

Life with Althaar

Episode 26: And You Turn Yourself Around

Version 2.1 (Recording Script), 12/18/20 - IWH (draft 2, BAJ)

[scene 1] The standard LWA opening spaceship whoosh. A piano glissando. We are in a much-classier Electric Egg. It SOUNDS smoky and a bit spooky-noir—there is a crowd, but they are somewhat hushed and waiting. XTOPPS noodles a bit at the piano under his introduction, setting the stage for DEE.

XTOPPS

(classy-hip smooth; for the supper-club crowd)

Gentlebeings, flarkmeisters, and finger-poppin' strizzers, knock this to your lobes. The newly redecorated, rebranded, *and* re-priced watering hole known to all and stately as Chip Frinkel's Electric Egg—your oasis in the cosmic storm, your tether on the event horizon, your most diplo-MAT-ic-cally immunized spot on the Fairgrounds—is most quadrilaterally tiled to present, with a standard from that classic Kwafatodian musical, *The Rise and Fall of the Planet of* [four syllables of KWONTZ-style gibberish], our very own Ms. Delilah Mallory!

Applause as DEE takes the stage and XTOPPS starts the tune (“Freiheit-Song”) —a galloping, raucous beat on piano and other instruments, in the manner of Kurt Weill's Berlin theater music (bordering on Kander & Ebb's Cabaret score).

DEE

(singing; verses in the manner of Brecht/Weill's “Havana-Song” or “First Threepenny Finale”)

My mother was not kind let alone loving
But she could tell the truth and tell it straight
You'll never get what matters but by shoving
Hold tightly to the meat that's on your plate

It's been ten years since mother was still living
And we all know that when you're dead you're dead
So when I'm feeling hopeful and forgiving
I just recall the words my mother said:

(choruses slower, in the manner of Brecht/Weill's “Alabama Song” or “Barbara-Song,” with a fleezborp obbligato)

You can't turn blood back into water
You can't turn gold back into lead
Take my advice, my naive daughter
Your honor's worth less than your bread

For freedom's only an illusion
Which his'try ever does confirm
Let's be clear, so that there's no confusion:
Escape is never on your terms

On Mars I knew a libertine named Jenny
Who Mama would most surely have adored
Her pleasures as diverse as they were many
There was no vice that she left unexplored

Now Jenny's was a solo dereliction
But Martians still held to that shibboleth
And when she was convicted for addiction
She sang as they did sentence her to death:

You can't turn blood back into water
As has been often aforesaid
Don't do more ever than you ought'er
Let chaos reign but plan ahead

For freedom's only an illusion
For higher beings as for germs
Once again, so that there's no confusion:
Escape is never on your terms

So she was put in prison and kept waiting
Until she'd hear the execut'ner call
But Jenny smiled and went on contemplating
How she would find a way to cheat them all

And when at last, the fearsome hour trembled
To do the job they planned and do it well
The firing squad, they came and all assembled
And there they found her hanging in her cell

*On the final chorus, XTOPPS joins in, echoing at the end of DEE's lines. Perhaps audience members that know this standard **hum along with the melody.***

DEE (and XTOPPS echo)

You can't turn blood back into water (*no, you can't*)
You can't turn gold back into lead (*you never can*)
Go cheerfully to your own slaughter (*with a smile*)
For no one hurts you when you're dead (*no more pain*)

For freedom's only an illusion (*just a vision*)
Between conception and the worms
Once last time, so that there's no confusion: (*one more time*)
No escape, except on your own terms

*Supper-club applause and mild approving vocal acknowledgment from the crowd.
Suddenly, a loud voice from the doorway over a megaphone, quieting everything.*

DORMER

This is Security! Please remain seated and do not make any sudden movements!

CHIP

Oh, what now?

NESS

(also on megaphone)

All patrons present may continue their consumption of intoxicants and artery-clogging snack foods, but this reputed entertainment must cease, in compliance with Section 194, Paragraph 82 of the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Agreement! "Song lyrics that contain, concern, describe, or obliquely reference specific parts of the Human body, when sung by Humans, are prejudicial against non-Humanoid species, and are therefore not to be sung, spoken, signed, or otherwise signified in polite society!"

XTOPPS

You call this "polite?"

DEE

(over the stage mic)

Chip! What the frid?!

CHIP

I'm on it, Dee! Just relax, everybody! Officers, would you mind stepping over here so we can discuss this? Xtopps, you keep playing. Dee, you just... take five while I get this straightened out, ok? No worries, folks, Ms. Mallory will be back in just a few minutes!

DORMER

(off megaphone as they come to the bar)

We'll see about *that*.

DEE mutters angrily as she leaves the stage for the bar. XTOPPS starts playing soft piano music. The crowd goes back to low chatter.

CHIP

(as they approach)

Okay, Corporal Quisling and Corporal Pétain, what's the deal? Really out to put a vonch on my big re-branding reveal, aren't you?

NESS

We have no personal opinions about your business practices or décor, Mr. Frinkel, except for when they break station law. Then it's our problem.

CHIP

Break *what* "station law?" You mean this Friendship Agreement the Foogs have laid on us?

DORMER

The Friendship Agreement is a League of Humans policy, sir.

CHIP

Yeah, right. We all know who actually wrote that shness.

DORMER

Well, *I* know that Earth Central was deeply involved in all aspects of the creation and implementation of the Friendship Agreement.

NESS

That's right! It clearly states as much in Section 1, Paragraph 38!

DORMER

And anyway, it doesn't matter who wrote it, because it's League law now, which means it's Security's job to enforce it!

NESS

With extreme prejudice!

DEE

And how exactly did that song violate the law? Because according to all the leafy kibitzers we've had in here over the past couple months, the problem is lyrics that refer to the Human anatomy, right? And there's nothing about the Human body anywhere in those lyrics!

DORMER

If Humans are mentioned in the song, then they've obviously got bodies! That's good enough for us.

CHIP

But that song isn't even about Humans! The original comes from Kwafatod!

KWONTZ

(gibberish: "It sure does! It's a classic! And that translation is terrible!")

DEE

C'mon, Kwontz, gimme a break about the translation. It's the best one in English there is.

NESS

We don't give a blorch's fleek about the original! Your translation uses Human names, takes place on a Human planet, and is being sung by a Human singer! So, by transitive properties, it is now about Humans! And their bodies!

DORMER

Ipsa facto!

DEE

Sure. Yeah, *that's* why you have a problem with it. Not for any more... *political* reasons.

CHIP

(doesn't want to argue from this perspective; a warning)

Dee...

NESS

I can assure you, ma'am, that Security has received *no* clandestine directive to suppress any form of creative expression that may be perceived as critical of the work of the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Committee, even if such critique is obscured by... uh, by... what's the word I'm looking for?

DORMER

Uh... satire?

NESS

No, that's not it.

CHIP

Metonymy?

NESS

No...

DEE

Litotes?

NESS

Ye—! uhhhh... no...

SOPON

Synecdoche?

DORMER

Oh, come on, that's just a subset of metonymy!

CHIP

Yeah, what's wrong with you, Sopen?

KWONTZ

(gibberish)

NESS

What's that?

KWONTZ

(gibberish at length)

Beat.

NESS

Noooo...

VERT

(surprising everyone, from out of nowhere)

Irony?

CHIP

Streez, Vert! Didn't see you down there! Call your shots!

VERT

Sorry, boss.

NESS

Not irony, no...

BUBBLES

Allegory?

NESS

Yeah! That's it! Allegory!

*A moment of **pleased murmuring among all of them** that this literary question has finally been solved, then back to business.*

CHIP

Well, then. If there's no such order, then you have no grounds to object to that song even if it *was* allegorical, which she already told you it isn't. And for the bazillionth time, League laws don't have any standing here in the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a, so why are we even having this discussion?

DORMER

Maybe because your Baronet is a peanut butter junkie?

NESS

Yeah! So maybe the Xybs won't actually give a tinker's quarn about us busting you up.

The Egg staff immediately goes into unified defense mode.

DEE

Oooh. Say, you want me to go and ask the Baronet about that? Chip? Should I? See, the thing is, officers, Xtopps may spread it smooth most of the time, but he's no stranger to rough stuff.

SOPON

Yeah, the zood may be *Xyba non grata* back home, but he's still royalty, you nulls.

CHIP

Exactly. So I'm gonna go ahead and call that bluff. Yeah, Xtopps may be the black sheep of his family, but that hits a little different when the family business is the Xybidont Empire. You know his mother's the Grand Duchess of Prang, right? He's a quarter-cousin to the Empress, for crying out loud! And yeah, they may not like him much back home, but they like insults to the Imperial dignity a whole lot less. So I suggest you find some other way besides hassling us to kiss the Fugulnari equivalent of ass, because if you try to enforce that "Friendship Agreement" in here one more time, all of us will find out just what the Empire thinks of a couple of two-bit Foog stooges trying to push us around.

DORMER

Uh...

NESS

I mean...

BUBBLES

You mean? You mean what?

CHIP

Yeah, what exactly did you mean?

NESS

Uh. I meant... that... we just wanted to give you a warning! You... be... better! Right? Okay, let's go, Dormer, our work is done here.

They walk quickly away, calling back as they go.

DORMER

Sure thing. *(to Egg staff)* But we'll be back! So just... watch it!

DEE

Whatever you say, officers. And hey, love those kicky new headbands you're wearing. What's *that* all about? Did you two start a little club?

DORMER

Oh, you'll find out. And you're all gonna be wearing 'em, too, soon enough! They're going to be *very* popular around here!

BUBBLES

Oh, yeah. They look like the hottest craze of 2495!

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

The Egg staff laughs as NESS and DORMER leave, muttering unhappily. They don't exactly cheer, but chatter positively among themselves, except for CHIP.

SOPON

Nice work, Chip! They lit out of here like their fins were on fire! We scared them good that time!

CHIP

(grim, action-hero style - Dalton in Road House)

Not good enough. They'll be back.

Beat. Real bringdown. Everyone silences.

SOPON

Okay, what is *with* you?

[scene 2] Opening title music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents..!

LIFE! WITH! ALTHAAR! Season two!

Episode 26... “And You Turn Yourself Around...”

*[scene 3] John’s bedroom. JOHN is awake and getting dressed, STELLA is groggily getting up. MRS. FRONDRINAX is heard over a station speaker, accompanied by calming music. JOHN and STELLA can **mutter quietly to each other** under this speech (“Where’s my..?” “Over there.” “Right, thanks.” etc.).*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And a very lovely top-of-the-cycle to all of those now rising and readying themselves for whatever they must do to keep the Fairgrounds and themselves in proper working order! This is your old friend Mrs. Frondrinax, of the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Advisory Committee, with another daily suggestion towards a better, more streamlined life for the benefit of yourselves and your community! Hey! Why not take a moment to consider again the many ways you can conserve energy through reducing movement? For example, do Humans really need to chew their food? It seems like you’re putting a lot of stress and strain on those mandibles of yours for no good reason! There are plenty of commercially-available appliances that could do that work for you ahead of time, and then all you’d need do is sip, slurp, gulp, or ingurgitate the pre-softened nutrient material! Try it! And I’m sure your lateral pterygoids will thank you for the rest! Just another cheerful life hack from your friends at the H.F.F.A.C, where we’re doing all we can to make this easy on you! Really, we are! (*music up and then out*)

STELLA

And we Humans sure gosh-darn appreciate it, don’t we, Johnny?

JOHN

Why shucks, Stell! I never considered before how much easier my life would be if I simply eliminated chewing my food! Who needs to taste it? And my stomach must have more than enough enzymes to break it down and get me all the nutrients I need!

STELLA

Speaking of, breakfast? I’m sure Althaar’s got something traditional and tasty ready. Or possibly something we’ve never heard of that’s maybe a little too interesting to be sprung on us first thing in the cycle.

JOHN

Or both. Yeah, okay if I go ahead while you get ready? Shower’s open.

STELLA

Nah, I’m gonna do that in the locker room at work, just gimme a sec...

The sound of clothing being donned at seemingly impossible speed, including belts, shoulder-holster, and lots of snaps and zippers.

JOHN

Damn. I will *never* get used to that, and I hope I never do. Do you really have that much use for the three-second suit-up any more? I'd think since most of the vent-biters got blasted you could slack off on the constant combat-readiness a bit.

STELLA

I guess, but... it's always good to keep in practice, right? And Althaar's breakfasts give me a good incentive. Come on, bacon bacon bacon!

Door whoosh as they exit to the room of living.

ALTHAAR

A good morning and a pleasant commencing of the cycle to FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes! Althaar hopes you are having sufficient time for a nutritious breakfast that will build strong bodies in at least a dozen different ways! Althaar has prepared the panned cakes, the bacon, the ja-va and fruit juices, and of course the toast with the Veg-ee-mite! Oh! And today, Althaar has made experimentation with another traditional Earth breakfast food, waakye! (*prn: WAH-chay*) You must be telling Althaar if it is success!

JOHN

Hmn. I'm good with the pancakes and bacon, I think. Thanks anyway.

STELLA

Oh, hey, waakye? Rice and beans work for me any time. Thanks, Althaar!

STELLA digs in to the waakye, JOHN eats as well but is more concerned with ingesting coffee.

JOHN

Hey, Althaar? Did you hear the latest announcement from Mrs. F? Just so you know, that's one piece of advice I definitely won't be taking. So please don't feel like you have to start serving your breakfasts in, like, non-chewable form.

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, FriendJohn! For as long as Althaar can make acquisition of the ingredients for the traditional Human breakfast, Althaar will be constructing the traditional Human breakfast! Although Althaar has made some study of the SMOOTH-ee, so he will be prepared if this suggestion of the Committee is becoming more of an insistence.

JOHN

Eegh. I didn't even consider that possibility. Maybe I should try some of that waakye while the... *(realizes that STELLA has downed all of the waakye by this point; enough normally for four healthy and large adults) ... getting's good...*

STELLA

(swallowing the last of it)

Uh, sorry. Thought you didn't want any.

JOHN

Streez, Supervisor!

ALTHAAR

Althaar is once again most impressed by the redoubtable trenchbeingship of Supervisor Reyes! Althaar should have been knowing better than to have concern of the left-overs!

STELLA

(getting up and ready to go)

Well, I got work to do, and a couple personal things I want to take care of first. You both know how fast I can shovel it down when I need to.

JOHN

I swear you're getting faster.

STELLA

"An army marches on its stomach," Johnny. Just ask Frederick the Great, Vortzanger the Pleasant Marauder, or Joey Chestnut. And now I'd better get out of here if I want to have time to hit the scrubbers before I clock in. Later, fellas!

Door whoosh as STELLA exits.

