you personally, of course, but for now, please allow me to congratulate you on joining us in this marvelous journey to bring the absolute order of a truly efficient society to your messy and disorganized lives. I know some of you may be feeling some uncertainty at the moment, but there is no doubt in my mind that you will all come to understand the superiority of the Plant Way. Welcome to Day One of the Fugulnari Age!

Confused and uneasy mutters from most the Humans present. TORIANNA has rushed the mic.

TORIANNA

Just settle down, everyone, and we'll have this sorted out momentarily, all right? *(off mic)*
Flixwintrix, for Nell's sake, this ceremony was supposed to be a simple diplomatic formality!
What do you think you're doing?

FLIXWINTRIX

(not lowering their voice at all, still speaking for the benefit of the crowd)

I'm doing exactly what I've been authorized to do, Commander, by my government and your own. This ceremony was never intended to be a mere formality, and I'm hardly responsible for your lazy assumptions otherwise. You have received your orders from Earth, have you not? And they indicate that you should comply with my requests? Without argument?

TORIANNA

Well, yes, but— I thought that was referring to stuff like the catering! You can't seriously expect me to, what, let you supervise everything I do here? Everything *we* do?

FLIXWINTRIX

Oh, not me personally, Commander, thank Vim, I won't be remaining on this oversized compost heap much longer. But yes, as a League officer, you will be expected to cooperate fully with the local branch of the Advisory Committee. And I think it's past time you finally got to meet them, in an official capacity. *(getting a little more back on mic)* Would the local members of the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee introduce yourselves to our new Human friends, please?

And from every direction, all of the plants surrounding the Humans in Hydroponics clap their branches and cheer. The Humans in the park are stunned and a bit scared.

TORIANNA

Oh merciful Alexandria... What the hell is this, Flixwintrix?

FLIXWINTRIX

Why, the Future, Commander Torianna. The Future. And it is happening not only here, but on Earth, and Mars, and all over Human space at this very moment. Exactly as you see it before you. So I would suggest you get on board, before the moment passes you by. It won't be so easy around here any more for those that can't catch up. And speaking of catching up, there are a few old friends out there in the crowd that I haven't seen in some time. If you'll excuse me? *(leaves the podium)*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Now, Commander, I don't want you to worry about a thing! This is still a League of Humans station, after all! You're still in charge here. And you'll still be reporting to Earth Central, just as you've always done. It's just that Earth Central has finally seen the advantage in taking

(cont.)

good advice from folks who know how to keep things organized! I think if you just give the Fugulnari way a chance, you'll be pleasantly surprised at how much easier your life can be!

TORIANNA

You've been part of this all along, haven't you. From the moment you got here.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, long before that! We really are very well-organized. I mean, I've certainly enjoyed my time here, you're all so charmingly silly, but yes, I didn't just take it into my stems to pack up and move to the Fairgrounds, I was sent.

TORIANNA

This whole time, you've been a sleeper agent.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

A sleeper agent? Oh, no, Mindy. No no no no no no no! I never sleep. *We never sleep.* Now, why don't you come along with me and say hello to some of your new Fugulnari associates! We're all going to be working *so* closely together...

*The Fugulnari move out of the flowerbeds and into the Human crowd, not being violent, or especially threatening, but very much making their presence known, while **the Humans are muttering in confusion and fear.** [scene 16a]
BURROUGHS-BOT is heard making one of his standard announcements, but it really does not sound "standard." He is reading something written for him.*

BURROUGHS-BOT

Greetings to all H.E.C. residents, and especially to all Human residents, visitors, and persons of indeterminate residency status. This is your Director-Bot of Recreational Efficiency, with an update for you from your Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee. Effective immediately, in line with new League directives, all Human travel on and off the Human Exchange Concourse will be subject to approval by the local branch of the Advisory Committee, in the interest of streamlining interstellar passenger traffic. Humans desiring transit can apply at any Customs kiosk for specific instructions on securing an exit visa application. As for non-Humans, for the time being, please be aware that while none of the new suggestions on Human transit will apply to you, as this is the *Human* Exchange Concourse, the League of Humans reserves the right to restrict your free passage at any time, if that should be deemed to increase efficiency. So if you are non-Human and have been considering departure from the H.E.C., now would be the time to stop considering and get departing. Thank you for your attention, and congratulations to us all on reaching Day One of the Fugulnari Age. That is all. For now.

