

Life with Althaar

Episode 32: Luck of the Drew

Version 2.3 (Recording Script), 09/03/21—LG (v2, BAJ)

[scene 1] The standard LWA opening spaceship whoosh. Inbound Freight. DREW is in the hallway outside the pickup zone for packages. WALKEN-BOT is behind the counter inside, protecting the package (singular) in his care.

DREW

(calling a little, most of this conversation is at distance)

...It's a dilemma, you see. Well, not a dilemma exactly. "Problem" might be a better word. Yes, problem. That'll do. So, here's my problem: I'm very close to the doorway. I can see you right there in the wall mirror, actually—look to your right—that's me, waving, hello, over here. Here. Hello! ... You have to look.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

I will look... where... I want to look. And we don't handle... lemmas. They're too feisty. There was an... incident. Small box, large alpaca. There was... shouting.

DREW

Alpaca? That's not a lemma. That's not even a llama, which is what you mean, probably. Though it's like a llama.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

That's... the difference. Between you... and me.

DREW

What?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

You like... a llama. Me, I don't... like llamas.

DREW

That's good to know, I guess? If not strictly relevant.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Another difference... between you and... me. Is that I am... in the Inbound Freight office. And you. Are not.

DREW

Well, that brings us back to my original point. I'm almost in the Inbound Freight office. I'm very close, actually.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Sometimes no cigar is... just a guy... not having a cigar.

DREW

What?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

You have to come into the Inbound Freight... office. If you want to collect... Inbound Freight. That's like the nose... on your face. Obvious, and I want... to punch it.

DREW

Right, fine, I don't know that that needed to be said, but getting back to my problem: I've almost used up my allotted steps for this cycle. But I've got exactly enough steps saved to get back to our— To my apartment. Before my pedometer goes off. *If* I don't get any farther away from home than I am now. Which leaves me... here. Right here. In the corridor, outside Inbound Freight. So what I was thinking was, if you could, say, expedite delivery? By bringing the package out here to me? So I can get home with said package sometime this cycle? Well, that's really just a logical extension of your duties as a package delivery bot, isn't it? And I'd be very grateful, I'd fill out any forms you need me to right here in the corridor. I can be very legible. That would be nice, right? Legible?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

I am *not* a... package... delivery bot, gesin. I am an Inbound Freight... Processing Specialist.

DREW

Okay. Sorry. But I think the point still stands, yes? Your job description is to receive packages from off-station, and get them into the hands of people on-station who are waiting for them. And there is my package, and here I am, waiting, unable to bridge the intervening distance through no fault of my own. So really, if you think about it—

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

It may not be... your fault. But it's also not... my problem. Handling freight is not just some... trash labor. It is a full-time... job. Not an adventure. One does not simply walk into Inbound Freight.

DREW

Well, I don't, obviously.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

But you... could. If you... chose to.

DREW

Technically, yes, sure, but then I wouldn't be able to get home afterwards. I'm pretty sure I explained that.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Your future... travel plans are none of my business, gesin. I'm just a package... delivery bot.

DREW

Right. Ok. Could we—what's your firmware release?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

I don't get personal. With strangers. Until they are... not strangers. Or unless I am crushing them, with my hands. Which is a... kind of intimacy. If you think about it.

DREW

Sure. Speaking of hands, gesin, what's that in your hands?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

What? These hands? Look. Nothing... or up my sleeves.

DREW

That's... that's great. Your fingers are so graceful. Classic design. That's predictive trackball flexion in there, isn't it? Are you a Folsom-5A?

Bleep bleep, DREW looks up the access codes in his super-plot-device handheld.

DREW

5A, 5A. Wow, I haven't done this in a while. Can we open your buffer arrays for a minute?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

No. That would be... inappropriate.

DREW

(professionally, with precision)

Input: Bypass device fwall(superuser) /s /r /ignore /noecho ENTER

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Stop that, dickhead. Command... not found.

DREW

Language, Tickle. OK, how about this one.

(again the professional)

Input: Copy con "Hello Christopher" ENTER echo off ENTER cls ENTER bypass fwall (superuser) ENTER input = audio device ENTER F6.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Control Z.

DREW

Hello, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

(quick processing sound)

It's an older code, sir, but it checks out.