JOHN

Annnnd... There she goes again, with a perfectly plausible explanation for rushing out of here *way* before her shift starts. Which seems to be earlier every time she does it.

ALTHAAR

The tone of FriendJohn is indicating the disturbment, is it not? But surely the punctuality of Supervisor Reyes is a thing to be greatly admired?

JOHN

I mean, there's obviously nothing wrong with the way she's been acting lately, but it's still... *concerning.*

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes the lessons of English are escaping him again, FriendJohn. Is the “concerning” not caused by the things that are obviously *something* wrong?

JOHN

No, that’s right, it’s just— The thing is, I feel like I *should* be nervous about Stella’s behavior, like if I didn’t know her well enough and trust her well enough, I’d jump straight to “she’s having an affair” or “she wants to split up.” But I do know her, and I *do* trust her, and I know when Stella has a problem she walks up to it nose-to-nose and says, “Hello, problem.” I mean, I’ve seen it. I’ve *been* one of the noses. It’s impressive. And scary. (*considering*) And more than a bit exciting. She’s really teaching me a lot about myself. Anyway, I know she’s not hiding anything like that, because if she had a problem with me, I’d be the first to know about it. Which means either I’m just being paranoid, or she’s hiding something else. But I have no idea what that something else might be. Or why she would bother hiding it. So yeah, the fact that there’s obviously nothing wrong is exactly what has me concerned. (*beat*) Whatever. She’ll tell me when she’s ready, I guess. Or it actually is nothing. Either way, brooding about it won’t do me any good, and I need to get to work.

We hear him get up, grab his tools, and head for the door.

ALTHAAR

Mm. Thanking you for this explanation, FriendJohn! Althaar believes he is understanding the concern now. But he is certain that the changed behaviors of Supervisor Reyes are having a reason most justifiable!

JOHN

Oh, yeah, no, obviously. It’s just hard not to worry when you feel like someone’s keeping a secret from you, you know?

ALTHAAR

Indeed, FriendJohn! It is a truth that Althaar has observed a great increase in the keeping of secrets among the peoples of the Fairgrounds, since the revealing of the hidden Fugulnari among you. Perhaps it is more difficult to be trusting even the dear friends, when it is learned that such a great secret has been withheld from your understanding. It provokes the assumptions to be questioned. Althaar has experienced this also.

JOHN

(at the door)

Well, don’t worry about me, buddy. I’ll never have any secrets from you.

Door whoosh as JOHN exits.

[scene 4] Music transition to the Bridge. Door opens as TORIANNA enters.

TORIANNA

Good morning, all, and let's get right to it. What should I be pissed off at first today, and is it worth fuming while standing, or should I settle my sitzfleisch in the command chair before I commence my first daily eruption?

AMBER

I think you should sit, sir?

STALIN-BOT

No! Take it standing like proud Bolshevik, Commander.

FRALL

I vote for sitting. In fact, if you'll pardon a Lieutenant's forwardness, given the nature of the upcoming few minutes, I would somewhat insist on it.

TORIANNA

...All right, the ass-planters have it. Fine by me. Let me enjoy this gift from the gone but unfortunately not-yet-forgotten, Mr. Several... *(sinks into the incredibly-comfortable chair)*
Ahh. And get that first sip of Megalon Lipase down... *(slurps coffee)* ...Ahhhhh...

STALIN-BOT

(as TORIANNA slurps)

...bourgeois fancy-pants hot bean beverage...

TORIANNA

... annnnd... GO. What's today's pointless annoyance?

On cue, yup, the door opens and MRS. FRONDRINAX enters.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Good morning, Humans! And all the rest of you, too, of course. All of you sentients on the Bridge! *(with a bit of distaste)* And, uh, Robots. I just wanted to pop in for a quick spot check, to make sure that command staff are setting a good example for everyone on the Fairgrounds by following the excellent advice of the H.F.F.A.C. So, tell me! What have all of *you* done so far today to promote adherence to the Friendship Agreement through your actions?

AMBER

I would rather not say? If it's okay? But I'm sure you'd get an enthusiastic answer from my sister Ashlee? In Hydroponics? She'd rather talk to you plants than her own sister anyway?

STALIN-BOT

What is Stalin-Bot doing? Stalin-Bot is doing job. Job is not enjoyable, but it needs to be done, so, Stalin-Bot is doing it. And advanced programming of Stalin-Bot is already at peak of robotic efficiency, so he does not need any suggestions from your *HFFAC!* *(pronounced like a sneeze)*

FRALL

As for myself, so far this cycle, I have considered many millions of questions, from those regarding the origins of space and time itself, to those concerning how one might better improve one's attitude through proper nutrition. Unfortunately, the consideration of the Friendship Agreement seems to have slipped my mind. Oops.

TORIANNA

And I, Frondrinax, had a ear-skritchingly good time working my jaws on the way down here just now, over a take-out frozen egg sandwich imperfectly reheated in the infrared oven at Tixondu's, whose lackluster food offerings are unfortunately not up to the high standards set by their coffee.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Commander! You do *so* seem to enjoy this cheeky banter, where you try to bait me by being disrespectful of the Friendship Committee's helpful suggestions. Of course *I* understand you don't really *mean* it, but the rest of the Committee? Ehhhhh... they don't quite "get" the Human sense of humor, you know how it is. So you should be a little more careful that they don't mistake these saucy quips of yours for flagrant insolence! Especially since your whole staff seems to follow suit. I think the we'd all appreciate it if you spent less time joking around with the crew, and more time pointing out to them how successful our initiatives have been at improving the lives of all the Humans on the Fairgrounds.

TORIANNA

Successful initiatives? Perhaps you could remind me what those were? Because I can't seem to recall any. Can you, Frall?

FRALL

Not on this or any other level of reality, sir, no.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right, yes, the food restrictions still seem to be causing more difficulty than we'd anticipated—I simply can't understand this obsession with flavor and texture you all have! Surely ingesting the correct proportions of nutrients ought to be the only thing that matters. And, yes, we're aware of the potential... issues with the curfew system once the sun sets on Belobog Beta, but, well, we've got over a year to sort that out, haven't we? And I'll admit that compliance with the Excess Movement Reduction guidelines has been gravely disappointing, but now that we've activated the tracking chips in the pedometers we should have that sorted out very quickly. And I'm sure all the additional revenue generated by the overstepping fines will make a considerable contribution toward some long-overdue upgrades around here! As for the trial run of the gravity-rationing program, well, we just won't discuss that, all right? Ever.

TORIANNA

Still waiting to hear about all the Committee's successful initiatives, Mrs. F.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, maybe if Station Command had chosen to help us implement our plans to fix this place up, instead of indulging in a lot of pointless and inefficient insubordination, things would have gone a lot more smoothly!

TORIANNA

And maybe if the Fugulnari had bothered trying to understand Humans instead of trying to “fix” us, you wouldn’t be having such a rough time of it in the first place.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Mindy, no. No no no. There was never any question of we Fugulnari sitting on our branches, watching such a promising young race stumbling about without proper guidance. We may still be refining exactly what kind of “guidance” will be most effective, but it’s more clear than ever that you desperately need it, and we’re certainly not going to give up! You are right about one thing, though: we obviously need to get some folks who better understand the Human mind involved in the advisory process. And we’ve extended a very important frond in that direction! We’re going to be opening our very first Recruitment Center here on the Fairgrounds, in the Central Promenade. Later today, in fact! The ribbon-cutting ceremony will be at 14:20. You may want to put in an appearance if you’re available, it would certainly boost your reputation in certain plots.

TORIANNA

What? What kind of “Recruitment Center?” Who are you recruiting? For what?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Why, Humans, of course! Who better to help us understand your needs than those among you who have already accepted the beauty and necessity of the Plant Way? You may not be aware of it all the way down here on the Bridge, Commander, but there are plenty of Humans on the Fairgrounds, and elsewhere, who appreciate that a little more structure is just what your species needs. Although we’ll be accepting members of all species, of course! Anyone is welcome, so long as they’re interested in supporting the work of the Committee. And of course publicly declaring that support will entitle them to, well, not special treatment exactly, but a certain recognition that they’re at least trying to get with the program. So I imagine we’ll be seeing quite a lot of interest!

TORIANNA

Oh, I’m sure you will. There are quite a few folks on the Fairgrounds who know what side their bread’s buttered on. For as long as we’re still allowed to eat bread, anyway. Where exactly did you say this Recruitment Center was going to be?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

On the outer ring of the Central Promenade, just next to the Nun-Gimel shuttle stop. You know, next to the Genome Hut?

AMBER

Hold on? Isn't that where the Fairgrounds Gift Shop is?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No, that's where the Gift Shop *was*, before last Tuesday. But two of our most talented negotiators, Dinorbiax and Fracottiverx, were able to acquire the location at a very reasonable price.

TORIANNA

That at least makes sense. It's a wonder that place managed to stay open as long as it did.

FRALL

On the contrary, sir, the Gift Shop was both more popular and successful than one would reasonably assume, given its location and stock. It seems that most beings passing through the Fairgrounds were inclined to pick up a souvenir of their travels there, primarily for the "kitsch" value. And long-term residents found their vast array of cheap knick-knacks a very attractive option for gift-giving when they were short on imagination or credits. It will be missed.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I think a few plastic keychains and personalized novelty mugs are a small price to pay in order to establish a center devoted to mutual understanding and collaboration between we Fugulnari and all the other species of the galaxy!

STALIN-BOT

(muttering)

Collaboration, you say? *That* is interesting choice of words.

TORIANNA

Well, best of luck with your ceremony, Mrs. F. You'll forgive me if I find myself unavailable to attend. I'm fairly certain I'll have more pressing business here on the Bridge. Of some kind.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(moving to the door)

I expected as much. But, Commander? I would strongly advise you to show at least *some* interest in contributing to the Great Ascension. Not to spread seeds out of season, but quite frankly, the prevailing sentiment among the local branch of the Committee is that you have been a serious hindrance to our work here. The only reason we have not yet prevailed upon the League of Humans to replace you with a more sensible officer, in fact, is my advocacy on your behalf. I do hope I won't have cause to regret that position, or change it. Ta-ta!

Door whoosh as MRS. FRONDRINAX exits. Beat.

TORIANNA

(tight)

Okay. I will be in my office until such time as anything else out here actually requires my attention. Let me know if that happens, would you? And Frall? Would you see if Althaar is available for a meeting as soon as possible? I have a few diplomatic matters I'd like to discuss with him.

Door whoosh as TORIANNA goes into her office.

AMBER

Replace Commander Torianna? Was she serious about that?

STALIN-BOT

Pssh, of course not! That plant is dirty liar! They would not dare!

FRALL

Oh no, Stalin-Bot, Frondrinax is very definitely telling the truth. About that, at least. There is a limit to the Committee's tolerance, and the Commander has been fast approaching it. She, and all of us, will need to use a great deal of caution indeed, if we wish her to remain in at least nominal charge of the Fairgrounds. And I can assure you that, despite whatever your personal opinion of her leadership may be, you do want her to remain in charge. The possible alternatives are... considerably worse.

STALIN-BOT

So what are you saying, Lieutenant *Obloko*? Commander Torianna is to demean herself by making nice-nice with plants that refuse to let her be strong and proud leader we have grown to grudgingly tolerate?

FRALL

What I'm saying, Uncle Joe-Bot, is that if the Commander does not, to some extent, behave in a manner you might consider demeaning, she will undoubtedly be replaced by a League of Humans officer who will enthusiastically submit to Fugulnari control. And such an officer will be nowhere near as patient as Commander Torianna is—for reasons even I cannot fully comprehend—with a Robot comms officer who is surly, insubordinate, and modeled after one of Earth's most deservingly despised historical figures. So when your normally-intrepid Commander chooses to walk lightly, I would advise you follow in her footsteps with equal care.

STALIN-BOT

(to himself)

Hmm, *da*. If you are afraid of wolves, keep out of the woods.

[scene 5] Music transition to Hydroponics. MRS. FRONDRINAX is angry and smashing a few things as ROOTY watches, uncomprehending. SMASH! BAM!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Raaaaawr! (*CRASH!*) Why! Won't! They! Just! Frosting! Listen!

BAM! SLAM! THUD!

ROOTY

Why is Mama Frondrinax angry?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I'm not Mama Frondrinax, and I'm not angry! (*beat*) Rrwraah!

She smashes something that breaks a great deal.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Why does that mulching Mindy have to make this all so DIFFICULT! I have been doing everything I can to *protect* that arrogant meatbag from winding up in a Tav hole, and she just keeps cobblestoning us! This is NOT! A! GAME!

SMASH!

ROOTY

Frondrinax? Do you want Rooty to help with the smashing?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No, Rooty, this is very much a solo activity. I just— I just *can't* with these Humans! They refuse to even *try* to be sensible! What *is* it about Earth species that causes this ridiculous stubbornness? I mean, look at this Earth plant right here! (*slapping it around*) No ambition! I mean, sure, it's got the stay-in-one-place attitude down pat, but that's not enough if that's *all* you want to do. Won't communicate, won't strategize. Just wants to be stupid. Won't talk, won't learn! Look at you! (*slap!*) Won't even defend yourself! Even if I were to tear you BRANCH! FROM! BRANCH!

Which she does. As she finishes wrenching the plant apart, MRS. FRONDRINAX becomes aware of someone approaching.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Uh, hello? Who's there?

H.F.

Just me, Mrs. F. Is, uh, is everything okay over here?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Oh, yes. I'm... I'm just helping this silly Earth cousin of mine by spreading his branches out to cover more surface area, since he can't seem to do it so well for himself. Rooty? Take these pieces and spread them around so they can ingest more of this lovely light and water, why don't you?

ROOTY

I don't think Earth cousin can ingest any more, Mama. He's in so many pieces.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Just do it, would you?! And don't call me Mama!

ROOTY

Okay! Come on, cousin, let's go play...

*ROOTY starts gathering up the dead pieces of the Earth plant—they don't have a very good reach, so it is difficult, and **we can hear them struggle**.*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Look, H.F. I've been meaning to tell you. I *am* sorry for that business with Miss Sophie, even if I wasn't at all fond of that little nitrogen fountain. I understand so very well how having an adorable little companion can ease the mental strain of day-to-day living in a place like the Fairgrounds.

ROOTY

Aw! Rooty loves Frondrinax, too!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I'm sorry, who mentioned you? Now go put that refuse in the compost bin!

*We hear ROOTY going away, struggling, and **talking a bit to the dead plant** as they fade out.*

H.F.

Well... that's nice of you to say, Mrs. F. But you have to understand it's a little hard for me to forgive your people for that.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, H.F., let's not be overly dramatic! Certainly I understand you had some attachment to that ridiculous little mammal, but are you really going to harp on it forever?