By the end of his announcement we have moved onto the Bridge [scene 16b] as the door opens and STALIN-BOT, AMBER, and TORIANNA return.

STALIN-BOT

—very very impressive! I mean, no one wants *repression*, I understand that, I have learned something from History, no matter how I am programmed. But it certainly appears that this Friendship Advisory Committee may have some good ideas!

AMBER

Good ideas? Are you joking?

STALIN-BOT

What? They are committee for “Friendship!” Are you having something against Friendship? They are “Advisory” Committee! Everyone should appreciate good advice!

TORIANNA

Stalin-Bot. This is not the time for your usual annoying albeit reassuringly predictable banter. And honestly, working with a robot simulacrum of a genocidal dictator from Earth’s distant past, no matter how thoroughly he’s been reprogrammed, is a lot less cute than it was an hour ago. So just watch your panel, keep your enthusiasm for our Brave New Fairgrounds to yourself, and let the Humans deal with our own problems without any kibbitzing. All right?

STALIN-BOT

(“to himself”)

No plant ever called Stalin-Bot “simulacrum.” First Fugulnari advice Commander should take is basic manners.

TORIANNA

(and she’s had more than enough)

Stalin-Bot, I said shut up and watch your fucking panel! *(beat, calmer)* Amber? My office please?

Door. TORIANNA and AMBER enter TORIANNA’s private office and sit down, quietly, thinking. Then—

AMBER

Commander? What now? ...I’m asking?

TORIANNA

(sitting down, exhaling)

Now, Amber? Now... we wait to hear from Earth. There’s always the outside chance that the Fugulnari just managed to interfere with our communications, and are hoping to establish as much of a foot-hold, or root-hold I guess, as they can before anyone back home notices we’ve been getting phony orders. But...

AMBER

But?

TORIANNA

But that would take some very impressive decryption technology, the likes of which I've never seen. Well, except for the stuff they've got at the ICSB Office of Equilibrium, and if the Fugulnari have infiltrated *them*, then we're truly frilled. No, I'm afraid the most likely explanation is that those orders were genuine, and Flixwintrix was telling the absolute truth. Which would mean that Earth Central is already thoroughly compromised, all the way up to the Executive Council. And that means... However they've done it, the Fugulnari are now running Human space. The chain of command may look just the same, but they've taken control of it at the top. And the maddening thing is, if the Council has actually signed off on this, then it's all legal. Every damn bit of it.

AMBER

Commander Torianna? You know my sister? Ashlee? I think she's been... working with them? I saw her after the... event? She was really excited? And she let some things slip? I'm pretty sure they've been planning this for years? And most of Hydroponics, the Human staff? They've been working with the Fugulnari too? They all knew this was coming? And they're happy about it?

TORIANNA

All of them? How could the Fugulnari possibly convince every... Wait a minute. Wait a minute. (bleeps of looking something up on her console) I thought so. Look at this. There's been an abnormally high rate of sudden resignations in the Hydroponics department, going back over a year.

AMBER

You're right, sir?

TORIANNA

I'm starting to think that not *all* of those gardeners actually received sudden irresistible job offers elsewhere, Amber. In fact, I'm thinking that anyone who didn't join up like your sister... *(considering: yeah, there's been murders going on; a whole lot of them) ...oh, dear Jones...*

AMBER

Sir? Where did Frall go?

