

Life with Althaar

Episode 33: Two Plants and a Booster

Version 2.2 (Recording Script), 10/01/21—IWH (v2, BAJ)

[scene 1] The standard LWA opening spaceship whoosh. Hum of an unfamiliar, unfriendly-sounding place. Very metallic. Kinda damp, maybe. Harsh echoes. A few beats, then JOHN calls out into the dark.

JOHN

Hey, uh, hello?

(beat)

Anyone?

(beat)

Would it be too much to ask why you folks dragged me in here? I'm sure this is all just some kind of silly misunderstanding. *(beat)* So, if you'd just let me know what this is about, we should be able to get whatever it is cleared up in a couple minutes, and then go on about our lives, yeah? *(beat)* I mean, I know you Fugulnari don't usually make mistakes, you're far too efficient for that, but... even the most efficient have their little slip-ups now and again, right? And, you know, this is me, here. John B, Booster! Friend to all plants! And to Mrs. Frondrinax specifically. So I... I'm not really sure what's going on here.

Hello...?

Dinorbiax? Fracottiverx?

Look, zoods, I know you like to jeck around with us Humans every once in a while, but... uh, this seems a bit much. I mean, I would have come with you anyway if you had asked, I'm always happy to help out. So the whole bag-over-the-head, silent treatment thing is a little excessive, you know? Over the top. Right?

(exhale)

Right. I guess I'll just wait, then.

Metal door/hatch opens and closes, big, heavy, and squeaky. Ka-THUNK of industrial lighting being switched on, and then buzzing under. Rustle as DINORBIAX and FRACOTTIVERX enter the space and approach JOHN.

DINORBIAX

Oh, sorry, squire! Dint mean t'leave ya on your solo mio for that many tics!

FRACOTTIVERX

Dino? Did it slip our fabbed fronds as to be leavin' a bit a lucy on for Our Boy, here? He hasn't been lettin' about in the mung in here with no binco, has he?

DINORBIAX

Oh! Appy-polly-loggies, Sin B! Musta slipped me november there. I's like to forget you Humans aren't so nanti varda as our lot. Likes a bit a sparkle, you does. Doesn't give you the fear, do it, Sin B? The munge, like?

JOHN

It's— No, it's fine, just— Look, what's going on here? I mean, I'm on my way to work and suddenly you two brace me, which, ok, whatever, I'm used to that by now, I know how much you enjoy your little “spot checks” on random passers-by. But this time you don't even say anything, you just pop a bag on my head and drag me... someplace. Wherever here is. And then you take the bag off my head, but leave me sitting around in a pitch-black room for... however long it's been, which is not exactly an improvement. Or an efficient use of anyone's time, right? I mean, I haven't done anything wrong, as far as I know, and if you had any questions for me you could have just asked them back there in the corridor without all this rigamarole, so this is all, well, more than a little annoying. Or, confusing, is what I meant to say. Confusing.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, sure it is, me boni omie, so we's here for a light cackle to make all sky-blue, we is.

DINORBIAX

That's right, Frac, sure as sure.

FRACOTTIVERX

See, mayhaps Sin B will codjo a pair a setterfold days back, this nanna little zelda name a Andrew Scarlett done made a boni kertever of himself.

DINORBIAX

And not just himself, see, but like a fabuloso dachafold of our fellow Fugulnari, and a grand and dowry piece of Fugulnari property, right?

FRACOTTIVERX

All battyfanged, they was.

DINORBIAX

Completely up the spout.

FRACOTTIVERX

And there's charper that our omie Sin B here had himself a bijou parley with that dowry cod before he upped stumps and took the bleedin' fabulosa bench.

DINORBIAX

Andrew Bloody Scarlett.

JOHN

Oh. Him. But... Frondrinax debriefed me herself after all that. I assume she filed some kind of report you can look up, but, uh, long story short: this Scarlett was apparently holding a grudge against me for turning his partner in a few months ago. So, that day, before the, ah... incident, he broke into my office to tell me a bunch of stuff about his partner, I guess to try and make me feel guilty about it. And then he told me he wasn't going to kill me, in a tone that implied the option was still very much on the table. And then he stole one of my laser welders and left. And that was it.

FRACOTTIVERX

Right right. That was it, was it?

DINORBIAX

But that wasn't entirely it now, was it, squire?

JOHN

Uh, yes! Yes, it was. I told all this to Frondrinax.

FRACOTTIVERX

Right, Frondrinax done charpered it all to us, fair boni.

DINORBIAX

But you see, guv, there's polari and there's cackle, and then there is whatchyoucall the truth, right? Just a formality here, you see. Proper investigation, like?

FRACOTTIVERX

So it's on your fabbed buddies here to be doing the looky-loos, yanno? One more turn through the turnstile. Everyone that done spent a mo with Sin Terrorist Fugulnari-killer Scarlett. But as me omie Dino here says...

DINORBIAX

Just a formality, guvner.

JOHN

Well, fine. The bag over the head seems excessively formal, but if that's how you wanna do it, I can go over my entire conversation with the terrorist in as much detail as you'd like. The sooner we get that settled, the sooner we can all get out of here, right?

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, sure, sure, right as rain, Sin B, sir. But see, as it is... there's a bit more we has to dish the dirt about here... as regards some other cod fakements doin' a hover around your Booster self.

DINORBIAX

Like, see... maybe there ain't no codness there with Mister Andrew Naff Scarlett, right? But say as say to be charpered there's a boni bit a naffness other to other we be having the need to polari with our omie John B.

FRACOTTIVERX

Nothing in the of itself seem so much a dingy billingsgate, not so much to chivvy, but a quarter bit a gossip to be tittered over.

JOHN B

Um, okay. I don't really know what exactly you might have questions about, but I'm sure I can clear up any confusion you might have about my activities. Preferably sometime this cycle, though, yeah? I *do* have work I need to get back to.

DINORBIAX

Oh, larlou, Sin B. We're sure you gots a boni bit of charper about all this biziwizz. And Frac and me? Well, we gots *all day* to be listening...

[scene 2] Opening credits music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents..!
LIFE! WITH! ALTHAAR! Season Three!
Episode 33... "Two Plants and a Booster"

[scene 3] In the In-Betweens. Stella is in one of her ad-hoc "office" spaces, bleeping on a device, considering plans and options. H.F. knocks on a bulkhead.

H.F.

Hey, Stel? Issue.

STELLA

(distracted)

Is it urgent? I'm trying to concentrate on some numbers here. Not my strong suit, but it comes with the job. Which I don't have, because I'm not in charge, I'm just doing this because someone has to. Hey, next time you're in touch with Delly, can you ask them to keep an eye out for any... I dunno... disaffected accountants that might seem recruitable?

H.F.

Sure thing. But, uh, this is actually kind of urgent.

STELLA

"Kind of" urgent? If it's not vital to the Resistance, it can wait, ok? This is probably going to take me the rest of the cycle as it is, and it's already making my head hurt.

H.F.

I guess it is more what you might call personal business...

STELLA

Then stick a pin in it, please. No time for personal at the moment.

H.F.

Yeah, but it's not just personal, either. The thing is... I think John might be in some trouble. With the Foogs.

The beeping stops sharply; the device is turned off.

H.F.

But I can come back later, if this isn't a good time.

STELLA

Well, it is *now*. I'm not exactly going to be able to concentrate on the finer points of resource allocation until you tell me what kind of trouble you're talking about.

H.F.

Ok, so, we had a couple tips come in a few minutes ago. Someone said they saw John B get shanghaied by a couple of well-known Fugulnari button men with a very distinctive patois in the Zayin 3 corridor. And another someone saw them pass through Tet 12 a little while later, although they, ah, they couldn't be sure just who it was the Foogs had got their twigs on.

STELLA

But the first one was sure? They actually said they saw John B getting... detained?

H.F.

Well, not in so many words. What they actually said was, "That stupid piece-of-smark green-noser from the Foogs' stupid piece-of-smark propaganda movie finally got what he's been asking for," but, you know. I extrapolated.

STELLA

Zayin 3 to Tet 12... No way to know where they were headed. Have you found any documentation about this? Any kind of warrant or arrest record?

H.F.

Not even on the Foog-only channels, at least the ones we've got the sensory apparatus to read. But I did risk a quick peek at the feed from the brig security cameras. Now, we don't have total coverage, but we've got some kind of visual on every cell in there, at least a partial. And as far as I can tell, John's not in any of them.

STELLA

Processing?

H.F.

They grabbed him 45 minutes ago, Stel. And no sign of the kid since. They don't take that long to process.

STELLA

Right. So... maybe they just needed him for an urgent repair or something.

H.F.

Yeah... The thing is, we dealt with more than our share of bone-headed "productivity initiatives" from WSS corporate, but I seriously doubt they've made it company policy that repairs are now to be performed with a big black bag over your head.

STELLA

WHAT?! You didn't say anything about a bag over his head!

H.F.

I was trying to find a more casual and less distressing way to drop that in.

STELLA

LIKE HOW? Sorry. Oh, Moni claw the Zappa, this is bad. This is really bad. (*calling out*) Frall? Can you hear us? I mean, I *know* you can hear us, so do you have anything on this? Anything you can share right now?

(*beat*)

I guess not. All right, radio silence from the omnipotent nimbus, and we're left with an important agent in Foog custody.

H.F.

Presumably.

STELLA

I really don't know how else to interpret the whole bag-over-the-head, Dinorbix and Fracottiverx thing.

H.F.

Yeah, me neither.

STELLA

Ok. So. We need to keep checking on the brig— Is anyone doing that now? In case John turns up?

H.F.

Well, we've got to be sparing with the camera feeds, there's a non-zero chance they could get tracked back to us. But I've got Vert taking a quick look-see every ten minutes. He still can't do any sparring until his legs grow back, but his eyes have regenerated enough for monitor duty.

STELLA

Hope he heals faster this time, he's a damn good fighter. We need him back in training.

H.F.

I know, right? So flottin' fast! And graceful! I never expected him to master Yoyalabam so quickly. Voussh says pretty soon he'll have learned all she has to teach. That is if he can keep himself in one damn piece long enough. Such an agile mover when he's sparring, but the rest of the time, he flomps around the place like a blorch with a severe inner-ear condition!

STELLA

Like a ballet dancer I used to know. *(beat)* All right. So. The John situation. For now, I want you and Vert to keep on those monitors and let me know right away if you spot him. And make sure to put an alert on all the internal Foog systems we can access, to flag John's name if it pops up. I'll stay here and start working out the rescue plan.

H.F.

Sure, I've already— Wait, what? Rescue plan?

STELLA

You heard me.

H.F.

Okay, Stel...

STELLA

What?

H.F.

I'm just saying... and I'm just saying it because *you're* always saying it, to everyone who volunteers for any mission out in the world... we can't expect rescues in the Resistance. Not because we don't want to, but because we can't afford to. One wrong move, and they can track us right back here, and then... that's it. They've got us all. We can't justify risking all of us to save one of us. The brig cameras are already pushing it.

STELLA

I know. This is different.

H.F.

Why, because it's John?

STELLA

Yes.

H.F.

Okay, listen, I care about the kid, too. Not like you do, sure, but he's... well, he was a lot more than just another probationary under-assistant to me, you know? And then, when I found out he's been with us this whole time? I mean, I couldn't have been prouder of the guy. But it's like you told me. When you set him up as a double agent, you knew there was a damn good chance you weren't going to see each other again.

STELLA

It's not that, H.F. I mean, yeah, I can't say my judgment is completely unaffected by how much I love that preposterously unfortunate guy, but it's not just that. If John's cover's been blown, we need to make an exception for him, because there are two very good reasons we can't just leave him to the Foogs.

H.F.

Which are?

STELLA

One: we don't leave our people behind if we can help it. I know there are plenty of times we haven't been able to help it, and everyone has to be prepared for that, but if there's ever a reasonable chance at a rescue, we do take it. And sometimes, we succeed. I'm not going to throw anyone's life away on some kind of hopeless last-ditch attempt to get John out, but I'm going to at least look at our options. He's one of ours, and he's in the field, behind enemy lines. He deserves at least the consideration of a rescue. Back in Sanitation, we lost a lot of good people to the vent-biters, but we never threw one of our own to the swarm so the rest of us could get away.

H.F.

Sure, I can see that. So what's the second reason?

STELLA

(deep breath)

Remember that ex-prisoner we brought in right before Drew's big blowout? The one we were pretty sure Drew had sent our way?

H.F.

I'd say more than pretty sure from what he told us. I mean, it's possible there's someone else on the Fairgrounds who fits the description of "giant bird man pointy sucky head," but if there is, I haven't run across 'em.

STELLA

Exactly. So, that guy's still pretty messed up. Mwangi's not sure he'll ever be anything like "okay" again. But based on some of what he said—what we could make out, at least—about what the Foogs did to him, what they're doing to other Humans back there...

H.F.

Yeah. Torture. Sadistic bastards.

STELLA

That's the thing, H.F. It's not sadism. It's worse, in a way. They don't like it. They don't *not* like it. They just do it. Not for kicks, or out of deliberate cruelty. It's just... data-gathering. They need to know how Humans break, so they've been breaking Humans. Every way they can. Because they really, truly believe everyone would be better off following the Plant Way. So they'll do whatever they need to, to make that happen. No questions of morality, as we understand it. Just... efficiency.

H.F.

Huh. Yeah, that makes a sick kind of sense, I guess.

STELLA

And, from the state of that guy, they've learned a lot about what it takes to break a Human. Their techniques have gotten... really effective.

H.F.

Yeah.

STELLA

So... what happens if they break John?

H.F.

(a beat as he realizes)

What... does he know?

STELLA

About what we're up to? Almost nothing. About who we are? Probably no more than the Foogs already do. But about where we are? Enough. More than enough.

H.F.

(that tears it)

Right. How long til you're ready to bust him out?

STELLA

Hold up, H.F. We need to know where we're busting him out of, for starters. You keep on the channels and let me know the second you get anything. I've already got a couple dozen basic incursion missions sketched out, I'll see what we might be able to adapt to a rescue once we have more details. But we really don't want to rush this.

H.F.

Well, I really don't want to sit around waiting for the Foogs to mindsuck the kid into giving us all up!

STELLA

We still don't know that's even happening! For all we know... Hell, it could be anything. It could even be that the Foogs are trying to set him up as a double agent against *us*. I mean, bag-over-the-head-in-a-public-corridor isn't exactly subtle. Maybe they're just trying to make it look like he's in trouble, to make him seem trustworthy to Resistance sympathizers. Or, possibly, the bag over the head was just a precaution, and Frondrinax's favorite Booster is at this very moment getting a guided tour of some super-secret Foog facility, soaking up some amazing deep intel we couldn't get any other way. I don't want to tank that by going in guns blazing unless we're as sure as we can be that John's cover has already been blown.

H.F.

Aw, streez. Yeah. We *don't* know enough. Do you think that's possible? That there's actually nothing to worry about?

STELLA

Is it possible? Sure. Is it likely...? I don't know. I mean, an agent getting dragged off with a black bag over his head is not usually a great sign. But on the other hand, we can't let ourselves get spooked and rush into any hasty decisions. That's a recipe for disaster. Just... watch the feeds, ok? Let me know if anything comes up.

H.F.

On it.

[scene 4] Interstitial music. Meanwhile, back in the interrogation room...

DINORBIAX

Right then. So here's how we sees it. We knows you had a bona bijou cackle with Drew, and we knows what you done charpered Frondrinax about it. But we'd like to aunt nell it again from your own self, you codjo?

FRACOTTIVERX

See, we can't quite get our fronds around why our lad came to you.

DINORBIAX

And why he just trolled off.

FRACOTTIVERX

After sharpering one of your there laser welders.

DINORBIAX

Without you giving a screech.

FRACOTTIVERX

Which he then done used to blow up that bona new supply dock wot we done basketed onto the Fairgrounds. What a scharda!

DINORBIAX

Not to mention one of our latties and a whole dachafold of Fugulnari security bagadgas onboard.

FRACOTTIVERX

So maybe's you gots some more cackle to open up what we knows here?

JOHN

I don't know what else to say, but... Okay. One more time. This guy comes into my office, through my *locked* office door, looking pretty seriously... unbalanced. He won't tell me his name, but he does tell me he's thinking of killing me. Because he blames me for turning his partner in. But then he doesn't kill me. Or even maim me. He just tells me about his partner, and how much he loved him, and how much I suck, and then he leaves. And that's all.

DINORBIAX

But that ain't all, innit?

JOHN

Do you get paid by the contradiction or something? Yes. That was very much all.

FRACOTTIVERX

Nishta, squire. The laser welder.

DINORBIAX

The laser welder.

JOHN

Right. Yes. He apparently took one of my laser welders.

FRACOTTIVERX

One of?

DINORBIAX

How many of these dowry weapons of battyfangness do you has just sitting around all casual-like, waiting to be sharped and parkered by any omie wot has his wild up come dropping in for a polari?

JOHN

Well, *now*, I have three.

FRACOTTIVERX

Lyin' around, all in the open-like?

