

Life with Althaar

Episode 14: The Other Shoe

Version 2.2 (Recording Script), 06/17/20 - BAJ

The standard LWA opening spaceship whoosh, additional “space sounds,” and, as we haven’t heard since the very beginning of the series, a bit of dramatic stock underscoring music and the voice of the ANNOUNCER.

ANNOUNCER

It is the year 2522. Somewhere in the Teegarden’s System, a large, shabby space station serenely traverses the orbital plane, trailing a scattered cloud of escape pod debris and flash-frozen xenomorph corpses. Inside, a Human and an Iltorian are settling down, on either side of a scrupulously opaque privacy curtain, to a pleasant morning meal.

And we move inside the station to the sounds of an Iltorian pattering about in the kitchen and a Human (JOHN) heartily consuming breakfast and coffee.

ALTHAAR

Has FriendJohn consumed a quantity of break-fast that is sufficient to his desires? Althaar is able to “whip up” as many panned cakes as are necessary! It is only to be asking, dear friend!

JOHN

I’m good, Althaar, but Stella might want some when she’s up. I’m just going to have another coffee before work. Although it’s not like I need the caffeine—it’s been so slow around here, it probably wouldn’t even matter if I slept through my shift. I mean, we haven’t had any kind of disaster in like, three weeks. That’s gotta be a Fairgrounds record.

ALTHAAR

Indeed! The recent absence of catastrophe is most extraordinary. It is a relief to Althaar, but also something of a confusion!

JOHN

Yeah, right. A calm Fairgrounds is just... wrong, somehow. I’ve been walking a fine line between “relaxed” and “wary.” Give it another week, and I’m sure it’ll be a microscopic line between “comatose” and “terrified.”

ALTHAAR

Yes, the unusual quiet has been most disquieting to Althaar also! So Althaar has been making use of this time devoid of lethal interruption, to commence a project that Althaar has been planning since the great excitement of last Criss-mass!

JOHN

Since—? Oh no, this doesn't have anything to do with me and Stella, does it?

ALTHAAR

It has to do with everyone, FriendJohn!

JOHN

Oh, good. Wait, what?

ALTHAAR

Althaar was inspired by the same events that resulted in Supervisor Reyes becoming FriendJohn's Very Special Friend, but it is the intention of the project of Althaar to increase the safety of ALL Humans on the Fairgrounds!

Whoosh of JOHN's bedroom door opening.

STELLA

(from inside JOHN's room)

Hey, Johnny! Is Althaar...?

JOHN

He's behind the privacy curtain, c'mon out.

ALTHAAR

And a most pleasant first cycle to you, Very Special Friend to FriendJohn Stella Reyes!

STELLA

(coming into the living room)

Hey, Althaar!

JOHN

Hey, you know you don't need to say all that every time you see Stella, right? Like, I already know she's my... very special friend, you know it, she knows it, you can just call her Stella. Or I guess "Supervisor Reyes" if you really want to keep it formal.

ALTHAAR

But Althaar is so very happy for FriendJohn that he has found a Very Special Friend! It is a great joy to Althaar, and so he wishes to be mentioning it often! But Althaar will verbally diminish his acknowledgements in the interest of brevity! Improving his brevity is another project to which Althaar has been applying himself.

STELLA

I appreciate the support, Althaar, and also the brevity.
(kisses JOHN, cheek or top of head, starts to move away from him)
Because I gotta hop in the shower and get out of here.

JOHN

I swear, sometimes I think you just hang out with me because it gets you access to a diplomatic suite with full water services.

STELLA

I'd be offended by that if I didn't have the same thought every time I have to use one of the communal sonic scrubbers.

JOHN

Hey!

STELLA

Just a thought! A brief thought! You try one sometime and then ask yourself what you'd do to get back into a real hot water shower.

And the bathroom door whooshes open and closed as she goes to the shower.

JOHN

She may have a point there.

ALTHAAR

Oh no, Althaar is certain that Supervisor Reyes does not feign enjoyment of FriendJohn's company for access to the cleansing waters!

JOHN

Yeah, I know that, Althaar, we were only joking.

ALTHAAR

Ah, comprehension! The use of feigned hostility in the Human "joking" has been a persistent obstacle to Althaar's understanding. These jokings are frequently absent to Althaar.

JOHN

Wh—oh, lost on you, Althaar. The joke's lost on you.

ALTHAAR

Yes! But Althaar was being foolish. It would be most implausible for Supervisor Reyes to be making a performance of false affection, particularly in light of the vigorous vibrations of mutual enjoyment that are frequently emanating from the bedroom of FriendJohn when Supervisor Reyes is making the overnight visit! That would be an elaborate deception indeed!

JOHN

The... “vigorous...” Uh, Althaar?

(inhale, has to go there)

Okay, I really don’t want to know, but I guess now I have to. Can you hear Stella and I having... “vigorousness?”

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, FriendJohn! The walls and door hatches of Suite C are soundproofed to the most exacting ICSB standards for diplomatic quartering! There is no chance of noise being carried through them!

JOHN

Ok. Good. So, uh, what vibrations are you talking about? And feel free to make your explanation as perfunctory as possible. Just... the bare minimum of information necessary to keep this conversation from haunting my nightmares for the next month, would be great.

ALTHAAR

Ah! Another opportunity for Althaar to be practicing his brevity! ...Hm. Althaar has not been “hearing” FriendJohn’s sexings with his auricular organ, but the sensillae on Althaar’s flixators are able to perceive infinitesimal vibrations, such as are carried through the floors when they are buffeted by a large object. Such as the bed of FriendJohn.

JOHN

Oh. Agh. Ok. Uh, I guess Stella and I will try to keep it... down?

ALTHAAR

Mm. Motion downward would most likely increase the impressions made on Althaar’s flixators, as it is through the floor that the vibrations are traveling.

JOHN

No, I meant we could... Actually maybe “keeping it up” is the answer. Or, well, I guess that’s the problem, isn’t it? Heh. Never mind, you wouldn’t get that anyway. But—

ALTHAAR

Is it a joke about the hydraulic action of the Human penis?

JOHN

Uh, yeah. Sorry.

ALTHAAR

There is no need for apology, FriendJohn! Althaar is always anxious to increase his knowledge of both the Human sexing and the jokings! Understanding of the humor is often the first step to true understanding of a people. It is not for nothing that Althaar pursued the full Jocularitry Studies course at the Yimbastush Institute for Acquisition of Intersubjective Expertise!

JOHN

O-kay then, happy to help. But anyway, what I was going to say was, I could get some cheap anti-grav units that could keep the bed up, like, hovering an inch off the floor. No floor contact, no vibrations, right?

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes you are correct! Although Althaar is not grasping why his perception of the vibrations of FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes should be a problem, this is a very clever solving of it nonetheless!

JOHN

It's just... one of those Human things, Althaar. We don't like people knowing the details of what we do in bed. Or, well, I guess that's not always true, some Humans are super into that, but... Why is it that the more I try to explain Human sex to you, the less I feel like I understand it myself?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is not certain, but he is very much appreciating the effort!

JOHN

I know you are, Althaar. Ok, so, I'll try to pick up some anti-grav units as soon as I get a chance. But until then, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention those, uh, vibrations, around Stell--

Bathroom door whoosh as STELLA comes back in.

JOHN

--AH! Hey! Wow, already dressed?

STELLA

Yeah, I wanna get into Sanitation Control early, take another look at the duty roster. Hey, Althaar, the spread looks great, but I'm just gonna grab something quick and get outta here. Where's the Incendion Raptor Sauce? Ah!

*STELLA can be heard squirting hot sauce on food, and **continuing to eat quietly and rapidly** during the conversation under much of the following scene.*

JOHN

Yikes! I still don't know how you can just drown a breakfast burrito in that stuff. One drop and I'd be running the length of the Fairgrounds with smoke coming out of my ears.

STELLA

Hey, as tasty as Althaar's cooking is-- Thanks, Althaar!

ALTHAAR

Supervisor Reyes is most welcome!

STELLA

I need a serious jolt to get my workday going. Especially today. I gotta kick some ass up there. Since 96% of the vent-biters got blasted into space back at Christmas, everyone's been getting complacent. Hard to keep up discipline when the most menacing thing you're likely to face on your shift is a clogged toilet.

JOHN

Hey, that's the kind of problem you want to have, right?

STELLA

Oh sure, I'll take it over the shredding-your-face-off kind of problem any day. But the thing is, I'm in command of a group of sanitation workers who were forced to remold themselves into the most fearsome fighting force in all of Human space, and it hasn't exactly been easy to re-mold them back into a bunch of actual janitors. I need to keep morale up, reacquaint them with what our jobs were supposed to be in the first place, and still maintain a patrol schedule for those last of those little jeckers still scuttling around in the ductwork. Plus try to prepare for Jones-knows-what might be coming down the pike—it's basically impossible to predict what kind of weird-ass emergency will be next around here.

JOHN

Yeah. Although the emergencies have been surprisingly sparse these last few weeks. Althaar and I were just saying...

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar was explaining to FriendJohn his new project! Since the Fairgrounds' Pods of Escape have all been deployed, and none have been yet replaced, Althaar has concern that there is now inadequate equipment for possible emergency.

JOHN

Well, there was always inadequate equipment, really, considering the old escape pods all imploded right after launch. We're better off without them—they were kind of the exact opposite of safety equipment.

STELLA

Unsafe-ty equipment?

ALTHAAR

Indeed, FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes! And Althaar is knowing that there has been difficulty in securing the new equipment of safety from the League of Humans, so Althaar has made use of his discretionary fund to place an order for 40 gross of the space-hats-with-air, suitable for Human wearing. And Althaar will be installing these in locations throughout the Fairgrounds where they may perhaps be needed! For safety!

STELLA

Space-hats-with...?

JOHN

(aside to STELLA) Space helmets. *(to ALTHAAR)* Althaar, I appreciate your good intentions, but you know the Fairgrounds is basically held together with duct tape and prayer, right? There's a reason we avoid making structural changes, it's not just because of the shoestring budget or the ridiculous stylebook regulations. Everything here's connected to everything else in... literally the stupidest way possible. Have you talked to anyone at HEC Command about this project of yours?

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes! Althaar has sought permission from Commander Torianna herself, and she has told Althaar: "Yes, sure, anything, anything you want Althaar, please, go ahead, I trust you, please go and do that somewhere that is not here."

JOHN

Uhh, ok. I still think you should be careful about adding new attachment points to the wall panels, though.

ALTHAAR

Hm. Then perhaps Althaar will merely rest the space-hats-with-air upon convenient surfaces, without making installation of the space hat securement clamps. And this will make a saving of time for Althaar also! Thanking you, FriendJohn!

JOHN

No problem. Where did you get that many space *helmets*, anyway?