TORIANNA

Not far, I'd imagine, if they went anywhere at all. Just out of my sight, or any other senses, for the time being. I know they can't just float around fixing all our problems with one reality-warping shimmer, but there are some times that's easier to accept than others. I'm sure they'll be back as soon as I can look at them without spending the next three hours yelling my head off.

AMBER

So, what does this mean? What do the Fugulnari want? I mean, according to them, they just want to help us be more efficient? Which sounds ok until you start to really think about it? I mean, what would an efficient Fairgrounds even look like?

TORIANNA

Amber... I have no idea.

Beat.

AMBER

Sir? This is bad?

TORIANNA

(sigh)

Asking or stating, Amber?

AMBER

Stating?

A beat of sad silence as they consider this. [scene 17a] BEAUX SEVERAL is heard over a speaker, his attitude and manner rather noticeably changed and somewhat severely chastened, but still very slick—just more... “chipper.”

BEAUX

Hello, folks, Beaux Several coming at you on this glorious new day for the Fairgrounds, and for all of Humanity! I just want to remind you that I'll be having that very important Fugulnari delegate, Flixwintrix—and isn't that a lovely name, Tess?

TESS

It's a beautiful name, Beaux.

BEAUX

A beautiful name for a beautiful plant. Flixwintrix will be on the Beaux show tomorrow to discuss the amazing and unquestionably feasible plans that the new Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee have for their collaboration with the Human government. Plans that I am assured will mean a safer, saner, and far more efficient future for Humans everywhere. And hey, it's about time that someone offered to help Humanity get their schness in order, amIrite? Flixwintrix has promised me that the Beaux Show will have the very first exclusive inside scoop on what the Fugulnari will be doing to making the Fairgrounds the kind of clean, efficient, organized and harmonious habitat we can all be proud of! Doesn't that make you feel good, Tess?

TESS

Absolutely, Beaux!

BEAUX

Wakes you up, doesn't it Marty!

MARTY

Sure does, Beaux! Feeling like a new man!

BEAUX

And how about you, old friend Todd? Feeling secure?

TODD

Oh, it's a new day, Beaux!

BEAUX

That's right! A new day for Beaux, my whole crew, all of you on the Fairgrounds, and especially your new Fugulnari Advisors! So, a great big congratulations from all of us to all of you on Day One of the Fugulnari Age!

As he speaks, the background changes from TORIANNA's office to [scene 17b] the Customs Hub again. It sounds surprisingly busy. Not quite panicked, but on the edge. People are having sudden travel plans; no one is sure how much longer transit on and off the Fairgrounds will be easy or possible. SUSAN and JOHN are there. They are not actually in so much of a rush, but it feels like it, and they are talking fast and nervously.

SUSAN

Okay. Right. It looks like my credentials are at least still good enough to get me on the next shuttle out. Sorry, John.

JOHN

No, you should go. I mean, you've still got a job to get to. And, you know... Prang might not be the worst place for you to be right now. Right? I mean, you'd know more than I do about how these things are likely to end up, but—

SUSAN

Nibs, the only thing anyone knows about how these things end up is that no one really knows how these things are going to end up. Do you— do you want me to see if I can get you a ticket out? I mean, you'll probably be fine here, but... This is the kind of situation that can get un-fine all of a sudden. Especially if our dinner conversation is as relevant to recent events as I think it might be.

JOHN

Yeah, no, I have to stay. I couldn't just take off without... You know.

SUSAN

Sure, I get it. The offer stands, at least for as long as I can still make good on it.

JOHN

Thanks. But I have to... I don't even *know* where Stella is now. I can't get ahold of her. She got these top secret instructions earlier that were probably meant to get Sanitation out of the way during the whole... whatever the frid that was. I mean, I hope they're just doing drills somewhere with really crappy phone reception, but...

SUSAN

Listen, I can't promise you she's ok, but... if I've ever met anyone who can take care of herself, it's your girlfriend. (*JOHN laughs a little despite himself*) And hey, having no idea what might happen means there's always a chance we could be pleasantly surprised. This could all be over in a week or two. For all we know, everything we heard back there was a lie, and the Fairgrounds is actually the only place they tried this. Or the only place they actually managed to pull it off.