H.F.

(tight, controlled)

Okay. Okay. Let's just set that aside for now. I actually came up here hoping to talk to you. You know, have a conversation, plant-to-mammal, to see if I could understand your point of view a little better. I mean, the Fugulnari point of view. Maybe it's something a Human can't understand, but I really don't see what your endgame is here.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Endgame? Well, it's perfectly simple, H.F.—what we're doing is an act of charity! We Fugulnari kept to ourselves for the longest time, you know, because we could see that our philosophy was somewhat... unattractive to other species. But we took our time examining all of *your* philosophies, and we finally came to the conclusion that there was a great deal of unnecessary waste going on all over the galaxy. So much inefficiency! And inefficiency leads to misery, sure as bark beetles lead to blight. So, after much consideration, we decided it was unfair to keep the Fugulnari Way to ourselves. We just had to spread out and share with everyone!

H.F.

So, if you intend to spread the Fugulnari Way across the whole galaxy... why start with Humans?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Well, you're still quite new to the ICSB, comparatively. And you had a couple of specific cultural disadvantages that made the whole process much easier. Your problem with those darling Iltorians was the main one, of course, but also that bizarre and all-consuming obsession with the reproductive process that seems to take up so much of your attention. The ICSB, of course, claims to accept all species equally, no matter what their idiosyncrasies, but honestly, you can't expect people to just ignore the fact that you're willing to attempt mating with anything up to and including abstract concepts! And of course you already had quite a few species of plant life on your planets that was almost identical to us, albeit strangely non-sentient, so that was certainly a bonus when it came to the logistics. But I don't know why you needed me to tell you all this. We've been saying over and over that we just want to help—this is for your own good!

H.F.

I guess I just wanted to understand your motives. Where you plants were coming from. If you were being honest about why you were really here. And I gotta say, you've convinced me. You really believe what you're saying. You *really* believe you're doing this for our own good.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hmm. I suspect I haven't really *convinced* you of anything, H.F. But I'm sure you'll eventually come to see how much better it would be for everyone if you just let us teach you how to improve your lives. And that once everyone else sees just how much better life can be under our guidance, they'll be happy to join in!

H.F.

Oh, no, Mrs. F, you've one-hundred-percent convinced me. I can honestly say I understand the Plant Way a lot better now. So, thank you.

[scene 6] Music transition to TORIANNA's office.

FRALL

Althaar will be here in just a few moments, sir.

TORIANNA

All right, thank you, Frall. And... once he gets here, can you make sure no one's listening in?

FRALL

I can, sir, but I will not. If anyone is listening in on this conversation, which you already know the Office of Equilibrium is at least able if not willing to do, it would be much better to allow it.

TORIANNA

...Are you just saying that because you want them to record you saying that?

FRALL

Oh, no, sir. They would not be able to do so. What you perceive as my "voice" is not actually composed of audible sound, and thus is not picked up by microphones or recording devices, unless I make a deliberate choice to make it so. I am merely sending impulses directly to your auditory nerves that your brain interprets as the sound of my "voice."

TORIANNA

Nelly hiss at you, Frall! I have TOLD you—!

FRALL

I promise, sir, I am in no way, shape, or form "poking around in your brain." This is simply the way I most easily communicate. And it is functionally no different, from a neurological perspective, from the way you experience the more traditional modes of speech.

TORIANNA

That... sounds reasonable, but I still don't like it.

FRALL

Would it settle any of your misgivings on the subject if I were to inform you that it has cumulatively saved you 312.6 hours sitting in pointless meetings over the years?

TORIANNA

(dubious)

How?

FRALL

When I am conversing with multiple beings at once, I am able to individually tailor their perception of my words in such a way that they are most able to fully grasp my meaning.

TORIANNA

So... when we're in a meeting, everyone hears you differently, but... we all understand you the same?

FRALL

Exactly. More often than not, when any group of individuals is attempting to come to a consensus, they are each vastly mistaken about how much of the others' meaning they actually comprehend. And I am frequently able to adjust for this by altering my responses accordingly, so that a genuine consensus can be reached, without the customary pointless cross-talk and faffing about. You're welcome.

TORIANNA

(honest wonder)

...Jonesey's gleaming orbs.

FRALL

(smug)

I'd like to see the Fugulnari beat *that* for efficiency in a four-dimensional space.

TORIANNA

All right, I'll be sure to remember that when you're "talking" to me from now on.

FRALL

That won't be necessary, sir. I'd suggest you forget about it, in fact, and just accept that whatever you perceive me saying to you is what you need to hear.

TORIANNA

Then... is there any particular reason you thought I needed to hear this now?

FRALL

(has reasons to not reveal reasons, of course, plays ridiculously stupid)

Uhhhhh... because... it was time. Yeah, that's it. It was time. And speaking of time, the time of Althaar's arrival is almost upon us, so I'd suggest you position yourself accordingly.

TORIANNA

(steeling herself as she turns her chair around)

Okay. It feels really rude to sit here facing the wall, but...

FRALL

He will absolutely not take offense, Commander.

TORIANNA

Well, of course he won't, but it still makes me uncomfortable. Not as much as the alternative, but still.

FRALL

Understood, sir.

Door opens. ALTHAAR enters.

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, Commander Torianna and Lieutenant Commander Frallen-Br'ar! Althaar has received the message that there was an issue most condensing on which you wished to be speaking with him?

TORIANNA

Yes, Althaar, thanks for coming. Sorry about the chair, I just, well... you know.

ALTHAAR

Oh, Althaar is not taking offense, Commander! It is a most clever solution to the potential of digestive distress!

TORIANNA

Thank you. So. Have a seat, or whatever is most comfortable for you.

A slushy expansion in the ALTHAAR-sound that indicates he's done something to be more comfortable, but who knows what.

TORIANNA

All right. Althaar. I'm sure you've guessed what it is I want to discuss with you. It seems there's very little else to discuss on the Fairgrounds these days. I know more or less where the ICSB stands on the matter of the... well, let's not mince words, the Fugulnari occupation. What I want to know from you, if you're able to tell me, is the Iltorian Commonality's position. And your own, if there's any difference between the two.

ALTHAAR

Your questions are presented with commendable directness, Commander Torianna.

TORIANNA

I don't have a lot of time for ambiguity these days, Althaar.

ALTHAAR

(settling in a bit; the diplomat side)

Mm. This is to be expected. As to the question of the positioning of the Commonality, Althaar can not of course speak for the Consensus Collation Group, but he can make adventuring of a guess. It is of course always the desire of Iltor to help in resolving the disputes between sapients, but it is to be invited before doing this. To do otherwise would be to impose the will of the Commonality on others, and this is not an act of kindness, no matter how it is intended. And this is true even if the result of this interference would seem to be most positive! So it is always caution when intervening in the affairs of others. And this is of course most true of your own people, Commander, because they are so scantily understood by Iltor. Althaar has of course been working very hard to remedy this, and to share his findings, but he is still only one being, and much work yet remains to him!

TORIANNA

I see. So, your people won't intervene because they don't want to impose their will on us? But the Fugulnari are already imposing *their* will on us. Doesn't Iltor have a problem with that?

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes, Commander! And those of Iltor who have friends among the Fugulnari are explaining this to them. And the Fugulnari are being very polite and listening appreciatively to their friends of Iltor, and then they are continuing to do as they have been. There has been much discussion on Iltor of how a more successful explaining may be achieved, but... Althaar has some doubt that this can be accomplished.

TORIANNA

From what I've seen of the Fugulnari, I'd say you're almost certainly right about that, unfortunately.

ALTHAAR

And of course there are some of Iltor who are agreeing with the official position of the ICSB, that this conflict is *not* between Fugulnari and Human, but between Humans-who-are-appreciating-the-Fugulnari and Humans-who-are-not. And if this is the case it would be doubly foolish to make interference!

TORIANNA

And do you agree with this position?

ALTHAAR

...Althaar is not certain. He has so very many thoughts about this circumstance that he is not always agreeing with himself! On the one grasper, it is most clear that the interposing of the Fugulnari is causing great up-set to the Human friends of Althaar, and this is making up-set in Althaar also. But on the other grasper, he does not know what there is to be done about this, if the methods of Iltor in which he has been trained are inadequate. So on the third grasper,

(cont.)

he is wondering if this circumstance is revealing a flaw in the methods of Iltor that has never before been noticed. And on the... Althaar has lost track of his graspers, but he is knowing that the people of Iltor have been making refinement of these methods for millennia, and it would be a great arrogance to think that Althaar is knowing better than the so many Iltorians of great wisdom who have made precedence of him! So he is not wishing to make increase to the suffering of his dear Human friends by acting with rashness. And he is sharing his thoughts with his many friends and teachers on Iltor, and hoping they will be able to help him find solution. He is aware that this must seem very inadequate to you. It is seeming inadequate to Althaar also, but he has yet to make devisement of some other way he can be providing the assistance.

TORIANNA

(a bit disappointed)

I understand, Althaar. You Iltorians are famous for being fair and neutral, after all.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, Commander Torianna. But... Althaar has been having consideration that there may perhaps be occasion when the neutrality and the fairness can not both be practiced, and it is necessity to choose between the two. And there are some of Iltor who are agreeing, but many others who are saying this can not be so, that there will be always some way to make resolution, with sufficient kindness and diligence. The letters of Althaar have been provoking the great controversy on Iltor! And this is making also the great ambivalence in Althaar, because he would very much wish for his theory to be disproved! If Althaar is wrong, then there is a way to provide friendship and understanding between Fugulnari and Human, and the principles that have been serving Iltor for so many metristals are still sufficient, which would be of the sizable relief! But if Althaar is right, then the path forward is one of great difficulty and sadness. So he is hoping that the wisest of Iltor are finding solution where he can see none.

TORIANNA

Have these wise Iltorians made any suggestions so far? Anything you might try, to bring about this “friendship and understanding?”

ALTHAAR

Mm, they have been providing Althaar with much information about the culture of the Fugulnari, of which he has been making most careful study, but... no, Commander, of the helpful suggestions there have not been so many. It has been conveyed to Althaar that “the gift of an updated hydration system is always well-received,” but in his opinion this is unlikely to be sufficient to the current difficulty.

TORIANNA

Well, I’m glad to hear they’re working on it, at least. Here’s hoping they have some more productive suggestions for you in the future. And that those suggestions will actually make it to you. I’m sure you’ve heard that Foogs have been keeping a pretty firm grip on the interstellar post, but I don’t know if that’s been affecting your messages at all.

ALTHAAR

Althaar does not believe so, Commander, judging of the responses he has received to his letters. However, Althaar has recently made request of several small devices for the use in detection of hidden listening devices. If this package is tampered with, or damaged, or if Althaar does not receive it at all, then it will be certain that the shipments of Althaar are being monitored also.

TORIANNA

Ah. But if the devices never show up, how will you know they were sent in the first place?

ALTHAAR

Oh! There will be a code phrase in the next message to Althaar when his friend has made shipment of the devices. So he will be knowing one way or the other!

FRALL

Very clever.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, Lieutenant, but Althaar can not be taking the credit. It is an ancient Iltorian diplomatic practice. If the Commander wishes, Althaar can make use of these methods to convey any messages you wish to be sending out of Human space. These will be forwarded with great speed by the friends of Althaar! But of course he can not make guarantee that his letters will continue to enjoy this non-interference from the Fugulnari.

TORIANNA

Thank you, Althaar. That may end up being very helpful indeed. And I'm reasonably certain that the Fugulnari wouldn't go so far as to interfere with *your* mail. They generally seem to think they can get away with whatever they please, but I can't imagine they would dare risk a dispute with Iltor. That really would get the entirety of the ICSB on their case.

ALTHAAR

That is possibility, but... they have been already making the surveillance of Althaar's activities, for almost as long as he has had residence on the Fairgrounds.

TORIANNA

What? They've been spying on you?

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes, this is of certainty. And Althaar suspects they have been attempting also to make sabotage toward his efforts at Human friendship. But Althaar has had such great good fortune to meet so many kind and generous Humans, such as FriendJohn and yourself, that these attempts were doomed to failing! And now, unless you are having further questionings, Althaar should excuse himself, as he has some dispatches that he must be posting as soon as possible, if they are to be of the greatest use to both himself and his Human friends.

TORIANNA

Of course, Althaar. And thank you. I'd appreciate it if you kept me informed of the current thinking on Iltor, as much as you can. And of your own thinking, as well.

ALTHAAR

Althaar promises that he will do so, Commander!

Door whoosh as ALTHAAR exits.

TORIANNA

Hmm. Not as much *direct* support as I'd hoped for. But...

FRALL

But as much as you were possibly going to get, Commander. And much more than you may even now appreciate.

[scene 7] Music transition to the WSS Office. H.F. is actually cleaning up. The door opens and JOHN enters.

JOHN

Hey, H.F., do we have any— (*sees H.F. in flagrante Boraxo*) Are you... cleaning?

H.F.

What does it look like?

JOHN

It looks like you're cleaning. This office. Which can only mean... Pleased to meet you, Hardyfox Fornes-Bot, when were you programmed? Because I think you've got a few bugs that need to be checked out.

H.F.

Very funny, kid.

JOHN

Seriously, though, when was the last time you cleaned this place? If ever? For all your hypochondric schness, this is the kind of behavior that makes me worry that you're actually sick for once.

H.F.

Hypochondria, schmypochondria. Still, you never know. Something might happen to me sometime, and don't-you-look-at-me-like-that I'm not talking illness here. For all you know, I might suddenly get a wild hair to retire one day and leave you in charge of the joint. And there's no jacking way you'd ever figure out this filing system of mine—

JOHN

(over)

System?

H.F.

—so I'd better take the time now to simplify it for you, right?

He picks up a large, random pile of many random papers, opens a file cabinet and just dumps them in and slams the cabinet shut.

JOHN

Gee, thanks.

H.F.

(exhales, ruefully)

And I had only just gotten this place sorted out after those Foogs tossed it looking for Miss Sophie.

JOHN

How is she?

H.F.

Oh, she's doing fine, considering. Not happy that she's not seeing as much of me these days, of course, but I got some folks to look in on her, play with her, all that, so it's worked out.

JOHN

Who do you know that's okay with going to the in-betweens just to check up on your dog?

H.F.

Hey, I got plenty of friends on this barge you never even met. Just because you only hang out with like a dozen people, doesn't mean that everyone else does. You're like one of those Earthers, travels the galaxy, but only eats the exact same Kaiser Clown burgers everywhere they go.

JOHN

Okay, okay, I know. I'm provincial. But you're the one that's been stuck on the Fairgrounds for half of forever. You're a fixture around here. That's how I *know* you'll never retire. You wouldn't know what to do with yourself. You'd end up like one of those old Security Officers, just hanging around the station house, telling the same stories over and over and complaining about how these whippersnappers just don't know what it was like in the bad old days.