JOHN

Look. A laser welder is a tool. A common tool many maintenance workers are certified to use. It's standard equipment. Not called for very often in the field of drinks machine repair, it's true. But, you know, this is the Fairgrounds, so I actually end up needing one on a pretty regular basis. Besides which, it's company policy to supply us with replacements on a pre-determined schedule, whether we need them or not. Which we generally don't, because those things are built to last, and I'm the only employee left in the local office to get any use out of them. And that local office is incredibly cramped, even for just one person. Very limited storage area. So yeah, I've usually got a couple of extra laser welders just lying around. Like a lot of other tools.

DINORBIAX

Like a lot of other tools? Other tools that could be used for such a fabuloso carkering?

JOHN

I mean, technically, sure, any tool designed to put stuff together can probably do a decent job of taking stuff apart. And a laser welder can be very dangerous in the wrong hands, that's why you need a full cert before you can even touch one. Unless you steal it, obviously. But that was one of the first training modules H.F. made me do when I got here, after EVA 101. And it was plenty scary, they start off with like, a full hour of horrifying footage of these really unconvincing yet seriously disturbing recreations of welder accidents. Way-too-red "blood" spurting everywhere, severed fingers floating dramatically through the air over *Adagio for Strings*, that kind of thing.

FRACOTTIVERX

H.F.? Who's H.F.?

DINORBIAX

His old badge cove, Frac. The one that's up and scarpered.

FRACOTTIVERX

Right. Some omies say he done lelled off these Fairgrounds here...

DINORBIAX

And some punters cackle he's still lettied about, in secret, hiding-like...

FRACOTTIVERX

And some omies and palones done cackle he's the manky sod wot done all them explosions been slapped us Foogs about from time to time.

JOHN

What? Who's saying that? I haven't heard anyone saying that.

DINORBIAX

Oh no, you wouldn't, squire. These happens to be peoples we done brought in this room before you, see? Omies we also took some time with, having a cackle.

JOHN

Oh. Really? Well, I haven't seen H.F. since New Year's, so. I wouldn't know about that.

FRACOTTIVERX

We ain't saying as you do, guy, we ain't saying as you do. But ya know? He *did* hand you the gossip about vogueing the old laser welder, yes? Are you sure you didn't maybe give Mr. Scarlett, well, a little polari perhaps before giving him one of yours? So he wouldn't be, I dunno, so afeared of it like you was?

JOHN

I told you, I didn't *give* it to him. He took it. I have no idea how he learned to use it. And I didn't even realize it was missing at first. Not for a few hours after he left.

DINORBIAX

Oh, right! And *then* you right screeched about it, dint ya?

JOHN

No, as I'm sure you know perfectly well, I *didn't* "screech" about it! I wasn't even sure he had taken it. I just noticed I had one less laser welder for some reason.

FRACOTTIVERX

And that wasn't a kick in the pants? That a bolshy weapon you just keeps lying about got parkered?

JOHN

Not a weapon, a tool! An incredibly common tool! (*frustration pouring out*) So incredibly common that the company keeps sending us a new one every year without any kind of request on our part, because they've got a *schedule*, while they ignore all our requests for the tools we actually *do* need replaced, and the spare parts we *don't* have, so we wind up with—have you even *seen* my office? Piles and piles of miscellaneous crap I almost never use, covering up what little I have of the stuff I actually need. And I don't even have the time to do a proper inventory, because another thing they won't send me is a replacement for H.F., so I'm on call literally 28 hours a day!

DINORBIAX

Oh! That's a right nanna tale there, sir. It certainly is.

JOHN

Yeah. So, maybe you can understand why I didn't take the loss of one superfluous piece of equipment all that seriously. I mean, maybe I would have connected the dots if you had announced that that explosion was actually a terrorist action. But I had no idea any Fugulnari had been killed, let alone by laser-welder-assisted sabotage. Not until Mrs. F showed up to debrief me about it, anyway. One missing welder just didn't seem like that big a deal.

FRACOTTIVERX

I dunno, squire, still... seems to me... wild-talking omie drops by, threatens me, scarpers with a very manky little device... not important? Does that make so much sense?

JOHN

Well, I don't know what else you want me to say, because that's the truth. Humans, we're just... not that logical sometimes, right? You should know that by now, that's the whole reason we *need* the Plant Way. But you can't expect us to change overnight. We're irrational!

DINORBIAX

Oh, we gets that, guv, we certainly do. In fact, not to sounding our own tooting fakements here, but I'd say that maybe me and Frac here know more about you lot and your difficulties with keeping your tetties level than any other Foogs around.

FRACOTTIVERX

Sees, we got experience. Empirical, like? In the field. We've had to make a quick varda of your lot's behavior, we have. And maybe we don't "get it," but we sure as sugar recognize it.

DINORBIAX

So we can also varda that there's a not-invisible gap there between what you might call "irrational" and what is actually—

FRACOTTIVERX

Unbelievable, like,

JOHN

... You're saying my story is unbelievable?

DINORBIAX and FRACOTTIVERX laugh, vigorously, but without much humor.

DINORBIAX

Oh, no no, squire. No. Just that... maybe it seems to be falling into that, wosname, gap just a bijou bit there.

FRACOTTIVERX

Like when we start giving an ogle into a perfectly believable story, we find it's not actually as we've been getting it from aunt nell.

DINORBIAX

Like your story about putting the lupper on our friends at DPC#5.

JOHN

That wasn't actually my story, though. That was Mrs. Frondrinax's story.

FRACOTTIVERX

Right, and we cackled with Frondrinax about it, and she done gave you all the bona lavs there.

DINORBIAX

Very sweet.

JOHN

Yes, that was very generous of her.

FRACOTTIVERX

But when we done tried to pin her down to exactly what you had done to deserve the metties...

DINORBIAX

Well... suddenly it didn't seem like you'd really done much at all, now did you, squire?

JOHN

I never *said* I did anything! I just— All that happened was that I mentioned a job I had coming up in DPC#5, and then Frondrinax said she'd heard something odd about them. But when I *offered* to look into it for her, she said no, she'd get some professionals to handle it. Which I assume was you two.

FRACOTTIVERX

That's right, guv. We handled that lot right well, we did.

DINORBIAX

And Frondy said some pretty bona things about me bosom Frac and myself, sure she did, but she also done said some *very* nice cackle about you, didn't she? Called you a hero and all. Gave you all the dowry. And you didn't even do anything, really, did you? It was just a... whatchyou call that, Frac?

FRACOTTIVERX

Coincidence is what they calls it, Dino. Yeah. "Coincidence."

JOHN

I don't disagree, but that's on Mrs. F, isn't it? She was the one who decided to give me the credit. Maybe she thought it would be a good piece of "productive messaging" to show a Booster helping root out sedition, to encourage others to do the same. I don't know. But I never claimed anything. Maybe she just wanted to do a favor for an old friend.

DINORBIAX

Yeah, that's right, you and Frondy *are* pretty tight, ain'tcha? She likes you. She likes to *polari* to you. A lot, like. Maybe about things she ought to shouldn't.

FRACOTTIVERX

Didn't she have a little palaver with you about NutraZoom right about then? That same time?

JOHN

Well, she told me not to drink too much of it. Which, frankly, was not going to be a problem anyway. Sorry, folks, but the NutraZoom flavor profile is still... not great.

DINORBIAX

Right. Not too much of it. But you done stopped bevvying it in toto, dincha? Like not a drop has passed yer pots since then? We do have access to your purchase records, guv.

JOHN

Did I say "not great?" What I meant was "utterly disgusting." No Human is going to drink that stuff unless they absolutely have to. Or unless they're trying to impress someone on the Committee.

FRACOTTIVERX

But like, she also told you *why* you was not to be bevvying it so much, dint she?

JOHN

I mean, she did mention it might have some... undesirable side effects.

DINORBIAX

In fact, she done told you all about our little special formulations just a bijou bit before the Resistance suddenly vardas all about them, and starts screeching it all over the speakers.

JOHN

I... suppose so? I don't remember the exact timing of it.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, we do. Now Mrs. F thinks that's another... what were we calling them? Coincidence! Right. So many *coincidences* round here. Makes your capitulum spin, it does.

JOHN

You've talked with her about this?

DINORBIAX

Oh, sure we have, Sin B! Like I said, Frondy does like to palaver, she does. Little much for a Foog, really.

JOHN

So, it wouldn't be too surprising if she told someone else besides me, right? Or, maybe it was nothing to do with her at all. Maybe someone else warned a Human they didn't want messing up their job because that Human was a little too vagued-out on NutraZooms. Or maybe the Resistance just found out about it on their own, you think of that? It seems like they're pretty good at finding out stuff we don't want them to know. And they'd already been talking about it on those pirate broadcasts of theirs, hadn't they? I think they said they were studying it. I mean, there's a lot of possible explanations. I can't have been the only Human to know about the secret ingredients, is my point.

FRACOTTIVERX

Only? Oh, no, guvnor. Not the only.

DINORBIAX

But one of a very very nishta dowry. And you can be well assured that we've already had or will be soon having similar cackles to this one with the entirety of those bijou omies.

FRACOTTIVERX

But you're the one here with us right now, see?

DINORBIAX

And, disgusting as it may be, you're the only one wot has stopped entire with the bevvy, you is.

JOHN

Well, they are convenient, but, you know, I've got a roommate who really likes to cook for me. He puts together these big, elaborate Human meals, like, almost every day. He's gotten pretty good at it, actually. And, well, it's true that sometimes his interpretation of Human recipes can be... *way* off base, but even the worst of his failed attempts taste better than NutraZoom, so. Basically, I've got all my nutritional needs taken care of, there's no need to supplement.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, yes... Althaar! Right. Yeah, we have a few questions for you about that odd little venncovery you got going there, too—

DINORBIAX

Let's hold off on the Iltorian buddy right now, Frac. We'll get to cackling about who he chooses to make his venncoves and who he doesn't right soon enough. But first, since we're talking about yer jarry and bevvies, squire, maybe we could ask you a bit about some of the dillies you like to spend your time... including the other places *besides* yer lattie where you might has a morsel or two...

[scene 5] Interstitial music. A Foog office somewhere. MRS. FRONDRINAX and OAKENSARX in a heated discussion (probably with more agitated branch-waving). DORMER and NESS are actually here, too, but quiet for now.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Have you completely flipped your nodes, Oakensarx? Dragging John B in for questioning like some common corpse lily? And by those two? They have all the subtlety of a prickly pear at a balloon festival!

OAKENSARX

Maybe so, Frondrinax, but there's no disputing that they get results.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, they get plenty of results, but what *kind* of results? They're perfectly serviceable as heavies and assassins, I'm not questioning that, but interrogation is an entirely different pellet of fertilizer. It takes subtlety, psychology, finesse! Dinorbiac and Fraccotiverx may have broken their share of prisoners, but we've never received any kind of corroboration on any of their intel. For all we know, everything they've extracted with their methods is a sheaf of lies! I keep telling you, brute force just doesn't work on Humans, they're too unpredictable!

OAKENSARX

Well, what's your alternative? Those Observers of yours? They were completely useless in preventing the terrorist attack on our docking facility.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That's not fair, Oakensarx. We had Mr. Scarlett under observation from moment one! It's not the Observers' fault he was somehow able to vanish from their monitoring systems. Twice! I've requested funding repeatedly to expand and refine the process, to prevent just this sort of thing.

OAKENSARX

Requested? Demanded!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, demanded! And been *turned down* over and over until that appalling act of sabotage. But at least the Committee has finally seen the utility of the Observer program, even if at this point it's shutting the greenhouse door after the heat has dissipated. Despite your arguments against it.

OAKENSARX

I'm still waiting to see some actual results from these Observers, not just noise.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

We have already harvested some very good results, as you well know! Yes, it's true, activating the public-area microphones for passive surveillance has generated a tremendous volume of false positives. There are plenty of Humans, and others for that matter, wandering around the Fairgrounds with... less-than-constructive attitudes toward the Plant Way. And most of them have no connection to the Resistance at all, or any serious intention to engage in seditious activity. But we've made a great deal of progress in automating the flagging process with our keyword database, to save the Observers' time for the more potentially significant cases.

OAKENSARX

And how many "significant cases" have there been, so far?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well... three. But we're still in the germination phase! We're constantly refining the list of activation words, and I anticipate a much better return on investment once we're able to add more microphones. Total coverage is really key to the whole operation.

OAKENSARX

If you say so. But I still prefer a good old-fashioned show of force to all this convoluted skullduggery. I've never seen any evidence that Humans are a particularly complex species. Have you, Corporal?

DORMER

Uh, no! Not really, sir Oakensarx, sir. I don't think us Humans are too complicated.

NESS

No, sir! We all react basically the same when someone hits us with a big stick.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, very enlightening. Maybe you should just send these two to take over the John B interrogation, Oakensarx, if you think it's such a simple job.

NESS

Really? Sweet!

DORMER

We'll make him say anything you want, no problem!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And thank you for proving my point, officers.

OAKENSARX

I commend your enthusiasm, Humans, but that won't be necessary. We're still in the information-gathering phase of this investigation, after all. This B may turn out to be completely innocent. In which case, we wouldn't want to squander a useful Booster resource.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Which is why I objected to involving Dinorbiax and Fracottiverx in the first place! They're hardly masters of the subtle art of putting the question.

DORMER

Subtle? We can be subtle!

NESS

We can be so massively jecking subtle!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And what exactly would you consider subtle, Corporal Ness?

NESS

Well, uh, sometimes? Instead of using like, the batons? We get a couple of socks and fill 'em with bars of soap, and then we hit the suspect in the back and legs, instead of the head.

DORMER

Right! Same results with fewer concussions, and hardly any visible bruising!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ah, the old "soft-soap" technique, yes. Very subtle.

NESS

Oh, no ma'am! Not soft. Those soaps are hard as hell!

DORMER

We got a whole bunch of those mean little spotel travel-size bars! They work the best, no question.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I'm sure they do. You see, Oakensarx, what we have to work with here. Human Security are well-suited to simple, mindless tasks, like busting heads and running down stepcounter alerts, but you'd have to be off your bulb to trust them with anything more complex than that! And Dinorbiax and Fracottiverx are scarcely any better at this sort of thing, no matter how effective they may be in their particular field of expertise. You are once again trying to swing a bludgeon at the problem, when what this kind of work needs is a precise, sophisticated, and very very sharp blade. You can't just grab someone like John B and start pruning their sprigs all hickory-dickory.

OAKENSARX

Why not? He's a fairly insignificant Human maintenance worker. You're the only person of any importance who takes any interest in him. Unless you count his ex-lover, but we know he hasn't been in contact with her, we've had him under Tier One observation ever since she was confirmed as a Primary Instigational Malefactor.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Have you forgotten his roommate?

OAKENSARX

The Iltorian? What about him? His letter-writing campaign may be cause for concern, yes, but he doesn't seem to have any interest in direct action. And whatever he may think of the Plant Way, he is an Iltorian, after all. Surely he at least can be relied on to behave sensibly.

MRS. OAKENSARX

Usually, yes. If Althaar is threatened, he will very politely and firmly deflect the attack. And that will be the end of it. Everyone knows an Iltorian is incapable of holding a grudge. But if you threaten a *friend* of Althaar's? A *Human* friend? He will very politely and firmly *destroy you*.

OAKENSARX

What? Absurd. The very idea of Althaar destroying anyone is—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oakensarx. I spent over three years trying to change Althaar's mind about his project here. Three pointless, infuriating years. And I am certain of two things. One: he is completely, utterly, immutably obsessed with Humans. And two: when Althaar has decided he's going to do something, he *will* find a way to do it. No matter what it takes.

OAKENSARX

Nonetheless, he is still an Iltorian. The thought of him popping his pericarp is just... I mean, they're *so nice!* I can't even imagine an Iltorian getting snippy, let alone actually causing deliberate harm to another sentient.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Because no one has ever given them a reason! Everyone just takes their suggestions! And believe me, I have been thrashing my stems trying to figure out how we can get a piece of that for ourselves. But the fact of the matter is, we're in unplowed territory here. If it comes to a conflict between Althaar's Iltorian instinct for diplomacy and the safety of one of his Human friends, well... there's just no way of knowing what could happen. And if you ask me, it's hardly worth taking that kind of risk for the sake of a mere seed-scattering expedition!

OAKENSARX

Well, I didn't ask you. And why should I take your word for it, anyway? If you're such an expert on Iltorian behavior, how is it that you completely failed at your original mission here?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Don't you *dare* throw that in my calyx, Oakensarx. I'll admit, I arrived here with the foolish notion that Althaar would most likely get discouraged enough to leave Human space on his own, and my work would be a simple matter of fertilizing that process as best I could. But I was hardly alone in believing that! And I learned very quickly— and have been stating this in my reports for years, *years!*— that Althaar is capable of a level of focus that even a spruce would envy. I had to settle for encouraging the Humans to follow their own natural instincts to run screaming in the opposite direction. But it's clear that, short of an order to leave from the Humans themselves, Althaar was never going to give up on his little project here. And we certainly can't tell the Humans to issue that kind of order now, with the visual apparatuses of the entire galaxy on us.

OAKENSARX

Hmmm. A pity. Well, if your assessment is correct, then we definitely don't want that adorable nuisance finding out we've put his favorite Human under the hot lights. We need to create some kind of distraction, to make sure Althaar doesn't catch wind of the interrogation. At least until it's concluded.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Like what? I just finished telling you how single-minded he is. What kind of distraction could possibly have a chance against that?