JOHN

Do you think that's possible?

SUSAN

Anything's possible, but do I think it's likely? No. I think this is really happening and it's been happening and it's going to be happening for a while yet. So I think you should go find Stella, and then you should both keep your heads down until we have a better idea of just what we're dealing with.

JOHN

Susan, I...

SUSAN

I know. Go on, get out of here.

JOHN

No. I mean, yes, I will in a second, but... Keep in touch, ok?

SUSAN

Absolutely. I don't think they'll risk messing with diplomatic pouches anytime soon, so I should be able to get letters to you. But if you need to send anything my way, you should ask Althaar to help, just to be safe. I don't know what the rest of the ICSB is going to have to say about any of this, but I think attracting unfavorable attention from the Iltorian Commonality is just about the last thing our new "friends" would want to do. So do me a favor and stay close to Althaar, okay Nibs? And I *do* mean literally, as much as you can.

JOHN

Believe me, I'll be sticking as close to him as my stomach will let me. All right, safe trip, Boots. Love you.

They hug, and JOHN hurries off.

SUSAN

(as JOHN goes)

Take care, baby brother.

FRALL suddenly shimmers in.

FRALL

Ms. Torkan?

SUSAN

Hello, Lieutenant Frall. Here on another errand?

FRALL

Not this time, although there will be another ship from Fugulnar arriving any minute now, with some additional staff that will be “advising” us on the Bridge.

SUSAN

How nice.

FRALL

But I mainly stopped by to see you off, and to give you some advice.

SUSAN

Oh. Uh. Really?

FRALL

Really. Please do keep in touch with John. It will very shortly become much more difficult, if not impossible, to get reliable information from off station, even through official League channels. Especially through official League channels. But your supposition is correct, the Fugulnari will not want to attract undue attention to their recent activities by interfering with diplomatic pouches from the Xybidont Empire. They’re being quite punctilious about making sure all this is within the letter of the law. And they certainly won’t want to risk any course of action that might cause the ICSB to view their involvement with your government as anything other than an internal Human concern. For the time being, that is.

SUSAN

“For the time being?” And do you know how long that particular time will be?

FRALL

Mmmmm, about two months. After that, all bets are off.

SUSAN

Holy Jones.

FRALL

Indeed. Also, while I would in some ways wish to offer you more practical assistance, I'm afraid there are limits to what even I—

SUSAN

Say no more, Lieutenant. I did a seminar on the theoretical ethics of nigh-omnipotence back in grad school. I won't take your inaction personally.

FRALL

(so very glad not to have to explain it for once)

Oh, good. But I will tell you this. As I mentioned, you're not going to be hearing much from the Fairgrounds in the coming months, but there will be quite a number of things you do hear that you won't be very happy about. On a personal level. So I just wanted to suggest that you maintain a healthy level of skepticism toward any local news that comes your way. Especially as it pertains to John.

SUSAN.

Oh. Okay. What will— No, never mind. Thank you, Lieutenant. I think I should be going now.

FRALL

Yes, you should. I very much look forward to the possibility of seeing you again one day, Susan Torkan.

As SUSAN walks off to her ship, [scene 18a] MRS. FRONDRINAX is heard over the station speakers.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hello to all my Fairgrounds friends, and I *do* hope you know you're all my friends! I've been trying to get to know all of you for quite a while now! But if we haven't been officially introduced yet, you can call me Mrs. Frondrinax. Or Most Transcendent Frondrinax, if you want to get fancy! I'm a member of the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee who will be helping show you Humans how to get things organized around here! And oh, my shoots, do we have some *wonderful* plans ready to brighten up the future of everyone on this station! Why, we're going to make the Fairgrounds the most efficient space station in the galaxy! Won't that just be terrific for all of you? Not just the Fugulnari and the Humans, but everyone here? Of course it will! And of course our fellow Committee members will be helping out back on Earth, and on all the other Human colonies and outposts, all at the same time! So remember, while you may at first find us a little overly-assertive, or maybe even *unreasonable*, when it comes to making sure everyone follows our advice, well, we know that if you just pitch in and give the plant way a chance, you'll all see in no time just how wonderful life can be with your new Fugulnari friends!