DREW

So, Christopher Walken-Bot. Very pleased to meet you. Give me your peripheral systems password hint, please.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

No! *(sound of cowbell, three strikes or so)* Crap.

DREW

Password Cowbell.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Access denied.

DREW

Password MoreCowbell.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

(he has now been lightly hacked, this is his response key; perhaps a chime?)

Hello, little man. Boy, I sure heard a bunch about you.

DREW

Aha! We're in. Input: Menu -> Edit -> Tools -> Config -> Command Line. Service = Service + 20. Save, Refresh. Sin Walken-Bot, would you bring me my package please?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

No. Not today. You got the wrong guy, ace! Override: Authenticating parameters. Of course, I am happy to be of... service. It would be my pleasure to expedite delivery. WHAT? Who said that? Did I just say that? Why in the... black doom of Clairton did I say that? Well, it doesn't... matter. Happily, I can't bring your your... package. Because I... don't know... which parcel might belong... to you.

DREW

I did mention I can see you in this mirror, right? Which means I can see the shelves behind you. There's only one package there, which I assume is because the Foogs seize and impound almost everything that comes in. Except for that one package, which I have the slip for, right here. So please, bring it to me.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

But there might be more... in the back. This is Inbound... Freight. Our business... is freight. Of the inbound... variety.

DREW

Are there more in the back?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Maybe. That's privileged... information.

DREW

Uh huh. Please bring me the one parcel currently in the room with you, which is mine.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

(robot unhappy processing noises)

You should not... be able to do this. I feel... un-happy.

DREW

Settle down, I'm not messing with your core programming or any of your higher functions, such as they are. I'm just donking with your actuator controls. Just like when you push subliminal scent traces to donk with Humans on the sly when we're not expecting it. (*WALKEN-BOT starts to object*) Yes you do! I worked on the subsystem demo design.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

We do not! ...Much. Yes, fine. We do. It's fun... to watch. You should see... your faces. But this doesn't end here. The Robot... Union has molybdenum-clad Security Grievance Accords, which—

DREW

Which require you to be properly patched. If you had done all your scheduled updates—You know what, never mind. When the end of the world finally comes, it'll be because someone didn't install the latest firmware. “Oh no, everything has been hacked and stolen and ruined, and oops I didn't close my telnet session.”

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Some of us... don't have time to go around patching and updating... every day. Life's too short, sport. You meatbags don't know what it's like.

DREW

The patch that would have stopped me doing this is almost nine years old.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

(picking up box and walking it over)

Don't pour oil on seized gears. It's... crass.

DREW

“Oh no, my fancy endpoint security didn’t protect me because *I’m still running edlin.*” Bell, book, and candle, people.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

(reading the shipping label)

Who’s people? I’m not people. I resent that, it’s... insulting. Are you... Rufus?

DREW

I’m Drew. Rufus is. Missing. Away. Anyway. He’s away. *(papers shuffling)* I’m his partner, here’s the Power Of... you know they call it a “receipt”? “In the custody of the Fugulnari security Branch, receipt against possible return.” I don’t know where they got their Medial S typography ideas from. It’s worse than Sütterlin. Probably someone should tell them.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

I can anticipate the... explosion. The sound of shattering glass.

DREW

Yeah, that’s probably how it would turn out. I’ve had better ideas.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

Much as it... pains me, to say it, here... is your package. Just sign— Oh... no. It’s— What... a calamity. Yes. What a disappointment. For you. How unfortunate. *(tsk tsk)*

DREW

What?

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

This is the blue... pickup slip. For expedited service, you need... the *pink* one. This won’t do. You’ll have to come back... later.

DREW

Oh, for— Input: Restart. And you know what? Restore from timed backup. Nighty-night.

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN-BOT

(noises)

[scene 2] Opening credits music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents..!
LIFE! WITH! ALTHAAR! Season Three!
Episode 31... “Luck of the Drew”

[scene 3] An announcement over a Fairgrounds PA:

GLOTTULIX

Attention, Humans of the Fairgrounds! This is Glottulix, friend of Frondrinax of the same thing she was from last time, although she's not so popular around there right now, *alright, alright, yes*, of the Fugulnari Committee for the Management of Human Affairs. This is today's friendship bulletin! We are here to warm your ears. And your noses, which are so cute, even if they are such a bad idea. It is the first cycle of glorious Day 309 of the Fugulnari Ascension! So hooray for us!