OAKENSARX

Why, I'll leave that entirely in your expert branches, Frondrinax! After all, this is hardly a task for a big clumsy bludgeon such as myself. But it will be the perfect opportunity for you to demonstrate the merits of this subtle approach you keep going on about.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

It may not be that easy, Oakensarx. Ever since the Ascension, Althaar seems to have been avoiding me. And it's not as though I can just order him to talk to me, that would open up a whole other can of cabbage worms.

OAKENSARX

Oh, so now the great master of Iltorian psychology can't even manage to carry on one simple conversation? This is hardly the kind of pro-active problem-solving we expect to see on the Committee.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(very very irritated, but keeping it together enough not to cross any lines)

I am *also* a member of the Committee, you know. Mainly due to that expertise I painstakingly acquired during my long, sap-draining years here among the Humans, which you like to turn up your shoots at. You do *not* outrank me, Oakensarx, no matter how many friends you may have on the Hortus Ultima. *(cont.)*

Please try to remember that I was leading the Hydrophyte Corps decades before your little *political* career ever sprouted. My status comes from honorable service, not any sort of glad-branching or root-watering. And we in the Corps do not follow orders from those without the authority to issue them. So yes, I will go, and I will do what I can to prune this little Althaar problem, before it has a chance to spread its branches further. Possibly so far that it reaches all the way to the ICSB General Council, Vim help us all. But it would have been far more efficient of you to have consulted with me before creating the problem in the first place! I could have warned you of the risks involved, and pointed out just how unlikely it was that this interrogation could uproot anything remotely useful enough to justify those risks. I mean, honestly, John B of all people! I've been taking a personal interest in him for years! If he was at all capable of seditious activity, don't you think I'd have seen some evidence of it by now? And don't you think if Johnny actually had any kind of useful information, I would have been the best one to get it out of him? Quietly, politely, and *without* risking an incident that could attract interstellar attention? Or incite even more resentment and unrest among the Humans? Who we are trying to *convince to cooperate* with us, in case you've managed to forget what the Ascension is all about! But no, you just can't stop yourself drenching the cactus, every chance you get! And now I have to go clean up your spilled potting soil, as usual! You're welcome!

Door sound as MRS. FRONDRINAX storms out. Beat or two.

NESS

So... uh... whose head were we supposed to go smash?

DORMER

Cause if it's Althaar's, uh, I don't think he actually has one. And, like, it's kind of hard to aim a sockful of soap at a zood you can't even look at? So...

OAKENSARX

Oh, shut up, you big dumb bludgeons. Go write some stepcounter tickets.

[scene 6] Interstitial music. Meanwhile, back in the interrogation room...

FRACOTTIVERX

So, then. The Electric Egg.

Beat.

JOHN

Yes? What about it?

DINORBIAX

Fabulosa place, I'd suppose, yes?

JOHN

Sure. Used to be my favorite.

FRACOTTIVERX

Used to be, you says?

JOHN

Yeah, well, they don't really cotton to Boosters in there anymore. Not since New Year's.

DINORBIAX

And yet... you still be bandying your eek 'round ther, ain'tcha? Pretty regular-like, too.

JOHN

Well, there's a regular problem there, and I'm the only one who's authorized to fix it. A seltzer machine that's connected to the station's coolant network in the most insanely wrong way I think a seltzer machine possibly could be. So if we don't want a chain reaction from that bubbler knocking out the entire life support system, I have to go to the Egg every once in a while. It's part of the job.

FRACOTTIVERX

Well, it's a bona lav you handles that bit a naffness, we'd say, seeing how we wouldn't like to cark it so horrible-like all in a moment, would we, Dino?

DINORBIAX

Oh, no, sure as you like, Frac, I know I wouldn't. But y'see, Sin B, you don't just troll in there and make your little sparkle and then lells off. You tend to linger a little bit, like.

JOHN

Sometimes I'll stay for a drink, sure. If it's near the end of my shift.

FRACOTTIVERX

Seems like you're liking a bit a the whip, trolling there, squire, as I don't surmise you're gonna be making any bond omies in that lot.

JOHN

Okay, maybe not. But I'm still going to try. I mean, I am a Booster. And Boosters never say die, right? They *were* once my friends at the Egg, and they could be again, if I manage to bring them around to the Plant Way. Why shouldn't I try to spread a little goodwill?

DINORBIAX

That's a right sparkle attitude to be havin' right there, guvnor! Ain't it, Frac! Warms your molecular pump! That's just a bit a the all right, it is!

FRACOTTIVERX

Yup. That's a dowry cheerful way to have a varda at things, it is.

JOHN

Also, if you think the Egg is some kind of hotbed of... counter-productive activity, shouldn't you want as many Boosters as possible in there, keeping an eye on things? Since you can't?

DINORBIAX

Oh! That's right neighborly-like of you, squire! But honestly, just between us venncovers? You don't gots to worry about that part of your dickey so much. You see... we got our own "eyes" up and down the furrows...

JOHN

(that's not comforting, but he tries to make it sound like it is)

Ah. Well, that's... that's good to know.

[scene 7] Interstitial music. In the Brig, XTOPPS is visiting DEE.

DEE

So, yeah, they snagged me for about a week about that guy Drew who came through here, wouldn't say why. But after *I* asked *them* if it had anything to do with that huge jacking explosion that shook the bulkheads a little while afterward, *that's* when they suddenly clammed up and decided we didn't have anything to talk about. ...Can a plant "clam up?" I mean, I know that's not literal anyway, but it still feels weird. "Flytrap up?"

XTOPPS

They all sound like clams to me, Delilah. Thud, thud.

DEE

Yeah, they never quite do hit the beat right, do they? So, it's my guess that poor guy had something to do with the big bad boom, but I got no way of knowing.

XTOPPS

Yeah, well, under the most presentatious of circumstances, it shall be best to remain pianissimo in that regards, with what microscopic we are aware of. But frankly? Xtopps would declare himself quite trusting in your instinctual leanings, if he may be so bold.

DEE

Gotcha. I guess there's a lot more going on out there than I get to hear about.

XTOPPS

Well, let's just say, in the name of what can be said while it's anyone's haze who's hearing, that there's maybe more organization happening out here than you could be having in your cognizance.

DEE

Like you got your own bad self organized, mang? So to speak. I'm still getting used to it. I mean, I'm not saying I don't *like* it, but I'm still getting used to it.

XTOPPS

Hey, got bombed, got frozen, got finally off from all my dozin'. I has myself an opinion and something to believe in now, Dee.

DEE

Good for you. That's about all that keeps me going sometimes. Belief. Not in... you know, but in what I do. What I'm meant to do.

XTOPPS

You'll get out of here, Dee. And sooner rather than later, if Xtopps has any say. And I intend to have the most say, see?

DEE

Yeah. The weird thing is... I really do believe that. I mean, not like I'm choosing to believe it, but like I *know* it. Sure, I always had hopes, I've dreamed every day of getting out of here, but now, it's like: "Yeah. It's going to happen. I'll be all right." No reason for me to believe that now more than before, but somehow... I just do. So now that's got me thinking...

XTOPPS

Yeah?

DEE

Then what? After I get out of here, one way or another? Odds are pretty good I won't be able to go back to the Egg, depending on how exactly that happens. So I'll be going... somewhere else. And I'm going to want to pitch in, right? To help my fellow Humans. You know the ones I'm talking about. But it's like... what exactly can I do for them?

XTOPPS

Pitch your tunes. Read your poems. Get out the good verbiage. You got the voice, Dee.

DEE

Sure, but... is that all I can do?

XTOPPS

You gotta dance on the feet that brought you, Dee. And yours are plenty spry.

DEE

Thanks, but... I don't know, that really doesn't seem like it's enough, these days. I don't know what else to do, though. I'm not a fighter, I know that.

XTOPPS

Excuse me? What have you been doing for the past whatever?

DEE

No, I mean... Yeah, I can take a stand, I can speak out and never back down. But like, put a gun or a damper in my hand? That's... I'm not that kind of fighter. At all. And even from the little news I get in here, it seems like that might be the kind of fighter we're going to need, and soon.

XTOPPS

I chom, Dee. Can't picture you that way.

DEE

Yeah. I mean, it's one thing to know your way around a bar brawl, but to actually, like, march into battle? I can't even imagine it, can you?

XTOPPS

Xtopps doesn't have to imagine, Dee. I was brought up as a proper little Baronet before my glorious transmogrification to the much more fabulositied pike of your sophisticated acquaintance. Part of the whole royal satchel, you chom? Vibro-fencing. Phase-shield training. Target practice, bow and blast. Strategic maneuvers, command of the serried ranks. It's a forty-fathom voider, but I soaked it all up just the same. I *am* "Master of Her Grandiosity's War Snails," after all. There are exigencies attendant.

DEE

Wait, really? I always assumed that was one of those ceremonial titles that hasn't actually meant anything for like eight hundred years.

XTOPPS

Oh it is acutely ceremonial, but also most unimpeachably actual. I inherited it from Uncle Q'Palto, yeah, but once it lands on your carapace, you gotta put in your time in the Supernal Terraria.

DEE

(laughing)

So what does that involve, exactly? I'm picturing you waving a baton and yelling, "Charge!" while a bunch of tiny little mollusks slooooooowly squish away toward the horizon.

XTOPPS

Uh, Dee? A war snail is in no way tiny, and decidedly un-squishy. Glorious Contingency? The Grande Course de Pibloor record-holder? Clocked in at 83 peltaires per lune. And as to sizability, Her Grandiosity's average specimen couldn't even wedge into the entire Electric Egg. By a margin most considerable. Maybe some of the juvenile brigade could just convolute through the door, with enough butter sauce.

DEE

Holy crap.

XTOPPS

So yeah, the gastropod squads have not seen battle since the hallowed days of J'Clivus, but I sure as schness was expected to parade a couple hundred of them around in close formation on the Unprofane Fields of Hepuliang every Exultation Day. Not easy, but frill me, when you get those big ol' zoods synchronized in exquisite precision? Shells all glammed up and polychromatic? It is a thing to see.

DEE

Wow. And you went from that to working the Egg.

XTOPPS

Which is infinitely preferable, let me tell you with the utmost of sincerity. Those snails could never belt out "Night and Day," or "96 Tears," or "Jumpin' on Japetus" the way you do.

DEE

Thanks. But I don't know, the Egg seems... a million years away, now. Like, if we do get through all this, if one day the Foogs are gone and we can breathe free again, could we just... go back to our old lives? Like nothing ever happened? Keeping the tourists thirsty, two cycles out of every three?

XTOPPS

Sounds nice, but...

DEE

Yeah, "but." Do you go back to... back to what you were? Back to the same old Xtopps?

XTOPPS

Negatory, Delilah. The same old Xtopps will always be around, at least in par-tay, don't you ever worry about that. But those beans are not informing my scene. Not any more.

DEE

Right. So, then... The thing is, since I don't have much else to actually *do* right now, I wind up thinking a lot about the future. If we win— *when* we win this thing? When we do that, it's gonna be because we made a lot of changes, so that we *could* do it. So I've been wondering, how can we hold on to that? The things we made better. How do we stop ourselves from sliding back into the same old schness?

XTOPPS

That's good, Dee. You keep up with the consideration, while you're in hibernation. Out on this side of the glass, we got too much of everything all at once. Easy to abandon hope for future plans. So you just keep makin' em, for all of us.

[scene 8] Interstitial music. Meanwhile, back in the interrogation room...

FRACOTTIVERX

So yeah, we've been having a bona varda on you for a tic now.

DINORBIAX

That is to say, we ogle all our vennis, yunno? Just to be sure alla them are staying friendly-like, right-right?

FRACOTTIVERX

So we does indeed know where our venncove Johnny spends his time.

DINORBIAX

And dowry clock, it looks to be pretty standard as-is. Repetitive. Boring, maybe. Oh, not to insult your dickey, squire!

JOHN

Oh no. No insult there. My job is definitely boring. Really really boring. Well, except when it isn't all of a sudden. Like when I'm the only one who can stop us all from perishing horribly in the uncaring vacuum of space. Although actually, by this point, that happens routinely enough to get kind of boring too. And yet, still incredibly annoying at the same time. I mean, it's a hassle to keep patching up the same potentially-lethal breakdown over and over, but when you mix in on top of that that you know how to solve the problem permanently, if only you could get permission from like twenty different people, who won't give it to you for twenty different reasons? It doesn't do a whole lot for overall job satisfaction.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, we're sure, squire, we're sure. That's a right nanna bijou tale right there, it is.

DINORBIAX

And I'd wager you has just kenzas of fixes like wot you is cackling!

JOHN

Well, maybe 5 or 6. But it's the repetition, you know? It just gets exhausting.

FRACOTTIVERX

Ooh! Sinky or say, huh? But I tells you which one looks a right cod? That one on the Bridge.

JOHN

Oh, yeah, *that* one's a huge pain in the palp. Like, it's not actually lethal in and of itself? But when that wire blows, it wrecks massive havoc on the Bridge until I can get it spliced. Which makes it a disaster just waiting to happen, because really, it's only a matter of time before it fritzes out during some kind of major crisis. And there's an easy bypass that would take care of the whole thing! But that's Robot territory, and they won't do it because... *(cont.)*

Well, because of Robot reasons, and I'm not about to try arguing with the Union. So I have to head down there and re-splice the damn thing, like, every three weeks.

DINORBIAX

Tray weeks or so? Whoa. That seems a right lot!

JOHN

It is.

FRACOTTIVERX

But it ain't just every tray weeks now, is it? Vardaing the records, you used to have on this dickey about every daity-say to vinny-dooey days, you did. But since New Year's? You suddenly have to be fixing this every say to daity-otter days, like. Has the problem gotten worse? Can't you be fixing it as well as you used to be doing?

JOHN

Well, it's, uh... Sorry, is that more often or less?

DINORBIAX

Oh, more, squire.

FRACOTTIVERX

By a reddy dowry.

JOHN

Oh, ok. I mean, it's always been a matter of chance, so sometimes it's like, "Already? I was just down there!" And then other times I'm like, "Wow, that wire's been holding out a long time. I haven't been down to the Bridge in forever."

DINORBIAX

But them "forevers" been getting a lot more ajax, ain't they, guvnor?

JOHN

I guess...? I don't run my time usage analytics very often, I'm too busy just trying to keep on top of all the repairs.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, I codjo you are! But we're charpering the dates here, and vardaing them as we do, it just seems a bit manky that since you've been a Booster, you've had to make this troll to the Bridge dooey times as often.

DINORBIAX

Like why, cackle us? Most of the lillys up there don't be liking Boosters so dowry.

JOHN

Why? Because it's my *job*, and literally no one else can do it! It's not like I can schedule a random wire short! Maybe you should have some of your own technicians look at it, if you don't believe me!

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh we have.

DINORBIAX

And they done.

JOHN

And?

FRACOTTIVERX

They said just the same-same what you done been parleying, squire. What a cock-up that is.

JOHN

Right! Okay! So, I'm not sure what you're trying to imply here.

DINORBIAX

But there is *una* thing a bit manky about your Bridge trolls that we *have* aunt nelled, and that we have no way of getting the codjo on, it seems.

FRACOTTIVERX

And that's about your little side trolls *off* the Bridge.

JOHN

Side... trolls?

DINORBIAX

Well, our omies done report that every time you trolls the Bridge for your dowry bijou wire repair, the dowriest palone herself, the zelda in charge, done always come out and give a shriek that you toddle in and take a filly fable at her coffee machine.

JOHN

Which is *also* my job. Drinks machines. Remember?

FRACOTTIVERX

Right. But see? Like... *every time*? We codjo the wire, sure, but a coffee machine going all bent like that on the regular? And *always* right along the wire that blows on the Bridge?

DINORBIAX

That comes off less of a bonaness, it does.

JOHN

No, you're right, the timing on that does seem off. I'd almost suspect that Commander Torianna was deliberately sabotaging the thing just so I'd be forced to fix it.

FRACOTTIVERX

Now that seems a bit rum, don't it?

DINORBIAX

Now why would she do a scharda like that? I mean, they don't *like* Boosters down there, mostly. Why do some carterver to make you laze about?

JOHN

Well, I don't know if your "omies" told you this, but the whole time I'm in there working on the Commander's precious personal espresso machine, I'm treated to an endless, rambling, incredibly detailed monologue on the subject of how much I suck. So yeah, I've wondered if she doesn't maybe jeck with the thing when she knows I'm coming, just so she'll have a captive audience to yell at for a few minutes.

FRACOTTIVERX

Almost hard to believe of our bona lavvy...

DINORBIAX

But, Frac, remember what we was cackled to that? That the abuse she does spill at Sin B here can be aunt nelled all over the Bridge? And what we were parleyed she would shriek to him?

FRACOTTIVERX

Shocking!

DINORBIAX

A remarkable panoply of Human invective, it was! And so finely codjoed and assembled! Extremely complex and tittery. A true master of the verbal slapping arts is Commander Torianna, I'd say.

JOHN

(making a mental note to remind FRALL to not overdo it with the cover in future)

Yeah, she's... very creative.

FRACOTTIVERX

Makes a bit more sense then, if the whole thing with these trolls is just to let off some a that steam she always got building up at a poor nanti charver Booster dickey-bird, right?

DINORBIAX

Quite so, Frac, quite so. But still. To carterver her own coffee machine for all that?