ALTHAAR

Oh, Althaar has made a bulk purchase through Honest Zwiznarp's Refurbished Component Shack! They had only the first 100 in stock, but they have assured Althaar that the remaining hats-with-air will arrive shortly.

STELLA

"Honest Zwiznarp's?"

JOHN

Yeah, Althaar, I dunno about the rest of the galaxy, but when a Human business feels the need to start their name with “Honest,” it’s usually exactly the opposite.

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, FriendJohn! Zwiznarp is not Human, but Mixolydian, so he is indeed honest. He cannot be otherwise!

JOHN

Look, I appreciate your optimism, but there’s such a thing as being too trusting. I mean, I know that Iltorians never lie, but there are a lot of shady characters out there.

ALTHAAR

On the contrary, FriendJohn, it is most possible for an Iltorian to lie! It is not to do so often, because it is a cruel thing to interfere with another being’s attempt to comprehend the Universe. But we are knowing that sometimes the “white lie” is appropriate! As when last week FriendJohn was asking Althaar’s opinion of his new “Hammer pants.” But among the Mixolydians, truthfulness is not a thing of culture, but a property of the brain structure! A Mixolydian is physically unable to tell a mistruth under any circumstance! So Sin Zwiznarp is certainly to be trusted!

JOHN

... You didn’t like my Hammer pants?

(to STELLA)

Oh, hey, that explains the name of that Mixolydian restaurant we ate at the other night!

STELLA

“Rixlon’s Acceptable Food?” Yeah, that... that was right on the money, actually. Speaking of which, thanks again for cooking, Althaar. Sorry I couldn’t stay long enough for a real breakfast.

JOHN

Three Incendion-soaked burritos and an inside-out fruit bowl isn’t a real breakfast?

STELLA

Sanitation training, Johnny. “We eat what we need before you need us to stop you getting eaten.” Even if we’re not doing much of that these days.

JOHN

Well, whether you’re mowing down a vent-full of toothy menaces or swabbing down a maintenance corridor, I still think you’re the biggest badass for 50 light-years around.

Brief kiss.

STELLA

(moving to the door)

Thanks, but I don't exactly feel like a badass while I'm doing the swabbing. Honestly, the bravest thing I get up to most days is coming over here and hanging out with an Iltorian. No offense, Althaar!

ALTHAAR

No offense is taken by Althaar, Supervisor Reyes! Althaar is aware of the great difficulty in achieving cultural exchange between Human and Iltorian! Because of the unpleasant expulsion of digestive fluids caused to Humans by the sight of the Iltorian form. But now, after FriendJohn, Supervisor Reyes is the Human that has spent the second-greatest amount of time in close proximity to one of Iltor! Your bravery is indeed worthy of praise! And Althaar is certain that your swabbing is also!

STELLA

Aw, thanks Althaar. Ok, I really gotta go. Later, Johnny!

Apartment door whoosh as she exits. JOHN starts getting himself together for work.

JOHN

Well... I still haven't had any work calls yet today, but I'm as stuffed as I'm gonna get, so I guess I might as well check in at the office. Maybe I'll swing down to the bridge first, see if they need anything.

ALTHAAR

And Althaar will commence his project of placing the space-hats-with-air in locations of convenience!

JOHN

...Uh huh. Oh, hey, have you seen my phasing pliers? They're not on my belt.

ALTHAAR

No they are not, FriendJohn! Althaar believes they flew approximately 1.6 meters across the room yesterday evening, when FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes entered the suite and began removing each other's clothes with great energy! As FriendJohn was throwing Supervisor Reyes's uniform top behind the sofa, the phasing pliers were launched out of FriendJohn's belt and landed in the corner, next to the floor lamp.

JOHN

(finding them there and picking them up)

Ah. Yeah. Here they are. ...Wait a minute. You could tell all of that was happening from inside your room? How sensitive exactly are these thingies of yours? You can't actually, like, feel our clothes coming off, can you? Please say no.

ALTHAAR

...Is this a situation in which the “white lie” is indicated?

JOHN

(sighs) No, I guess not. The horrible, horrible truth, please.

ALTHAAR

Then yes, FriendJohn! Last night’s vibrations were particularly energetic. The speed of the clothing removal caused a moment of apprehension for Althaar, as he feared FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes were responding to some danger, but the vibrations ultimately indicated otherwise. And Althaar appreciates your bringing the sexing to a speedy conclusion, so that he was able to get to sleep at an hour that was within reason!

JOHN

(quietly mortified)

Aaagh...

ALTHAAR

Oh! But please do not cut short your intended sexings for the comfort of Althaar, FriendJohn! Althaar would never wish to interfere with his dear friend’s enjoyment of the Human romance! And Althaar also found the comedy performance of last night to be of great amusement, so enjoyment was had by all! It is not to worry, FriendJohn.

JOHN

“Comedy performance?”

ALTHAAR

When Supervisor Reyes attempted removal of the pants of FriendJohn, while his boots still remained on his feet? What an incongruous and comical situation! The hilarity rendered Althaar prostrate with zygomatic oscillations!

JOHN

Right, the comedy performance. Yep, that’s exactly what we were doing. Glad you liked it.

ALTHAAR

Oh, no! Althaar had meant to mention to Supervisor Reyes that the hair elastic for which she had been searching had been flung last night under the dresser of FriendJohn! And now she has departed without retrieving it! This omission is most upsetting.

JOHN

You can feel *that*?

ALTHAAR

Althaar’s sensillae are most perceptive, FriendJohn!

JOHN

Yikes. Ok, you know what? Don't worry about the elastic, you don't have to mention that to Stella, okay? Seriously, please don't ever mention it ever. I'll make sure she gets it back. *(to himself, as he heads for the door)* After I pick up those anti-grav units for the bed! *(door whooshes open)* Later, Althaar!

The door whooshes shut, and the theme music comes in...

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...
LIFE WITH ALTHAAR, season two!
Episode Fourteen... "The Other Shoe!"

Fade into Bridge sounds on a very slow day. Nowhere near as much background chatter as usual. FRALL and TORIANNA are engaged in what sounds something like a serious discussion. It is not.

COMMANDER

...ginning with... "B."

FRALL

(thinking)

Hmmm. "B?" Given the current status of the Bridge, Commander, I would assume you are referring to the broken indicator light on the methane atmospheric monitoring board.

COMMANDER

Dammit, Frall! Yes, of course that's what I'm referring to.

FRALL

(smug noise of satisfaction)

COMMANDER

Look, there are times when it's incredibly useful that you know what I'm thinking before I can say it, but this is obviously not one of them! Come on!

FRALL

I'm afraid it can't be helped, Mindy. I believe it's now my turn. I perceive--

FRALL is interrupted by the Bridge door whooshing open. JOHN enters.

JOHN

Hello, Commander! Lieutenant Frall.

COMMANDER

Hello, Mr. B. What brings you down to the bridge? Is there a problem? Please let us know if there's anything we can do to make your job easier. Seriously, is there a problem? Anything? Anything at all that would break up the monotony around here?

JOHN

Oh, no, sorry. Actually, my work queue's totally empty, I just thought I'd stop by to see if there was anything you might need. But I guess you're having a slow day, too, huh?

FRALL

Considered from a Human perspective, you're correct, John B. To my perception, the bridge is filled with chaotic activity as per usual, but of course only an infinitesimal percentage of that activity is relevant to the concerns of four-dimensional beings such as yourselves.

COMMANDER

Which means it's of no concern to WSS.

(the WSS jingle plays from JOHN's pager and from a console)

So there's obviously nothing for you to do here on the bridge as a technician for WSS.

(and jingles again)

So, don't worry, if anything happens, we'll be sure to call you at WSS.

(and again)

The moment that a problem comes up that can only be fixed by WSS.

And one more time the jingles play.

JOHN

What. Are you doing.

COMMANDER

I don't know, at least that stupid jingle gives me something to be annoyed about, which is better than this interminable ennui. Now please get out of here before I say it another half-dozen times. And do feel free to call in if you have something interesting to report. And by interesting I mean anything that might possibly engage my attention for one yottasecond. Seriously, the bar is so low it's descended all the way through the deck plating and the exterior bulkhead. The bar has entered free orbit, B. Even the tiniest problem with a wire, a drinks machine, or a window, please don't think twice about interrupting my busy schedule of absolutely fuck-all. I'm begging you.

JOHN

Got it. Okay, I guess I'll go see if H.F. has anything for me at the office. The office... of WSS.

Jingle plays, COMMANDER makes an annoyed sound.

JOHN

(retreating quickly)

Sorry, sorry, just trying to help...

Whoosh of the door as JOHN leaves.

COMMANDER

(sigh)

Okay, Frall, where were we?

FRALL

It was my turn.

I perceive, with my little sensory apparatus, something beginning with... E.

COMMANDER

(after a beat)

And can this something be perceived by the Human sensory apparatus?

FRALL

(another beat)

Ah. I appear to have once again neglected one of the basic rules of the game. My apologies.

COMMANDER

I know you know how the game's supposed to work, Frall! You're really bad at this!

FRALL

The purpose of a game is entertainment, is it not? And I am indeed entertained.

COMMANDER

Well that's not saying much, you're entertained by carbonation!

STALIN-BOT

Commander! I would be willing to play fair game with you.

FRALL

(to herself)

...the physics of bubble formation can be quite diverting...

COMMANDER

(sighs, knows this isn't going to go well, but what the hell)

Okay, Stalin-bot, let's go. You start.

STALIN-BOT

I sense with my little lens, something beginning with 'P'.

COMMANDER

(after a beat)

It's panel! You always say panel!

STALIN-BOT

Yes, I always say panel, panel is all that I see! Every work cycle, I stare at panel! Maybe if I am given more interesting job worthy of my highly advanced programming I say more interesting thing, but no, I am stuck answering stupid docking calls on stupid panel so I am very bad at stupid game!

COMMANDER

Never mind! Game's over!

Oh, what I wouldn't give for a normal, reasonable, solvable problem. No apocalyptic scenarios, just a little bit of a challenge. Like, something at around 40% of the usual level of peril around here would be perfect. A minor diplomatic kerfuffle. A non-lethal systems failure. Or some League bureaucrat making a surprise visit.

FRALL

Careful what you wish for, Mindy.

COMMANDER

And you can stop with that, too! You've been saying that for months now, every time I complain! Well, I'll have you know that whatever effect it may once have had has thoroughly worn off. You're just the energy cloud that cried phase-wolf!

STALIN-BOT

We have phase-wolves now? We just got rid of vent-biters!

COMMANDER

Oh, shut up and stare at your panel!

I know the other shoe is going to drop sooner or later, it's the waiting I can't stand. How long has it been since we got one of those vaguely worded communiqués from Bigelow on Earth? A month? Two?

FRALL

Ten weeks, sir.

COMMANDER

Right. And even then it was just, "Watch out. They're coming. More soon." That's not actionable. I mean, I get the need for discretion, but when "discreet" slips over the line into "cryptic" then you might as well not bother.