H.F.

Nah, kid. Soon as I retire, I'm outta here. Finally gonna travel like I always dreamed. Get myself an S-RV, one a them traveling double-wides, ya know? Fully tricked out with a real kitchen and bath. Cydonia King-Size bed. Able to pull a mini SuLu jump once a day. Just me and Miss Sophie, out on our own, finally getting to see all those amazing places I've only read about. *But*. I gotta get a few more years in before I can swing the down payment, so... yeah, you're gonna be stuck with me for a little while yet. Unless, as I was sayin', the unexpected intervenes. As it has been known to do. So far, it's just been the Under-Assistants at this office taking "involuntary early retirement," but there's nothing says I couldn't wind up buying it just like poor old Derbolt. (*shudder*) That's no way to go.

JOHN

You know, you never did tell me how—

H.F.

(*and he never will*)

So I want you to be ready, in case you do end up the one and only representative of—here we go—WSS (*both pages and desk: WSS!*) on the Fairgrounds.

JOHN

Well, I seriously doubt I'll be dealing with *that* any time soon, but I *will* help you clean this place up, if you want. Maybe I should start with the supply closet—

H.F.

Hey, no! Don't touch that door, kid! It was already a booby-trap before that gravity-rationing shness, there's no telling what kind of avalanche you'd unleash if you opened it now. Besides, you don't have time, there's a job just came in, up on Mem 23. I already pulled up the ticket for you. (*JOHN checks the audible readout during this:*) Now, listen, I know sometimes you like to dawdle a bit in the Central Promenade after a run to the Lower Concourse, but I want to get this place sorted out sometime before March, yeah? So just get that milkshake mixer recalibrated and get back here. *Then* you can dive into the closet if you want, I'll see if I can get some kind of long-distance door-opening mechanism Goldberged up by then.

JOHN

All right, H.F., I'm on it. And don't worry, I'll still be around when it's time for you and Miss Sophie to take off in that S-RV. I would not want to miss that. Later.

Door whoosh as JOHN exits.

H.F.

(*a mirthless chuckle*)

Yeah. Tell me about it, kid.

*[scene 8] Music transition to the Green Room at the Electric Egg. DEE and XTOPPS, hanging out. XTOPPS is **taking a hit** off something peanuty.*

DEE

Frill those Foobs, mang. We're just trying to entertain, right?

XTOPPS

...right...

DEE

I never even thought about getting "political" before *they* showed up and started pushing.

XTOPPS

I chom, I chom. We're just a couple of tune-slingers tryin' to peddle our not-so-meager wares.

DEE

Of all the joints I've worked all over the galaxy, this is the *last* place I would have expected to run into this kind of censorship smark.

XTOPPS

Mang, I left the Empire to get as most exuberantly away from anything political as I could. Joke's on me, huh?

DEE

And politics certainly never came up back on Tammuz. All anyone worries about on a farming colony is weather, bugs, and fungus.

XTOPPS

Yeah, not a lot of use for cut-throat politicking amongst the space-e-yuss waves of sorghum on some boring little dirtball.

DEE

Hey! No trash-talking Tammuz Beta from the slumming royal junkie in the corner, get me?

XTOPPS

Streez, Dee! I am stunned in the most lee-gitimate fashion to hear you have some kind of big ol' Rosebud for that snoozefest of a home planet! I thought you hated it there.

DEE

I mean, I did, but you don't shave someone's home planet, zood. And there's a lot to like about Tammuz if you're cut out for farm life, which I sure as shness wasn't. I knew that from day one of knowing anything, until I was able to jump the dump when I was sixteen. But it'll never stop being home, not really. Not just the planet, but the people. Did I ever tell you about them?

XTOPPS

Farmers, mostly Human? Stuff grows well there, yeah? But no legumes, so far as I heard, so my interest, shall we say, waned most precipitously.

DEE

Okay. Well, for centuries, before Humans ever got extra-solar, Tammuz Beta was just sitting there, untouched and uninhabited. Great climate, perfect atmosphere, promising soil, no artificial terraforming needed for most oxygen breathers, you couldn't design a better planet for farming if you tried—but no one wanted to go in and do the work. A whole bunch of different species did preliminary surveys, but they all ended up deciding it was too far out of the way to get any decent return on the investment. Until the Tammuzians came along.

XTOPPS

Wait, did I miss something in a nut-glitch? I thought there *were* no Tammuzians?

DEE

Well, there weren't, *yet*. Just a collective of farmers from different Human outposts, who heard about this planet right on the edge of Human space, with so much untapped potential just sitting there, like it had been waiting for them to develop it. So they came together, created the Tammuz Charter, and dug in. And my grandparents were there, right from day one. The first Tammuzians.

XTOPPS

They left Earth for that?

DEE

Earth? Frid, Xtopps. The Mallorys left Earth behind over three hundred years ago. We may not exactly have the distinction of *your* grand heritage...

XTOPPS

Okay... okay... you know exactly how much that most circumstantial pomposity means to *this* tune-slinger, Dee.

DEE

But when the first colonists left Earth for Mars, the Mallorys were right there. And when we headed even farther out? Mallorys in the first outposts on the moons of Saturn.

XTOPPS

Can't stop moving, huh?

DEE

Well, *some* of us. I'd say around 95% of the Mallorys just want to find their place, plant whatever'll grow there, and get to work making more Mallorys. Which is why I've got cousins by the dozens back home. But that other 5% can't be happy unless they're on the move. You can guess which genes I got. I think that's why being stuck here the last nineteen months gives me the haddabs. Twice as long as I've stayed put anywhere for at *least* twelve years.

XTOPPS

Yeah, I hear you. I can't say I expected to remain among the most maxxed-out demi-est of the demimonde-iest space station in the galaxy for quite so long, not to mention get strapped down to it by a fragment of my own embarrassingly *recherché* past life.

DEE

Exactly. So yeah, I wouldn't move back to Tammuz if you... well, maybe if you paid me a lot, but like, a LOT. And I'll knock it all I want. But I'm a Tammuzian, and a Mallory, and I'm frilling proud of it. Someone *else* bad-mouths my dirtball...

XTOPPS

Appo-polly-ogies, partner. Didn't read the room. You know I'd *never* wanna upset the best canary I've ever shared the pickle with.

DEE

Thanks, Xtopps. And no worries. I know you've always got my back.

XTOPPS

As long as there's a Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a, and as long as I'm that Baronet, you'll always have a place to sing whatever you want, partner.

[scene 9] Music transition to the Central Promenade. People milling about, but, to one side, specific milling by some Fugulnari. MRS. FRONDRINAX is there, instructing ROOTY.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right, Rooty! This is a big day for us! Our first Recruitment Center! Right here on the Fairgrounds! It's quite the vote of confidence, so let's make sure it's not misplaced, hm? Is the staff ready to open up?

ROOTY

Alllllll ready! They look so nice in their uniforms and headbands! Ooh! Can I be a recruiter, too?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh no, I've got a special job for you, Rooty! We're going to put you right out front, as our greeter! Your distinctive blend of endless optimism, adorability, and thorough absence of higher reasoning functions are just perfect for attracting the kind of new supporters we're looking for.

ROOTY

Yay! Rooty's gonna be a bally-talker!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That's my little carny! Now, where is that Ashlee? I know she prefers the company of us plants, which is only to be expected, but her function here today is supposed to be communicating with her *own* species. You go inside and check in with the recruitment staff, Rooty, while I look for our perky little collaborator...

They fade off. A little bit away, JOHN is encountering AMBER.

JOHN

Hey, Amber, I don't see you off the Bridge too often. What brings you to the Central Promenade? And what's this... *(reading sign)* "Recruitment Center?" Recruitment? For what?

AMBER

Hello, John? You know, I just noticed, you ask a lot of questions?

JOHN

(a beat; yes, he is doing a take to an invisible camera)

I... guess I do, yes.

AMBER

Anyway, I'm still not sure what exactly what they're recruiting for? But my sister might know? I was trying to talk to her earlier? And she said I should come up here for some kind of "ceremony?" That she was hoping I'd be a part of? Whatever that means? Oh, hey, there's Stella?

STELLA walks up.

STELLA

(she's real good at sounding casual, but not 100%; she's not happy to see him here)

John? What are you doing here? I thought you were at work!

JOHN

Oh, I was coming back from a ticket on the Lower Concourse, annnnd I maybe decided to take the scenic route back. And then I saw this crowd, so I wanted to check it out.

STELLA

Yeah, it's some stupid Fugulnari thing, I guess. We definitely don't need to stick around for that. Come on, if you're playing hooky from work, let's go grab a snack.

JOHN

Actually, now that I'm here, I kind of want to find out what stupid crap the Foogs are pushing this time.

STELLA

We can hear all of it from Velbopp's. They've got this new frozen quiescence, the Rootersvard? I wanna see how it works, inside and out. There's some kind of trick to it.

AMBER

Oh *there's* Ashlee? I'm going to find out what she has to say for herself? And I'll probably need a medium-squishy cone after hearing that? So if I do find out what all this is about, I can fill you in afterwards? I'll see you there later?

AMBER moves off.

JOHN

I think I'd still rather see for myself what— Oh, streez! What the hell is H.F. doing up here? I thought he'd still be safety-rigging the storage closet! Okay, yeah, Velbopp's it is. I didn't *think* I was playing hooky from work, but I most definitely am now.

STELLA

(you can practically hear her pulling him)

Great! Come on.

As STELLA and JOHN move away to the far side of the Promenade, we move over to where AMBER and ASHLEE are arguing.

AMBER

(fading in)

So what am I supposed to tell Mom and Mimi, Ashlee? Even if I'm lucky enough to actually get a message to them under the new restrictions? Oh, you'll never guess? My little sister's funny little obsession with plants has turned into selling out her entire species?

ASHLEE!

You never understood me, Amber!

AMBER

You're right? I never understood your thing with plants? But I never said one harsh word to you about it? Not one? And neither did Mom? Or Mimi? We supported you when the other kids made fun of you? But this is different? This isn't just caring about plants? It's serving them? And making Humans subservient to them?

ASHLEE!

Which is everything I always wanted! I always knew that the plant way would be better for everyone! And now the Fugulnari are proving it!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(coming over)

Oh, there you are, Ashlee darling! It's time for your speech!

ASHLEE!

I have to go now, Amber! I have something important to do! Not just for me, but for all Humans! I hope you'll see that and join us! Before it's too late!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Lovely to see you, Amber! Your sister is very special, you know? She's been so crucial to our work here on the Fairgrounds. You must be so proud.

*MRS. FRONDRINAX and ASHLEE walk away; AMBER walks away in another direction, **muttering angrily to herself** (yes, still in questions). And there is the sound of tapping on a podium microphone as MRS. FRONDRINAX prepares to speak.*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(at a podium, on mic)

Ahem. Testing, testing. Good afternoon, and welcome! We are here today to commemorate a very special occasion for the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Advisory Committee, but since you've been hearing so much from us Fugulnari recently, we've asked one of our most trusted and devoted Human friends to speak to you first, about what we're doing here, and just what it means. Ashlee from Hydroponics, everyone!

Smattering of applause from the types of beings who will clap at any introduction.

ASHLEE!

Good afternoon to my fellow Humans, honored Fugulnari, members of other species, and future *official* friends of the Fugulnari Ascendancy! I'm so excited to welcome you to the grand opening of the very first Recruitment Center for our new Efficiency Partnership Booster Program! What we're doing here is giving all Humans, and anyone else who wishes to show their acceptance of and devotion to the Fugulnari Way, the chance to *formalize* that devotion! Just drop in here at the Center anytime! Whenever it's convenient for you! *(cont.)*

One of our friendly staff members will be happy to share with you the fascinating philosophy of our plant friends! And you'll be able to see just how it applies to *you*! And how much *better* it will make your life! Your personal Fugulnari guide will spend all the time with you that you need! And there are even some cool games and fun quizzes along the way! You might even get tested on our special machine! It can look into your heritage, and see what plants *you* might be distantly related to! Are you a beautiful violet! Or a mighty sequoia! Your guide will be more than happy to tell you! And if you choose to formalize your relationship with the Committee, and sign a document averring your devotion to the Way, you get the bestest gift on the Fairgrounds! Do you see this kicky headband I'm wearing! It's not *just* a headband! It's a beautiful display of the understanding between you and our plant friends! Each headband is individually customized for the wearer! It contains two pheromonal tags that can be read by any Fugulnari! One which indicates you are a friend! And another that is derived from your *own* body chemistry, that acts as *your* signature! So when you meet a Fugulnari, they'll know right away that you're a friend! And treat you accordingly! Isn't that great! So come on, Humans! And show the whole Galaxy what a good friend to the Fugulnari you can be! Drop on in to the Efficiency Partnership Recruitment Center! And formalize your devotion to the Fugulnari Way!

Larger applause. ASHLEE's attitude has really helped sell this.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Thank you, darling! Ashlee from Hydroponics, everyone! Let's give it up for her! (*more applause*) A fine example of the kind of Human we're looking for, to build bridges between us Fugulnari and the Human community, and, as she said, *all* species of the galaxy that might be interested in learning about the Fugulnari Way! And now, with the cutting of this ribbon, I shall officially open our very first Booster Recruitment Center! Ashlee, the scissors? Ahem. On behalf of the Human-Fugulnari Friendship Advisory Committee, I now declare this Recruitment Center open for—

EXPLOSION. A bomb has gone off inside the Recruitment Center. Fireball and glass shattering. Screaming, mostly in surprise, from the crowd outside, most of whom are thrown to the ground by the shock wave, but are basically uninjured. There is the sound, however, of screaming, burning Fugulnari from inside the destroyed Center. Gradually, the sound dies down to confusion, rushing, and low moans. Among the debris, MRS. FRONDRINAX fades up, screaming.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Rooty! Oh my fronds, Rooty was in there! No! No! Not Rooty! Sweet little Rooty! (*starts dramatically crying*) Oh, Rooty! The sweetest clipling there ever was! (*really going for the Oscar*) Aaaaaaah! Rooty! Rooty! You shall be avenged, I swear it! Mama Frondrinax shall avenge you, my little darling! Revenge for Rooty!

ROOTY

(*who has wandered up to MRS. FRONDRINAX during the above*)

Yay! Mama Frondrinax loves Rooty! It's okay, mama, Rooty is still here!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What?! But— I saw you— How?!

ROOTY

I was bad, Mama, I'm sorry. I saw the mulch wagon go by, and I left my post to go chase it. But being bad was kind of good, right? Because that means Rooty didn't get blowed up!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(who has stopped crying the instant she saw ROOTY was okay)

Oh. Wondrous. What a relief.