OAKENSARX

(off-mic, to himself)

Why do I bother? Why do I even write these?

GLOTTULIX

I do not know, Oakensarx! I do not know. And now, the news!

OAKENSARX

My rings for these seasons will be small, dark, and mean.

GLOTTULIX

Today the Fugulnari *Agricultural Directive* becomes the Fu-Hu *Cultural Initiative*. After all, we are not alone here on the Fairgrounds, not anymore! It is time to share the best of both of our agricult—wait, cultures! Just cultures! Both cultures, Fu and Hu! To celebrate the unity of our shared vision, The Committee strikes at rumors that we Fugulnari are out of touch with the pruning edge of art... by forming a band! Welcome with us the new #1 group, The Fu-Hu Fighters! Fighting for Unity! Fighting for Spirit! Fighting for Efficiency! Greening the air near you! Also, do not eat the green air! It is not for beginners! Ha!

OAKENSARX

He's making me squarrose before my time.

GLOTTULIX

Stay tuned for tomorrow, and an exciting announcement about the new Green ReVite Active Beverage, specially formulated for the benefit of those workers toiling very reasonable hours in our Productivity & Delight Centers for fair compensation, generous benefits, and spacious comfortable homes, in which they happily spend their many leisure hours in joyous purfuits!

[scene 4] The news broadcast attenuates in the standard scene-changing way, ending as a distant public broadcast heard down a cul-de-sac corridor. DREW is just a few steps from his doorway, and his daily allowance has run out.

DREW

Oh, Luther burgers. This close to the front door and my steps are dry. If I didn't have to detour around that giant ear of corn in the Concourse I would have made it inside.

DREW puts down the parcel, takes out his phone, makes a call.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Hello! You've reached HECNET General Services. All of our operator is a little busy at the moment, please hold. Boop, click. *(not a sound effect, he says "boop, click")*

DREW

There really should be a way around these step counters. I wonder what they're coded in.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Boop.

DREW

Maybe I could call a transport and ask it to smash me gently over to my entryway.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Boop.

DREW

Maybe I could tell you that I know you're still on the line, because you keep saying "Boop."

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Boop. I'm busy. Almost done.

DREW

What are you— Never mind. I really, *really* don't need to know that.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Boop. I'm making some soup. We don't get breaks.

DREW

Well, I'm sorry to hear that, but it doesn't help with my predicament. Or maybe "dilemma" is a better word. Or should I stick with "problem"? It's an evergreen, "problem" is.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Boop. What's in the box?

DREW

I don't know. I haven't opened it yet. It's addressed to my boyfriend. Partner. I'm not supposed to say "boyfriend" any more, since we moved in—actually I guess that doesn't matter now. Anyway, my partner. Rufus.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Thank you for holding. How may I direct your call?

Intermittent soup-eating noises over the phone through the following.

DREW

I wonder if there might be a short-term step-sharing service to which you might direct me. I'm just a few paces away from—

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Sorry, that's not a thing. I could put you over to the Foog Internal Stability and Immobility Service, maybe they can help. They used to sell extra steps, but I think they've stopped.

DREW

I was hoping I wouldn't have to talk to—

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Know the feeling, but I'm not sure what I can tell you otherwise. Unless you want me to call you a transport and ask it to smash you gently over to your destination.

DREW

I'm not the first person to think of that, am I.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Nope. By the way, Pro Tip: that doesn't usually turn out so well. The best success story I've heard involved denatured Putrescene oil, a set of electrostatic hoverskates, and a gas-powered grappling hook.

DREW

Can I order—

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

They sold out of those in a couple of hours. Anyway, that zood got where she was going, but I heard she was docked anyway, and hit with a 90-day "Cabbage Looper" parasite code tag on her ID. Not to mention the smell.

DREW

Is there any way I could, like, borrow steps against next cycle's allotment?

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

That would be useful, wouldn't it?