FRALL

Quite, sir.

COMMANDER

Oh, you're one to talk.

FRALL

Touché.

COMMANDER

And I still haven't heard back from Earth Central about those requisitions for replacement escape pods. That may be infuriating, but it's not interesting. All I can do is keep sending them status update requests, which for all I know are being delivered straight into the shredder, and sit around waiting for them to grace us with a response. You'd think they might at least pretend to care that all our escape pods freaking imploded seconds after launch. I mean, those things were literally the exact opposite of "safety equipment."

FRALL

"Imperilment equipment?"

COMMANDER

Sure, why not.

(deep sigh)

Okay. That's it. I've reached the point. I'm going to do it.

FRALL

You don't mean—?

COMMANDER

Yes. I'm going to perform the most mind-meltingly boring task that falls under the purview of the Commander of the Fairgrounds.

FRALL

I'm frankly as stunned as I can be, sir. You've successfully avoided it for the last six years.

COMMANDER

And with gusto, Frall. But now, it has somehow become the only remaining use of my time that is of even the most marginal interest. Yes, I'm going to run... a complete epsilon-level systems diagnostic.

Gasps from all around on the bridge. This is a mind-meltingly dull job.

FRALL

Very well, Commander, I'll leave you to your tedium and pursue a task of a similar interest level for myself. What I had spotted in our game was a stray electromagnetic pulse passing through the Bridge whose source I cannot identify. So, I intend to spend the next cycle traversing the length of the Fairgrounds, subjecting every micron of the station to the most intense scrutiny of which I am capable, until I find where it is coming from. Please enjoy your combing through hours of inconsequential numeric data output, to whatever extent that is possible...

FRALL noise as they apparate through a bulkhead.

COMMANDER

All right then. Stalin-bot? I'm going into my ready room to run the diagnostic. I just need you to handle one thing, and of course to let me know if anything else even marginally important comes up while I'm in there.

STALIN-BOT

(hopefully)

I am in charge while you are occupied with systems check?

COMMANDER

What? No! But the intercom in there is broken again, your chair is closest to my office, and you have the loudest voice around here. So you're in charge of yelling for me. But more importantly, an epsilon-level diagnostic is going to take each station system off-line for a few seconds. Which will set off the monitors that are normally supposed to make sure those systems don't go offline, because none of the engineers built in an exception for their own testing procedures, because of course they didn't. So, this whole process will trigger a series of extremely unpleasant klaxons and a whole lot of annoying flashy lights, unless you use the manual overrides to turn off all the screamy-screamy and blinky-blinky for the next few hours. So that the only annoyance I'll have to tolerate during this diagnostic will be the suffocating drudgery of certifying that every single first-line system on the Fairgrounds is free of irregularities. Followed by the auxiliary systems. And then the triple-redundancy systems. You get the idea?

STALIN-BOT

Is no problem, Commander. I am in charge of no distractions!

COMMANDER

Sure. Fine. Now I'll be in there with a PCM and a triple espresso and that's all I want to know about until I come out. You just deal with the alarms, ok?

Door whoosh as TORIANNA exits to her ready room.

STALIN-BOT

(muttering to self)

Deal with alarms. I am product of top of line software engineering! I can deal and double-deal! Alarms and warning lights are easiest deal there is.

Sound of multiple switches being thrown and buttons pushed.

STALIN-BOT

There! Is not difficult. I turn off ALL alarms. You want no distractions, Stalin-bot will give you no distractions!

Music transition to the WSS office as the door whooshes effortfully open and JOHN enters.

JOHN

Hello? H.F.? You here? Right, John, like he could hide in this cubbyhole. Guess he actually got a work ticket. Oh, wait a minute, there's a note...

"Hey, B. Had a minor job sanitizing a water fountain in the Gimel 8 hydro-park, and since it's almost end of shift, I'm going to pick up Miss Sophie on the way and bring her along for a walk. Call me when you get in, H.F." Okay...

(commlink sound)

Hey, H.F.! You in the park?

H.F.

(over comm)

Hey, John. Yeah, I'm all done here. Anything new on the slate?

Sound of JOHN checking the digital readout. It just beeps once. If possible, forlornly.

JOHN

Just one thing, looks like a minor wire short off of Auxiliary Life Support Control Number 4. I'll take care of it, by the time I get there we'll be officially into my shift anyway. Enjoy your walk with Miss Sophie.

H.F.

(over comm)

I'm sure I will if I can find her! She's run off the path somewhere I can't even see. She loves to do this to me. Ah, she always comes back.

In the middle of this next line, the environment shifts and we are now with H.F. in Hydroponics hearing JOHN in the office over the commlink.

JOHN

Hey, H.F., while I got you, where's the best place on the Fairgrounds to get anti-grav attachments for a bed?

H.F.

Whoa, Johnny! I may run things a little informal around here, but I'm still your boss, all right? That is definitely more than I need or want to know about you and Stella, according to the 'unprofessional inter-employee contact' section of the WSS— (“WSS!”) ...Employee Manual.

JOHN

(over comm)

It's not what you think! Well... mostly. Look, I just need to know where to go for cheap anti-grav units. They're a common household appliance, don't make it weird.

H.F.

(not at all believing him)

Yeah okay, sure kid. You want anti-grav attachments for something... approximately bed-sized, I'd say your best bet would be X.Z. Drachir and Offspring, up in Samech 11. Decent prices, friendly service, and, uh... real discreet, if you know what I mean.

JOHN

(over comm)

I don't need them to be dis— ugh, whatever. Are they trustworthy?

H.F.

Run by Mixolydians, you can't get more honest! Always know what you're getting.

JOHN

(over comm)

Ok, good. I don't want anti-grav units that'll burn out after fifteen minutes and dump me on the floor.

H.F.

You know, they aren't really “anti-grav” units, they're just mini field generators that counteract the Fairgrounds' artificial gravity in the immediate area.

JOHN

(over comm)

I know, I know.

H.F.

I'm not just being pedantic here, you gotta be precise when you're dealing with a species utterly devoid of guile. With a Mixolydian, what you ask for is exactly what you get.

JOHN

(over comm)

Right. Well, I'm used to that anyway, living with Althaar. You don't wanna know what he ordered in from Poppy's one night when I said I could eat a horse. Anyway, I might as well get going on this short. Later, H.F.

H.F.

Later, kid.

Sound of MISS SOPHIE barking from some ways away.

H.F.

Miss Sophie! Here, girl!

(as we hear MISS SOPHIE's barking get closer and closer)

Good gir— What have you got there? Miss Sophie! What did you do? You put that down right now! Give it up!

Sound of H.F. trying to pull something out of MISS SOPHIE's mouth; she growls a bit and pulls back, thinking this is a fun game.

H.F.

I ... am not ... PLAYING ... with you, Miss Sophie! That is not your stick! Give it! Give! It!

Sound of a plant being wrenched from MISS SOPHIE's mouth; she makes happy-whiny sounds indicating she wants H.F. to throw it and keep playing the game.

H.F.

No, Miss Sophie! Shame, Miss Sophie! This is not a toy! This was a living plant in the hydroponics park, and you dug it up and killed it! Bad! What if Tante Mrs. Frondrinax was here? And she saw you doing this to one of her relatives! Can you imagine?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(who has been there all along)

No need to imagine, H.F., I'm right here and I saw the whole thing!

H.F.

AH! Oh, hey, Mrs. F. Listen, I am so so sorry about what Miss Sophie did. She knows better than to go digging up the plants in here. I don't know what's gotten into her.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, that's all right. You know that I'm not particularly fond of these mammals of the canine variety, but I must say that Miss Sophie isn't nearly as rude as some I've encountered. And in fact, this unfortunate distant Earth relation of mine had already upped roots before your little friend ever got near him. So really, Miss Sophie did me a favor by bringing him here. Now I can dispose of his remains properly.

H.F.

Oh, good. I mean, you're sure?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(yes, she is hiding something)

Why, certainly! With so many plants in the station's hydroponic parks, quite a few of them are dying off all the time of perfectly natural causes. It's nothing unusual at all! I'm positive that's exactly what this was. Completely natural causes. Nothing to worry your little skull about.

H.F.

Well, I'm sure glad it wasn't Miss Sophie's fault. Are that many plants dying off here, really? That's kind of dangerous, isn't it? I mean, that's where we get most of our oxygen.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No, no, dearie, the Hydroponics staff does a marvelous job of keeping the population just as it should be. That's why you never see any gaps. They're wonderfully dedicated workers, you know, very talented. And full of appreciation for plant life!

H.F.

I guess. I never seem to see any of them around.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh they're ... around. They like to stay in the background, you know. Almost invisible. They think everyone's attention should be on the foliage. They're very devoted to us. To plants in general, I mean. *(out to change subject right away)* Anyway, you just leave the corpse of my fallen relation here to me, and I'll dispose of it in the proper, respectful way. The plant way. No need for you to involve yourself further. You two can go and enjoy this lovely day!

H.F.

I still feel kinda bad about Miss Sophie dragging him out here. You sure I can't help?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, no no no! Our removal rituals are very private! Very very private! And time-consuming! Frankly, anyone non-herbaceous would find them terribly dull. You just go on and have fun with your little fur-bearing quadruped and I'll take care of the solemnities. Off you go!

As he and MISS SOPHIE fade off, leaving the park:

H.F.

Okay then, Mrs. F, thanks again! See you around!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(muttering to herself as she picks up the dead plant and starts moving away)

All right, my silly little Earth cousin, let's make sure you're properly eradicated, shall we? Where is the nearest garbage chute? And when I get back, I'm going to have to give someone another lesson in covert disposal techniques. Careless, careless, careless!

And as she moves off, music transition to the Electric Egg. As with everywhere else, same sounds as usual, but a bit ... less so. Not that it's empty, just subdued.

CHIP

(deep sigh)

This bites.

SOPON

What's nibbling on you, Chip?

CHIP

Are your eye membranes molting again? Look at this place! What's nibbling on me is it's dead in here!

SOPON

What? We're doing okay business. Pretty typical mid-cycle crowd.

CHIP

Yeah, but it's so *quiet*. I want buzz, dammit! Where's the excitement? Where's the commotion? Where's the hubbub, the hullabaloo, the hoopla!?

SOPON

I don't know, boss, the Egg's usual kind of excitement involves a lot of breakage. Maybe we could use a few hoopla-free cycles once in a while.

CHIP

And Dee, what the hell was that last set? Could you have been any more low-key?

DEE

Read the room, Chip. This is not a rock-and-roll crowd. I am a professional, and I adjust my setlist to fit my audience and their needs.

CHIP

An hour of traditional Frizmerlite funeral ballads is not what anyone needs! Including the Frizmerlites!

DEE

Wow, you have got to repose your gizz once in a while, or you are going to give yourself the habdabs something ferocious.