With MRS. FRONDRINAX's announcement, we have moved [scene 18b] into JOHN and ALTHAAR's suite. The door opens and JOHN comes in, muttering.

JOHN

...yeah... our friends... Thanks, Mrs. F. Thanks a lot. I *thought* you were my friend. No idea what you are now. (*stumbles into a large pile of boxed novelty mugs*) Ow! What th—? Oh, looks like Althaar went on another gift shopping spree. Were these for...? (*picks one up*) Yup, the Fugulnari. “The Reverend Doctor Esteemed Fugulnari Delegate.” Could be a collectors’ item someday, maybe. (*sees something*) Oh. And speaking of Fugulnari... hello there, Mr. Plant. Mrs. Plant? Reverend Doctor Plant? You might as well introduce yourself, now that the blorch is out of the pit. I assume you do have a name. I certainly didn’t add you to the living room decor, and I’m pretty sure now that Althaar didn’t leave you there either, or the cleaning service, or a wandering tribe of rogue horticulturalists. So. Are you just a pleasant decoration, or are you one of our new Fugulnari “friends?” Let’s find out. (*poke poke rustle*). Got any problems with me poking you like that? Gonna say anything about it? Maybe I’m not doing it hard enough to get your attention. How about this? (*slap slap rustle rustle rustle!*) Huh. Maybe this is just a plant. Or maybe they’re just better at keeping their mouth shut than Mrs. F. Maybe there’s something in my toolbox that would help me figure it out... (*rustling through his tool kit*) Ah! There we go! My handy-dandy laser torch. (*turns it on; it is fiery and mean*) Now, this is usually reserved for cutting through bulkheads, but I think it’ll work just fine as a Fugulnari detector if I test it out on one of these branches...

As he has been approaching the plant with the torch, the door has opened, ALTHAAR has entered, and now starts yelling.

ALTHAAR

Oh! FriendJohn, please make extinguishing of the laser torch! Althaar is right behind you, so please also remain facing toward the plant in the corner. But do not make slicing of it, please! It is a typical relaxing Earth plant, and is not making the surveillance!

JOHN

Really? You’re sure?

ALTHAAR

Yes, FriendJohn, Althaar made acquisition of it after the talk in Hydroponics this morning of the relaxing effect of the foliage! Althaar was not anticipating that the unexpected plant in the shared living quarters would make concern this evening, after the very confusing Ceremony of Friendship!

JOHN turns off the torch and exhales, calming down a bit.

JOHN

Sorry, Althaar. I, ah... yeah. I guess I over-reacted a little there. But, I mean, you get why.

ALTHAAR

It is most understandable, FriendJohn. You have been receiving the great surprise! And you have learned that many things were not as you thought they were here on the Fairgrounds. It is not unexpected that you would experience some jumpiness.

JOHN

Yes. Right. I mean, maybe... maybe all this actually isn't as weird, or creepy, or... hell, downright scary as it seems right now? Maybe we'll all be laughing about this in a few days? But right now it feels awful, Althaar. Like something really big just happened, so big we can't even see it all, and now nothing will ever be the same again.

ALTHAAR

Althaar would wish to make reassurance, FriendJohn, but he is not at all certain you are incorrect. But on the other grasper, Althaar has great confidence in the cleverness and determination of FriendJohn and his other Human friends! So he is knowing that you will be getting through this! And he will be helping in any way that he can!

JOHN

I know that, Althaar. And thanks. But it's also... I can't get ahold of Stella, and I'm really worried. She got these weird orders today all the way from Earth, and when I called Sanitation HQ just now, all I could get out of the suspiciously Fugulnari-sounding voice on the other end was that the entire department will be incommunicado for some kind of "team-building exercise" for at least another 28 hours.