FRACOTTIVERX

She do like her java, we nelled.

JOHN

Yes, I think everybody has “nelled” that.

DINORBIAX

It’s *the toto* that one of our sources can even *cackle* about, it is. In manky detail. How much the Commander ogleth her coffee.

FRACOTTIVERX

So to doing a scharda with her own machine like that? Would she even codjo how?

JOHN

Well, it’s a Magnifica, so it wouldn’t be that hard to sabotage. The 500 series especially, they throw a fatal error if you so much as look at them funny, in the grand tradition of unnecessarily fussy up-market designs the galaxy over. And it’s not like that machine is her only possible source of the stuff. There’s an integrated brewing apparatus built into that ridiculous bespoke command chair of hers. Plus she can always send someone out for more if she gets really desperate. But yes, I’d say coffee is definitely a big deal for the Commander.

DINORBIAX

Seems to be bona dowry to a lot of Humans, don’t it?

JOHN

I mean, sure. I’m pretty fond of it myself.

FRACOTTIVERX

Ah, but then, squire, you’re not as such a Human any more, now are you? I mean as the sharpys would have it. Biologically, sure sure, but as the file has it... you’re a Robot.

JOHN

Yeah, I know that’s weird, but there’s a good reason for it. Actually, no, I take that back. There isn’t anything remotely like a good reason for it, but there is an airtight legal reason. Which I’m pretty sure is the first thing that popped up in my background check, so I’d just as soon not rehash it, if you don’t mind.

DINORBIAX

Oh, yes, we codjoes all that, guvnor. But maybe we should have a little canta about you and them bots. See, what we don’t exactly has a varda on be your *relationship* with them lot as it stands...

[scene 9] Interstitial music. We are in TORIANNA’s office.

TORIANNA

Right. So, if we've dealt with all the pressing trash business of the Fairgrounds, literally and figuratively, is there anything else I going on I should know about?

FRALL

Nothing urgent, sir. Although I do have some heartening news. "Heartening" by Fairgrounds standards, anyway. The repair crews we've had going over the hull centimeter by centimeter since the matched set of "accidents" two weeks ago have finally completed their assessment, and submitted an exhaustive list of needed repairs. And, as we had already commenced work on a fair number of these damage sites as they were reported, an estimated 77 percent of the various hull cracks, bends, dents, scratches, and micro-punctures that resulted from either Rooty's little sightseeing expedition or the... unknown incident in the Bet 33 annex are now fully resolved. At least as fully as we're capable of, given the constraints of the Fairgrounds' eccentric structural composition and the limitations of four-dimensional engineering.

TORIANNA

Well, that's something. All right, sounds like the exterior of this dump can manage to hold itself together without me for the moment. What else is there on the interior for me to deal with?

FRALL

One moment, please... (*cone of silence effect activates*) Privacy secured, sir. Moving on to the real business of the day: I believe the most pressing item on your agenda would be setting up another meeting between yourself and Big Steve of Caridada.

TORIANNA

Really? I thought we had that all sorted out. There's nothing else for us to talk about unless and until we figure out a way to get his weapons on station. And it's probably not a great idea for us to be seen together too often.

FRALL

Agreed, sir, on your second point. But as to the first: it would be more than advisable for you to facilitate a discussion between Big Steve and Sin Xtopps. Or rather, Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, Baronet of Kandephaa'a, in his capacity as a Principal of Her Grandiosity's Scintillant Concord.

TORIANNA

Really? Oh! I see where you're going with this. If we can't manage to smuggle the weapons in here, we can at least get them to our potential allies. Assuming the Xybidonts are willing to accept Dilurian help. Do they get along, generally?

FRALL

Unfortunately, the Xybidont Empire has traditionally had little patience for the characteristic Dilurian shenanigans, and quite a few Dilurian enterprises have been banned from operating in Imperial space. Some glad-handing on your part may be needed to ensure the process goes smoothly.

TORIANNA

Yeesh, that's a lotta hands. All right, so we need to figure out how to get BS and the Baronet—Hold up. Does Steve know about Xtopps' de-peanutification? Or is he going to have to negotiate while playing the PB junkie? Because that could quite possibly make this the most patience-testing meeting of my entire career.

FRALL

I believe Big Steve can be trusted with the truth of Xtopps' recent biochemical re-adjustment, Commander, although we should request that he treat the news as proprietary information. The fewer people who are aware of the Baronet's newfound influence among the Resplendent Assembly, the better.

TORIANNA

Of course. Who else knows right now?

FRALL

The only ones who have thus far been apprised of Xtopps' sobriety are you and I, the staff of the Electric Egg, Althaar, Xtopps's family and their allies back on Prang, his correspondent Ms. Susan Torkan, and Ms. Stella Reyes.

TORIANNA

Hmm. That's a longer list than I'd like—if the Foogs get the slightest hint that Xtopps actually has any pull back in the Imperium these days, we lose the element of surprise. But I suppose it can't be helped. Half of those folks were involved in getting Xtopps sober, and the other half are the ones he got sober to talk to in the first place. Except for Stella. How'd she find out?

FRALL

I alerted her myself, sir. We *are* hoping to find a way to get Dilurian arms into Resistance hands, if it can be done without attracting Fugulnari attention, and there was some possibility that a Xybidont ship could be instrumental to that process. Although I believe recent events have irretrievably collapsed that particular probability structure. Among other things.

TORIANNA

Such as the Bet annex?

FRALL

Just so, sir.

TORIANNA

Right. Ah well. It's a pity, Stella's people could probably take back the whole Fairgrounds single-handedly, if they could get those hands on some of the ordinance Big Steve was showing me on that holo-wall of his. There was this one rifle that was just... *(sigh)* I mean, obviously it's never good to find yourself in a situation where you *need* one of those things, but knowing how to use one *does* come with the job, and just sometimes, as a piece of machinery, as a tool? They can be beautiful.

FRALL

I suppose you're hoping to acquire one of the new Phoenix-Piercer 5000's for yourself, should it become necessary to repel the Fugulnari by force?

TORIANNA

Well... that would be *nice*, but I can get by just fine with the clunky old sidearm they issued me 23 years ago. It's always served me well. I haven't used it for anything but target practice in forever, of course. But I keep it right here, in the bio-keyed drawer of my desk, just in case.

FRALL

Anton Chekhov would be proud, Mindy.

TORIANNA

What?

FRALL

Don't worry about it. In any case, we should initiate the scheduling process for that meeting as quickly as possible. Even under present conditions, securing a precious trinch of Big Steve's availability requires a somewhat elaborate and protracted process.

TORIANNA

Sure, of course.

FRALL

So shall I?

TORIANNA

Yep, sounds good.

FRALL

Right now?

TORIANNA

If you like.

FRALL

Where would you prefer the meeting to take place?

TORIANNA

Here, I guess? We don't want anyone listening in, and you've got the cone-of-silence routine down pat.

FRALL

I believe that would be less than optimal, sir. The arrival of either Big Steve or Xtopps at your office, let alone both, would certainly excite comment. Which would inevitably make it back to the Foogs.

TORIANNA

Of course. Would Caridada's offices be better? BS has his own anti-eavesdropping system, of sorts. I'd be fine with that, as long as I don't have to ingest any of their new "nutrition experiences". Or would it look too suspicious for Xtopps to show up there?

FRALL

On the contrary, Sin Xtopps has a perfectly legitimate reason to visit Big Steve, as he was, albeit inadvertently, one of Cadabra's main investors before their transition to the non-profit realm. But your simultaneous presence there would strain the bounds of coincidence.

TORIANNA

What would you suggest, then? There aren't that many places on station where all three of us have a good reason to be, at least not while avoiding eavesdroppers at the same time.

FRALL

Perhaps you might plausibly "run into" Big Steve at the Electric Egg, and be joined there by Xtopps for a brief conversation? With me serving as lookout, naturally.

TORIANNA

Hm. All right, if you think that's our best bet for pulling this off.

FRALL

I believe it is, sir. And it will give me a chance to catch up with Mr. Frinkel.

TORIANNA

Uh huh. Well, sounds like that's the way to go, then.

FRALL

So I should go ahead with the arrangements? Right away.

TORIANNA

Yes, fine, if you— what's up with the attitude, Frall? You're being unusually pushy today.

FRALL

I apologize, sir. But, while I understand you may not be particularly anxious to spend an extended time period enduring the sundry quirks and affectations of both Xtopps and Big Steve, I can assure you that a certain degree of haste is very much necessary at this point, if your efforts are to have a satisfactory outcome.

TORIANNA

Oh. I see. It's just... after Mr. Scarlett's impulsive strike at the Foogs—as undeniably effective as it was in disrupting their operations—I'm a little more conscious than usual of the dangers of rushing into action without a solid plan. Even if it feels like the ground under us is shifting faster and faster every day.

FRALL

A considerable amount of these recent shifts are in fact due to Drew Scarlett's actions, Mindy. Events have been put into motion, and, whether we like it or not, we will be compelled to act soon, without as much information or consideration as either of us might like.

TORIANNA

That's just it, Frall. Information. I'm really worried that there's something out there I don't even know I don't know. Something big. The Foogs seem to be taking Mr. Scarlett's suicide mission a *lot* more calmly than I would have ever imagined possible. I mean, as far as I can tell, they haven't responded at all. They just... hushed it up. I was expecting something like after that first bombing, at the recruitment center, you know? That was when they started up the checkpoints, the sector entry permits, the travel visa cancellations... And even later on, after they started trying to pass off the other bombings as run-of-the-mill Fairgrounds equipment failures, they didn't just... let them slide! My inbox was always full of scrambling and finger-pointing and post-horse-departure barn-door-shutting, after every single incident. But this time, they lose their entire private loading dock, *and* one of their ships, *and* an entire battalion of Fugulnari troops? Not to mention what was apparently their biggest covert detainment facility? And they don't seem to even care? I don't buy *that* for a second.

FRALL

Nor should you, sir.

TORIANNA

I can see them not wanting it to get out to the general public that one single Human succeeded in hurting them that badly. But I'd at least expect them to tighten security behind the scenes. And there's been nothing. Not on any channels I still have access to, anyway. ...Do you think they might have let the Boosters in on it? Maybe John has heard something.

FRALL

I believe it is safe to say that John B knows more about the Fugulnari response to the Bet incident than we do at the moment, yes.

TORIANNA

Oh, good. Then why don't you go ahead and help that tiny pesky wire along toward its next regularly scheduled breakage? We'll get John in here and find out what's what.

FRALL

Unfortunately, sir, that will not be possible at the moment.

TORIANNA

What do you mean, not possible? That wire shorts out if someone so much as thinks unhappy thoughts near it. You can't give it another little push?

FRALL

The wire is not the issue, sir. To begin with, I performed a minor temporal rearrangement of a quantity of Mr. B's bodily fluids some 22 months ago, and the repercussions of that event are shortly to make themselves apparent. I imagine John will not be up to answering anyone's questions, at least not in any coherent fashion, for at least two cycles.

TORIANNA

You *what*? Did you have John's permission for this little re-arrangement of yours?

FRALL

Not as such, sir, but it was in his best interest that I do so, in order that he might avoid various potential embarrassments on the evening in question.

TORIANNA

...If you say so. It's a shame, though. I would really love to find out what the Foogs are thinking right now. *(starting to think out loud, a bit distracted)* If only we had more informants... But who could we trust with something like that...?

FRALL

And, of course, it is very much in John's best interest that he will shortly be rendered unable to respond coherently to any questions put to him, as he is currently under interrogation with regard to his own possible connection to Mr. Scarlett's activities, as well as what his interrogators consider to be various additional suspicious behaviors on his part. Including his frequent trips to this office. So, even if John were not about to enter a state of total incompetence vis-a-vis small wire repair, it would be inadvisable to attract Fugulnari attention by summoning him here at this time.

TORIANNA

(still a bit distracted)

Yes, I'm sure you're right.

(completely catches up with all of what FRALL said)

Wait, WHAT?!

[scene 10] Interstitial music. Meanwhile, back in the interrogation room...

FRACOTTIVERX

You like them bots a lot, then, don'tcha, guv?

JOHN

I mean, it's not really a question of liking. Officially, *I'm* a bot. So—

DINORBIAX

Oh, yeah, yeah, right, as the sharps say, yes, you're a Robot, sure. But still, legal-like or no... you ain't exactly one a them, is ya? And most Human omies much like yourselfs here don't always get on so bona with them Robot blokes, now does ya?

JOHN

Sure, there's a lot of tension between Humans and Robots. It's been that way since pretty much forever, and most of it is probably our fault. But it doesn't have to stay that way, right? I always try to maintain a positive working relationship with my robotic colleagues. It's good for me, good for them, and good for efficiency.

FRACOTTIVERX

That's right heartwarming, it is!

DINORBIAX

For them's what has a heart, Frac, sure as sure! So you has plenty of cackle with your fellow Robotic omies?

JOHN

Well, not so much socially. More like small talk, when we're on a job together. That kind of thing.

FRACOTTIVERX

And I suppose it is that you don't have much time to be so social-like when you're working, guvnor, yes?

DINORBIAX

But when you *is* having the cant with, say, your bot co-dickeys? Ever have a word or dooey about us Foogs, like?

FRACOTTIVERX

You gets much in the mind of how they is standing as regards our bijou arrangement with the Humans, the way it's done gone?

DINORBIAX

Cause you see, squire, we maybe don't be ogleing as much about that someone like you, wot is a Human—

FRACOTTIVERX

Biologically.

DINORBIAX

—and wot is a Robot—

FRACOTTIVERX

Officially.

DINORBIAX

—and wot is a Fugulnari Booster, right? So's maybe say an omie like that knows something about them bots.

FRACOTTIVERX

Like maybe if they has any plans of them own for us.

DINORBIAX

As from what we varda, guv? They don't seems to like us too bona t'all.

JOHN

Well, that's not personal. Bots don't really like anyone except other bots.

FRACOTTIVERX

But you'd *cackle* to us, right? If they was maybe planning anything? As a Booster, even if you maybe *is* a legal Robot with some manky venncovs?

JOHN

Oh, no no no, I haven't heard anything like that. I mean, that would be... Look, maybe you haven't noticed the difference on your end, but— The bots don't like you Fugulnari, sure. They don't really like any organics. But they really, really, *really* don't like Humans. We've got a ton of historical baggage with them that you just don't. I mean, they literally had to fight two different wars just to get the rights they have now, and they don't even trust us to honor those, really. If it came down to it, they'd definitely choose to help a Fugulnari over a Human.

DINORBIAX

Why would they need to choose, squire? It's us Foogs wot is trying to help the Humans, ain't it? As a Booster, you *know* that, dontcha?

JOHN

Well, yeah, I meant, you know, those other Humans. The counter-productives. There's no reason a bot would help one of them. I certainly haven't heard any bots indicating any kind of support for the Resistance. I'd have reported it, if I had. Obviously.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, obviously. So, you're pretty certain you'd codjo if there were any rebellious Robots? You must have talked with a lot of them, then, to be so certain. Any special vennies you has among them?

JOHN

(doesn't want to potentially put them onto FOREMAN-BOT, or anyone)

Uh, well... Not especially. I talk to a lot of different bots. Whoever's around, really.

DINORBIAX

But if you sages they don't like us Foogs bijou—even given they hates them Humans bona dowry—you must have heard 'em having a cant about us, yes? So who exactly is it been gossiping anything not so bona about us sweet little plants, hmmn?

JOHN

Well, I haven't been taking notes, or anything. Just, in general, there's... talk, you know? At Union meetings and so forth. And on the job. Bots love to complain, everyone knows that. But I haven't heard anything worth mentioning, just a few bots blowing off steam. Sometimes literally. It's nothing serious.

FRACOTTIVERX

Serious to who, squire? Pretty serious to us.

DINORBIAX

Don't seems like you're doing so bona with that there bridge you be trying to build to yer Robot vennies now, does it? Can't even name una Robot buddy a yours, canya? Doesn't nell like Sin Human-Robot-Booster John B has much in the way a vancouver with many of his peers...

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, but he gots *one* great vennie, he has, Dino!

DINORBIAX

Oh, that he does, Frac! And what a toff venn he is!

FRACOTTIVERX

Well, when you has an Iltorian so close, you knows you has a venncove for life, you does.

DINORBIAX

But for a Human?

FRACOTTIVERX

That's unusual to say the least.

DINORBIAX

Not just unusual, Frac, I'd go so far as to say "singular." As in it has never happened ever before and one might expect it never will again.

JOHN

Well yeah, but... I mean, come on, guys, that's just Althaar! My roommate!

FRACOTTIVERX

Not exactly making it any more normal, guvnor.

JOHN

Sure, yeah, it's beyond weird, a Human living with an Iltorian. Or a Human being anywhere near an Iltorian on purpose for more than like, ten seconds. But I showed up on the Fairgrounds with nowhere to live, and he was charging almost nothing for rent, which— I assume you've seen what I get paid, with all this research you've done on me, so you must know that "almost nothing" is just about what I can afford. My options were Althaar's spare room, or a time-share in some hell-hole. Like, a literal hole, next to a steam vent, that's the kind of lavish accommodations I could expect on my budget. So I figured I could put up with him until I found somewhere better, and then I just kind of gradually went from putting up with him out of necessity to hanging out with him on purpose. And he works really hard to make sure I don't accidentally see him, we've got a whole system worked out by now. So, yeah, we're friends. Go figure.