CHIP

What? You haven't been getting into Xtopps's PB stash have you? You're sounding pretty spread-out.

DEE

Ok, first of all, you know what Xtopps would do to anyone who touched his stash, and secondly, in case you hadn't noticed, I'm a Human? All I'd get out of that stuff is a good source of protein. What is your damage?

CHIP

What *isn't* my damage? Look at these people. Just sitting there. Eating. Drinking. Making *polite conversation*. I can't stand it!

DEE

Seriously, Chip, you need to take a minute and just foob out, all right? This is the opposite of a problem. You've got plenty of customers, no one's on strike, nothing's imploding, you should be happy! You've been skating on the edge so damn long, you've forgotten how to get centered.

CHIP

I can't do it, Dee! I need something to happen! Something! Anything!

FRALL apparates in.

CHIP

Anything but that!

FRALL

Don't mind me, Mr. Frinkel, I'll be out of your... hair in a moment, I'm just going have a quick look at a few things. No need for concern.

DEE

Hey, Frall.

FRALL

Hello, Dee. Might I say, that Frizmerlite set was just captivating. I was particularly fond of 'O Let Not Our Desolation Be Ended Until the Barren Mountains Are Consumed by the Implacable Seas of Despair,' you so rarely hear that one these days.

DEE

Oh, thanks a lot! Yeah, I've been getting really into the Frizmerlites lately, been scrounging up a lot of those old monofilament recordings. They've got this really raw feel to them, you know?

FRALL

Quite. Have you considered adding 'Weep, O Mine Open Lesions?' to your repertoire? I find those augmented fourths in the chorus delightfully haunting.

DEE

Oh, I don't know that one! I'll have to check it out, thanks!

CHIP

No one is singing about open lesions in my dining establishment, thank you very much! And what are you looking for, anyway? Is this an official inspection? This is sovereign Xybidont territory, you know, we've got rights! Don't make me get out the scroll!

FRALL

Please relax, Mr. Frinkel, as much as you're capable of doing so. I am merely engaged in a matter of scientific curiosity. It is highly unlikely that the object of my search has anything to do with the numerous activities of dubious or flagrant illegality taking place in this establishment. (*sparkles*) And now my pursuit must continue elsewhere. Good afternoon, gentlebeings!

FRALL floats away through another wall. A bit of a beat.

CHIP

Hey, Sopon?

SOPON

Yeah, boss?

CHIP

How much of our "special stock" would you say is of dubious or flagrant illegality?

SOPON

By ICSB or League of Humans rules?

CHIP

Either. Both.

SOPON

Uh... about 23 cases.

CHIP

Right. We're dumping it. Open the "backup fridge."

Sound of a digital and physical serious unlocking and air escaping as part of the wall behind the bar slides open to reveal a secret chamber. There is a hum.

DEE

Frill me. How much contraband you got back there and am I an accessory?

CHIP

It's not contraband, we're in Xybidont territory. And I'm probably gonna kick myself later for doing this, but that supercilious demon-cloud has got me worried. For all I know they're cooking up some kind of... unauthorized beverage exemption to diplomatic immunity. So what we're gonna do is, keep one bottle of each just in case, and hurf the rest of it right down the drain. It doesn't move anyway. Sopon, start popping corks! And hey, Bubbles!

BUBBLES

Yeah, boss?

CHIP

Sorry, but I'm gonna have to open you up and flush out a couple of your tubes. The "special" ones we don't talk about. I don't want one drop of that stuff in here where someone, or *something*, can make trouble over it.

BUBBLES

Who's gonna be rummaging around in my nether regions to find out? Are you crazy, Chip?

CHIP

Crazy? Crazy like a phase-wolf, Bubbles. Okay, open up...

*Sound of CHIP opening BUBBLES's panel and banging around as he starts some kind of autoflush sequence. **BUBBLES makes quiet noises of discomfort.** SOPON is pouring out liquids for the rest of the scene. XTOPPS has wandered over to DEE.*

XTOPPS

Hey, Dee! What's the stumble? Has Chip flipped or have I?

DEE

Oh, the quiet's given him some kind of barkeep's brain fever. He's seeing inspectors and code-humpers and Security goons coming for him around every corner and he's gone all nerve-simple. Frall just said one thing to wind him up, and now he's going totally unwound.

XTOPPS

Oh. Yeah, huh? What did Boss Fog say, in even letters?

DEE

Nothing, really, they just said they were looking for something on the station, and that it had nothing to do with anything illegal around here. Hence the overreaction. Frall knows Chip won't believe a word they say.

XTOPPS

(failing at casualness)

Right, right. Searching for something "not illegal." That sounds very definitely plausible. Okayyyy, so... I gotta effoe for a piece, dig? Gotta see a man about a Tikbalang.

XTOPPS exits, unconvincingly humming "casually."

DEE

(to herself)

Oh, I am not liking the sound of that.

(to CHIP)

Hey, Chip? I'm gonna vague for a bit. Back in 20.

CHIP

(barely paying attention)

Whatever, Dee! Just have something less dirge-y and more urge-y next set!

DEE exits. CHIP keeps trying to force liquid out of BUBBLES faster than her pumps can flush it.

BUBBLES

Chip! I can flush my own tubes! Would you get your meat mitts out of my access panel? This is so embarrassing.

ALIEN BARFLY

(from the other end of the bar)

You tell 'em, sister!"

SOPON

(shaking a bottle; it makes a not-quite-liquidy sound; calling)

What about this shness, Chip? I'm not quite sure it counts as a liquid.

CHIP

I don't care. Is it sentient?

SOPON

(not-at-all sure)

Eh... probably not?

CHIP

Then down the drain it goes. Hurf it.

*Sound of oozy “liquid” gugging out of a bottle into music transition and an empty corridor. We can hear **MRS. F** hauling the plant corpse closer as there is an announcement coming over the speakers from **BURROUGHS-BOT**:*

BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention all Fairgrounds residents. This is your recreation director speaking. Due to the surprising number of residents with more time on their hands than they know what to do with these past several weeks, all recreation facilities have been completely denuded of equipment due to overuse, thievery, unsportsperson-like smashing, and misguided hunger. As a result, until we receive new shipments of leisure equipment, the recreation facilities now consist of several large, echoing spaces with absolutely nothing in them. Go ahead and find some recreation in that, you pitiful savages.

*Sound of a disposal hatch lid clanking, and leafy, organic things being shoved into it, along with **struggling sounds from MRS. FRONDRINAX**, who mutters to herself as she forces the dead plant in.*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh ... you get in there you silly useless Earthling excuse for flora ... oof ... I swear you're even more annoying dead than you were alive ...

*As this continues, we can hear **ALTHAAR** approaching, but **MRS. FRONDRINAX** doesn't notice until he speaks.*

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, Mrs. Frondrinax!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(very flustered)

Wha—! Oh, hello Althaar dearie! I certainly wasn't expecting to run into you in this deserted side corridor! What a pleasant surprise!

ALTHAAR

It seems that you are having some difficulty with the shoving of a large leafy object down the disposal chute! May Althaar assist?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, NO, Althaar, I think I have this —UNH!— under control here. Just some discarded parts of an Earth cousin I want to get out of the way. It's up to us plants to look after our own, you know.

ALTHAAR

Oh! The deepest of condolences from Althaar to you, Mrs. Frondrinax, on the deceasing of your distant relation!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You're very kind, Althaar, but don't worry. It was this one's time to go, I can assure you. All that's left for me to do is completely eradicate any sign of his existence. ...As part of the mourning process! It's important to us plants, you know, to be able to (*resuming her efforts*) move on as (*oof!*) quickly as (*rgh!*) possible.

More shoving sounds and grunts from MRS. FRONDRINAX.

ALTHAAR

Ah! Althaar must apologize for his ignorance, as the Fugulnari culture is not one of his specializings. Althaar must remedy this as soon as he is capable!

Shoving pauses as MRS. F gives ALTHAAR her full attention.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh no no no no no no no, that's quite all right, dear. I don't expect you to study up on my people, you have enough in your pot already trying to understand those silly Humans! And there are only 28 hours in a day, you can't be an expert on everything, can you?

ALTHAAR

Althaar can try!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No, I won't hear of it! You'll run yourself wilted if you keep up this pace. Now I want you to promise me you won't start another one of your little study projects on the Fugulnari, all right? I'd hate for you to exhaust yourself.

ALTHAAR

Then Althaar is promising! But Althaar does not wish to commit an accidental rudeness. Mrs. Frondrinax must inform Althaar if he is to take an action that is likely to cause offense!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Of course I will, dearie. But you really shouldn't work so hard, you know. You cause me no end of worry sometimes. And what's this you've got here? A whole hover-sledge full of boxes? Have the Humans got you making deliveries now?

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, Mrs. Frondrinax! This is a special project of Althaar! Althaar has purchased these space-hats-with-air for Human safety, and is now placing them, without wall attachment, in locations where they may be needed. In case of disaster! Which is happening often on the Fairgrounds, so Althaar has hope that his efforts will be of use quite soon! Although it would be better if the space hats were not needed. It is an ambivalent hope.

Sound of ALTHAAR stowing helmets to one side, across from where MRS. F is still occasionally trying to jam the protruding bits of dead plant back into the trash tube.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Althaar! Really! I'll never understand why you go to so much trouble over these Humans! If they're so careless as to lose track of where their breathing medium has got to, well it's their own mulching fault! They've got to stand on their own two roots sometime, and mollycoddling a younger species is no way to make them behave themselves.

ALTHAAR

But the Humans are behaving themselves already! Althaar has documented a large quantity of behaviors in his Human Culture Data-Base! Althaar finds the Human behaving to be of endless fascination.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I know you do, dear. It's a pity they don't feel the same about your people, isn't it? That must be awfully disappointing for you, poor thing.

ALTHAAR

It is a truth that Althaar has sometimes frustration with the obstacles to his understanding. But Althaar knew that this task would not be easy when he was choosing it! And more knowledge is being gained every cycle by Althaar! Today he has learned that the Human business that calls itself "Honest" is in fact the opposite! He is most excited to learn the origins of this curious custom!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Of course you are, bless your vascular bundles. *(one more attempt to fit the dead plant into the trash)* Oof! Get IN there, you wretched thing!

ALTHAAR

...Mrs. Frondrinax? Althaar is having a suggestion related to your funerary practice, but it is one that would provoke indignation among many sentients. Would you still wish to hear it?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Funerary—? Oh, yes, right. Suggest away, sweetheart, I'll take any help I can get.

ALTHAAR

It seems certain that your departed one is of a size that can not be accommodated by the standard garbage chute.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You can say that again!