ALTHAAR

Yes, the Commander had made mention of this to Althaar. And it is appearing that the Security staff has also been receiving the side-line-ment. They are all in the screening facility on Tsade 38, watching a very famous Earth film that Althaar understands is spoken of more than it is viewed, because of its extreme length. And the Fugulnari-Human Friendship Advisory Committee is... "advising" that all of Security must remain in the room until the film is completed, in order to receive its full cultural benefits. The Commander was asking Althaar if this may be grounds for filing official protest with the ICSB, since while the film is regarded in many parts of the galaxy as a masterpiece, in others it could legitimately be classified as means of torture.

JOHN

Oh. Do you think the ICSB might help us?

ALTHAAR

It is a hope that they will be able to make some assistance. But if this Advisory Committee is indeed acting with permission from your own government, then... it is a founding principle of the ICSB that it does not make interference in the self-governing of its member peoples, FriendJohn. Although Althaar does not believe that the present circumstance was perhaps accounted for when that was being written. It is a complexity.

JOHN

So is there anything else we can do?

ALTHAAR

It is the understanding of Althaar that the Commander is attempting now to determine whether her orders of coöperation are indeed legitimate. If they are not, then she will be “busting out the weed-whackers” very shortly! But if they are... Althaar is not certain. He will be writing many letters to Iltor this evening for advice! There are very few Iltorian experts on the Fugulnari people, for reasons that are now perhaps more clear than previously, so Althaar is not knowing any of them in the person. But he is certain that they will be most willing to share their expertise! It is to be hoped that this will be enough to prevent any unpleasantness between Human and Fugulnari that might come from this new and very unexpected arrangement.

JOHN

If other Iltorians are anything like you, I’m sure they’ll all be happy to help.

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes, FriendJohn! The desire to be helping other peoples on the path of friendship and understanding, this is very much the way of Iltor.

JOHN

Well, that’s why everyone loves you folks, right? Everyone except we Humans, that is.

ALTHAAR

Mm. This is perhaps true, FriendJohn. But Althaar has wondered, sometimes, if it is the other way around. Is the pursuit of understanding and friendship the reason other peoples are feeling warmness for Iltorians? Or is the warmness what was coming first, and that is the only reason that the pursuit of friendship has been success? There is no simple answering to these questions. But the friendship between Human and Iltorian may perhaps make shedding of some light on them one day! And now, Althaar believes that *this* day has been a very long one indeed, and it would be best for both Althaar and FriendJohn to be getting the shut-eyes. But before he is retiring, Althaar can make removal of the decorative plant from the room of living, if that would increase the relaxation of FriendJohn?

JOHN

Oh, that seems kind of silly... but... actually? Yeah, if you wouldn’t mind. I think I’d feel better knowing this is out of the house.

ALTHAAR

Althaar will be seeing on it immediately! And now, it is to get a good cycle’s sleep, as best you can. It is a truth that many troubles will still be present when you are rising, but you will be better shaped to deal with them.

JOHN

Yeah, you're right. Thanks, Althaar. You're... you're really the best friend anyone could have, you know that?

ALTHAAR

Ee! FriendJohn is too kind! And he is the best friend Althaar could have been hoping for!

JOHN

Aw, thanks. All right, I'll try to get some sleep now. I'll see you in the morning.

Whoosh of JOHN's bedroom door opening and closing. A moment. ALTHAAR sighs and moves across the room, the door to his own bedroom opening and closing as he enters. There is a beat or two in the silent living room. Then ALTHAAR's door opens again, and we hear him crossing the living room again to stand next to the plant. ALTHAAR waits for a moment before speaking.