ASHLEE!

(coughing and woozy; she's a bit hurt from the shock and flying glass)

Frondrinax! Frondrinax! What happened! Was that an accident!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh no, Ashlee. That was no accident. It would seem we've been letting our concern with appearances stunt our roots far too long. It's time to break out of the pot. If these Humans think that a little explosion will stop us teaching them how to better themselves, then they're clearly in need of a lesson in just how serious we can be.

[scene 10] Music transition to the Electric Egg. The regulars are around the bar.

SOPON

Hey, boss, do I really have to use these Theban polliwogs? They're a real pain in the palp.

CHIP

Yes! It's all part of the re-brand. Chip Frinkel's Electric Egg is now a lodestar of outer-world charm, just like in the old holos.

SOPON

Pretty sure in the old holos they used those fake plastic dealies. Because these keep trying to climb out of the glass on me.

DEE

You better keep those things out of the green room, Chip. I do *not* want to find one in the toe of my street shoes.

CHIP

Okay, okay, so the re-brand still has a few kinks to work out! And what are you doing here clobbering about garnishes? Shouldn't you be back on stage right now?

DEE

Right. Come on, Xtopps, I know just the song I want to do. And I'm dedicating this one to *you*, Chip.

XTOPPS

Oh, yeah, I chom the one you mean.

CHIP

(it's a running bit; he knows what's coming)

Oh no, Dee. Not *that* one again.

DEE

(loves annoying him with this)

It's our special song, boss man. It's just for *you*.

SOPON

Hold up, zoods. Before you head up there—anyone hear anything about some kind of bomb going off in the Hub?

DEE

A bomb? No. Where'd you hear this?

SOPON

Just whispers at the bar about a bombing in the Central Promenade. Normally not something I'd give a whole lot of heft, but I've had three customer so far mention it.

XTOPPS

Xtopps is not responsible! Xtopps *ne-he-hever* bombs!

CHIP

No, Xtopps is just permanently bombed. Sopes, you can't have heard that right. If there was an actual bombing, we'd have heard an announcement by now, or alarms going off or something. At the very least, there'd be—

DORMER

(over megaphone, from the doorway)

Hey, Frinkel! We better not hear any singing from in there!

CHIP

Buzz off, deck-thumpers! You don't have smark to say about it, so get out of my doorway!

NESS

(also on megaphone)

We are firmly ensconced in League of Humans jurisdiction, Frinkel! Where we have every right to stand! And talk! With a megaphone!

CHIP

Well, I have every right to call Torianna and have her sand your traitorous asses nine ways from Frongs-day! So move it!

DORMER

Not as of the latest update to the Friendship Agreement, you don't!

NESS

That's right! In the interest of efficiency, direct oversight of Security forces has been transferred to the Advisory Committee!

CHIP

(quietly)

Oh, frill me.

DORMER

But we're not here to make trouble, Frinkel! We just came by to pass on some information! Information you may find useful!

CHIP

Yeah, right! Your excuses are getting weaker by the cycle! You got something to say to me, you can say it from out there!

XTOPPS

Chorp, let's just get 'em in here and settle this gizz before Dee and I get rustosified. *(calling)*
Hey! Fuzz! You may temporarily Philly-dog inside my jurisdiction, but remember, Authorities Cannot Apprehend Bargoers in Kandephaa'a!

NESS

(off megaphone, as they walk over)

Yeah, yeah, we know all about ACAB.

DEE

See that you remember it.

DORMER

Oh, we remember it. But what we've got here is a list of things you'd better remember.

DEE

What?

NESS

On this datapad are two folders containing lists of all songs ever performed by any cabaret artist in the known galaxy, according to the Musicians' Union and GASCARP. One list is of songs approved by the Committee as officially inoffensive when performed by Humans, and the other is... uh, not.

In the background, DEE starts bleeping through the two lists on the pad.

CHIP

Hey, zoods? Nothing has changed since you were last here. The Committee still doesn't get any say in what can and can't go on in the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a.

NESS

Yes, sir. You are within your legal rights to allow any lyrics of your choosing to be performed inside the Egg.

DORMER

But we checked with Earth Central, and double-checked with the Committee, and it turns out that if the sound of an interdicted lyric makes it out into the hallway, where we just so happen to hear it?

NESS

Then we will have witnessed a violation of League law, and can arrest the performer as soon as they exit Xybidont territory!

DEE

(stops checking the pad)

What?

NESS

Except the Baronet.

DORMER

Yeah, we still can't touch him.

NESS

But, uh, *anyone else* performing a song on the no-no list will be detained, and subject to fine and/or Remedial Compliance Habituation!

DEE

Uh huh. Have you even *looked* at these lists? Here's the list of songs I'm *allowed* to perform... (*presses button; very short bleep*) ...and *here's* the list of songs you can throw me in the brig for. (*presses button; really long scroll that just keeps going under*) This doesn't even leave me enough for a single set!

DORMER

Pff, you just have to use your imagination! Like, "99 Bottles of Space-Beer" is still on there. You could fill up a set with that one easy, just keep adding bottles!

DEE

You cannot be serious. Look at this list! Here, lemme stop it at random. (*she stops the still-running scroll with a finger and looks at the song her finger is on*) Right. Look at this one! All of you. Look! *That* song is offensive?

NESS

It is on the list of interdicted lyrics, so yes! It is offensive!

DEE

It's a kids' song! An incredibly stupid and monotonous kids' song! I wouldn't sing it again anyway in a million cycles, for a trillion credits, I had to do *way* too many kiddie birthday gigs when I was starting out, but, c'mon! The Committee actually banned *that?!*

DORMER

Yeah, for obvious reasons!

NESS

You have no grounds for complaint, ma'am. That one is clearly about the Human body.

DEE

It's about a dumb dance that anyone can do!

DORMER

That *Humans* can do!

NESS

That song specifies at least four distinctly Human body parts! Depending on the version. That's what it's all about!

DORMER

The lyrics even say so!

Beat.

DEE

(tight, furious, controlled)

You know what? Fine. I'm going back to the green room, Chip. *You* can work this out, and then let me know when I might once again have the opportunity to actually do my job, ok? *(leaves for the Green Room)*

XTOPPS

Yeah, I guess I'm gonna go make a few improvisatory air sculptures on the keys until such time as I'm allowed to work my magic properly. Excusez-moi. *(moves away)*

DORMER

All right then. It appears we've reached an understanding.

CHIP

Oh, yeah. We're good. Sure. Thanks so very much, *Officers*. Oh, wait. What's the story on that bomb everyone's saying went off in the Central Promenade? You jeckers know anything about that?

NESS

We know *nothing* about any kind of bombing in the Central Promenade, sir!

DORMER

That's right! So drop it! *(beat, then quieter to NESS)* Wait. Do we know anything about that?

NESS

I don't. I thought maybe you did.

DORMER

Nope.

NESS

(excited)

Well, let's go see if it's true!

DORMER

(as they rush out)

What if it's a terrorist bombing?

NESS

Aw, mang, that'd be *sweet!* Gloves *off*, baby!

Beat as their exit is considered.

CHIP

Okay. Well. That puts at least *some* of the entertainment on hold. (*thinks, calls*) Hey, Xtopps? Why don't you do that song Dee had planned? They can't throw *you* in the brig for it.

XTOPPS

(*from the bandstand*)

Uh... Not sure I still cork that melody, boss-man—

CHIP

You were gonna play it for her, you can play it for all of us. Now play it!

XTOPPS does. Piano intro to song, which sounds as much like "As Time Goes By" as we think is legally possible.

XTOPPS

(*sings*)

You can't remember this
Because you don't exist
Since I went back in time
And crushed that little butterfly
Now time's awry

My lab assistant, too
She's just become some goo
With one large compound eye
That I can't seem to classify
Now time's awry

My stupid error
Caused you to negate
Then all my loved ones
Started to mutate
So many horrors I can't contemplate
In one blink of an eye

I must take inventory
Within my lab'ratory
What can I rectify?
The world will never forgive my work
Now time's awry

Appreciative applause.

CHIP

(sighs, then)

Gods, I hate that song. Thanks, Xtopps.

SOPON

Hey, cheer up, boss. This is gonna blow over soon enough. Things have to get better around here eventually.

CHIP

(action film mode again)

Sure. But first? They're gonna get worse. Much worse.

Beat.

SOPON

See, mang, this kind of grimdark blurg is exactly why I don't think this whole rebrand has been good for your head.

[scene 11] Music transition to TORIANNA's office. A beat or two of silence.

TORIANNA

Well.

FRALL

Well.

TORIANNA

It's started.

FRALL

As you knew it would.

TORIANNA

Yeah. *(beat)* Dammit. Damn them all. The Committee, the ICSB, *and* Earth Central. The Foogs for starting all this in the first place, the ICSB for not doing a damn thing to stop it, and Earth for being so complacent that it was even possible. And now... here we are.

FRALL

If it's any consolation, sir, I can assure you that some form of violence was inevitable.

TORIANNA

(exhale) It would have looked a lot better if the Foogs had hit first.

FRALL

Perhaps, sir. But ultimately, it does not matter. One side was going to start it, and the other was going to respond in kind. The opinion of anyone outside this conflict as to “who started it” is not worth considering at the moment.

TORIANNA

But we’ll need to consider it sometime, won’t we? We’re almost certainly not going to be able to get the League back under Human control without some kind of outside help—I don’t need your precognitive abilities to know that. And someone on our side firing the first shot is the kind of thing that provokes stupid questions. “Why did the Humans turn to violence?” “Was it really necessary to go so far?” “What have the Fugulnari *actually* done to you that would justify this?”

FRALL

(imitating Beaux Several)

“Hey, I’m just asking questions here!”

TORIANNA

(allows herself a bit of a laugh)

Weird to think of Beaux Several right now. I don’t exactly miss him, but he did liven the place up a bit. And I can’t fault his taste in obvious bribes. But he must be long gone from the Fairgrounds by now. Or... he’ll never be leaving the Fairgrounds again. Is that a question you’d be willing to settle, Frall?

FRALL

Let’s just say that his final score in the game of “Boff, Marry, Kill” is a great many of the first, five of the second, and one of the third.

TORIANNA

Yeah. He’s providing nutrients somewhere in the back of Tav 48, isn’t he?

FRALL

Yes. Oh, and since it can be of no further importance now, I suppose I might as well confirm that your suspicions as to his origins were correct. He was not in any way Human, but a shapeshifter of the Melogneesit species.

TORIANNA

Oh? I’ve always wanted to meet a shapeshifter. Though I guess if Beaux was one, then for all I know I’ve met dozens.

FRALL

Not... *dozens*, no.

TORIANNA

What about his sidekicks? I haven't seen anything of them around either. Are they all so much mulch?

FRALL

No, actually. Their tenure with Mr. Several had provided them with a great deal of experience in the practice of the precipitous bail-out. They all managed to organize a covert departure to safer ports of call shortly after Beaux's indefinite leave of absence was announced.

TORIANNA

I'd be tempted to follow their example, if I thought there would still be any such thing as a safe place after the Foogs are finished here. It's pretty clear at this point that Humanity is just a test run for them. I hope there's still something we can do to make sure this particular "experiment" is a resounding failure.

FRALL

I can assure you that you have done all you will be able to in the short term, sir.

TORIANNA

Okay, then. I'm ready. We're in it now. All we can do is to wait for where the Fugulnari care to take this. And I hate waiting.

FRALL

Don't worry, sir. You won't be waiting long.

[scene 12] Music transition to Sammy's Wiches. JOHN and ALTHAAR are sitting as near as possible at the counter. Music plays from a radio. The joint, as usual, is crowded.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is very pleased that FriendJohn has allowed him to make treating of the lunch, at the authentic Human-style dining establishment of Sammy's! But he is still not understanding why FriendJohn will not be joining Althaar in partaking of the most famous and popular Philly Cheese Steak!

JOHN

You know why, Althaar! It's because of Chee's... product. I don't care how it tastes, there's no way I'm eating another of those things now that I know where that stuff comes from.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is aware that the taste is a most subjective thing, but it is difficult to imagine any being disliking such a rich and vibrant flavor! And there are very many Humans who also considering the exudations of Chee to be the "taste sensation!"

JOHN

Yeah, I know, everyone else likes it, I used to like it, but that doesn't change anything. And I really wish you'd drop it, ok? Consider the fact that I, a Human, am able to sit two seats down from you, an Iltorian, at a lunch counter—with a screen between us, but still—and eat my roast beef with peppers and onion-substitutes on an *excellent* approximation of an authentic Amoroso roll. And even your presence is not grossing me out nearly as much as the thought of slathering some of Chee's "special sauce" on it. That should give you some idea of how strongly I feel about this.

ALTHAAR

Althaar must beg the forgiveness of FriendJohn. He will cease the friendly joshing on the subject of Chee's whiz at once!

JOHN

Thank you. I really wish they'd call it something else to avoid confusion. That phrase means something a lot less repugnant on Earth. Though if you'd once told me I'd actually be saying that about the original Cheez Whiz—

CHIP

(coming up to the counter)

Hey, John, and I assume that's Althaar back there?

ALTHAAR

Hello, Mr. Frinkel! Yes, Althaar is concealed behind the convenient barrier that the very solicitous Sammy has purchased for the Iltorian vistings!

CHIP

Yeah, I just assume you're around whenever I run across an unexpected screen, curtain, or ornamental solid-light structure. Although that has backfired on me a couple times. Hey, Sammy! Usual lunchbag to go!

SAMMY

Wit or wit-out for *you* today, Chippy?

CHIP

Uh, wit.

JOHN

Ugh.

CHIP

So, how's *your* day been, zoods? I've been wrapped up in the latest chapter of the thrilling saga we like to call, "How are the Committee and their goons in Security trying to shut me down this cycle?"

ALTHAAR

Althaar also has been making contemplation of potential future action by the Fugulnari, although Althaar's considerations were of the questions of diplomacy more philosophical and far-reaching.

JOHN

Well, my day's been the exact opposite of philosophical or diplomatic so far. I was over on the Central Promenade when that bomb went off at the opening of the Foog's brand-new Recruitment Center.

CHIP

Wait, that was *real*?

JOHN

What do you mean, "was it real?" I was there!

CHIP

Look, the only thing any of us heard about a bomb was a few rumors circulating at the Egg, and you can imagine how seriously I take rumors from *my* customers. We checked HECNET, all the local news stations—there was absolutely no mention of any bomb.