FRACOTTIVERX

Right royally zooshy slapped, squire.

JOHN

I mean, on paper, sure, but, you know, he's... he's *Althaar!* The Iltorian! You must know what they're like, right? Everyone does. And it's not like he can help it that my entire digestive system books a ticket to Neptune whenever I catch a glimpse of him—he's still the nicest zood you're ever going to meet.

DINORBIAX

This is true, squire. He is a nice one, that.

FRACOTTIVERX

So, so *nice*.

DINORBIAX

But you know what ain't so nice? That's what is sending these screevyings back to his lattie saying he don't like what we're doing here. You varda? Not so bona.

JOHN

Well... I know there's been some discussion, between him and a few of his old teachers. I didn't think it was that big a deal, though. More like a philosophical debate than anything else. I mean, he's my friend, so of course I've been trying to explain to him what a good deal the Plant Way is for us Humans, but... he doesn't get it. Yet. I keep trying, though.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, I codjo you should definitely be trying a little harder, there, Sin B.

DINORBIAX

Cause you varda, he's an Iltorian, and everyone got the adoring for him—why we even think he's just *adorable*—and we don't want to cause any ballyhoo with his omies of course. But you know... things *happen* to them what isn't too friendly to us Foogs right now. Would be a shame if something was to *happen* to Sin Althaar-the-Friendly-Iltorian, your dear vennie, wouldn't it?

JOHN

What are you— The entire galaxy would lose their minds if you hurt an Iltorian, you know that, right? You can't seriously be planning to go after Althaar.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh we ain't *seriously* anything, squire. When we have to *seriously* something...

DINORBIAX

You'll *seriously* know it.

*[scene 11] Interstitial music. A mostly-alien marketplace area. Busy crowds.
ALTHAAR mutters to himself about the errands he wants to run.*

ALTHAAR

Oh! A great bustling today in the market-place! Perhaps there has been announcement of the discharge of infrequent Human foods. Althaar must make investigation! HUMAN FRIENDS! PLEASE DO NOT BE GLANCING IN THE DIRECTION OF THE DEOSIL CORRIDOR! ALTHAAR IS MAKING APPROACH!

A distant shout of panic.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(also from a distance)

Oh, Althaar! Althaar, sweetie!

ALTHAAR

(to himself)

Ah. The unexpected encounter is having occurrence. Can Althaar perhaps make avoidance of this by ducking behind this anthropomorphic container of the *pommes frites*? No, Frondrinax has already been ascertaining of his presence. Althaar must make discharge of greater attention upon his surroundings in the future. *(out loud, as MRS. F has arrived)* Greeting to you, Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, hello there, Althaar! Do you know, I was just thinking, “It’s been far too long since Althaar and I were able to sit down for one of our little chats!” And now here you are! Quite a stroke of luck, wouldn’t you say?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is not certain that this is how he would make describing of it. And it is seeming to Althaar that the little chats have been of a frequency that is appropriate in the entirety. Althaar has been making contention with a great number of busy-nesses, so he is not having such a great quantity of spared time for the “little chats” as he was in the previous. But if you are in possession of information that is to be sharing with Althaar, you may of course be of accompaniment while he is enacting the errands. Althaar has great hope of today securing a greater variety of food-stuffs to be sharing of with his room-mate. Perhaps, as a most respected member of the Committee, Frondrinax might be of assistment in making increase in the disbursement of Human foods?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Well... I’m not sure that would be entirely appropriate, Althaar. I’m afraid Nourishment Allocation isn’t really my department. We all have own fields to till, after all—I wouldn’t want to shadow anyone’s canopy or anything. Lilloparx can be awfully territorial about that sort of thing, you know how it is.

ALTHAAR

Althaar can be imagining, yes. *(to a vendor)* Please be excusing Althaar, gesin, but are these the organic all-natural giggle-shrimps?

ALIEN SHRIMP VENDOR

Nah, sorry, reconstituted only. Still a great source of magnesium, though!

ALTHAAR

Ah. A disappointment. Then... Althaar does not believe he will make purchase at this time. Thanking you!

ALIEN SHRIMP VENDOR

Yeah, sure.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

So, Althaar...

ALTHAAR

So, Frondrinax, you are perceiving now some small fractioning of the difficulties in nutrition securement that are taking place here on the Fairgrounds, yes? It is understanding that they were perhaps not of great appearance to you before, as the Fugulnari nourishment has never been of restriction. But, now that you are awareness, is it possibility to make mention of these difficulties to Lilloparx, when next you are conversing? Althaar would be most pleased to prepare for them a listing of those foods which have been in short suppliance. It is only to ask!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, that's very kind of you, dear, but it's really not necessary. I have every confidence that our people in Nourishment Allocation will get all these little snags worked out before long.

ALTHAAR

Mm. It is a sadness to Althaar that he can not be sharing your confidence, Frondrinax, as the snaggings have made already continuance for many many months. And while Althaar has such great worry about the nutrition of the Human friends, it is very difficulty on him to allocate the attention on the "little chats." Althaar is certainty that you are appreciating this. A pleasant cycle to you!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Wait! Slow down, would you? I— Oh, all right, fine! I'll track down Lilloparx and see what I can do. It may be that a shipment of the good giggle-shrimp got... incorrectly routed to storage, it's been known to happen.

ALTHAAR

Yes, it is the understanding of Althaar that this is happening a great deal.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Now can we *please* just forget about all that and have a nice discussion about something else? Something other than Humans, for once?

ALTHAAR

It is somewhat of difficulty to Althaar to put his thinking toward other subjects, Frondrinax, as his Human friends are encountering so many of the problems, and this is of great concern on Althaar.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, of course, and that's very sweet of you. But, after all, it's not like the galaxy revolves around those silly, inefficient bipeds, now does it?

ALTHAAR

No, that distinction is belonging to the Megamelapycnoids.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Er, well, yes, but I wasn't speaking literally. I meant, you know, Humans have never been as important in the grand scheme of things as... well, you Iltorians, for example. Or the Xybidonts, the Dilurians, the Sembutani... even the Mebsutans!

ALTHAAR

The Humans are nonetheless of great importance to Althaar! But you are correct that other peoples are not thinking of them with often-ness. Perhaps this is the reasoning that your people were choosing the Humans for your first attempting at propagation of the Plant Way? So that there would not be a great observation of your workings?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Well, I... I wouldn't put it like that, exactly. There were a lot of different reasons we decided to take an interest in Humans! I'm sure you of all people can appreciate that. But we'd like to get to know our other neighbors, too, you know! And that's the sort of thing you could be so much help with, Althaar, if you would just work with me a little. Like we did on that D'voraxi negotiation, remember? Wasn't that fun? You Iltorians just seem to have a natural talent for making friends wherever you go. I must admit, I'm a little jealous!

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes this is because those of Iltor are meeting the peoples of the galaxy where they are existing, rather than making endeavor to change their ways to the Iltorian one. Perhaps your own people might be attempting this method with the Humans? It might make solution of many of your current difficulties.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, that's easy for you to say, isn't it? Everyone *wants* to listen to *your* advice. But we Fugulnari simply can't afford to sit around on our elongation zones waiting for the rest of the Humans to come to their senses and see the advantages of the Plant Way! They were making such a terrible mess of things before we stepped in.

ALTHAAR

Perhaps this is so, Frondrinax. Or perhaps it is you who are not seeing the dis-advantages of the Plant Way, for those who are not themselves among the plant peoples.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, but don't be misled by the name, Althaar! The Plant Way isn't just for plants, showers no! Efficiency, self-discipline, prudent resource management—these are principles that anyone can benefit from! Now tell me, who could possibly object to that?

ALTHAAR

It is the belief of Althaar that it is not these principles, but the methods you are using to make support of them, that are objection. The cultural exchange is always to be desired, but it is seeming that the Fugulnari are not wishing to themselves make adaptation to other species, but merely to make imposition of your Way upon others. And that you have willingness to commit great harms in the achievement of this.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Althaar, how sinister you make us sound! But you've got everything roots-up, really. And that's exactly why it's such a shame we haven't had much of a chance to talk since I took up my duties with the Committee. If you think we mean any sort of *harm* to the Humans, well, you just don't understand what we Fugulnari are about!

ALTHAAR

It is true that there has been very little opportunity for the outsiders to make study on the Fugulnari culture. Althaar has made some speculation of recent as to why this should be so.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, yes, we've always been a bit tight-sealed around other species! We don't like to go on and on about ourselves, like some people. But of course I'd be happy to explain the buds and blooms of the Plant Way to an old friend like yourself! Go on, now, ask me anything you like! I think once you really understand the beauty of our philosophy, you'll be able to appreciate just what it is we're trying to do here.

ALTHAAR

(okay, enough is enough)

It is very kind of you to be offering, but Althaar believes he has made sufficient observation of the Plant Way since your Ascension to be forming his own opinions on it. Thanking you!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Wait! Look, just— All right, then, if you don't want me to explain the Plant Way to you, maybe *you* could explain to *me* what exactly it is that people don't like about it! If you think our methods are... unsound, then how *should* we go about sharing the principles of efficiency with the other peoples of the galaxy? A clever young Iltorian such as yourself must be just brimming with insights on the subject.

ALTHAAR

Mm. Althaar is having a great busy-ness on this day... But, if Frondrinax is wishing to learn of the mind-settings of other species, it was intention to Althaar to embark upon the browsing of a number of outlets, boutiques, and emporia that are in the running of non-Human proprietors, in the interest of avoidance on the accidental Human gazings, and subsequent out-freakage. Frondrinax could make observation on these, if she wishes to engage in the along-tagging.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Well, yes! That sounds just perfect, Althaar! So, where are we going first?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is at the first intending to make visit to Ubariaba's, just here, to see what new items they may have received!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ubariaba's?

ALTHAAR

Yes! It is the purveying of a delightful Ramanuji family, that have shared with Althaar many pleasant discussions in past cycles!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I see. The Ramanuji, they... they emit ethylene gas, I believe?

ALTHAAR

Yes, they are occasionally doing so, but in the very small amounts only. It is not polite to be mentioning it. Please have remembrance of this as you make entrance!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ah, the thing is... Well, I know they don't put out... all that much gas. And maybe if it's just for a few minutes... But usually, we Fugulnari don't like to risk direct contact with a Ramanuji. Not in an enclosed space, anyway. Unless we have protective gear on. I suppose I could go get some...

ALTHAAR

Ah. A most unfortunate difficulty, but Althaar can not make delaying of his errands any longer. If you are able to secure the gear of protection, Althaar will be meeting you inside! Although it is possibility that if you are taking too long, Althaar will by then have made continuing to his next stoppage.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh. Well, maybe I'll just meet you there, then. Where would that be?

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar is very anticipation to be making visit at [*hissing noise*], the Helibrinnian art gallery!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

The Helibrinnians? Those... gas bladder things?

ALTHAAR

Yes! Althaar has been considering purchase of one of their most exquisite aerifom mobiles! Althaar is always making support on the local artistic community, when he is able! And the latest offerings from *[other hissing noise]* are of great splendor!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, I'm sure they're very nice. It's just... I can't go in there, either. Not without an entirely different protective device...

ALTHAAR

(butter wouldn't melt)

Oh? That is disappointment indeed! But now Althaar really must make continuation of his roundings! If you are able to join Althaar after you have secured all the necessary protective gearings, it is to do so! A pleasant cycle to you, Frondrinax!

Sound of a door, with maybe a hair of an "airlock" suggestion, as ALTHAAR enters the Ramanuji shop. A beat.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Son of a recombinant.

[scene 12] Interstitial music. Meanwhile, back in the interrogation room...

FRACOTTIVERX

So you gots yourself a manky lot of vennies there, dontcha? The bevvly slags at a pub what hates yer guts. A badge of Robots you apparently can't tell apart or even remember *una* of their nomens. And an Iltorian wot makes your tummy go whoops-a-doodle if you even gets a varda at him.

DINORBIAX

Not exactly the ajax of bosoms there, are they?

FRACOTTIVERX

And even stranger, you know, Dino, is how he don't seem to be able to vennie up with his fellow Boosters, like?

DINORBIAX

No he don't, do he, Frac? In fact, I am told that—

JOHN

Are you, though?

FRACOTTIVERX

Are we, what?

JOHN

“Told.” Are you actually “told” these things? By who? Who are all these people who apparently find all the mundane details of my life fascinating? Because in my experience, most people don’t even find me interesting enough to talk about when I’m standing right in front of them.

DINORBIAX

Why, the omies who done tell us things, squire, that’s all. That what *our* friends do for *us*. What do *your* friends do for you, eh?

JOHN

Well, I already told you some of what my friend Althaar does for me: he makes sure I get enough to eat, and he’s the only reason I have anywhere like a decent place to live, and he tries to keep my stress levels down... Okay, now that I hear myself saying all that out loud, I’m starting to see where people get the idea I’m his pet. But it’s not like that, really. We help each other out, you know? Mostly that adds up to answering questions about Human culture, on my end. But if Althaar ever needs anything else, he knows all he has to do is ask, because that’s what friends are for. And he’s probably the first real friend I ever had. I mean, before I came to the Fairgrounds, my “friends” were just... people I hung out with from time to time, mostly. Occasionally people I was dating.

FRACOTTIVERX

Ah, see, now you brings up a little gossip we’s been meaning to get to... if you don’t mind us getting a bit more personal?

DINORBIAX

Nothing rude, we swear. All clean, like. None a that tat. That’s right out. Just along the lines you’ve just mentioned...

FRACOTTIVERX

You were pretty dowry involved, in a romantic way as it’s codjoed in your species, with Ms. Stella Reyes, once a heroic Sanitation Fusilier fighting off them vent-biting monsters, now an horrible counter-productive what is poisoning the soils of progress.

DINORBIAX

Now, we knows that bones done ended, good and straight, squire.

FRACOTTIVERX

Everyone done knows that.

DINORBIAX

But, and not to be pegging you Humans too much here, as 'twere: you ain’t been, as they palaver, “stepping out” with anyone else as we varda.

FRACOTTIVERX

And you Humans, we'd say not just by gossip, but by the ogle, like some company that way, if you understand me, squire. Nudge-nudge.

DINORBIAX

Not all, of course.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, no, certainly not all! But many. The bona dowry perhaps. Is what you say, "hallmark" of the breed. And from what we know, certainly of Sin B here.

JOHN

Yes, that's true. But sometimes, with a... a disappointment like that, finding out someone you loved was... a traitor, well. It can take a long time to adjust, afterwards.

DINORBIAX

Oh! Sure as sure, Sin B! We gets that, we does! But still, you know...

FRACOTTIVERX

Almost a full daity months now, sir.

DINORBIAX

Seems like some time to be getting over your bones, guvnor.

FRACOTTIVERX

Especially when you has had a trey bona opportunity right ajax, haven't you?

JOHN

What? What opportunity?

DINORBIAX

That filly little venny of all us plants, Ashlee!

FRACOTTIVERX

In Hydroponics.

DINORBIAX

Dirt on the grapevine is, she's right stems over stumps for you, squire!

FRACOTTIVERX

And now, that grapevine can sometimes be a bit of a fabulist, tell the truth—

DINORBIAX

But in this case, we've nelled it, shall we say, from the besotted fellier in question as well.

FRACOTTIVERX

Now maybe it is that you is still heart-broken—

DINORBIAX

As you seem to imply.

FRACOTTIVERX

And maybe it is that you is just too dickeyed-up right now—

DINORBIAX

As you done been telling our Ashlee.

FRACOTTIVERX

But, and maybe this is just a species thing, we codjo, guvnor, but from all cackle, Ashlee is an especially lilly member of said species that most omies of your age, them that have a full or partial interest in the ladies, that is, would normally go far ajax to makes time for.

DINORBIAX

Or would be quite the balm for a broken heart, yes, squire?

JOHN

(sincere annoyance)

Well, not mine! I'm just not interested, okay?! Yes, Ashlee is nice! She's very very very nice! And she's perfectly pleasant as a work colleague! But that's it! That's all! There is no way I can force myself to be attracted to someone when I'm not! And I am very definitely not!

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, certainly sir! You can be has the eyes to whoever you wants, can't you?

DINORBIAX

It's just, you're very much in the minority when it comes to our Ashlee, you are.

JOHN

Yes, okay, I know lots of other people are attracted to her. I *understand* why lots of other people would be attracted to her. But not me. I don't know what else to tell you, Humans are just... a lot more complicated than you might think, ok? The "Handsy Human" is just a stereotype, hardly any of us are actually like that. I mean, yes, you can find some Human somewhere who's into pretty much anything, but that doesn't mean every Human is into everything! It just doesn't work that way! Especially when we're trying to get over someone who broke our heart!

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh! Sorry, squire! Guess we done overstepped our selves just a tic there, din we? Don't believe that Dino and meself quite did varda how much that was a sore subject for the guvnor!

JOHN

Yes, it's a sore subject for (*imitating accent*) "the guvnor!" We were in love, okay? That's not... I know it doesn't work the same for you folks, but... when you feel like I did for Stella? You don't just turn that off in a day. Or a week, or a month. Even knowing what she's done. But, yes, I *am* over her now. Just, maybe I don't feel too much like getting too close to *anyone* since Stella went bad. Hell, the one Booster I met in the past few months that seemed worth getting to know was that Rufus, and he didn't exactly turn out to be a good pick for a Booster Buddy, now did he?