ALTHAAR

No, thank you, Althaar is practicing his brevity. But there is another method of disposal nearby, although Althaar is not certain it is appropriate for your ceremonies. Is Mrs. Frondrinax familiar with the special toileting facilities provided for those species such as the Pliziod, whose defecations are of unusually large volume?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, not personally, no. We Fugulnari excrete in a much less vulgar fashion. But I see where you're going with this... Yes, that would do nicely! Are there any nearby, do you know?

ALTHAAR

There is such a facility just past the next corridor junction! Oh, Althaar is very pleased that his suggestion has not caused offense!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Not at all, dear boy, you've been a tremendous help. I'll take this dumb— this demonstrably tragic loss over there this very instant!

Rustling and clanking as she hauls the dead plant back out of the garbage chute.

ALTHAAR

Then Althaar will be continuing with his space-hat distribution! He hopes your mourning process is resolved with all appropriate swiftness!

Sound of ALTHAAR moving away, as we follow MRS. F dragging the dead plant down the hall toward the oversize lavatory.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, yes, Humans, Humans, Humans... That boy certainly has a laser focus, doesn't he? If only he could be put to better use. Oh, well. No point sending a taproot into solid rock. And I suppose he's not totally fruitless, that idea about the oversize lavatory was quite clever, really. Ah, and here it is! Now let's get you down that pipe, Mr. Incriminating Evidence!

Opens a decidedly cavernous-sounding space toilet. Starts jamming the dead plant down it with difficulty.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Rrrgh! Stupid thing. Why do you have to have so many branches? No one likes a show-off.

A cavernous-sounding flush. Beat.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, for—! Flush, damn your petioles! Maybe if I can jam something in there on top. Now what's in here that could— Oh, another one of Althaar's little portable atmosphere devices! Perfect! If I can just... *(sound of shoving branches using a helmet as a ram, followed by a thoroughly successful flush)* There! Finally! ...Hm. Better flush a couple more of these helmet things for good measure, I don't want him popping back up unexpectedly, do I?

And as there is the sound of MRS. F jamming helmets down the sewage system, with attendant flushing noises, etc., music transition and crossfade to another corridor in a more populated area, where JOHN is muttering to himself.

JOHN

So ... if I cut over to Mem, I can get the elevator to Lower 38, and then Auxiliary Life Support Control Number 4 is just off the— Oh, hey! There's that place H.F. was talking about. Might as well make a quick stop...

Whoosh of door to appliance store opening/closing — a well-maintained, clean and popular store. Canned music. Bell dings as JOHN enters and is approached by a Mixolydian.

OFFSPRING

Hello, potential Human customer, and welcome to X.Z. Drachir and Offspring, X.Z.'s not in right now, I'm the Offspring. What can I help you find today?

JOHN

Yes, hi, I need some anti-grav units... I actually don't know how many, maybe one, or maybe four? I've never tried floating furniture before.

OFFSPRING

Furniture! Sure thing! Easy! We got your anti-grav units in all popular sizes and power levels, suitable for floating any and all household appointments. So what is it you're needing to float? About how big?

JOHN

Something... bed-sized...

OFFSPRING

I see. And how heavy?

JOHN

Uh... “bed” weight.

Beat. OFFSPRING is polite, but is used to where this goes.

OFFSPRING

Just... the bed?

JOHN

With two Humans on it?

OFFSPRING

(reassuring; used to this)

I understand, gesin. Don’t worry, we’re very experienced with Human... cultural needs. We of course sell household appliances of all kinds to all species, don’t get me wrong, but when a Human walks through the door, well... *(chuckles)* Don’t worry, we’ve seen it all here at X.Z. Drachir and Offspring. If you’re interested in picking up any accessories today, by the way, we carry a wide range of rope, cord, and elastic strapping.

JOHN

No, it’s not... Just the anti-grav units, please.

OFFSPRING

Fair enough! Now, I must tell you that it is in no way necessary to float the bed in order to put the two Humans into a gravity-free state. Attaching the units to the top of the bed is a much more economical option.

JOHN

No, I want to float the bed. Just the bed. I want to be able to lie on the bed normally, I just need it to not touch the floor. Or any other surfaces. Can I do that?

OFFSPRING

(small beat)

O-kay, that’s a new one on me. I don’t see the appeal, but hey, chacun à son goût. We don’t judge.

JOHN

I’m not— Not everything that Humans do has to be a sex thing! *(beat, inhale)* I mean, it’s kind of a sex thing, but only like, tangentially. I just need the bed to not cause any vibrations on the floor. At all. Ok?

OFFSPRING

Fine by me. Like I said, I don’t judge, I’m not even capable of it. So, standard bed? Or platform, futon, cot, bunk, mud pod, what are we working with here?

JOHN

Just a bed, queen-size, four legs. Standard Earth-style.

OFFSPRING

(now thinks they've got someone with money)

Oh, hey, queen-size! Well now, if you're a sapient who can afford that kind of comfort, why don't we head straight on over to the HoverMaster 2000s! Now these babies—

JOHN

Hang on, are you just trying to upsell me to the most expensive units you've got?

OFFSPRING

Yes!

JOHN

Well, don't. I can't afford anything pricey. My apartment may be fancy, but my paycheck definitely isn't. My roommate's the one with the money.

OFFSPRING

(thinks they're "getting it")

Oh, I see. You've got yourself a sugar parent! Well, I'm sure if you ask them nicely—

JOHN

(trying not to think of ALTHAAR in that role)

Agh, no! No! So much no. He's my roommate. He has absolutely nothing to do with my sex life! Or he won't, once I get some anti-grav units for my bed. Just show me the cheapest option that's not totally unreliable, all right?

OFFSPRING

Huh. Ok, well then what I got for you here are four Shur-Flowt Economy Juniors. Now, some less reputable dealers would tell you that for a situation like yours, the Juniors aren't up to that kind of mass, you gotta get the Shur-Flowt Elders, but take my word for it, these are cheap, reliable units that can easily handle a simple Tier 4 inanimate float.

JOHN

Is that what I want?

OFFSPRING

That is apparently what you want, for some reason.

JOHN

If they're anti-grav and keep the bed off the floor, that's all I need.

OFFSPRING

Before we go on, in the interest of pure honesty, I feel compelled to mention that they aren't really "anti-grav" units per se, they're just dampening fields that counteract the local artificial gravity in the immediate area. Now, if you were to spring for the HoverMasters, those babies are fully bi-modal, can function in all artificial gravitational environments, *and* in natural gravity wells of up to 2.7 hypertonnes. Really worth the investment, they last forever! I am of course using the term "forever" in its metaphorical sense, the average lifetime of a HoverMaster is 37.1 Earth years, assuming typical use.

JOHN

That's great, but my needs are... very specific to my current living situation. The Shur-Flowts should do fine. So, do I just put one unit on each leg? Is there a way to make sure it stays level? If one of them conks out, I don't want to roll off the bed in the middle of the night.

OFFSPRING

Oh, sure, you can add a failsafe linkage component. That'll distribute the load, so if one of 'em powers off, it'll at least give you a nice even ride back down to the floor. So, let's see, normally the Juniors'd run you 60 credits per unit, plus another 45 for the linkage, but I can knock it down to 275 credits for the whole schmear, as a means of building customer loyalty.

JOHN

275 credits! That's insane!

OFFSPRING

Here at X.Z. Drachir and Offspring, I can assure you that our prices are entirely not insane. In any case, if you can't afford that, I don't know how you're gonna pay for the power to run these things. They drain the station grid worse than a hyperwave crockpot.

JOHN

Oh, my roommate pays the utility bills, that's not a problem.

OFFSPRING

Whew! Mang, I'm in the wrong line of work.

JOHN

It's not work! I mean, it's not anything! I have a very generous roommate, who is a good friend, and that's all he is, and please stop making me think about this!

OFFSPRING

Okay, okay! It's no chitin off my nasal plate.

JOHN

Seriously, though, 275 credits? For that much, I might as well just get a room at Discreet Floambort's Short-Term Spotel for Furtive Sexual Encounters every time I want to— Oh. I guess that's a Mixolydian business, too, huh?

OFFSPRING

Sure is! Floam's my cousin. He provides a valuable service to the community!

JOHN

So, as a Mixolydian, 275 is really the absolute best price you can give me? And I'm not going to find a better deal anywhere else?

OFFSPRING

Hey, I'm not trying to cheat you, buddy. I literally genetically can't! You won't find a lower price anywhere on station.

JOHN

Okay, well... I guess I'll just go back to work and spend the rest of the cycle trying to decide whether my privacy is worth living on freeze-dried seaweed planks for the next six months.

OFFSPRING

I don't envy you, prospective customer!

JOHN

I mean, I'm exaggerating a little. It wouldn't all be seaweed. My roommate loves to cook me these really elaborate breakfasts.

OFFSPRING

Your roommate. Who is in no way your sexual partner.

JOHN

Right!

OFFSPRING

...Is he single?

JOHN

I... don't really know if that concept applies? He's an Iltorian.

OFFSPRING

Ohhhhh, ok. Why didn't you say so? Well anyway, best of luck with your financial situation. We don't see a lot of sales on the Shur-Flowts, so I'm certain we'll still have some in stock should you decide to return.

JOHN

Yeah, I'll... think about it.

OFFSPRING

(cheerfully)

All right then. Have a pleasant cycle, although in truth your emotional state is of little concern to me!

JOHN leaves the store, moving through a somewhat crowded space and walking to an elevator, punching some buttons on his commlink.

JOHN

(to himself)

Ok, I should let Stella know I'll be off work at—

Sound of his call being picked up.

STELLA

(on the phone)

Hey, Johnny, what's up? Didn't I like, just leave your apartment not half an hour ago? Or has extreme boredom started to compress time somehow?

JOHN

Whoa, sorry. I thought I would go straight to voicemail. You don't usually pick up when you're working.

As this continues, JOHN gets in the elevator.

STELLA

Yeah, well, like we were saying this morning, crazy slow. The vibe in Sanitation Control was getting seriously squirrely, and that's not good. So I pulled everyone off the monitors, switched all the consoles over to auto-scan mode and sent the whole crew out on patrol. Anything to—

JOHN

Just a second—

(to elevator)

Mem 38, please.

ELEVATOR VOICE

Now leaving Mem 11.

JOHN

Okay, you were saying?

STELLA

Oh, yeah, I just gave the squad some makework. Except for the new guys.

JOHN

New guys?

STELLA

Yeah, they sent us five new guys to replace the fifty we lost at Christmas. I'd complain, but hey, at least I can supervise their training personally. And they need it. These folks are as green as a freshly-sprouted Ionian bamboo grove. They've never even seen a vent-biter, so I let Engineer Russet take them up to Poppy's to have a gander.

JOHN

Oh, they still have that one living in their kitchen?

STELLA

Sparky, yeah. I mean, I wouldn't trust one of those little monstrosities to stay domesticated, but no one at Poppy's has been devoured yet, so, what the frid. It makes for a good practical demonstration, anyway, and the thing seems to stay happy as long as they keep feeding it eels and sweetmeats. How about you?