JOHN

Well, the place definitely blew up. And I guess I can't be 100% sure it was a bomb, but I've got a fair amount of experience as to what stuff on the Fairgrounds looks like when it blows up by accident. This was... really precise. Serious shock wave you could feel in your bones all the way across the Promenade, but there was almost no damage to any other storefronts. So either the Foogs got spectacularly unlucky, which, yes, is always an option around here, or they got hit by someone who knew exactly what they were doing.

CHIP

When was this?

JOHN

About an hour and a half ago? I called up Althaar to tell him the whole thing and he insisted on treating me to lunch to try and keep my mind off it.

ALTHAAR

Was anyone injured in this unfortunate act? You have not said yet, FriendJohn.

JOHN

Oh. Well, it was hard to see with all the smoke, but I'm pretty sure there were a lot of Foogs inside, and it looked like only a couple of them made it out. As to the crowd outside, I think just minor scrapes and bruises, maybe hearing damage.

ALTHAAR

Oh. That is most distressing.

JOHN

Hold up, you actually hadn't heard *anything* about it until I told you? I thought it was weird when I came in here that everyone wasn't talking about it, but I figured that was just the usual Fairgrounds apathy. How does no one know? A frilling *bomb* went off on the Central Promenade!

ALTHAAR

Althaar must be assuming that this is because the Fugulnari do not wish it to be known. Their attempts at the efficiency initiatives have not always been success, but they have been showing themselves most effective at the control of information. They may perhaps be desiring to delay official announcement of this misfortune until they have made settlement upon a response. Althaar has great concern as to what this response will be. The Fugulnari are tending to go... more than a bit over the side of the boat when they are experiencing the up-set.

CHIP

Hoo boy, do they. Frid. This is definitely going to spell trouble for the Egg.

ALTHAAR

Why are you believing this, Mr. Frinkel?

CHIP

Because whenever something gets flotted up with one of their stupid "initiatives," we get more Foogs in there trying to hassle us. It doesn't even matter if whatever policy's causing the pushback is something that doesn't affect us at all—the last one was about transit tube seating protocols—they just really really hate that there's one place on station that's not under their total control. Which means every time they get frustrated, I get a whole new sledge-load of headaches to deal with. And I can't just tell them to jeck off, because if they do finally decide to cut off my shipments, that's it. I'm done.

ALTHAAR

That is certainly most unfair and unfortunate.

CHIP

Yeah. On the other hand, this bombing proves that there may be a whole lot of places on station that aren't actually under their control. So maybe it'll take the heat off us for a while. And on a personal level, I can't say I'm too sorry about it.

ALTHAAR

Mm, Althaar can not make agreement with this, Mr. Frinkel. The violence is always most regrettable, even when it is committed against those who have performed the actions quite troublesome. And Althaar is fearing that the consequences of this will be very dangerous for his Human friends!

CHIP

I mean, I don't love violence, but...

JOHN

The thing is, Althaar, you've studied Human history. We've almost never been able to stop one group of us from abusing their power over another without some amount of violence. The moral high ground just isn't enough. Like when— *(stops as he hears what's on the radio)*

The following starts under the previous lines. As it goes, more in Sammy's are paying attention.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Uh, hey... am I on? Hello, Fairgrounds listeners. We apologize for interrupting your regularly-scheduled period of unobtrusive lunchtime stock music cues, but we have just received a news item that... that we think all Humans on the Fairgrounds need to hear right away—*(some commotions starts in Sammy's)*—or they might not hear it at all. I should probably be getting this out faster but I'm not sure it matters right now.

People are moving toward the radio. As the commotion is heard above:

JOHN

What did they—? Sammy! Can you turn that up?

SAMMY

Yeah! Sharon, hit the volume! Everyone pipe down a second!

The radio gets louder, and Sammy's quiets down.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

So. Okay. Still on? We'll see for how long. A report has just come in off a transport from the Luyten system. Uh, this has not been completely confirmed, but it is from a source who claims to be a first-hand witness to recent events on Tammuz Beta. *(from here the ANNOUNCER fades into the transition music)* Some weeks ago, League of Humans Forces, operating in concert with the Advisory Committee, arrived on Tammuz Beta seeking to implement the new...

[scene 13] Music transition to the Electric Egg. At the bar. Door opens, CHIP enters to the bar, shaken. ALTHAAR is a bit behind, yelling ahead

ALTHAAR

(more rushed-sounding than usual)

Althaar is entering the Electric Egg, Human friends! Please avert your eyes, and would Sin Bubbles be activating of of the warning sign, please!

CHIP

(insistent but also trying to “keep it down”)

Hey, Sopon?

SOPON

Yeah?

CHIP

Dee here?

SOPON

Sure. Hasn't left her dressing room since you went out.

CHIP

No one else went in?

SOPON

Just Xtopps, why?

BUBBLES

Hey, boss? You look like you accidentally put on Sopon's foundation this morning.

SOPON

Bubbles is right, mang, it's like looking in a mirror. What's got into you?

ALTHAAR

Please, Sin Sopon, have you been hearing any discussion of Tammuz Beta from the customers at the Egg?

SOPON

Yeah, actually. Those Foogs over there.

*They've been there the whole time, but now we hear more clearly the sound of a group of about a half-dozen **FUGULNARI** whooping it up in some kind of drunken celebration.*

SOPON

They were yelling something about Tammuz, and, uh, kicking trunk? I wasn't really paying attention.

CHIP

Well, you need to. We all need to. All right, I'd better get to Dee before she hears about this from anyone else. Althaar? Could you fill these folks in?

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar will perform that sad duty, Mr. Frinkel.

CHIP

Right. I'll be in the back.

And CHIP heads for the Green Room as we hear a fading-away bit of ALTHAAR telling the staff what has happened. The Green Room door opens and closes.

XTOPPS

Oh! Hey, Chorp! No worries, Dee-li-lah and my own most newly ossified self are coming off break and ready to scone. And we will be keeping it to our Foogy friends' approved setlist. We are professionals and we have worked it out!

DEE

It might only be twenty minutes of material, but hey...

XTOPPS

I take some serious solo space, we can stretch it to thirty-five.

DEE

(getting up and moving to go out)

So, no sombrero, we're on it.

CHIP

Yeah, no, Dee. Sit down a minute, ok? I've got to talk to you about something.

DEE

Chip! We're good. We've got a show, and we're ready to go. It's all good.

CHIP

Dee. Please. Sit down.

DEE

What? I've been torpidating in here watching Xtopps get flaked up for the past forty minutes. I'm antsy.

CHIP

Okay, so the thing is... *(breath)* Someone has to tell you this, and I'm really sorry it's me. You deserve... you deserve someone better than me for this, but I'm all there is.

DEE

What's the big flurry, Chip? Have the Foogs finally decided all singing is offensive now? Fine. If I have to sit a night out, I'll sit a night out. You and Xtopps can wave the scroll at them again, and we'll—

CHIP

No. Dee. Sit *down*, wouldya?

XTOPPS

Want me to go vamp?

CHIP

Not now, Xtopps. You mind sticking around?

XTOPPS

(catching there's something heavy going down)

I'm here.

CHIP

Okay, so, Dee? You know the Foogs pulled this “advisory” shness all over the League. Earth, the whole Solar system, every settlement in Human space.

DEE

Right. I mean, they're not letting a lot of news through, but they told us that much themselves. I still haven't heard anything from my folks, but I assume they're dealing with exactly the same pointless bullshit there as we are here.

CHIP

Not according to the news that just came in.

Beat.

DEE

(slowly, way-too-calmly)

Chip. What are you talking about?

CHIP

They didn't have too many details, Dee, but from what I heard—

DEE

Where?

CHIP

Radio in Sammy's. So, whatever happened was at least three days ago, probably more, word's just getting out. One of the local stations got ahold of the news from a witness on a passing ship, I guess. They only got out some of the story before the station went dead. I think the Foogs cut them off.

DEE

Uh-huh. So what some-of-a-story did they get out before that?

CHIP

Right. Well, I guess the Ascension started out on the Tammuz moons the same way it did everywhere else—the Foogs came out of hiding, made their announcement, said they were gonna be “advising” the local Human government. Which didn't go over so well...

DEE

It wouldn't.

CHIP

Yeah. So they went back and forth like that for a while, kind of like we have been here, and then... things got really bad, really fast.

DEE

How bad?

CHIP

Apparently the Foogs had a bit of a chip on their... whatever anyway because of the whole farming colony thing. So when they started getting some actual pushback, they called in an entire League Forces battalion to enforce the Agreement, and...

DEE

What did they say on the radio?

CHIP

I mean, they were rushing though it pretty quick, I think they knew they were gonna get cut off, so for all I know this was a complete exaggeration—

DEE

What. Did. They. Say?

CHIP

The word they used was... “scouring.”

XTOPPS makes a low, involuntary, deeply-pained noise.

CHIP

Now who knows what really happened, this is all from just one witness, maybe what they saw was an isolated incident. Frid, maybe none of it is true, we just don't know. But whatever the truth is, I'm sure the ICSB will have something to say about it—

DEE

About what? A slaughter that's already happened? What are they going to *say*?

CHIP

I... I dunno, Dee. Just... Look, I don't want you going out there tonight, okay? There's a bunch of Foogs in the house—(*she starts to say something and he keeps going*)—WHO I WILL be kicking out immediately. Right, Xtopps? I may have to get out the scroll again.

XTOPPS

Do it, mang.

CHIP

But before I do that, I'm going to call in all the bouncers who aren't working tonight. These Foogs are loud and wasted, and getting more so. So it might get unpleasant.

DEE

They're... *celebrating*?

CHIP.

Yes, and I'm throwing them out. And we're not allowing *any* Fugulnari in here from now on, okay? None. Right, Xtopps?

XTOPPS

I'll issue a flotting promulgation if they push it. Been a while, but I have studied the art of sesquipedalian menace.

CHIP

Thanks. So, Dee? You just stay in here and let me handle this. I'll let you know when the Foogs are gone, and then you can go home and take as much time off as you need. Okay?

DEE

Home?

CHIP

Yeah. Xtopps? You'll get her back to her place when it's clear?

XTOPPS

I'm on it.

CHIP

(heading for the door)

Right, I'll be back when they're gone. And Dee? We're all with you. You're not alone. Got me?

DEE

Gotcha, boss.

Door opens and closes as CHIP exists. A beat or two.

DEE

Okay, Xtopps. C'mon. We have a set to play.

XTOPPS

Wait, whaa—! Hey, Dee, you heard the man—

DEE

Yeah, and we're late. Let's go. It's showtime.

*XTOPPS and DEE exit the Green Room, DEE closing the door behind her. She **breathes audibly**, gathering herself, probably leaning back against the door. Off to another side of the Egg, we can hear the drunk group of celebrating **Fugulnari singing** "The Fugulnari People's Anthem," as heard in episode 22. XTOPPS reads the room and doesn't like it.*

XTOPPS

Hey, Dee? I think Chorp's right. Let's just stay tiled in the back, yeah?

DEE

Uh... no. No. I gotta sing, Xtopps.

XTOPPS

Oh, Dee...

DEE

I have to, Xtopps. Let me do this.

XTOPPS

I'd never stop you, mang, but... keep it cautious.

DEE

(walking from him to the stage)

Yeah, cautious... *(as the Fugulnari finish a round of the anthem, she is on the mic)* Hey there! Wasn't that nice, everyone? Some of our *advisors* decided to sing their special little song for us! You know, I was *paid* to sing that song of theirs about, oh, eight weeks ago. Any guesses how much I'd have to be paid to sing it now? Anyone? Well... whatever you guess? You *lose*.

XTOPPS

(to himself)

Easy, Dee, easy...

DEE

So, I don't want to harsh your evening or anything. I just have two things I'd like to say. My name is Delilah Mallory. And I am a Tammuzian.

The room quiets considerably. Word has gotten around. Something is happening here. DEE is as controlled as a person currently held together by solid white-hot anger can be.

DEE

And there was a silly little song that I learned back on Tammuz Beta when I was growing up. I think most of us Humans learned this song as children. Doesn't matter where you came from, Earth, Mars, Nun-Imma—we've all sung it. So feel free to join in, okay? It's not the kind of number we usually do here, just a kids' song. And it's not exactly fashionable right now, but I think our advisors over there should get to hear it.

(singing, and goddamn she means every fucking bit of it like it's the most meaningful piece of music ever written)

You put your right hand in
You put your right hand out
You put your right hand in
And you shake it all about
You do the hokey pokey
And you turn yourself around
That's what it's all about

(talking)

Come on, Humans, you all know this!

*During the next verse, more and more Humans all around the Egg are joining in, at first uncertainly, then with greater and greater passion. As they do, the Fugulnari **angrily begin singing their anthem again as loudly as they can.***

DEE (and growing CROWD)

(singing)

You put your left hand in
You put your left hand out
You put your left hand in
And you shake it all about
You do the hokey pokey
And you turn yourself around
That's what it's all about

*The Fugulnari **keep singing their anthem**, trying to be louder than the CROWD, getting angrier and louder, but they are being drowned out.*

DEE

Sounds like our leafy friends over there want us to listen to *their* song instead! Why don't we show them what we think of it? Come on, Humans! All of you!

During the following verse, XTOPPS gets on a keyboard and joins in playing, following the CROWD as best as he can.

DEE (and even larger CROWD)

(singing)

You put your right foot in
You put your right foot out
You put your right foot in
And you shake it all about
You do the hokey pokey
And you turn yourself around
That's what it's all about

*The FUGULNARI are almost inaudible under the Human CROWD. They are getting frazzled and **starting to protest, yelling at the stage**.*

DEE

Hey, you know what? This is a Human song, but that doesn't mean the rest of you can't join in! Any aliens out there like our song more than that Foogy schness? Help us out!

*And with this verse, the crowd singing along gets bigger, with more alien voices. We can hear **some familiar voices joining in**: KWONTZ, VERT, and the ALIEN BARFLY (who doesn't exactly sing the words but **makes drunken noises to the tune**).*

DEE (and still-growing CROWD)

You put your left foot in
You put your left foot out
You put your left foot in
And you shake it all about
You do the hokey pokey
And you turn yourself around
That's what it's all about

During the above verse, over at the bar:

SOPON

Boss? What do we do?

*CHIP takes a breath, a beat, and then **joins in the singing**, loud. After a moment, SOPON **joins in**, then BUBBLES **does**. The FUGULNARI, **yelling complaints and threats** under the loud singing, make for the door, angrily.*

DEE

There we go! *(about the departing FUGULNARI)* And there they go! Good riddance!
Everyone! Last verse, let's take it home!
(singing with the now massive mixed CROWD of Humans and aliens)
You put your whole self in
You put your whole self out
You put your whole self in
And you shake it all about
You do the hokey pokey
And you turn yourself around
That's what it's all about

*And as this is ending, with many in the CROWD not even finishing the verse but **dissolving into cheers**, the doors open and there is the sound of Security—Human and Fugulnari riot police together—entering the Egg. Heavy boots.*

FUGULNARI RIOT COP

(over megaphone)

You are to end this demonstration immediately and return to your residences or temporary lodgings! This is an illegal gathering in violation of the Friendship Agreement! If you stop singing and leave quietly, there will be no further reprisals!