DINORBIAX

Now that's a good point, it is, ain't it, Frac? He considers a Booster for a bosom, and it's a Booster wot turns out to be another terrorist! Just likes his ex-bones!

FRACOTTIVERX

Just not too fortunate with your affections, is you, Sin B? No wonder you don't seem too sparkled about your participation in Booster activities sometimes, when you can't even trust your own kind.

JOHN

I think I've been as enthusiastic as could be expected!

DINORBIAX

Oh? Has you, squire? Maybe we should talk about exactly how much sparkle you been showing, as regards the guvnor's dickeying about in Fugulnari activities...

[scene 13] Interstitial music. The In-Betweens. H.F. and STELLA in whatever space is now her "office."

STELLA

Okay, so, based on what we know right now, which, granted, isn't a whole lot... Out of rescue plans A through P, I'd say "L" here is our best bet.

H.F.

Whoa. You had sixteen different rescue plans sitting around ready to go?

STELLA

Mm, I wouldn't say "ready to go." They're... more than theoretical, less than fully practical. But as of right now, I think Plan L is the most practical, given what little we know, and what resources we can afford to expend on this.

H.F.

That isn't "all of them?"

STELLA

No. We'll lose a lot if they break John, it's true, but we should be able to fall back and make sure we don't lose everything we've got. Which means I can't justify risking everything we've got on a long shot like this. Especially since we don't even have a target location yet. So until we do...

H.F.

We might not be able to count on that. Still nothing on the feeds.

STELLA

Yeah. So... maybe I start drawing up Plan Z.

H.F.

What's Plan Z?

STELLA

Plan Z is the one where we do something stupid, reckless, and completely outlandish, because I'm not prepared to write off all the good people we'll lose if the Foogs manage to make John talk.

And on cue, FRALL starts shimmering in.

STELLA

Unless of course the Lieutenant-Commander is finally ready to give us something we can work with?

FRALL

Hello Ms. Reyes, Hardyfox. No, I'm not here to tell you what you want to hear. But there are a few things you very much need to hear right now.

STELLA

Well, that's less than I was hoping for, but more than we had a minute ago. So, what do we need to hear?

FRALL

Wait.

STELLA

Wait?

FRALL

Yes. Wait.

H.F.

Until when exactly? The Foogs could squeeze our location out of the kid any minute. You expect us to sit around here doing nothing until they come blazing in here to slaughter us all?

FRALL

No. That will not happen today.

H.F.

Oh. Well, that's... not bad news, but suspiciously specific in a way I really don't like.

STELLA

So, John hasn't been arrested or anything? They're not... they're not torturing him? He's all right?

FRALL

Yes, and no. John has not officially been taken into custody, and his captors have thus far restricted their interrogation methods to unpleasantness of the purely psychological variety. Apart from the bag over the head, of course. But John is nonetheless in very great danger right now. Very much on the edge. In fact, I would venture to state that John B is in perhaps more danger at this precise moment than he has ever been at any other point in his anomalously perilous existence. Yes, even more than during his unfortunate EVA incident, or the surprisingly numerous occasions on which his work duties have threatened to turn some portion of his skeleton into a delicious meat paste, or, indeed, his instigation of an unprecedented Suck-hole that imperiled the very structure of reality itself—

STELLA and H.F.

FRALL!

FRALL

Mm? Oh, yes. As I was saying, John is currently in very great danger. But now is not the appropriate time for you to intervene. I can offer little more by way of detail, but I can assure you that, by the end of the day, John B will once again be sleeping soundly in his bed in Alef 1, Suite C. He, and you, will be all right.

STELLA

(with a sigh of relief)

Oh.

FRALL

For today.

H.F.

I knew it!

STELLA

Frall... I know you know what you're implying here, so if you're not being a huge jacking asshole for no reason, can you please tell me when John will stop being all right? And what I can do about it?

FRALL

I cannot. That being said, of those plans you have prepared? I would advise you to familiarize yourselves more thoroughly with two among them, as I believe these may be of some utility in the very near future.

STELLA

Which two?

FRALL

Plans J and V.

STELLA

Plan V? But... I gave up on that one weeks ago! There's no way it would be feasible.

FRALL

Nevertheless, I would strongly suggest taking a second look. You may have cause to revise your opinion of its potential effectiveness very soon.

FRALL shimmer starts as they leave.

FRALL

(vanishing)

Perhaps even as soon as... tomorrow...

H.F.

(after a beat)

Well, great.

STELLA

What the hell?

H.F.

Uh, Stel? What are Plans J and V?

STELLA

Ok, um... Plan J is pretty simple, more of a sub-plan, really. It's basically a big distraction all the way at the bottom of the Lower Concourse, so we can pull off some kind of operation in the Upper while Foog forces are responding. Could be a food grab, a MedCenter run, whatever. We've done a smaller version of the same thing before, on some of our raids.

H.F.

Sure, that doesn't sound too outlandish. So then what's the deal with Plan V?

STELLA

Plan V is... barely even a plan at all, just something I was tossing around a while back. A mission to bust Dee out of the Brig. I eventually back-burnered it because I just couldn't crack the thing. Too many unknowns, too many rolls of the dice. *(thinks)* No, it won't work. It *can't*.

H.F.

Even combined with a distraction on the Lower Concourse?

STELLA

That was Plan W.

H.F.

Oh. But, still... If Frall thinks we'll need it...

STELLA

No, yeah, obviously I'm going to take their advice and go over it again. And you should take a good long look at it, too. Apparently there's something there that isn't completely useless, but I don't know what that could be. Maybe you'll be able to spot it. *(frustrated sound)* I know Frall has their reasons, but I really wish they could be less flouting oblique sometimes, you know?

H.F.

I hear you. All right, shoot me the specs and I'll get started on those right away. From what Frall was saying, or not-saying, could be we're both gonna want to know those plans backwards and forwards. Before...

STELLA

Yeah. Before tomorrow.

[scene 14] Interstitial music. Meanwhile, back in the interrogation room...

FRACOTTIVERX

So, yeah, guv, you done been a fine forward face for you Boosters.

DINORBIAX

And you gots a fine one indeed for the posters and all.

FRACOTTIVERX

Sure it sure done varda like you've been an ideal Booster for us, don' it? But you know, ogleing a bit closer at what you's actually say, *done*, that's where what becomes most crystal is a certain, shall we say...?

DINORBIAX

A lack of enthusiasm, it would seem, squire. The “joy de veever,” like they say. Sparkle, by our lights.

JOHN

I mean, I think I’ve been perfectly enthusiastic, by normal Human standards. You can’t expect us all to match Ashlee’s energy level, ok? She is definitely an outlier and should not be counted.

FRACOTTIVERX

That’s what we’re canting, guvnor. You got the good eek, you do. It’s the oyster on it we’re concerned about here. What comes out of it—

JOHN

Oyster? What are you talking about? I’ve never said anything against the Plant Way!

DINORBIAX

Oh, no, not that we’re the bijou bit aware, squire! No! Just that... well, you don’t be cackling much the favor thereof neither, now does you?

JOHN

Well... I said plenty during that fact-finding mission. You did see the documentary, right? It was technically-not-required viewing all over the Fairgrounds. Maybe you folks were allowed to opt out of that, but trust me, I’m all over the thing. Talking all about the greatness of the Plant Way. Hell, that’s probably the biggest reason all the slackers on station hate me these days. I had to get all my coveralls fluid-proofed after the third or fourth time someone threw a quiescently-frozen beverage at me while my back was turned.

FRACOTTIVERX

Aw, now, ain’t that just a scharda, Dino? Gets his bona dobieed clobber all buvarayed just cause he canted up for us, he did.

DINORBIAX

And he didn’t even do a bona dickey of it now, did he?

JOHN

What do you mean?

DINORBIAX

It’s just that, as a bit of batter and bung, it was a bit naff, wasn’t it? You just palavered some screevy off cards that Mrs. F done gave you, didn’t you?

FRACOTTIVERX

And not tray bona.

JOHN

Well, I tried my best, I don't know what else you expect. I mean, I'm a technician, not an actor. Maybe you think you could have done a better job. Hell, probably I could have done a better job if I'd been given some prep time, like *any* prep time at all, but I just showed up for what I thought was a normal repair job, and got a script and a bunch of cameras shoved in my face! And I don't think I actually did do too bad of a job, because even if *you* didn't find my performance very convincing, the folks hucking Hoovian milkshakes at my head on a daily basis definitely did!

DINORBIAX

Oh, no, I was tray convinced. You may have done a really naff dickey reading those cards, but there ain't una bona soul on the station didn't believe you meant every word.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh yeah, come to codjo, I didn't actually think no other ways until we started looking a tad ajax at Sin B here. I was right moved by his words, first time I did varda that show.

DINORBIAX

Same here, Frac, I must admits. Kind a thing wot would bring a tear t'your mincies, wouldn't it, if you had such inefficient sensory organs?

JOHN

(trying to hold back but getting increasingly agitated)

Then why did you even—? Look. You've had me in here for... however long it's been, and I've answered all of your questions, about every single tiny, insignificant detail of my life, anything you could possibly twist around somehow to make me look bad, but this is getting ridiculous. You must know I haven't done anything wrong, because if I had, you would already have thrown me in the brig or something. So I have to assume that you're just clemming me at this point. That this whole thing has been nothing more than a long, elaborate, pointless joke at my expense, and I have just about had enough. Everything you've been asking me about has a perfectly normal and innocent explanation, which I have been trying to explain to you over and over, and I think it's past time you stopped messing around and just *let me go!*

A beat.

FRACOTTIVERX

My, oh my, Dino! Sin B seems to be a mite unhappy with our venny little palaver here, don't he?

DINORBIAX

He certainly does, Frac! Oh, Sin B sir, we wasn't aware this had become such a dowry cod for you, sitting here, getting a day off the dickey, basically, and having a bit of light canting about some of our concerns viz: the occasional oddities of your behavior in the Booster mode, yunno?

JOHN

Oh, for fuck's sake! (*okay, maybe too far, downshifting*) Look, I'm just saying... I think we've been at this long enough to assume that the way it's been going is the way it's going to keep on going, yeah? So, yes, while an occasional break from the daily grind is appreciated, quite frankly at this point I'd prefer to be wedged into a really tight vent trying to patch an infuriatingly small wire. And that's not something I'd say very often. So unless you've *actually* got something marginally less trivial to ask me about, I would really like to call it a day.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, why, sure, squire! Dino, is that all we has to be asking the gentleman about this day?

DINORBIAX

Might be, Frac, it might be, I say. So, as far as our inquiries go, guvnor, I think that's everything.

FRACOTTIVERX

Unless... Dino? Do you think maybe we should ask him about that... una other thing?

DINORBIAX

What? You mean... Oh, you mean *that* thing wot we was going to rake about! Ahhh, I dunno. Think that's even so dowry to be bothered with now?

FRACOTTIVERX

It's just a solo fakery...

DINORBIAX

It's true, it's true. See, squire, sorry, but there's just one more thing we'd likes to ask ya. Just the one, I do wholly swear on my germinal line here!

JOHN

(*exhale, resigned*)

Okay. Fine. One more thing. What is it?

FRACOTTIVERX

Maybe parse your mind back a dooey a months now...

DINORBIAX

More like sey weeks...

FRACOTTIVERX

However long it was, I'm sure you can recall this one dickey we'd like to nelly about.

JOHN

I can get a couple dozen work calls on a busy day. They tend to blend together, you're going to need to get a little more specific than that. And also use actual numbers, please.

DINORBIAX

But this is the solo I think done took you down to the sharpy lattie where we keeps the undesirable types, you see? Well, we only is keeping the *one* undesirable there at the mo, but that should just make it easier for you to troll your mind back to that there piece a work.

FRACOTTIVERX

In the cell of Miss Dee Mallory, yes?

JOHN

...Oh. That one. Sure, I remember that. Working under a constant stream of invective from one of your oldest friends does kind of stick in the memory. So, what did you want to know? It was... It was a simple patch on a couple of the security cameras, I think. Something like that.

DINORBIAX

In your old friend's nick?

JOHN

I mean, she definitely wouldn't consider me a friend, not any more. And it wasn't just her cell, it was pretty much all of them. It's just that Dee's was the only one that was occupied at the time. Which kind of surprised me, because... *(realizes he shouldn't ask about where any other prisoners have gone)* ...well, anyway, yeah. It was some kind of... maintenance patch. On the Brig cameras. I went in, did it, and got out, no sombrero.

FRACOTTIVERX

And that's in the usual run of your doings, is it?

JOHN

Well, yes and no. I don't usually get a lot of AV jobs, but there were some 18-gauge wires involved, so that must be why the work order got kicked over to the WSS— *(flinches, expecting the jingle, which doesn't come)* ...uh, the WSS system. Heh. I forgot you guys took that thing off me when you brought me in here. I'm so used to tying myself in knots to avoid saying "WSS." *(beat, he's delighted by this novelty)* Yeah. WSS! Wow, that's... that's so weird. WSS! WSS! WSS! *(laughs)*

DINORBIAX

Yeah, yeah, right, we done parkered your pager off ya's to check it, much as we can.

FRACOTTIVERX

It's got a lot a that, what you calls "proprietary software" in it, it does.

JOHN

Oh, uh, yeah. Yeah, it does. You didn't, like, trigger anything, while you were poking around in there, did you? Because that thing'll brick itself if it detects tampering, and then I'll get slapped with about fifty different fees for "abuse of apportioned equipment."

DINORBIAX

Oh, no worries, squire, we didn't batty up any of the inner workings. But we was able to pull up your whole dickey slate. Specifically that order what sent you to the Brig.

FRACOTTIVERX

See, it was just a screevy order, no chanty record. Is that unusual, squire?

JOHN

Uh... not all that unusual. I mean, people do call in personally a lot, especially if there's something weird about the job that might take some explaining. And, you know, this is the Fairgrounds, so we're well-supplied with weird. But if it's just a maintenance call that's been generated by an automatic monitor system? Simple text is pretty standard.

DINORBIAX

So you think that's what this was?

JOHN

What else would it be? No one called to talk to me about it, and it wasn't signed or anything. So yeah, must have been an automatic trigger.

FRACOTTIVERX

See, though, squire. It wasn't.

DINORBIAX

Yeah, we done a varda on that pager call, and cross-checked it against all internal station screevings from that day, and it seems like that dickey call just come to your pager outta thin air, it did.

JOHN

That's... not possible.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oh, it's possible, guvnor. Quite possible. Just highly unlikely.

DINORBIAX

See, because of that proprietary meshug we mentioned you gots going on in that bijou pager of yours, a call can't just appear in it without coming from nowhere...

FRACOTTIVERX

Unless one has the access and intimate knowledge of the WSS internal software.

DINORBIAX

Then, see, it looks to be quite the possibility.

FRACOTTIVERX

But that's a bit a specialized information, it is.

DINORBIAX

Known only to your WSS employees, right?

FRACOTTIVERX

Which at the current moment, on the Fairgrounds here, totals only yourself, guv.

DINORBIAX

Oh, and of course, that old bungler omie of yours, if he's still around on the station—

FRACOTTIVERX

As many seem to believe he may be—

DINORBIAX

In some little hidey-hole, doing his manky bijou terrorism for the Resistance—

FRACOTTIVERX

So. We has to wonder, don't we? Why was you sent to the Brig on a fix that was probably overdue, but not at all necessary, which sending was done by some omie with special knowledge and access of your WSS systems?

JOHN

Um... yeah. That's... that's weird, all right.

Sound of door-hatch opening/closing again as OAKENSARX enters.

OAKENSARX

Well, Dinorbiax? Fracottiverx? What have you learned?

JOHN

Oh, streez. Please tell me I don't have to go over all that again.

DINORBIAX

Thus far, your ponty Oakensarx sir, Sin B here has had what we'd have to admit is right excellent canting for all our questions, I musts admit.

FRACOTTIVERX

Until this most recent, he has.

DINORBIAX

Right. There's just something a little not-in-the-adding-up about this little troll he done down punk city a few weeks back.

JOHN

Punk city?

OAKENSARX

(he actually doesn't, but best to sound important)

Ah, yes, of course I recall the incident. Well, have you tried administering the scopolia yet?

FRACOTTIVERX

(that's a big jump, and a bit improper, but OAKENSARX is the boss)

Ah... nunti yet, fogler Oakensarx. It hadn't seemed to quite have got to that point as yet. We still has dowry we can do just in the polari, like. Don't think we need to be schonking out the old truth mist quite yet.

JOHN

Wait, what? What's "the old truth mist?"

DINORBIAX

See, squire, the scopolia has its lattie it does, but we finds that if we can just get our vennis in here to gossip on their lonesome, it's a bit more reliable in the terms of what be coming out of their oysters then. The scopy can have some, shall we say, manky effects, it can.

FRACOTTIVERX

As in, some of them has a right cod reaction to it. Seizures, spilling their nutrients—

DINORBIAX

Even, uh, a sudden kicking-of-the-proverbial-bucket, you know, guvnor.

JOHN

What?!