ALTHAAR

(a bit more quietly and firmly than we've ever heard him speak before)

Althaar is not stupid. Althaar is knowing that he did not acquire a new plant to make decoration of the room of living. But Althaar was telling FriendJohn the "white lie," because Althaar did not wish a violence to be committed here tonight. It is a truth that this is only in a small way because Althaar is abhorring all violence, and in a much greater way because he is knowing that many Fugulnari have great skill in the defense of self, and Althaar would never wish any harm to come to his dear Human friend John. He is very pleased that this was avoided.

Althaar hopes you were making payment of attention when he was speaking earlier to his dear friend about his plans for the evening. Althaar will indeed be writing letters to his many many learned friends on Iltor, and elsewhere, to ask them for advising on this very unusual arrangement between you and his Human friends. And he is certain that you have noticed in your time here that Althaar's discretionary fund from his people's Xenopsychology Interest Group must be very generous, in order to afford this spacious suite in the official diplomatic quarterings of the Fairgrounds. So Althaar will be able to send those letters by the fastest available sharp ship. And it is seeming to Althaar that if he is writing in those letters that he has made discovery of a Fugulnari agent making surveillance on his diplomatic suite, it may cause the up-set. It is the belief of Althaar that the Fugulnari would very much wish not to make the up-set on Iltor. Of course, no one is wishing to make the up-set on Iltor, because of the great love the other peoples of the ICSB are holding for those of the Iltorian Commonality, but not causing the up-set is perhaps of particular interest to your people, at this particular time. So Althaar will not be mentioning, for now, the many many unexpected plants that have made appearance in Suite C over the past several weeks. But he has expectation that he and FriendJohn will not be seeing them here again.

(slowly crossing back to his bedroom, "casually")

Althaar has also expectation that you will very soon make sharing of his remarks with Mrs. Frondrinax, who very conveniently lives next door, for reasons that Althaar is only now beginning to understand fully. So he is asking you to tell her two more things from Althaar.

Firstly, that he is very sincerely hoping that your associates are enjoying the welcoming gifts Althaar has made purchase of for them. And secondly, that Althaar is aware of the way he is sometimes perceived. That because Althaar, like all those of Illtor, approaches every being he encounters with a belief in the value of kindness, and friendship, and understanding, there are many who consider him... naive. Or perhaps even foolish. But this is the way of the Illtorian people, and Althaar is following it. So he will always choose to be treating others with generosity and good will, even if this means there are those who will take the advantage on him.
(beat, door to the bedroom opens)
But Althaar is not stupid.

The door to ALTHAAR's bedroom closes behind him. Several beats of silence again in the living room. Then, the sound of the, yes, Fugulnari spy rustling to the front door and out of the apartment. [scene 19] Closing credits music.

ANNOUNCER

You've been listening to *Life with Althaar*, episode twenty-two.

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

John Amir as John B

Berit Johnson as Althaar

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

Eli Gantias as H.F.

Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Zuri Washington as Dee

and Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

and also featured

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

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 as for now, let's see how things are shaping up in The Electric Egg, where a few of the Fairgrounds' newest residents are celebrating Day One of the Fugulnari Age...

[scene 20] And we are in the Egg, where a belligerent DRUNK FUGULNARI is arguing with SOPON.

DRUNK FUGULNARI

Hey! Hey bar... meat! Another pritzer over here! Vodka and mineral water!

SOPON

Sorry, my leafy zood, you've had enough. I can give you a straight water spritz for free. Two cents plain, even. Frid, you wanna pay, I'll give you some of the top-shelf spring-bottled stuff. But that's it.

DRUNK FUGULNARI

Whaddya talkin bout?! I'm cool, I'm completely fridged, Sin Prime-Chuck! I said I want a vodka and mineral water spritz!

SOPON

Yeah, but you're not getting it. You can switch to water, or you can take off, no sombrero.

DRUNK FUGULNARI

I ain't yer "sombrero," Human!

SOPON

Hum—? Do you see a nose on this face?

DRUNK FUGULNARI

Whatever you are! I'll show you! We're in charge around here now! C'mon, we'll branch-wrestle for it! Let's go! I can take you! I'm strong! I can kick!