*There is **angry and frightened muttering and reactions**, silenced by the goddamn majestic voice of XTOPPS.*

XTOPPS

(suddenly sober as hell - complete fucking royalty - he can pull out every moment of his upbringing full-blast when he needs to)

I am Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, son of Grand Duchess J'Bollont, House Byllaburt, Marquess Runroar of Brellipheen-Hwyine, Baronet of Kandephaa'a, Potentate of the Fyrexian Isles, High Lord of Menchitan, Master of Her Grandiosity's War Snails, *and* Fairgrounds Staring Contest Champion, of the Grand Duchy of Prang! The Electric Egg is the official seat of my Baronetcy! You will cease threatening *my* guests, and leave *my* territory immediately, or face the wrath of the Xybidont Empire!

You could hear a pin drop in the Egg now.

CHIP

(quietly, aware that bad shit going down is now unavoidable)

...holy fuck...

FUGULNARI RIOT COP

Baronet! Under both League of Humans *and* ICSB law, diplomatic immunity does not apply in the case of seditious acts being committed in a consulate, mission, outpost, or monarchical seat within the bounds of a foreign planet, colony, country, or territory! If you continue this obstruction, you will be in violation of interstellar law! This unauthorized gathering will disperse immediately! And, Baronet, you will lower all of your arms and drop the weapons you are holding at once!

XTOPPS

These are the six Scepters of Grand Matriarch J'Threnn, you uncultured barbarian, and if you lay one frond on *any* of my guests, *I will beat your floral ass with them!* *(quiet)* Dee? Go ahead.

DEE

(calling out)

Chip?

CHIP

(in for a penny, in for a pound)

It's your room, Dee. Do what you need.

DEE

Everybody? From the top.

(starts singing)

You put your right hand in—

The song continues, with the entire CROWD joining in almost immediately.

FUGULNARI RIOT COP

You are to cease this seditious action and leave the premises in 15 seconds or we will force you to comply! 15! 14—! (*continues countdown*)

DORMER

(*with NESS, among the riot cops*)

Hey, Ness? Uh, are we— are we doing this? I mean, they're breaking the law, yeah, but... Feels real weird beating up Humans just because a bunch of herbies said so.

NESS

What the frid is wrong with you? We're not doing this for the herbies! We're doing this because we've got orders to keep the peace! Which means we finally get to bust some heads!

DORMER

Oh, yeah! Right!

FUGULNARI RIOT COP

(*finishing countdown*)

—1! Officers! Move in!

*And the riot cops charge, the song fading into screaming. It is now violent sonic chaos. None of these individual actions can really be "heard" among the stomping, smashing, baton-hits, and screaming, but they **should be recorded** (with **adlibs**) and in here simultaneously to be caught by attentive listeners, as part of the massive noise: CHIP jumps the bar like an action hero, getting in one or two ineffective punches at riot cops in armor before he is badly beaten by batons - his arm is broken. SOPON gets on the bar and starts to swing a pipe or bat kept behind the bar at the cops, but is grabbed and beaten. BUBBLES sprays her most caustic liquids with pinpoint precision at the cops, but some get to her (she revs her attached lathe but not in time) and beat her, bending her dispensers and jamming her in one place at the bar. KWONTZ swings his briefcase around while yelling (**gibberish: "I am a lawyer and I'll sue your asses off!"**), but is also beaten and subdued. The ALIEN BARFLY ("**I'll tell you, sisters!**") turns out to have immense strength and tears two Fugulnari literally in half, before she is piled on and cuffed. VERT has grabbed something heavy and is running around, dodging the cops successfully as he smashes the feet of Human cops and the pots of Fugulnari ones. ALTHAAR **is screaming desperately** from behind the Big Blorch Hunter II machine for the violence to cease. DEE prepares to use her mic stand (it probably still isn't the animatronic flamingo, but wouldn't it be funny if it was?) to hit some cops, but she is hit by a neurodamper, frozen, and cuffed. XTOPPS tries to attack the cops assaulting DEE with his scepters, but is struck and knocked backwards, spilling a number of his instruments around the stage, causing a horrible blare of feedback to come from the PA system that just grows*

and grows. Dozens of others in the Egg are beaten and/or subdued and cuffed. It just gets worse and worse and louder and louder.

[scene 14] The violence and screaming feedback slowly fades away almost to silence, as we fade up on TORIANNA's office. The door opens and JOHN comes in.

JOHN

Commander? You wanted to see me about— *(realizes there are others in the room)*. Oh. Hey, Stella. Frall.

STELLA

Hi, John.

JOHN

Glad to see you're ok, Stell. You haven't been answering your phone. After I heard about Tammuz Beta, I wanted—

TORIANNA

You'll have time for that later, Mr. B. Would you sit down, please? I have a few things I'd like to discuss about the contract between the Fairgrounds and W... your company.

Chair scrape as JOHN sits.

TORIANNA

(quietly)

Okay, Frall, go to it.

Sound of the FRALL shimmer, but growing deeper and wider, and expanding as if to all sides of the room.

FRALL

We're secure, Mindy.

TORIANNA

Right. Sorry, John, there's a chance we're being listened to, even in here. Had to get through that plausible deniability schness until Frall could become our security bubble.

FRALL

And we *are* being listened to in here anyway, Mindy.

TORIANNA

I don't care about the OE listening in. I *hope* they're listening in. But it's vitally important that the Foogs don't hear about this.

JOHN

Oh. Is this about what happened at the Egg? I just heard. Or, I heard a little, and then the local news channel went dead. Just like the radio in Sammy's when they were reporting about Tammuz Beta. What little I heard sounded really bad. Do you know... Is everyone okay? Althaar was on his way there with Chip to spread the news about the Tammuz thing...

STELLA

Althaar's fine, John. No one laid a finger or a branch on him. But everyone else...

FRALL

Apart from a few who managed to flee the scene, everyone else at the Egg has been arrested and jailed, or will be jailed subsequent to the completion of medical treatment or repairs.

TORIANNA

Although Dr. Mwangi tells me that some of the injured aren't likely to pull through.

JOHN

(quiet)

Son of a bitch.

TORIANNA

As far as the people you know personally, Chip and Kwontz both have a few broken bones, and Chip will probably be spending a night or two in jail once he's taken care of. Xtopps came out of it with nothing worse than a few bruises, typical for someone that intoxicated—they just roll with it, it seems. Bubbles is badly dented up and will be offline a few days while her nozzles are replaced. Sopon's going to be laid up for a while. The Foogs did a real number on them, and I guess their species is pretty fragile. And that little green guy, what's his name? The annoying one.

FRALL

Vert.

TORIANNA

Right, Vert. He got banged up a bit, but I'm told he managed to smash quite a few pots before they finally took him down. I guess being so tiny made him a hard target. I hope he thinks it was worth it, he'll certainly be doing some time. Along with that drunk who's always parked at the end of the bar. You know, the one with the hair? I don't know if she even understood what was happening, she only knows one sentence in English as far as I can tell, but she ripped a couple plants apart with her bare hands before they got to her with the neuro-dampers.

JOHN

What about Dee?

FRALL

Ah. Dee.

STELLA

Dee's got a lot of bruising, and she's suffering some short-term neurological issues from the neuro-damper hits, although she's expected make a full recovery. But she's in jail now, and it looks like she's going to be for a while.

JOHN

But... can't Xtopps do something about that? I mean, he's royalty! And he was *beaten*? There's no way the Xybidont Empire will stand for that. Is there?

TORIANNA

I certainly hope not, John, but there's no way of knowing how long it will be before they hear about it. And I'm sure whatever story does make it out to them will have been heavily massaged by the Committee.

FRALL

Not to mention that, while an assault on even a dimly-regarded aristocrat like Xtopps would normally provoke an immediate and resounding response from the Empire, there is some question as to whether they will extend themselves for him specifically. The internal machinations of the Xybidont aristocracy are... well, to call them cut-throat would be a severe understatement. So Xtopps's family, and his distinguished mother in particular, may not wish to strain their ties to the Empress in support of a son who has already considerably weakened their standing through his antics. We will have to wait and see whether the Grand Duchess considers her honor, and her affection for her son, to be worth the considerable expenditure of social capital it would require to convince the Empress to intervene. The most likely outcome is that the Empire will eventually issue an official statement of censure toward the Fugulnari for this act of *lèse-majesté*, which they will cheerfully ignore.

JOHN

And... Dee? How long is she going to be in jail?

TORIANNA

It's hard to say. Everyone else, the Foogs will only hold for a few days, just to prove a point. But their official story is that Dee instigated a riot, so she needs to be detained indefinitely as a threat to public safety. And it looks like they're also going to charge her, if they even get around to charges, with not only sedition, but the planning of that bombing in the Central Promenade this afternoon.

STELLA

Which is ridiculous. She had nothing to do with that!

JOHN

(and he thinks he knows who was behind it)

Yeah. The bombing. I was there for that. And so were you, Stell, although you were working *really* hard to get me away from that Recruitment Center. So, if Dee didn't plan that bombing, which I think we can all agree she didn't, then I'd like to know who did. Although I think I can guess.

FRALL

Stella did not plant that bomb, John.

JOHN

(tiniest bit of doubt)

Oh?

TORIANNA

It was Hardyfox.

JOHN

(beat; what the hell?)

Oh. *(as what H.F. was saying makes more sense)* Oh! But—

STELLA

It was time. I'm so sorry I've been keeping this from you, Johnny, but... well, I guess you'll understand why I haven't had as much time for you these last few weeks. There's a Resistance movement here on the Fairgrounds. And I'm part of it. So's H.F. We're just local so far, but we've been trying to make contact with anyone who's been doing the same elsewhere in Human space, if they're even out there. No luck yet. But either way, we intend to stop the Fugulnari takeover of Humanity through sabotage, subversion, and when necessary, violent action.

JOHN

And today was the day it became necessary.

STELLA

(no question)

Yes.

TORIANNA

(many questions, but...)

Yes.

FRALL

(no questions; deep regret)

Yes.

JOHN

Right. Okay, so... where do I sign up? Who's in charge? You, Commander? Or... H.F.?

TORIANNA

No, John. My actions are under far too much scrutiny by the Committee to risk any direct involvement. It wouldn't be safe for me or the Resistance.

FRALL

The Commander's greatest potential value to the Resistance is to offer them whatever limited assistance she can from her current post, even if the most she can do is slightly impede the official attempts to counteract their efforts. Their effectiveness would be greatly reduced if she were replaced as Commander of the Fairgrounds by a willing Fugulnari collaborator.

STELLA

And I wouldn't say that anyone's "in charge" of the Resistance, really. We've been trying to keep things communal and work on a cell-based system to minimize the risk of the whole organization being taken out. But, well, when it comes time to make the big decisions, a lot of people tend to look towards... the person who first started putting it together.

JOHN

(the penny drops; with a bit of a laugh of admiration)

Of course. Of course it would be you, Stella.

STELLA

Yeah. The core group came from my Sanitation Fusiliers. I knew them, I knew who could be trusted. And then we started expanding. H.F. got wind of it from someone in the in-betweens, and came to me offering his technical expertise. And... I'm the one who signed off on his bomb plan today. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you until now, Johnny, but there were... reasons.

JOHN

(just a hair of bitter; JUST; he trusts her)

Because I was your boyfriend?

STELLA

I wish it was just that simple, John. Yes, I love you, and I *wish* I could say that my whole reason for keeping you out of all this was to keep you safe. But. As much as I want that, not letting you get involved was more for... tactical reasons.

JOHN

Tactical?

STELLA

When I first started thinking about our possible strategies going forward, and all the possible Fugulnari responses to those strategies, I realized that someone like you could be exactly what the Resistance needed, as a... strategic instrument. To be brought into play when necessary.

JOHN

Strategic how?

TORIANNA

How close are you with Frondrinax these days, John?

JOHN

I've been turning and walking the other way every time I see her, what do you think? She subjugated my entire species!

TORIANNA

But before the... "Ascension." You were pretty close to her, yes?

JOHN

I... guess? If you'd asked me back then, I probably would have laughed and said she was annoying but harmless, always showing up at the most inconvenient times, coming into our apartment uninvited... Which, yeah, makes me feel pretty stupid, looking back on it now. But... I don't know, I guess I do miss the silly, sweet, slightly dotty old Mrs. Frondrinax, even if she never really existed. Althaar actually thinks her whole mission here was to try and keep him from getting too close to any Humans, that she was doing all she could to subvert our friendship, but... I don't know. He's usually a lot more optimistic about people's intentions than I am, but I'm having a hard time believing Mrs. F would do that. I suppose it makes sense, though.

FRALL

(a confirmation ALTHAAR is right)

It does.

TORIANNA

We'd like you to start talking to her again. And keep her talking. See what she might let slip about the Fugulnari's plans. They're well-organized as a whole, but individually, some of them get careless and sloppy. They like to talk.

JOHN

Yeah, when H.F. and I were pulling our clumsy-albeit-successful rescue of Miss Sophie, we heard one of the guards saying something about Tammuz Beta. Didn't mean anything to me at the time, but...

STELLA

See, yes! That's *exactly* what we're gonna need!

FRALL

And Mrs. Frondrinax is a particularly likely source of useful information. She has stumbled into the trap that awaits every deep-cover agent: the false self she was presenting to the world has become more real than she had ever intended. She is no longer entirely comfortable among her own people, and they in turn suspect that her loyalties may not be as solid as they once were. She is, in short, lonely, and will very much welcome a sympathetic ear, no matter to whom it is attached.

STELLA

So we need you to listen, and learn as much as you can.

JOHN

But what if they suspect you're with the Resistance? Being your boyfriend is probably going to get me labeled a security risk at the very least.

STELLA

I won't be around, John. After tonight, me, most of the Sani crew, H.F., a few others? We're going into the in-betweens full-time.

JOHN

So, they'll *know* you're with the Resistance. How am I supposed to convince them I'm not?

STELLA

John. Here's how it's going to go down. After tonight, we won't see each other again until the day after tomorrow. You'll be on the Central Promenade at 13:37 hours, hanging around outside the Recruitment Center—the Committee have made re-opening it their top priority, it should be up and running with at least a skeleton crew by then. You'll be considering whether or not to go inside. I will “run into” you there and we will have a fight. I won't tell you exactly what about, it's better if you're not over-prepared, but I'm sure you have some idea. Just follow my lead. And it's gonna hurt, baby, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But this is how it needs to be. I'm going to walk away, and you'll take a moment, and then walk into the Recruitment Center. You'll tell them you're now in charge of your company's office on the Fairgrounds, you're a friend of Mrs. Frondrinax, and you want to know how can you help the Fugulnari cause. And then you listen to what they tell you to do, and you do it.