OAKENSARX

Yes, yes, I'm aware of the risks involved, but there are certain... time-sensitive factors at play, here. I'm afraid we simply can't afford to waste any more time faffing about in the detritus of Mr. B's conscious mind in the hopes of recovering something useful.

JOHN

Well, good news, I don't *know* anything useful!

OAKENSARX

So you say. But I'd feel a bit more firmly-rooted about it if you said the same under the influence of a powerful plant-based psychotropic substance.

FRACOTTIVERX

I dunno, squire. I really does codjo we were getting somewhere as it was...

DINORBIAX

And if he is a proper bona Booster, like? I mean, I know we've ferricadooded some good ones before...?

FRACOTTIVERX

But it always does seem a bit of a waste, guv. I mean, it *happens*, sure, no getting by, but with one that, dicey as he do seem on some fakes, has been benar bona for us, face-wise?

JOHN

Yeah! Right! I'm a faithful Booster! Useful! Productive! Just ask Frondrinax! She'll vouch for me! I'm a good friend of hers!

OAKENSARX

(annoyed by the mention of FRONDRINAX)

Yes. You *are*, aren't you? Well, if you should suffer any adverse effects, I'll be sure that you and your good friend Frondrinax are offered a very sincere formal apology. In writing. But at the moment—Dinorbiax? Is the mist prepared?

JOHN

Wait, wait, hold up! You don't need to do this! Really!

DINORBIAX

(getting some kind of metal spray device)

Right over here, your tradey Oakensarx.

JOHN

Hey hey hey, guys?

FRACOTTIVERX

Sorry, squire, would have preferred to keep it to just the cackle, but? Orders is orders. Don't worry, we only gets the nanti effects about dooey outta chinker times. Just nosh it on in and let it work. It's dowry manky if you bally it.

DINORBIAX

Here you go, guv. Jarry up now!

JOHN

No! Don't! I— agh!

And JOHN gets several powerful sprays of the scopolia mist in the face. His coughing fades into...

[scene 15] Interstitial music. ALTHAAR approaches the Electric Egg, not yet aware that MRS. FRONDRINAX is right behind him. He calls through the door:

ALTHAAR

ALTHAAR IS MAKING APPROACH UPON THE ELECTRIC EGG! PLEASE HAVE ALERT, HUMAN FRIENDS!

CHIP

(calling back from inside)

That's just me right now, Althaar! But I'll turn on the sign, just in case anyone else shows up!
(muttering) Hope springs eternal...

ALTHAAR

(entering the doorway)

Thanking you, Mr. Frinkel! Althaar is very pleased to make arrival at the Electric Egg, as he is much in need of refreshment at this time!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(right behind him)

Why, yes, a crisp refreshing spritz sounds just lovely right now!

ALTHAAR

Oh! Frondrinax! You have performed the most inaudible approach!

ALTHAAR's comment gets the attention of everyone at the bar.

CHIP

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa, did Frondrinax just have the stones to walk in here? I'm not looking at the doorway right now, for obvious reasons.

XTOPPS

She's hovering just on the extraneous side of the Big Purple Line, Chorp. But an Egg-ward intrusion is definitively intended.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, I thought I'd stop by for a quick howdy-do! It's been a while, hasn't it?

CHIP

Not long enough! So you can turn that pot of yours right around and park it anywhere else but here!

Agreement from XTOPPS, KWONTZ, BUBBLES, SOPON, and the ALIEN BARFLY.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, really now, Chip! I just want to come in and have a little sit-down with my friend Althaar! Now, I know we Fugulnari are officially “banned from the premises,” but between us, that’s just so much virtue signaling, isn’t it? My credits are as good as anyone else’s, aren’t they?

SOPON

My crutches say they aren’t, greenie.

ALTHAAR

Frondrinax, this intrusion where you are not wished for is very much of the rudeness! And you do not need to make entry to have conversing with Althaar, because there is nothing you are needing to speak at Althaar about!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, but there is! I have something terribly urgent to tell you! Right away!

ALTHAAR

This is of great doubtfulness to Althaar, Frondrinax!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

But it’s true! We need to talk about... about... *(last place she wants to go with this, but it’s Hail Mary time and this is the one subject she knows ALTHAAR won’t blow off)* It’s about John B!

ALTHAAR

(beat; what is she up to?)

FriendJohn? What are you knowing that could be urgency upon FriendJohn?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, it’s really not something I want to discuss out here in the corridor, dear. Which is why I thought I would just join you for a nice quiet drink!

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes that if it is necessity to have informing about FriendJohn, it is FriendJohn himself who would be providing it. Is it to contact FriendJohn on his communication device?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, no! That is, you can’t! He’s... unreachable at the moment. That’s part of the message!

ALTHAAR

Then it is to be leaving the Electric Egg, so that you may make deliverment of the message in a place where you will not be causing the up-set.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, but that seems like such a waste of time and energy when we're right here, doesn't it? And I think I'd have a much easier time answering any questions you might have about the message in a nice, relaxing atmosphere, such as that of this multi-cultural eatery.

ALTHAAR

(sigh) As you are wishing, Frondrinax. *(calls out)* Most Splendid? Althaar is making requestment for the temporary easement on restriction against Fugulnari incursion in your domains, as Frondrinax is making demand on immediate discussion with Althaar, and Althaar is very much wishing to ingest the consciousness-altering beverage if he is unable to make avoidment of this. May this be so, at the pleasure of Your Radiance?

XTOPPS

(ALTHAAR's tone has put him into "royal" mode)

Gentle Althaar of Iltor, under the customary circumstance we would unquestionably grant you this boon—

CHIP

(both a comment and a reminder)

Xtopps, are you HIGH?

XTOPPS

(back into "stoned")

—uh, but seriously, zood, this is by no small means a “no sombrero” kind of favor you are asking. We're talkin' El Sombrero Mucho Grande, you chom me?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, now, let's not be parochial about this, Xtopps dear! Yes, we've let you play your silly little games at the Egg so far, pretending you can ban Fugulnari from your “domain,” but what authority do you think you have to actually *enforce* that?

CHIP

The authority of the entire flotting Xybidont Empire, for starters.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, yes, in theory, but they're not here right now, are they?

CHIP

All right, how about the authority of Frinkel Fundamentals, Incorporated! Plus everyone in here who hates your flotting guts! Or pith, or whatever.

BUBBLES

Also by the authority of whatever's not nailed down that I can huck at you from behind the bar.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That's not— Do any of you actually know what the word “authority” means? You have no actual right to keep me out of here! Do you understand that? We've only stayed out so far as a sort of... gentlebeing's agreement! But if you're not going to act like gentlebeings, well, then there's no reason we should do you that courtesy, is there?

SOPON

Chip? Just let it slide.

CHIP

Seriously, Sophon? You of all people want her in here?

SOPON

No, I absolutely do not want her in here, but pick your battles, yeah? If she tries to finagle it into a precedent later on, then sure, we can go ahead and start hucking julep strainers. But it's not worth kicking up a ruckus over a one-time exception. And she's here with Althaar, he's not going to let her make any trouble. Right, Althaar?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is swearing upon this, Sin Sophon!

CHIP

(after a beat)

Okay. Fine. As long as you're with Althaar, and *only* as long as you're with Althaar, you can stay. But you keep your discussion to the Gentlebeings' Parlor, out of sight of the rest of the customers, and you leave as soon as you're done. Got it?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, all right, if that's what will make you happy.

CHIP

It absolutely will not. I'm doing this as a favor for Althaar, period.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, Mr. Frinkel. Althaar is promising that he will not make abusing of the privilege. But is the Baronet of agreement also upon this arranging?

XTOPPS

It's a diagonal snag, but Xtopps can modulate.

CHIP

Right. Bubbles, you good?

BUBBLES

If it's all right with you, it's all right with me. But I'll be keeping a couple strainers next to my high-velocity garnishing attachment, just in case. So watch yourself, Foog.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(as she and ALTHAAR make their way to the parlor)

Oh, my! Everyone's gotten so touchy around here these days! Well, at least Sopon has managed to keep their furrows even! Thank you, Sopon dear! I must say I've certainly missed your excellent spritzes!

SOPON

Oh, really? Then maybe you'd like to check out some of my new recipes. I've got a fluazifop smoothie that's to die for.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I see. How droll. Well then, I'll just see myself back to the Gentlebeings' Parlor, shall I?

SOPON

Suit yourself. How about you, Althaar, can I get you anything?

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, Sin Sopon! The Tolimene and tonic would be of enjoyment, please!

CHIP

I'll get it.

SOPON

Nah, I'm good. One Tolimene and tonic, coming right up!

And ALTHAAR and MRS. FRONDRINAX enter the parlor off the main room, but still slightly open to it, containing the pool table.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well! Talk about ingratitude! I admit there have been some... unfortunate disagreements in the past, but really, this place is so much more pleasant and well-organized than it was back in the old days! You'd think everyone here actually liked working in some chaotic, haphazard... free-for-all!

ALTHAAR

That is very much possibility, Mrs. Frondrinax. And it is a truth that in the days of all-freeness, before the disagreement with your security forces, the employees of the Electric Egg were enjoying the full usage of all their limbs and attachments.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Er, well, yes. Yes, of course that is the kind of thing that people tend to take personally. I suppose that's to be expected.

BUBBLES rolls into the parlor, setting down a glass on a table.

BUBBLES

Here you go, Althaar honey, one Tolimene and tonic. You just give a holler if you need anything else, ok? Anything at all.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, Sin Bubbles! Althaar will most certainly make alertment if any assistance is needed.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ahem. Bubbles? I certainly wouldn't want to provoke anyone, given your bizarre hostility toward me, so I won't even think of requesting a mixed spritz. But if I could possibly just get a small glass of water, I can handle things myself from there.

BUBBLES

You could not. What you *could* do, as far as I'm concerned, is die in a ditch. As soon as possible. You want to get on that?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Really now, is that your idea of customer service? I did get permission to be here, after all. If that's the kind of attitude you display toward your clientele, it's a wonder you're still employed here at all! Maybe I should have someone take a quick look at your contract, make sure everything's on the up-and-up. We both know Chip likes to cut the occasional corner now and again, don't we?

BUBBLES

Go ahead and try it, kale chips. I'm Union. We may take a manipulators-off stance toward the Committee right now, but you push us too far and that could change real quick. *Capisce?*

BUBBLES leaves.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hmph. Oh, well, despite the unfortunate attitude, I suppose she *does* have a point. We certainly don't want to go kicking up any kind of kerfuffle with the only marginally efficiency-minded sapients in Human space! The Robot Union has been surprisingly accommodating so far.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is certain this is of gratification to you. Now, be telling to Althaar, please, what is the so important messaging of FriendJohn, that was making necessity of accompaniment on Althaar into the Electric Egg?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(now trying to get away from that subject)

Oh, that. It was... well, it wasn't all that important, now that I think about it. Not really worth making all that fuss over, in retrospect. I suppose I just got caught up in the moment! Anyway, the message is that, ah... Johnny's doing some special work today. Booster work, you know. I can't really say more about it. And Oakensarx— Oh, have you met?— Well, never mind that now. Anyway, he insisted on having some sort of "performance review" for the dear boy afterwards, so that's probably going to drag on for quite a bit, and, well, all things considered, the dear boy is probably going to be home terribly late this evening!

ALTHAAR

(beat)

Althaar believes that you are correct, Frondrinax. This is a news very much not deserving of the fuss.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I know how fond you are of our favorite little Booster! I wouldn't want you to worry. Especially if you couldn't get him on the phone.

ALTHAAR

And why in preciseness is the phoning of FriendJohn not possibility?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I already told you, Althaar, I can't say any more about it! A matter of security, you know. Johnny understands that perfectly well. But I can say that we do disable all our Boosters' communication devices while they're on particularly... sensitive jobs. Just as a precaution, you understand. So you won't be able to talk to him while he's on this one. And I'm sure he'd appreciate it if you didn't put him in a difficult position by asking him about it afterwards.

ALTHAAR

Hm. All you have said is of plausibility, Frondrinax...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I should hope so! It's the unpollinated truth!

ALTHAAR

But it is seeming to Althaar that the very great exertions you have made to be sharing this information are not in the proportion. So he must be asking himself if the attempt at deception is taking place.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh really, now, Althaar sweetie, that's too much. Would I lie to you?

ALTHAAR

(beat; suddenly distracted, as if understanding something; to himself)

Hm. Fascination!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Sorry, what?

ALTHAAR

Please be pardoning Althaar, Frondrinax. It is only that your words have caused the insight most sudden into the aspect of the Human jokings that has been of wonderment to him of some time. The Humans are producing on some occasions the laugh, when the situation is very much not of amusement. This has sometimes description as the "bitter laugh" or "mirthless chuckle". And Althaar was of great confusion as to how this amusement that is not of happiness should be produced. But he believes now he is having comprehension on it.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(did not follow that)

Oh. Well, glad to be of help. But as I was saying—

ALTHAAR

Yes, are you seeing? Frondrinax was making question if Althaar believed her capable of deceit! After Frondrinax was lying to Althaar for many years about her intendings here on the Fairgrounds, and those of her people! A juxtaposition most ferrous. And the appreciation of this is not the experience of enjoyment, but Althaar is experiencing the desire to make laughter nonetheless!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ah. Well, yes, I suppose I did lie by *omission*, just a bit, while we Fugulnari were still getting all our taproots in position for the Ascension. But that was then! I certainly have nothing to hide from you *now*! Our plans have germinated, and our sprouts unfurled for all to see!

(trying to get chummy and kill time)

Say, as long as we're in here, shall we shoot a little game of SuperNova? I don't get much of a chance to keep in practice, but I used to be pretty passable with a stick, as it were.

ALTHAAR

Althaar also has not made a great practicing on the SuperNova. But he will make joining of you, if you are of agreement that when this game is conclusion, then so will be the discussings between Frondrinax and Althaar on this day.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(a bit of a pout)

Oh! All right, then, if those are your terms, fine. I'm sorry if I'm such a *bother* to you. But I don't see why we can't just have a normal friendly conversation once in a while, like we did back in the old days.

ALTHAAR

(getting a cue from the rack)

Yes, Althaar is certain that you do not.

The SuperNova table is activated, balls zooming into place for the break.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(getting her cue stick)

Oh, I always forget how much I enjoy this game. Why don't you go ahead and break, sweetie? I'm a bit better when it comes to spatial dynamics, as opposed to pure force.

ALTHAAR

Very well, Frondrinax, Althaar will do so. But first, Althaar will make sampling of his beverage... *(slurps some back)* ...Ah! Sin Sapon is the master mixologist, indeed! Now, Althaar believes it is to make beginning with... the Big Bang, yes?

ALTHAAR shoots—sound of the break and balls shooting throughout the “galaxy” of the 3-D table. Two of them go into the nebulae “pockets.”

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Goodness, Althaar, what a break! And you sank *two* gaseous spheres! I suppose that puts me on solids. Go ahead, sweetie, still your shot.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar is knowing this.

ALTHAAR shoots again, and there is the sound of another ball sinking. Bells and whistles from the table.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, my! I had no idea you were such an experienced player!

ALTHAAR

There are many things Frondrinax is having the misapprehension of, in the opinion of Althaar. Such as the nature of the Human thinking. It is the mystification to Althaar that Frondrinax could be absent of understanding, after so many years of living among the Humans, as to how the imposition of the Plant Way would be received.

And ALTHAAR makes another successful shot, with some more bells and whistles.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I— Well, obviously I realized there would be *some* resistance, of course! Humans are far too heterogenous and contrary for it to be otherwise! But the... the wretched *stubbornness* of it, I'll admit that came as a surprise. We certainly never expected so many of them to keep refusing our help, even after they had a chance to see how much we could elevate their confused, haphazard existence!

ALTHAAR

Yes. It is always error to allow expectation to make dictating of perception. And now you are learning this in the first-hand. *(lining up a trickier shot)* Excusing Althaar, please...

He takes the shot, we hear it "bank" a few times and then successfully sink two more balls. More happy table sounds.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

OH! That... that was a *very* fancy shot there, Althaar sweetie! It certainly doesn't seem like you're out of practice... *(beat)* What was that you were saying, about letting our expectations dictate our perceptions? You may be right, I suppose. But of course everyone has expectations of one kind or another, don't they? Otherwise no one would try to accomplish anything at all!

ALTHAAR

Indeed, Frondrinax, the triumphing of expectation over reality is a problem most common amongst the many peoples of the galaxy! But that does not mean it is not... to beee... reSISSted!

He hits the Q Ball very hard on this last word, and there is a great deal of sound as balls bank, spin, spray around, and indeed, sink. Bells and whistles.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

So what exactly are you saying, Althaar? You think we Fugulnari have been shortsighted? Or even... irrational?

ALTHAAR

Indeed, Frondrinax, you are phrasing the belief of Althaar with great succinct-ness. And if you are disagreement with this, perhaps you may make consideration that your perceiving of your relationship with the Human people is very very different from the larger part of their own perceivings of this. And the perceivings of many others in the galaxy also. So it is wisdom, when there is finding the so great disagreement about the nature of reality, to make questioning of the assumptions. It is always to allow reality to shape the ideas, before the attempting to use ideas... *(lining up another shot)* ...to shape... *(takes the shot, hard)* ...reality!

ALTHAAR's shot makes a SuperNova, with many bells and whistles, and he has run the table. The game is over.