JOHN

Well, I was trying to do some shopping, but it turns out... *(decides against getting into it on the phone)* You know what, skip it. Right now I'm off to a nothing of a wire short in Auxiliary Life Support Control Number 4.

STELLA

Life Support is nothing?

JOHN

Life Support isn't, this wire is.

STELLA

You always say it's nothing, but aren't there like five regular fixes you guys have to do that would literally destroy the entire station if they didn't happen?

JOHN

Five or six, depending on how you count them, yeah.

STELLA

I mean, one thing you can say for the vent-biters, at least you know when they're trying to kill you. Until you started telling me about your job I had no idea that just spending a day on the Fairgrounds qualifies as an act of death-defiance. Hardly anyone here knows just how slipshod this whole place really is.

JOHN

Right. And the Fairgrounds just keeps finding new ways to almost kill us. And, you know... now that I've said that... Everything's been so quiet lately... Yeah, I'm taking no chances on this job. That wire really is nothing, but the thing about the Life Support Control rooms is that of course they've got at least one branch of every essential system on station routed through them. I think I'm going to be extra careful on this one, and shut down all the connections to Number 4 while I'm working on it.

STELLA

You're going to shut down Life Support!?

JOHN

Just one of the auxiliary monitoring rooms. It's called auxiliary for a reason, it only gets used maybe once or twice a year. But if something were to go spectacularly wrong in there, it's just possible that it could cascade into the rest of the system, and that really could shut down Life Support. ... Yeah, heck it, I'm just going to shut off every connection in a ten-meter radius before I get to work.

STELLA

Ok, that sounds a little extreme.

JOHN

I just... wanna be careful right now. And it's not like I'm in a hurry. Things have been way too quiet. We're just about due for a simple job to turn into a major disaster for no logical reason.

STELLA

I hear you, but it seems like shutting off a twenty-meter chunk of system connections could... also do that?

JOHN

Nah, if the shutdown causes any problems, it'll set off an alarm on the bridge, and they'll just switch over to the redundant systems.

STELLA

What if they're busy?

JOHN

Normally I would definitely worry about that, but I was just up there. They're super bored. If I do set off an alarm the Commander will probably give me a medal or something.

*Music transition from elevator to another corridor, pretty deserted and echoey.
DEE is muttering to herself as she follows XTOPPS at some distance. She has briefly lost sight of him.*

DEE

Ok, Xtopps, what could you possibly be doing all the way down here in Samech? We said no more scheming. You promised! When I find out what you're— Wait, where did he go? Oh, frill me, there's like twelve different corridor junctions here. Ok, don't flip yet, there's got to be some way I can figure out—

DORMER

(in the middle distance)

Hands where we can see them, gesin! That's all twelve, you know the drill!

DEE

Hah! I guess Security isn't totally useless...

The Security goons' conversation with Xtopps gets more audible as DEE approaches.

XTOPPS

Aw, c'mon, don't you driffers have anything better to do than hassle me?

NESS

We literally do not, gesin.

DORMER

There's been like, nothing happening around here for days.

NESS

Weeks!

DORMER

Right! We haven't had a single violation in forever. Not so much as an illegally-parked hoverboard. And we've got quotas to meet, okay? So let's see what's in that assortment of elaborately-embroidered satchels, and no funny business!

XTOPPS

Listen, clutcher, on the stratum, I'm not even holding right now. And even if I was, we all chom this number: you haul me in, squawk at me a little, I flash my diplomatic immunity, the Commander squawks at you a lot, then you mulch me out of the cells and I go back to my own little slice of the Baronetcy of Kandepha'aa, otherwise tagged the Electric Egg.

DORMER

Aw, c'mon, be a pal.

NESS

Fairgrounds Security could really use your support, gesin.

DORMER

Right! It's a public service, if you really think about it.

XTOPPS

No! Xtopps is occupado, zoods. No time for side trips of the literal or chemical variety. Now slough off!

NESS

Thrab it, let's head over to the Zen garden on Pay 12. I got an idea.

DORMER

Yeah?

NESS

We can cite the boulders for loitering.

DORMER

But, like, they're not Plinthoids, are they? They're just Earth rocks.

NESS

Let 'em prove it.

DORMER

... Yeah ok. And you! Just watch your— watch all your things. We've got our eye on you.

XTOPPS

(to himself)

Oh, Xtopps is peeping *so* many things. Squeaking of which, *(he opens some kind of maintenance hatch)* let's have us a little rummage...

XTOPPS humming to himself as he rummages through some containers of indeterminate variety. Meanwhile, DEE lets out a brief scream when she hears:

ALTHAAR

Please do not make any sudden turnings around, Ms. Delilah Mallory! Althaar is approaching!

DEE

Shhhhh!

ALTHAAR

Oh! Is the air of Ms. Mallory escaping? Althaar has prepared for this! He has many many space hats with air! It is only to reach behind you—

DEE

(frantic whispering)

No, shush! I'm shushing you! Be quiet! Please!

ALTHAAR

(as quietly as he can be, i.e., not very)

What is occurring? Is there danger? Are you certain the space hats are not required? Althaar wishes to provide as much safety as he is capable!

DEE

No, I'm fine! It's fine, I just need to— and he's gone already. Great. Never mind, Althaar. I was trying to be inconspicuous. It doesn't matter now.

ALTHAAR

Ah, Althaar has much experience in attempting to remain unseen! Although his success has been somewhat variable. Has Ms. Mallory attempted concealment behind the *Big Blorch Hunter II*? Althaar has found this to be most effective!

DEE

I'll keep that in mind. Listen, I've gotta go, ok?

FRALL appears.

ALTHAAR

Greeting, Lieutenant Frallen-Br'ar!

FRALL

Good afternoon. Have either of you by any chance seen an unusual wave packet moving through here? About 3 nanometers, give or take.

DEE

Uhhh, I don't think so, sorry.

ALTHAAR

Althaar must unhappily admit that his visual receptors can not perceive this wavelength! Nor can those of Humans, if he is correct in his remembering.

FRALL

Of course. Well, I just thought I'd ask. Toodles!

FRALL disappears.

DEE

Oh-kay. Anyway, I've got to hurry if I'm going to figure out—

FRALL re-appears.

FRALL

By the way, Dee, Sin Xtopps is currently heading down the deosil corridor, on his way to Mem 38. You should be able to catch up with him easily via the express elevator, which is actually running perfectly for once.

FRALL re-disappears.

DEE

(calling to thin air)

Thanks!

ALTHAAR

If you are certain you have all the air you are requiring, then Althaar will continue with his distribution of the space hats!

DEE

Ok, before I go, I have to know: what is the deal with the “space hats?”

ALTHAAR

Ah! Althaar has been having concern for his Human friends, after the deploying and subsequent implosion of the pods of escape. So Althaar has purchased the space-hats-with-air, and is placing them where they may be retrieved by Human friends! So that they will not be deprived of the necessary air in emergency!

DEE

Aw, that’s really thoughtful of you, Althaar. Thanks for looking out for us!

ALTHAAR

It is of no trouble to Althaar! And now Althaar will be proceeding down the hubward corridor, so that there will be no accidental viewings and subsequent expulsion of digestive fluids! A pleasant cycle to you!

DEE

Thanks, you too! All right, Mem 38, huh? This just keeps getting weirder. Xtopps, what are you up to this time...

Music transition to Auxiliary Life Support Control Number 4. A room of tech things, humming and beeping. Very rarely accessed. Door whoosh and JOHN comes in.

JOHN

(looking around)

Whew. Well, this is exactly what I should have expected. A roomful of ramshackle, outdated technology kept immaculate and sparkling by the cleaning bots. Which is also for some reason being used to store several large metal barrels of... *(reading off the barrels)* "Liquid Putrescine Lubricant." Yikes. *(moving to the other side of the room)*

Okay, well I definitely don't need to be anywhere near that. And over here we have the maintenance console... and a whole bunch of space-hats-with-air that I'm assuming Althaar decided to leave here just in case someone happens to be using the place when we have an emergency. He's thorough, I've got to give him that. Let's just check in on the console first...

(sound of typing on a console; a bleep)

Right, so the wire I'm looking for is in the sublevel right under that hatch. Annd before I head down there, I'm just going to do a temporary shutdown of everything coming in and out of here, so that nothing I do can possibly backfire horribly, for once...

(more typing, and some affirmative bleeps)

Great. Now for that short...

Sound of JOHN descending a ladder out of the room. A short beat. Then the door opens again, and XTOPPS enters, maybe humming to himself.

XTOPPS

Okay, okay, now let's just clench that no one's been gripping my goobers down here...

(sees the helmets)

Whoa, that's new! Who put in this fetching display of space hats, mang?

(sound of removing a helmet from a shelf)

Nertz, you'd have to be a Human to get your bean into one of these.

Door opens again and DEE enters, fed up.

DEE

Hey!

XTOPPS

Whoa! *(tosses the helmet over toward the console in surprise, where we hear it clonk onto the buttons and cause a small bleepy sound before it hits the floor)* I swear it's not mine! I was just doing a hat inspection!

DEE

What? Ok, listen Xtopps, I have been following you all over this damn station, watching you go in and out of storage rooms, and hatchways, and cubbies, and I give up! You're not doing a hat inspection, because that's not a thing, and even if it were there's no way anyone would trust you to do it.

XTOPPS

Bleech, Dee! I could be a hat inspector if I wanted! The Potentate of the Fyrexian Isles knows his way around a haberdashery!

DEE

Stop it! Just tell me what the frid you've been doing all day! You're hiding something, and it's something big, and I want to know what it is before it comes back to bite us both on the... whatever your people use for an ass.

XTOPPS

Nah, it's not so much big as it is a lot. Just candling on my barrels over here...

He has moved to them and is beginning to twist off a nozzle on the top of one.

DEE

What th— Xtopps, no! Don't open that! It's putrescine! That stuff smells like the men's room at an Arcturian dubwaltz dive!

The cap comes off the barrel

XTOPPS

Foob it, Dee! That's just camou-flawg-ee. So no one'll jeck with it.

(sniffs the open barrel)

But that... that's the good smell.

DEE

What is...

(the smell hits her from across the room)

Whoa. That is... that is seriously...

XTOPPS

Oh yeah, that is seriously. That is not only seriously, but also passionately, vigorously, and zealously 30 gallons of pure, uncut peanut oil. The real stuff.

DEE

This is just about your habit? It's just about the nut?

XTOPPS

What else?

DEE

Xtopps, you've spent the whole day skulking all over the station like a Cryptidian smoke-weasel. I thought you were trying to hide something really serious! Not the Fairgrounds' most ineffectually-concealed drug habit! What gives?

XTOPPS

Mang, I dunno. It's a little bit force of habit, plus all the, you know, sinister lack of snag we've had going on. And then Chip started getting yonked about his whole surprise inspection smark, and it's pretty easy to get me yonked when I'm coming down. Which reminds me...