JOHN

Ok, this is like, the... forty-third most upsetting thing about this plan, but don't you think all that's a little... melodramatic? And obvious?

TORIANNA

Not really. The Fugulnari aren't big on emotional subtlety, especially when it comes to mammals. And they genuinely believe Humans should want to help them. They're unlikely to question it.

JOHN

Okay. So then... what? I work for them?

FRALL

Mostly just *around* them. You do your regular job. Or whatever else they tell you to. But you listen.

JOHN

Okay, so... I'm walking around wearing a stupid headband that says I'm a traitor to my species, and doing whatever the Foogs want so they'll start feeling chatty while I'm around. How do I get in touch with you if I learn anything?

STELLA

You don't. We can't risk it. I have to stick to the in-betweens, keep on the move. So you absolutely can't come to me, or do anything that would show you know there's anything going on in there.

TORIANNA

You'll report to me, John. Right here. You're already needed on the Bridge at least once every three weeks for that one stupid wire that keeps shorting out on us. Just mention "confidence" while you're out there making repairs, and I'll "remember" that the espresso machine here in my office has been giving me some trouble. Frall will do their cone-of-silence bit and provide a plausible simulation of you cussing out a malfunctioning group gasket for anyone who might be inclined to eavesdrop, and we'll be able to speak freely.

JOHN

Every eighteen to twenty-four days. Thereabouts. And the rest of the time, I walk around being hated by just about everyone else on the Fairgrounds.

FRALL

But not *all* of them.

STELLA

And that's important. We need to know about collaborators, too. Which Humans might be doing the same thing you are, but for the other side. And which aliens might be leaning for or against joining up with the Committee.

TORIANNA

And we'd *also* love to find out which side of all this the Bots are going to fall out on. That might end up being incredibly important, and they may trust you more than any other Human on station. Which I know is a pretty low bar to clear, but still.

STELLA

Basically... We just need you keep your ears open and use your instincts. Everything's still too up in the air to give you any instructions clearer than that.

JOHN

Yeah. No, that's... that is unfortunately completely clear. And totally logical. So. When will I get to see you during all this?

STELLA

You don't.

JOHN

Ever?

STELLA

Ever.

JOHN

Until?

STELLA

Until... all this is over, and the Fugulnari are gone, or we're dead. That's how it is.

JOHN

Stella.

STELLA

And that's true whether or not you choose to help us.

JOHN

Choose? I have a choice about this?

FRALL

Of course you have a choice, John. Even if you were a member of League Forces, we would never force you to accept such a weighty and perilous mission. That would somewhat contravene the principles of freedom which we are trying to defend, would it not? You will not be required to simulate a public break with Stella, nor to feign allegiance to the Fugulnari.

STELLA

I'll still have to stay away from you no matter what. But if you'd rather just keep your head down and stay out of it, that's absolutely your prerogative.

JOHN

While you're risking your life? You know I couldn't do that, Stel. And... it's not just you, half my friends just got the shit kicked out of them for singing a stupid kids' song! Of course I want to do whatever I can to stop this! Anything! And I'm pretty sure the three of you already know that, or I wouldn't even be here.

FRALL

(affirmative sound)

Hmmmm....

JOHN

So... who else is in on this? I mean, who else will know I'm actually working for the Resistance?

FRALL

Nobody, John. Just the three of us.

JOHN

What?

TORIANNA

We can't risk it.

JOHN

I mean, I appreciate that, but isn't there anyone who—

FRALL

No, John. While we appreciate that the general disdain generated by your public embrace of the Fugulnari will be a heavy burden indeed, the risk of losing a unique potential asset is too great to allow even one potentially untrustworthy individual to learn of your true allegiance.

JOHN

Not even H.F.?

STELLA

Sorry, no. I know, you'd trust him to the Outer Rim and so would I. But no.

JOHN

(slowly)

What do I tell Althaar?

FRALL

Nothing.

JOHN

But... *Althaar*?

TORIANNA

No.

JOHN

So I let the kindest, sweetest, most generous and *ethical* person I've ever met, who thinks the world of me for some reason, believe that I'm willing to go along with a fascist takeover of my own species? The species he's dedicated his life to for years?

FRALL

Yes, John. That's exactly what you do.

JOHN

(breaking a bit)

I have no idea why you think I'll be able to handle this. I... I don't know if I can.

TORIANNA

John. Out of everyone you've met on the Fairgrounds, who would you consider the most critical, the hardest to impress?

JOHN

Well... *(seeing where this goes, but it's true)* Yeah, you three would definitely be up there.

TORIANNA

Right. So if we all think you can do it...

JOHN

Yeah... yeah... I know. Okay, I'm in. But you already knew that. Just... pardon me a second?

(he takes a moment for himself, inhales, yells)

I JUST WANTED TO HAVE A NORMAL, BORING, UNEVENTFUL LIFE!

(breathes hard for a moment, evens out)

Just needed to get that out, sorry. I'm good now. So. I guess I should go.

TORIANNA

John—

FRALL

John B. If you would like some privacy in order to say your goodbyes to Ms. Reyes before you are forced to part, I would be able to arrange that for you at this time.

JOHN

(considers a hair)

No, I don't think so. If I'm going to do this I have to start right now. I'd better get home and see how Althaar's holding up. Unless... Sorry, Stella, I should have asked. Did you want to—?

STELLA

(stating the facts)

No, Johnny. I love you, and I'll miss you, and I'll see you for real on the other side of this.

JOHN

Yeah. I love you, too. All right. I'll see you at 13:37, on the Central Promenade, day after tomorrow. Commander, Frall? I guess I'll be seeing you the next time you need a 16-gauge splice. I'll be the guy in the stupid headband.

TORIANNA

Thank you, John. And good luck.

FRALL

I'll see you out.

FRALL's shimmer sound "opens up" a bit around the door, and it slides open as JOHN exits.

[scene 15] Transition—no music—just the crossfaded ambient sounds of where JOHN is passing (not in real time; shortened, dreamlike) - through the Bridge, down an elevator, through corridors, all spookily quiet - until he reaches his and ALTHAAR's suite. Door opens as JOHN enters.

JOHN

Althaar? You here, buddy?

ALTHAAR

(quiet, contemplative)

Yes, FriendJohn. Althaar is here, behind the Curtain of Privacy.

JOHN

I heard a little about what happened at the Egg. Do you want to talk?

ALTHAAR

Yes, FriendJohn. The conversing with the dear friend would be a great consolation at this time.

JOHN

(sitting down next to the curtain, near ALTHAAR)

You were there when it all went down, right? I heard they didn't touch you, but everyone else...

ALTHAAR

Yes... it was... It was very horrible, FriendJohn. Althaar had never before perceived physical violence in the person. At least, none that was of such deliberateness. And certainly none that was practiced on those who are dear to Althaar. He has of course studied the violence of history, and observed the fictional depictions of it. But to be present when it is occurring is a thing of much difference.

JOHN

It's okay, buddy. There was nothing you could have done.

ALTHAAR

...Althaar did consider unconcealing himself from behind the Big Blorch Hunter II machine, so as to stop the Human forces of Security who were practicing some of the violence. But then he had concern that this would make incapacitation also of the Humans who were attempting to flee the violence, and this would leave them at the mercies of the Fugulnari forces. And these mercies Althaar thinks are very small indeed. So Althaar did not emerge, but merely made implorement of the forces of Security to cease their strikings and neuro-scramblings. And they were not listening to Althaar. So in the end, Althaar was doing nothing of use.

JOHN

You can't blame yourself, Althaar.

ALTHAAR

Althaar must contradict you, dear friend, as he is doing so at this moment.

JOHN

Yeah, I know. But, listen, this was a long time coming, and if it hadn't happened today, it would have tomorrow, or the day after that, or... And I know how hard you've been working to keep this whole Fugulnari thing from going bad, but... sometimes trying just isn't enough. And that... that sucks, buddy, I know. But I also know you're going to get up again tomorrow and keep trying anyway, because that's what you do. So now I think we should both get some sleep. As a very good friend once told me, "It is a truth that many troubles will still be present when you are rising, but you will be better shaped to deal with them."

ALTHAAR

(a small almost-laugh) Yes, Althaar will sleep. But not before Althaar has written several more letters to his friends and teachers on Iltor. Althaar has been corresponding with them for some weeks in the hope of resolving his many confusions about the Fugulnari Way. But after tonight, Althaar believes his confusions about the Iltorian Way are outnumbering even those. Althaar has some envy, FriendJohn, that the Human Way seems to present your own people with much less confusement.

JOHN

Maybe. I still find other Humans plenty confusing, sometimes. *(beat)* Althaar, you trust me, right?

ALTHAAR

Of course Althaar is trusting FriendJohn!

JOHN

Did you trust Mrs. Frondrinax?

ALTHAAR

Hmmm. In a sensing, yes, but not the same way that Althaar trusts FriendJohn. Althaar is always attempting to act with kindness and generosity, and he is hoping always that others are doing the same, but Althaar's studies have taught him that this is very often not the case. And of course Althaar believes his studies into Human culture have given him some understanding of where FriendJohn is emerging from. Whereas he had never made study of the Fugulnari before their most unexpected Ascending. He had not anticipated this would be of such great necessity one day. It is unfortunately not possibility to make detailed study of *every* culture in the galaxy, FriendJohn. And it is to believe Althaar when he says he has tried.

JOHN

Yeah. I know you trust me, but... if you were to find out I was behaving in a way that... that you considered improper or even... immoral. Like the way Mrs. F and the Fugulnari are behaving—

ALTHAAR

This is a thought experiment most implausible, FriendJohn.

JOHN

Right, but... If I did? What would you think?

ALTHAAR

Althaar would believe that FriendJohn must have some very good reason for behaving in such a fashion. One that was not yet grasped by the understanding of Althaar.

JOHN

That's... good to know, Althaar, thanks. But, you know, even the worst people in history had friends who made excuses for the horrible things they did.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is knowing this. But Althaar is also knowing FriendJohn. And it would take a very great changing in the heart of FriendJohn to turn him into a person who is not deserving the trust of Althaar.

JOHN

Thank you, Althaar. You have no idea how much that means to me right now.

ALTHAAR

And now Althaar believes it is time to follow the excellent advice of FriendJohn, and adjourn for the sleeping! Preceded in the case of Althaar by the letter-dictation. Althaar is wishing you a restful sleep cycle, FriendJohn.

JOHN

Pleasant dreams, FriendAlthaar.

The doors to both their bedrooms open and close as JOHN and ALTHAAR go in. [scene 16] Over speakers all around the Fairgrounds, MRS. FRONDRINAX is heard, backed by soft, but vaguely martial music.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(a lot harder than we've heard her before)

Hello, residents of the Fairgrounds. This is Frondrinax, of the Fugulnari Committee for the Management of Human Affairs. Well, it's been a day, hasn't it? It has been made clear to the Committee that many Humans on this station are less than appreciative of our work on their behalf. Not only that, but some of these Humans felt the need to act out in a manner both seditious and violent against our perfectly reasonable advisory strictures. Well, this has shown once and for all how much you Humans are in need of a firm hand, and how remiss we have been in allowing you to treat our Friendship Agreement as merely a list of *suggestions*. From now on, the Management Committee will be very clear about what is required to improve the lives of Humans, and we expect our requirements to be followed without question or protest. It's the law, and it's for your own good. If any of you have a problem with that, you're welcome to take it up with your League of Humans government, who I'm sure will be very diligent in keeping us apprised of your complaints, along with who exactly is doing the complaining. That's all for now. Think about where you stand, and await further instructions. Frondrinax out.

A harsh bleep as MRS. FRONDRINAX cuts her mic. [scene 17] Closing credits music in.

ANNOUNCER

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

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

Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

Zuri Washington as Dee

Berit Johnson as Althaar

Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

John Amir as John B

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

and Eli Gantias as H.F.

and also featured

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

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

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

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

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

Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanic

Life With Althaar logo and illustration by Dean Haspiel

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This is the end of season two of *Life With Althaar*! We will be back every other week with our third and final season starting July Second, 2021! But please keep checking our social media for between-season information, and please support our patreon and merch store! So until we return with more Tales from the Fairgrounds, let's check in on our pal Althaar, as he dictates a letter back home to Iltor...

[scene 18] Fade up on ALTHAAR in his room, in whatever is his equivalent of a bed, as he talks into his device.

ALTHAAR

...and so, most honored teacher Chi'Pwell Risgonsi Frihsplum Gwstrown Burwekkeyontz, these are the facts, as best as Althaar's subjective understanding may convey them. There is the violence, and there is the law, and the violence observed by Althaar was permitted entirely by the law. Because of the arrangement made between the Fugulnari and Human government, which of course Althaar must once again be noting he believes was achieved by much deception, and possibly also by still more violence that has remained thus far concealed. So the great suffering Althaar has observed can not be ended by the law. But it can also not be endured by Althaar. He has seen no way yet to make resolution of this. But he must be asking, if the precedents and principles of Iltor can not make prevention of this suffering, is this not evidence of a great lacking in these precedents and principles? Yes, the risk of making interference in that which may be imperfectly understood is a great one, but is this truly a risk of more weightiness than that of permitting the suffering that may with interference be ended? Is it always the arrogance to look at the actions of another and say, no, you must not do this terrible thing? Are there not times when this may be necessity, to pursue in fullness the aims of friendship and understanding?

(cont.)

(beat) Please pardon Althaar, dear Chi’Pwell Risgonsi Frihsplum Gwstrown Burwekkeyontz, if his questions are foolish. It is a truth that he is still beginning his journey, and he is knowing that his experience is but a tiny pebble beside the great mountains of wisdom gathered by the many generations of his predecessors. Althaar is very much hoping that you are seeing an answer to these questions that Althaar’s proximity to them has perhaps prevented him from noticing himself. So Althaar is thanking you for continuing your attentions, and he will be most pleased to receive the responding of his most perceptive and generous teacher and friend. And he is always remaining your faithful student, Althaar.

*A bleep as ALTHAAR turns off the device. He **inhales deeply** and then **sighs**. There are sounds of ALTHAAR putting things down and puttering around a moment as he prepares to sleep. ALTHAAR **begins to hum to himself**—it is “The Hokey Pokey Song.” He **makes a last sound**... *sad? considering? wondering? appreciative? ... and turns off the light with a click.**

END OF SEASON TWO