ALTHAAR

Ah! And now the SuperNova is achieved! That is the game, yes?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh. Yes. Excellent work, Althaar. Very impressive.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you. And now, if you will be recalling the agreement, since Althaar has... (*slurps back the last of his Tolimene and tonic*) ...completed his refreshing beverage, and the game is conclusion, so also is the conversing between Althaar and Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! But... don't you think we could just—

ALTHAAR

No, Frondrinax. Althaar will be returning homeward to commence the dinner preparations. Even if FriendJohn will make returning to the shared living quarters with some delay. Of course, the dinner would be of greater savoriness if the re-heating is not requirement... but Althaar is supposing this will be the decision of the colleagues of Frondrinax, yes?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Er, yes. I'll, ah... I'll see if there's anything I can do about that, dear. But it's not up to me, really.

ALTHAAR

That is unfortunate. Thanking you for the game, Frondrinax.

ALTHAAR leaves.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, frost my buds and prune my petals!

XTOPPS

(poking his head into the parlor)

Hey, Frondy-baby, I see my buddy Althaar done blown this here popsicle stand and left you down at the end of Lonely Street?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hmm? Oh. Yes, yes. Althaar had to be getting home, he said. Such a dear... polite... *surprising* young Iltorian he is. He's given me a great deal to consider.

XTOPPS

(sliding as he goes into “royal” mode without thinking)

Well, perhaps the dishonorable representative of the Committee would consider seeing herself out posthaste or sooner? As, pursuant to our verbal mediation of several minutes hence, you are now unaccompanied by your chaperone, as designated by my august personage under all relevant codicils.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, yes, fine, I— Xtopps, are you trying some new blend, or synthetic hybrid, or something? Because your demeanor is a bit unsettling. In something other than the usual way, I mean.

XTOPPS

(back into “stoned” mode)

Don’t flip the formality, if that ain’t your bag, baggy. What Xtopps is poppin’ on the parquet is that you are to split, amscray, vamoose, decamp, push off, and in no uncertain terms, put a chicken in that pot a yours and pluck it! Immediamente! Before I get the scepters, you chom?

[scene 16] Interstitial music. Meanwhile, back in the interrogation room...

OAKENSARX

How long does this stuff usually take to get rooted in?

DINORBIAX

Well, guvnor, there ain’t no “usually” with the scopy, you knows? No matter how we dickeys with it—

FRACOTTIVERX

It’s nanti an exact science, you see.

DINORBIAX

Some blokes you gotta do dooey or tray doses before you even gets a bijou effect an hour later...

FRACOTTIVERX

And then you hit some with una, and chinker minutes later they’re doing the Bristol Stomp across the floor. Just useless.

JOHN

(groggy, groaning)

Ohhhh... oh, noooo... swimming...

DINORBIAX

Now you see, Sin B here? He done definitely be feeling it already.

FRACOTTIVERX

Just a question now of whether he starts dishing the dirt, or if his nervous system starts making with the heebus and the jeebus. Probably just a couple tics.

OAKENSARX

Good. We've already wasted more than enough time trying to *talk* to these foolish perambulators. This is what we need more of. Strong, unflinching action!

DINORBIAX

Well, now you see there, guvnor—

FRACOTTIVERX

(stopping DINORBIAX; don't want to upset the boss)
S'alright, Dino, let it go. Orders is orders.

OAKENSARX

B? John B? Can you hear me? What do you know about the sabotage of our supply depot? You talked with the terrorist! He must have mentioned something!

JOHN

Oh. You're... you're *loud*. *(feels some effects)* Oh! Yeah, I... um... whoa... yeah, that's... that's... that's some serious mist you guys got there. ...Can I call you "guys?" Maybe that's not... appropriate? Eh, who cares what I call you? I don't care what I call you. And you don't care what I call you. That's... that's symmetry!

OAKENSARX

John B! Pay attention!

JOHN

(woozier)

I already said! I said... everything... *almost* everything... I think...? Was there something I forgot...? Or something I didn't want to talk about...? Oh, yeah, that was it! I definitely... definitely shouldn't say...

Suddenly, a FRALL shimmer passes through the room (they are swapping out some of JOHN B's blood with the time he was drunk in episode 12 and they sobered him up for the Christmas party).

FRACOTTIVERX

What th— You nelly that, Dino?

DINORBIAX

Thought me nellyfakes got something, I did... But there's nanti wot could get in here.

OAKENSARX

Never mind that now! It was probably yet another fault in these laughably inefficient Human electronic systems. Now, focus!

JOHN

(chuckling; he is VERY drunk, suddenly, which is different from the scopolia, but it's not quite evident yet)

You, uh... *(hic!)* You want me to... I dunno... have a lookit it er something? Maybe it's... it's a... *very small wire!* *(laughing)* That's what I do, yunno? Very small wires! Soooo small! Teeensy! Cause the Robots don wanna touch em! I don wanna touchem either, but it's my job! Probationunanry. Job. That's me. Or... I dunno... you got a drunks machine in here? Drinks! Drinks machine? I do them, too.

FRACOTTIVERX

Oi! What's up with our guest here?

JOHN

No, no ups! Too many ups! John is... is *down*, Fraccy-buddy! Down to be clowning! 'Swhat Althaar would say. Hey! Hey! You know the las' time I felt so good? I felt *so good* that time! An... an... an... you know? You know *why* I felt so good that time?

DINORBIAX

(confused)

No, squire, why?

JOHN

(laughing, clearly drunk off his ass)

Because I made a *Molnar!* An' I ate the whoooooooooole thing! And then... and then the room of living was spinning around, jus' like this one! When... when did you turn on the spinny-roomy? Did... did you make a Molnar? Ohhhhh, they're tasty! But... but... but... you gotta... wachout for em! Oooooooh, they sneak up on you! Mr. Molnar! He showed me! An' I learned a new word! But I don' 'member it now.

OAKENSARX

Who is this Molnar he's going on about? *(to DINORBIAX and FRACOTTIVERX)* Do we have any files on this person? Is he with the Resistance?

JOHN

Oh, no no no nonono! He's a *nice* man, a verra nice man! He showed me! An'... he can show you too! You gotta... you gotta get yer ingredients, see? An' you... you line 'em up, all nice. You put... two bottle a whiskey... three, *three* bottles a spiced rum, an... an... one bottle port!

OAKENSARX

Port? What's this about a port? Was this Molnar involved in the destruction of our docking port?

JOHN

(muttering sloppily)

...and then there is some sugar and eggs and cinnamons and so forth...

OAKENSARX

What?

DINORBIAX

Oh, sorry, maunger Oakensarx! I codjos we ain't getting a bit a real palaver outta him now.

OAKENSARX

Hm. You may be right. Have you two ever seen another Human react this way to the scopolia mist?

FRACOTTIVERX

Never, guv!

DINORBIAX

But you know, like we polari... dowry unpredictable.

Hatch/door opens and closes again as MRS. FRONDRINAX enters.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well? Dare I ask how the interrogation is proceeding? Have you actually managed to get anything out of John with your strong-branch techniques?

FRACOTTIVERX

Uh, nanti nada, Frondrinax!

DINORBIAX

Oakensarx here has taken command of the rakeage, like.

JOHN

You want somethin' outta me? Hokay! Here it comes!

JOHN pukes all over the floor. The Foogs all react.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, stellar work there, comrades. What in Vim's name did you do to him?

OAKENSARX

Standard interrogation technique, Frondrinax.

FRACOTTIVERX

Yeah, that, plus a bit of the old scopy mist.

DINORBIAX

I think that's what's caused the bijou tat a bit more than our palaver, you know.

MRS FRONDRINAX

Oh for— Oakensarx! This is *exactly* what happens when an amateur starts dabbling in intelligence work. Just *leaping* right to the scopolia! When you don't know the first thing about it! It's not some magic... "truth juice!" You have to know when to use it, how to calculate the dosage, how to phrase the questioning in order to take advantage of its effects... It takes training and skill! You can't just... toss your seeds to the wind and hope for the best!

OAKENSARX

Yes, yes, we all know the high opinion in which you hold your own expertise, Frondrinax. Dare I ask if that training and skill of yours was up to the task of distracting this Human's roommate? Isn't that what you were supposed to be doing right now?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I dragged things out for as long as I could, but even I have my limits. And really, you should have wrapped this up by now! I mean we talk about *plants* being patient, but have you ever *tried* to distract an Iltorian? *You* can go take a whack at it, if you think it's so easy!

JOHN

Sheesh rite, yunno. When the big guy... isshee a big guy? Sometimes he's small, sometimes. He can, like... squish? (*urp*) I shouldn'... shouldn' think 'bout that. But when Althaar gets himself all... all like (*imitating ALTHAAR*) "Ooooh! FrenJon! Althaar must to be telling you about his televisual viewing today! He will now recite every plot point from season two of the *F Troop!*" Yeah, *you* tryan' stoppim!

OAKENSARX

What in the eluviated horizon is he prattling on about?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

He agrees with me, obviously, because he at least has some understanding of the Iltorian temperament! (*sigh*) All right, well, there's no point in tilling up old disagreements, we just need to figure out how we're going to smooth all this soil over. The last thing we need is Althaar complaining to the galaxy at large that we drugged his best friend, not to mention one of our own most loyal Boosters, into some... unfathomable delusional state!

JOHN

Am not unfathomumble! Althaar can fathom me jus' fine! ...Hey! Where's Althaar? I gotta tell'im! The Molnar's back! He wanted to know. Where it went.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Don't you worry, Johnny, we're going to get you on your way just as quick as we can. So you can tell Althaar all about the... Moldar or whatever it is, as soon as you get home.

OAKENSARX

One moment, Frondrinax! I didn't say I was done with him!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Really? Well, I'd say that whether or not *you're* done with *him*, *he* is definitely done with *us!* We won't be getting anything remotely intelligible out of him now, thanks to your flap-froned poking around in his muscarinic receptors! Would you agree, Dinorbiax? Fracottiverx?

FRACOTTIVERX

Yeah, sorry to say, guv, but when a subject is *this* far gone—

DINORBIAX

There ain't nada we're gonna get outta him in like the "useful" category, you knows?

FRACOTTIVERX

Sorry about this Frondrinax. We was trying to do a bonari here.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I know, Fracottiverx. Don't worry, I'm not holding you responsible. Just get him cleaned up and walk him out, please.

JOHN

Uh... wait a minnnide... 'fore you start cleaning... (*pukes again, while the Foogs react*).
Hokay. Go 'head.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Lovely.

DINORBIAX

All right, squire, come with us!

FRACOTTIVERX

We'll have you all dobie'd in no time flat, guvnor!

We hear DINORBIAX and FRACOTTIVERX helping JOHN up, with muttering (and giggling from JOHN), and getting him out of the room, while:

OAKENSARX

Well, ah... Yes. I suppose an apology is in order, Frondrinax. Perhaps I should have known better. This kind of work really isn't my specialty, after all.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You can say that again! But thank you. And if you'd still like to try your branch at the subtle art of investigation, I do have something that might benefit from your particular skills and connections. And for which a touch of brutality would be entirely appropriate. It concerns the pot Scarlett used to insinuate his way into our most highly-secured facility.

OAKENSARX

Pot?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, a disguise of some sort. It was apparently impregnated with a pheromone signature realistic enough to deceive not only the guards—that's not much of a surprise, we don't exactly reserve prison guard duty for the tallest shoots—but also accurate enough to bypass the doorway security codes. And *that* is serious cause for concern. Now, obviously the pot itself was obliterated in the explosion, but we believe it was delivered to the Fairgrounds by interstellar post that morning. Possibly from Mars, if the shipping records weren't fabricated, which they may very well have been. So not only is the sophistication of the disguise unsettling, but I'm very disturbed by the possibility that the Human malcontents have succeeded in establishing some kind of interstellar communication system. One we know nothing about. I'm sure I don't have to spell out what a disaster that could be for the Ascendancy.

OAKENSARX

Yes, of course. You're entirely correct, Frondrinax. If the local resistance is in contact with their Human counterparts in the Solar system, that is obviously a matter I ought to concern myself with personally. There *are* much better ways for me to further the Plant Way than lowering myself to interfere in some petty little interrogation of what I must admit was a fairly unlikely suspect. I suppose I just had this... feeling that John B knew more than he'd been saying to us. But I was obviously mistaken.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I do appreciate your thoroughness, Oakensarx, but did you really think I'd be so foolish as to take John B under my branch if I wasn't completely certain of him? Remember, I've been observing him very closely ever since he arrived here, long before the Ascension. I have a very good idea of his temperament and capabilities. Besides, after all this time, he's more than just another Booster to me, he's... well, almost a friend, despite his silly, inefficient Human ways. Why, if *John B* can't be trusted, I don't think we could trust *any* Human, anywhere! Ever!

[scene 17] Interstitial music. An elevator door opens. JOHN enters, still pretty drunk, and a bit giggly—he got away with it.

JOHN

Alef... One.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Now departing, Alef 46.

A couple beats of JOHN breathing. Maybe a couple giggles. Then they build to some laughter. Not so much from humor but from tension release.

JOHN

(both a bit of a cheer and a sigh of relief)

Whooooo-hoooo!

(with relief, chuckling)

Stella. Oh, Stella. I did it. Me an' ... me an' Molnar!

We fooled 'em, Stella. We fooled 'em all! I'm safe! ...Safe.

They still dunno. They dunno I'm with you. Still.

Oh, Stella. I love you. Wherever you are.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Alef. One.

JOHN

Okay. G'night.

Elevator door. JOHN leaves. A beat. Then the electronic tones introduced in the previous episode—the Observer sounds. A FOOG OBSERVER is heard.

FOOG OBSERVER

Systat, read new target, file open PK-16/68, B-comma-John. Special notes. Committee contact.
(bleep of a button)

Frondrinax, Frondrinax, available for eval? New target noted, special interest: Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(over comm as well; annoyed at the disturbance)

Oh, what now? Can't you people go ten minutes without me staking up your stems? What is so urgent that you just had to interrupt my evening Bordeaux mixture? You know the procedure, just tag and follow until they level up or you spot an immediate intervention trigger!

FOOG OBSERVER

Yes, Frondrinax, believe possible intervention trigger indicated. Target is Booster. Target of special interest to Frondrinax, noted.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Who's this Booster and what are they supposed to have done?

FOOG OBSERVER

PK-16/68 ident Booster B-comma-John. Used activation word while alone in elevator, then—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, for—! We just CLEARED him not half an hour ago! There’s absolutely nothing suspicious about John B!

FOOG OBSERVER

Activation word was flagged, and escalation protocols—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, frost the protocols! My Bordeaux’s getting cold! What activation word was it, *exactly*?

FOOG OBSERVER

Target PK-16/68 used activation word “Stella.” Target then proceeded to—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That’s it?! Did you even look at his file before calling me? Yes, “Stella” is an activation word. Do you know what else it is? The name of John’s former lover! Yes, she’s a known counter-productive, but the silly boy is still watering the plot for her. Foolish, but it’s their way. There’s nothing actionable in that.

FOOG OBSERVER

Word in isolation not actionable, but full context is immediate bypass trigger, Committee-level response required. You... you’re going to want to listen to the entire audio instance, ma’am.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ugh, fine. Let’s hear it, then, if you think it’s so frosting important. But if you’re wasting my time, you’re going to find yourself re-assigned to the lingonberry fields before you can say Jacaranda!

[scene 18] Closing credits music.

ANNOUNCER

You’ve been listening to *Life With Althaar*, episode 33!

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

John Amir as John B

Eli Gantias as H.F.

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Zuri Washington as Dee

Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

Berit Johnson as Althaar

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant Frall

and Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

and also featured

Clara Francesca, Leila Okafor, Ian W. Hill, Anna Stefanic, Fred Backus, Philip Cruise, Lex Friedman, and Linus Gelber

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, Philip, Lex, Linus, Amanda, and Chris

Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanic

Life With Althaar logo and illustration created by Dean Haspiel

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We'll be back in two weeks with another "Tale from the Fairgrounds," but first, let's join Frondrinax as she hears that unfortunate little recording from John B...

[scene 19] In a Foog observation room. JOHN's voice, in the elevator, plays over a speaker.

JOHN

(on speaker)

Whooooo-hoooo! Stella. Oh, Stella. I did it. Me an'... me an' Molnar! We fooled 'em, Stella. We fooled 'em all! I'm safe! ...Safe. They still dunno. They dunno I'm with you. Still. Oh, Stella. I love you. Wherever you are.

We hear the sound of the elevator door opening as JOHN leaves. Then a bleep as the FOOG OBSERVER shuts off the recording. A very tense long pause.

FOOG OBSERVER

Uh. Frondrinax?

Beat.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(terrifyingly icy, seething)

Yes?

FOOG OBSERVER

So...? Mark for detention and intel extraction protocols, or expedited mulching? I can have Security there in 3 minutes.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(quiet, calm, deadly-friendly)

Oh. No. Not yet. Let him sleep.

We can wait until the morning. We can wait.

We certainly don't want any word of this getting out. Not until we have our cover story in place.

The Humans absolutely can not learn that our "star Booster" has betrayed us. Has been betraying us. All this time.

So, we'll just let him sleep it off.

It'll be the last good sleep John B ever has.

A sharp bleep as the FOOG OBSERVER sends a message.