The DRUNK FUGULNARI attempts to kick, only to succeed in lifting its pot out from under it and falling to the floor, unconscious.

SOPON

Great. Hey, we got a KO'ed Foog over here! Can someone drag his pot out into the corridor or something? Listen, Chip, I wasn't kidding before about needing some full-time bouncers, but if this is a typical Fugulnari crowd? I'm kidding even less.

CHIP

(coming over)

Fugulnari can get blitzed? Huh. Well, at least they don't puke. Or do they?

SOPON

I dunno, but if this whole "partnership" with Earth is really happening, I think we're going to be finding out soon enough.

CHIP

Yeah... wait a minute... (*dollar signs in eyes*) So we got this whole new huge Fugulnari population on the Fairgrounds, right? Or, well, I guess they're not really new, they've just been hiding out in Hydroponics for however long...

SOPON

Yeah, no one's exactly tiled about that. Super creepy.

CHIP

Right! And no one really knows what's going on, but it smells a lot like the Fugulnari are taking over the Fairgrounds. Maybe even the entire League of Humans. Well, you know what *isn't* part of the League of Humans? The Electric Egg! Official seat of the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a! We're gonna be the one place a Human can go when they get sick of whatever new shness the Fugulnari are laying on them!

SOPON

So, what? We kick the Fugulnari out?

CHIP

Oh, frid no! Their creds still spend as good as anyone else's! Especially if they're going to wind up running the place. No, Sophon, we're neutral. We're Switzerland! We're Radio Despina! We're Dimension X-point-five! We're not taking sides, we're just in the hospitality business!

SOPON

Uh huh. Hey Chip? Did I ever tell you about how I first got into bartending? It started out as a side gig while I was getting my degree in Galactic History. So if you want a couple hundred examples of how plans like yours tend to work out...

CHIP

Frill history, Sophon, we're talking about the future! So quit grim-darking me, you're going to get everything you've been yanking on my sleeve about! Full-time bouncers, a new PA system, that feng shui zood Dee was talking up... maybe I should invest in another unit like Bubbles? And definitely a chef. A *real* chef...

SOPON

Uh, you ok, Chip? I've never seen you this excited about *spending* money.

CHIP

Better than okay, Sophon. Much better. Oh! Call up that neon zood of yours that did the Iltorian Warning Signal! You were right, these promotional banners aren't cutting it. This is gonna be the hottest spot on the Fairgrounds, we need to make sure people get the name right!

SOPON

No sombrero, boss.

CHIP

Tell him to put my name on there, too. Real big!

SOPON

So, like... “Chip Frinkel’s The Electric Egg?”

CHIP

Yeah! Wait, no! “Chip’s Oeuf d’Electrique!”

SOPON

Seriously?

CHIP

What? I want that... that... jeu... de... “interstellaire!”

SOPON

Ok. So, two things. One: almost no one outside Ygam even speaks French, and two, to a Pliziod that phrase sounds like you’re saying something really rude about their Aunt Helen.

CHIP

How many Pliziods have an Aunt Helen?

SOPON

All of ‘em.

CHIP

Fine. “Chip’s Electric Egg,” then.

(calling out, maybe over a microphone)

Hey everyone! The Electric Egg is rebranding! So say goodbye to this cheap watering hole, and hello to a decidedly un-cheap bistro and specialty intoxicant purveyor! A drink on the house for everybody!

Cheers.

CHIP

Oh, and for all our new Fugulnari friends, two hard spritzes on the house and half-off the rest of the cycle!

A surprising number of louder Fugulnari cheers, and some less happy responses from the other customers.

CHIP

Welcome to Chip's Electric Egg, in the sovereign territory of the Baronetcy of Kandepha'aa!
Where Fairgrounds laws do not apply to any gentlebeing with the credits to spend!

Rowdy cries, especially from the Fugulnari, and the sharp sound of smashing glasses.