Dips an appendage in the oil and licks it off his xtopp/finger with great satisfaction. Then starts closing up the barrel.

XTOPPS

Oh, yeah. That's all I can take of that. Even for a major gumehead like me, you got to keep it inertial. No more than a few drops of the straight stuff. Oh, hey! You want some, palomino?

DEE

Nah, unless I'm making Thai food I like it in a more spreadable form. Hey, what was that helmet thing you hurfed over there?

XTOPPS

I dunno. Some Human shness they keep in here. Who cares?

DEE

Oh, wait. That must be one of those space helmets Althaar's been leaving around the place! That's so thoughtful of him. I guess he got worried that with all the escape pods destroyed, we Humans didn't have enough safety equipment. Although those escape pods were pretty much the opposite of safety equipment.

XTOPPS

Yeah. Precarious...ness equipment?

DEE

Sure. Well, the helmet looks ok, but I think it might have hit something on this console. Turned something on? Or maybe off. I hope we didn't break something important.

XTOPPS

Nah, if it was important there'd be like, a big no-jecking klaxon going off. There's a big no-jecking klaxon going off around here every time some zood stubs their toe.

DEE

Right. Well, there's no klaxon. Just this little flashy light. *(uneasy pause)*...Let's bouge though, yeah?

XTOPPS

(as they move to the door)

Cautious. Back to the Egg, my salamander...

*The door opens and closes as they exit. After a short beat we hear **JOHN** coming back up the ladder as he calls.*

JOHN

Hello? Anyone up there? Is that you, Althaar? Listen, I don't think you need that many space hats in here, ok? It's not what you'd call a heavily-trafficked area. Althaar?

(he has climbed back up)

Huh. I really thought I heard someone up here.

(stubs his toe on the dropped helmet)

Ow, my toe! Oh. I just had to talk him out of hanging his space hats securely on the wall, didn't I? Good job, John.

(heads over to the console)

Okay, so I just need to reverse the shutdown, and then I'll be— Hmm. I thought I shut everything off. Why is there a flashy light? "Sewage Flow Modulator." Huh. Well, I didn't touch the sewage system, it should be fine. Okay, I just need to turn all the local nodes back on, and...

(typing on keyboard; more affirmative bleeps)

Done! Time to go sit around in the office until my shift is up.

(as he's moving to the door)

Oh yeah, I forgot to actually make dinner plans with Stella. I don't know why, but I'm suddenly feeling like Chinese tonight. I could seriously snarf down a huge plate of cold sesame noodles right now.

Music transition and back to the Bridge. Door from TORIANNA's ready room opens and she enters.

COMMANDER

(big sigh)

All right! Epsilon-level systems diagnostic has been run, checked, and double-checked!

Some lazy cheers and clapping from the bridge crew.

COMMANDER

And may Jones have mercy on my miserable soul if I ever again have enough time on my hands to make that an appealing option.

Sound of FRALL apparating in.

COMMANDER

Perfect timing, Lieutenant! Was your little errand was as hideously boring as mine was?

FRALL

The Human concept of “boredom” has little meaning to me, Commander. However, I can say that there was less of interest to be found in my most recent study than in almost any other situation I have encountered, in any time or space in which I have existed, am currently existing, or will exist. And I’ve spent millennia in dimensions with no extant matter whatsoever, so that’s saying something.

COMMANDER

Well, it certainly says something about The Fairgrounds, though I’m not certain it’s anything new. All right then. Stalin-Bot, status update please. Did any messages or alerts come in while I was sandpapering my brain in there?

STALIN-BOT

How should I know?

COMMANDER

(tight)

Be-cause... That was the job I gave you before I started?

STALIN-BOT

Yes! Stalin-bot was in charge of no distractions!

COMMANDER

Yes, thank you, I wasn’t distracted. Now what exactly wasn’t distracting me? There should at least be some pending alerts that I set off myself during the systems check.

STALIN-BOT

Oh, certainly that must be so. But they will not come in until I turn alarm systems back on.

COMMANDER

Which alarm systems are off right now?

STALIN-BOT

All of them, Commander!

COMMANDER

WHAT?

STALIN-BOT

What? You are asking for no distractions! How am I to know what is distraction to inefficient meat brain such as yours? I turn off all alarms, so there is no confusion.

COMMANDER

All right... so. Do you think. You could turn the alarms back on now? Right now, please!

STALIN-BOT

What is the rush? Nothing has been happening for ever, why should it start now?

STALIN-BOT flicks the switches and pushes the buttons to turn the alarms back on. Immediately, multiple horrible alarms, and clicking sounds indicating lights blinking, start blasting from all directions. Voices rise on the Bridge and over the commlinks as damage reports pour in from all over the station.

COMMANDER

Jones-dammit! Frall, sitrep!

FRALL

(with a shimmer)

Commander, it appears that some malfunction has caused a wide-ranging blockage in the station's primary sewage system. The fungal monitors have overloaded and shut down, and the backup overflow protocols failed to initiate, so that the sewage is leaving the pipes in numerous unintended and inconvenient locations.

COMMANDER

GAH! Of course, of course! I let myself get suckered into thinking I have an actual grip on things for a moment here, and the literal bowels of this place decide to remind me the only boss around here is the gaping maw of chaos!

FRALL

It's good to see you happy again, Mindy.

COMMANDER

Happy! Happy? This isn't 'happy,' Frall, this is the perverse relief of pessimism vindicated! Nothing around here makes sense unless something is going ludicrously awry. Are the leaks centered anywhere in particular?

FRALL

First, I must regretfully inform you that referring to these emissions as "leaks" is severely understating the pressure behind them. I further regret to note that, while the epicenter of the blockage itself appears to be somewhere in the vicinity of Gimel 8, the subsequent increased stress is being exerted on the entirety of the sewage system, and as a result, these incidents are occurring at a wide range of locations. Literally everywhere on The Fairgrounds is vulnerable.

And on cue, there are the sounds of pipes groaning and then almost immediately, exploding and spurting sewage around the Bridge.

FRALL

As you can see.

COMMANDER

Aaaargh! Get the robots, Sanitation, anyone qualified to deal with this, down here on the double! Anyone! Even those chumps from WSS!

The WSS jingle plays from a sodden console. TORIANNA screams. Music transition to the Electric Egg. It sounds a bit more lively at this point. A STATION ANNOUNCER is heard.

ANNOUNCER

Attention Fairgrounds residents and visitors! The sewage system has been repaired and should no longer be randomly extruding, spraying, atomizing, drizzling, squeezing, or exploding its contents! Sanitation is on the job and will continue to clean all soiled public areas until needed. All requests for refurbishment of, and reimbursement for, soiled private quarters may be submitted to the HEC Customer Relations Board, and will be processed with all possible speed. Also, while the repairs continue to settle and the sealant in some sectors dries, it is requested that all sapients with waste deposits averaging over 100 kilos please “hold it” for the next 2 cycles. This means YOU, Pliziods! The Human Exchange Concourse thanks you for your patience.

At the bar, most of the regulars, spread across the audio frame. The bar is its usual noisy self, maybe even more so. Audible background rowdiness.

CHIP

(chipper)

Well, well, well, this is more like it!

DEE

Of course. You can't be happy without hearing the sound of broken glassware at least once an hour, with a regular supply of thrown fists or similar appendages on the side.

XTOPPS

I know I got my own inclines, Chorp, but you are some serious kind of uptightness junkie.

JOHN

(exhausted)

Chip, don't tell me you actually like this place to be constantly teetering on the brink of anarchy?

CHIP

Of course I do! That's when you know you're alive!

JOHN

And you enjoy having your clientele covered the lingering odor of sewage that's probably going to take a week to wash off?

CHIP

That I could do without. But hey, if there's one thing we know at the Egg, it's how to make the best of a bad situation! So why don't you relax with one of Bubbles's special Sewage Pipe Bomb cocktails! Best way to take the edge off! You look beat.

JOHN is audibly disgusted at the drink theme and at each of the names coming up.

BUBBLES

Whaddya want, John? I got Paper Mill Discharge, Sparkling Autumn Gowanus Fizz, Effluvial Julep, and Sex on the Beach.

JOHN

Sex on the Beach? What's that got to do with sewage?

BUBBLES

Well, in this version, the beach is next to a stockyard, so I throw in some Raspberry U-Bet and garnish with these cute little bone-shaped swizzle sticks I picked up over Arcturus way! Plus the tiniest spritz of putrescine to get that genuine abattoir aroma.

Big "ugh" from JOHN and DEE.

H.F.

Hey, B, don't be so namby-pamby! That one may not be so great for the Human sensorium, but the rest of 'em taste fine, it's just the name that's gross. Have a Loose Leaky Mudslide, it's a real treat!

JOHN gags a bit.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, poor Johnny! I'm pretty sure that color can't be healthy for you. Unless you're about to come to your senses and start photosynthesizing, ha ha! You should probably go home and have a bit of a rest.

H.F.

Seriously, B, that was a hell of a cycle. Didn't expect to be pulled out of bed by any kind of emergency, let alone raging storms of organic waste shooting out from random pipes all over the place. But, at least we got it under control.

KWONTZ

(warbles) [And just in time!]

ALTHAAR

(from over behind Big Blorch Hunter II)

FriendJohn and Mr. Fornes are indeed clever and efficient at handling the disasters! It is fortunate they were able to assist with this one! And it was of great interest to Althaar to experience firsthand the Human phenomenon commonly known as a “shitstorm!”

DEE

That’s not usually a literal expression, Althaar! Like, at all. I’m not sure there’s ever been one of those before, and I certainly hope I’ll never see one again.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Then Althaar is doubly fortunate to have experienced such a unique phenomenon with his Human friends!

SOPON

You okay back there behind the *Big Blorch Hunter II*, Althaar? Can I get you anything else?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is well, Sin Sopon! Althaar is still “nursing” his first Toxic-Beach-That-No-One-Is-Having-The-Sex-On. His current level of blood alcohols is sufficient for the pleasant buzz!

Door opens, off. TORIANNA and FRALL are entering, with FRALL’s distinctive sound. Welcoming acknowledgements from all at the bar.

CHIP

Hey, Commander!

(icily)

Lieutenant.

(back to chipper)

So... a Gibson, Commander?

COMMANDER

Oh, yeah. That was one of the... well... I guess by Fairgrounds standards that wasn’t very much of a disaster. It’s just been a while. I was getting a bit rusty at being productively furious.

SOPON

(serving it)

Here you go, Commander.

CHIP

So where were you, Frall, in all your omnipotent nebulosity?

FRALL

Why, Mr. Frinkel, I would think you'd be pleased to know I am not actually everywhere at once. Unless I put my mind to it. At any rate, I was unfortunately distracted during the time leading up to this debacle by a stray EM pulse, the source of which turned out to be as inconsequential as is physically possible, and thus, I failed to note the very unlikely cascade of coincidences that set this latest mishap in motion. First, a literal-minded Bridge robot turned off all the alarms that would have informed Command of the various problems that were about to occur *before* they converged into a disaster. Then, an unusual combination of elements happened to enter the sewage system within the same one-hour time frame. An unusually large quantity and variety of exotic (and possibly contraband) alien intoxicants was discharged into the wastewater system from somewhere here in Lamed Sector, while a sizable piece of plant matter, presumably from hydroponics, was somehow introduced into the septic system nearby. The interaction of these elements caused a sudden and violent fungal bloom to occur, producing an intractable and rapidly-expanding blockage of the local sewage pipes. Normally, this would cause the fungal monitoring system to activate its enzyme dispersal nozzles, breaking up the bloom and then flushing it out of one of the sluice gates, but unfortunately the gate mechanisms were completely blocked by a number of space helmets that had also made their way into the sewage pipes. At this point, the redundant systems should have kicked in to re-direct the now-partially-decomposed fungal matter to other sluice gates as needed. This process began correctly, but some manner of malfunction in Auxiliary Life Support Control #4 had shut down all systems traversing that node, with the exception of the Sewage Flow Modulator, which meant that the fungal blockage, rather than being directed to the relevant sluice gates, was instead accelerated and propagated to every pipe in the sewage system. And, well, you're all familiar with the result.

COMMANDER

Which I'm sure we'll still be smelling off and on for the next year.

FRALL

It was truly an amazing combination of random, seemingly innocuous actions that would have passed without incident had they not occurred in close proximity to one another... A fascinating consonance. I suppose we'll never find a reason for it.

A beat as everyone realizes their part in creating the sewage disaster, maybe hemming and hawing quietly ("yes, that IS interesting, isn't it?").

CHIP

(trying to sound blasé and innocent)

Well, that's just the Fairgrounds for ya, am I right?

Overdone agreement sounds from all who had a hand in the disaster.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(out to change the subject)

Ahem. So, John, weren't you going home to rest?

JOHN

No, I told Stella I'd meet up with her once her shift is done, which could be anytime soon but probably won't be. Sanitation's still doing mop-up.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I think it's so sweet you have a new special person in your life, Johnny! Of course you've got plenty of friends here, but that's not really enough for a Human, is it? No offense, Althaar!

ALTHAAR

No offense is taken, Mrs. Frondrinax! Althaar is very pleased for FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes! And now Althaar is reminded! FriendJohn, did you today find success in purchasing the anti-grav units for the bed? In order to overcome the bed-room difficulties?

DEE

(after a beat, straight-faced)

Difficulties?

JOHN

(another beat, then)

Okay look—

A burst of laughter, and everyone starts snickering and giggling off and on during the following.

JOHN

It's not what it sounds like! I swear! And even if it was it wouldn't be anyone's business, ok?

DEE

John, I don't want to overstep here, but you know, if you're having some... trouble, and need a, I don't know, female perspective? You can always ask. What are friends for?

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

JOHN

No! No one has to tell anyone anything! I don't need any perspectives! I'm just having problems with the bed!

H.F.

Problems in bed are always rough. I feel for ya, kid.

JOHN

I'm not having problems *in* bed, just *with* it! And I don't need any advice! Why do you all just leap to the conclusion that it has to be something embarrassing?

CHIP

If it isn't embarrassing, then why won't you tell us about it?

JOHN

...Ok, it's a *little* embarrassing but I promise you whatever you think it is, it's... it's way weirder than that. But *less* embarrassing. So can we just leave it there?

XTOPPS

Eventually, mang. But not for another round or two.

JOHN

What is so strange about me buying a few simple anti-grav units?

COMMANDER

For your... "bed-room difficulties."

JOHN

Anti-gravity has a wide variety of everyday household uses!

KWONTZ

(warbling) [You know, they aren't really "anti-grav" units? They're just mini field generators that counteract the Fairgrounds' artificial gravity in the immediate area.]

JOHN

I KNOW they're not, Kwontz! I know!

*Sound in the medium distance of a horrible splashy explosion from one of the Egg's bathrooms, and foul water spraying everywhere. **Groans and disgusted reactions.***

CHIP

What the--?!

(yelling)

Goddammit, who the hell let Large Mike the Pliziod use the bathroom?

LARGE MIKE

(a big but well-meaning alien, off by the exploding bathroom)

SORRY!

General groans and into music transition and fade to JOHN's bedroom. JOHN and STELLA are in bed, audibly exhaling in exhaustion from the long day.

JOHN

Well.

STELLA

Yup.

JOHN

Thanks for dinner. I love Shorty Tang's, but the prices are a bit steep for me normally.

STELLA

You needed it. We both got hit pretty hard by this one, huh?

JOHN

Yeah, the Robot Union got really creative with their definition of "drinks machines." Of *course* we have species on the Fairgrounds that find sewage potable. Normally I'd try to argue the point, but I wasn't in a very good negotiating position given that I was the only one there with a sense of smell.

STELLA

Oh believe me, I know, I spent way too much time breathing through my mouth while debating the exact dividing line between the respective duties of Human and Robot Sanitation engineers.

JOHN

So exhausted.

STELLA

(the barest suggestion)

Too exhausted?

JOHN

Too exhausted for wha—

Oh. I mean... Well...

STELLA

Sometimes it can actually be really good when you think you're completely tapped out.

JOHN

Yeah. Yeah. Just... let's kinda keep it low-impact right now, 'kay?

STELLA

I don't think we have much choice.

JOHN

No, not just because we're wiped. Ugh, sorry, I should tell you before— There's kind of an issue. With Althaar.

STELLA

...And you're mentioning this now of all times why?

JOHN

Ok, so the thing is—

The intercom bleeps and ALTHAAR's voice is heard through it.

ALTHAAR

(over intercom)

FriendJohn? Althaar has sensed his name being spoken. Are FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes in need of some manner of assistance?

STELLA

Oh, you could hear us with the door closed? We didn't leave the intercom on, did we? I'm so sorry!

ALTHAAR

(over intercom)

Oh no, Supervisor Reyes, the auditory organ of Althaar has no involvement! It is rather—

JOHN

It's okay, Althaar, I'll explain it to Stella. Please just... go back to bed.

ALTHAAR

(over intercom)

Very well! Althaar wishes you both happy sexings!

Intercom bleeps off.

STELLA

(not angry, not worried, just "what the hell?")

John--?

JOHN

Ok, so it turns out that uh, he's got these super-sensitive hair things on his flixators? That can sense... vibrations. Which is different from hearing somehow, I didn't really get that part, but... yeah.

STELLA

Oh, Jones lick a asshole! Well, we can't be doing this in the Sanitation bunkhouse, I'll tell you that much for free.

JOHN

Don't worry, I already figured out how to fix it. The problem is vibrations moving through the floor, so I was thinking if we got some anti-grav units for the bed, as long as it's not touching the floor, I *think* he won't be able to sense anything. I was going to pick some up today, but, well, they're kind of pricey. And then the Fairgrounds turned into a giant shit-splosion and I didn't have the time to go back for them anyway. But I swear, I'll buy them as soon as I can.

STELLA

And you think that will stop Althaar... "listening in?"

The intercom bleeps again.

ALTHAAR

(over intercom)

Althaar believes the anti-gravity units will be most effective, Supervisor Reyes, although in the interest of accurate-ness, Althaar must point out that these are not true devices for the removal of gravity, but rather miniature fields that prevent the artificial gravity in the immediate area from being exerted!

JOHN

(sighing, lets it go)

I know, Althaar, thank you.

STELLA

(calling)

Thanks, Althaar! Goodnight!

ALTHAAR

(over intercom)

A very good night to you from Althaar!

ALTHAAR's intercom bleeps off

STELLA

(softer to JOHN)

I'll go in halvesies with you if you pick them up first thing tomorrow.

JOHN

Done. Get the light.

Lights out with a click. Closing credits music.

ANNOUNCER

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

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

Berit Johnson as Althaar

John Amir as John B

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

Eli Gantias as H.F.

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

Zuri Washington as Dee

and Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

and also featured

Ian W. Hill, Anna Stefanic, Linus Gelber, Holly Pocket McCaffrey, Lex Friedman,

{OFFSPRING actor}, Philip Cruise, {ANNOUNCER actor}, {ZANRAK actor}, and {SELED actor}.

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

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

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

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

Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanic

Life With Althaar logo and illustration by Dean Haspiel

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We'll be back in two weeks with another Tale from the Fairgrounds, but right now, it looks like someone else is poking around in Auxiliary Life Support Control Number 4...

Ambience of ALSC #4 again. Door opens, two aliens, ZANRAK and SELED (unidentified species) peek in.

ZANRAK

(entering, looking around)

'Kay. Coast is clear, mang! Get the hover-sledge!

Sound of hovercart humming in, pushed by SELED.

SELED

Whew, security on the aux controls is a joke, innit?

ZANRAK

Security on the Fairgrounds is a joke in any case, Seled. No one bothers to cycle the passcodes, and once we've lifted something, no one cares enough to come looking for it. Let's see what's loose in here we can snag...

SELED

Oh, more of those fancy space helmets that Iltorian's been leaving all over. Cool. We already got dozens of 'em, though.

ZANRAK

Hey, grab 'em all. Easy to unload those on Honest Zwiznarp.

Sound of helmets being dumped in the cart.

SELED

Zwiznarp takes stolen goods? Isn't he a Mixolydian?

ZANRAK

Hey, I don't tell him where the stuff comes from, and the great thing about Mixolydians is they never think to ask. Oop, there's one more over here on the floor...

SELED

(noticing something on the other side of the room)

Hey! Hey, Zanak! Take a look! Holy—! This can't be what it says, can it?

ZANRAK

"Liquid Putrescine Lubricant?" Oh, by Rabathon, we've hit the frilling jackpot, Seled!

SELED

This stuff is worth five times as much on the black market as... as... as uncut peanut oil, Zan!

ZANRAK

And a lot safer to move. With peanut oil it wouldn't be just theft, you're taking an inter-species intoxicants rap on top. Why the frid would the Humans shove all these barrels all the way down here?

SELED

Well, I heard to Humans this stuff smells like corpses, so...

ZANRAK

Humans! What a bunch of nulls. They're scared of freaking *Iltorians* for Thonarab's sake! All right, get out the Shur-Flowts and let's hover these babies on out of here.

Sounds of anti-grav units being attached to the barrels and activated. The barrels float and liquid sloshes softly inside them. They move them carefully to the door and out.

SELED

Mang, we get these barrels to the Syndicate? That's it. We're gonna be set. Like forever!

ZANRAK

We're finally out, mang! We can get our own ship, get off this dump, and go back to Altair in style!

SELED

And about time!

And the door whooshes firmly shut.