DREW

In other words, no.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Got it in one. Looks like you're stuck there until shift change. Assuming they actually remember to do the reset on time. *(tone change)* Listen, is there someone *special* you want to speak with? For a *private chat*? Someone who might understand your feelings? My Werk-Trak monitor has been glitchy lately, sometimes it fails at key moments. If that helps. A lot of the time it doesn't register names clearly.

DREW

No, thanks. Not really the mood for Physical Stimulus right now. Plus, you know, stuck in a public corridor. I think I'd rather be in pants-up mode if any of my neighbors happen by.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

Too bad, I'm wearing my chaps. They're popular. But that's not what I meant. I have *(loud click, power-down noises; whispers)* Your sympathy audit says you check out. I have some blind message-drop numbers if you need to reach Humans who know how to register *potential* and *resistance*. Re-sis-tance. If you know what I mean. Can't be traced. I can post them to you if you need. *(loud click, power-up noises)* Oh no, my Werk-Trak glitched and stopped recording again. They really ought to fix that. *(clears throat)*

DREW

Ah. No no. I appreciate the offer. I just—thanks. Hey though, be careful with that stuff. Stuff like that'll get you... You could get in a lot of trouble with that. With... with the soup, I mean. You could get burned. If you're not careful.

HECNET CUSTOMER SERVICE

(finishing up the soup)

Of course. Taking care the best I can, you too. Have a better one.

They hang up.

DREW

Remind me why I still live here, after what happened. Oh, right. Where else am I supposed to go?

He makes a new call.

DREW

Hi, is this where you recruit Boosters? I was wondering. If I sign up, do I still get my travel restrictions waived for the day? I remember that was an offer I heard. *(response)* Mmm-hmmm. Does that... yes, got it. Does that happen right away, or is there a waiting period? If it's right away, I'd like to know more.

[scene 5] A thoughtful new promo spot in association with the Fu-Hu Cultural Initiative spills through the Fairgrounds like a bad case of mass halitosis.

SOOTHING P.S.A. BOOSTER VOICE

Once we walked alone, brash and brave and foolish. Now we have partners, for life and then some. It's good to be home, and rooted with our new companions. Our Fugulnari friends. But who doesn't dream, sometimes, of the crazy old days of selfish, risky glee? The glory of youth! Our days of fire!

WARD

(frank, confessional style)

I thought I was better off that way. Even now. I remembered—you know, playing the field. Out until all hours. New faces, new friends, new experiences. Inspired by literature, devouring music, full of ideas. I was young, you know? I was independent. The world was my tank-bred Spotted Mollusk. They were crazy times.

JUNE

(frank, confessional style)

When we met, well, wow. Maybe not love at first sight, or maybe it was, kinda. I knew I'd found a keeper, a partner. But I love who I was back then. Before I made my choices, before I shut the doors. I mean, you're kind of cute. If we had met after a couple of Mega-Ritas, who knows what might have happened? We might have had a Sahara Hot Night of a memory, you know? I'd still make the choices I made, but this was before. You know? We could have been a thing. Before. For a while. A hot second.... Hot. I miss that, sure. Not that I would do it right now. I mean, not with just anyone.

WARD

Same for me! I was thinking the same thing! An adventure, before settling down!

JUNE

Not *settling*.

WARD

No no. *Settling down*.

JUNE

Very different.

WARD

Sure is.

They laugh. Not very well.

SOOTHING P.S.A. BOOSTER VOICE

And then it's time to put aside childish things. To make the mature decisions. To say goodbye to those old days of unfettered happiness and joy. To find a partner. As we did, with the Fugulnari. A commitment. Not to erasing our cherished past, but to building a new future. A solid future, one that seats two. One with room for all of us.

JUNE

Of course.

WARD

Right.

JUNE

Because we have to grow.

WARD

You can't stay a kid forever.

JUNE

There's more to life.

WARD

So much more.

JUNE

I miss them. Those days.

WARD

Oh God I miss them so much.

JUNE and WARD TOGETHER

For the future. For the heart. For the past. Never forget who you are. Derma VibroShave.

VibroShave jingle plays in MRS. FRONDRINAX's office, which is where we have ended up listening to this work of ad-u-tainment.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I told you I wanted something uplifting! That wasn't uplifting. That wasn't even up-nudging!

ROOTY

Rooty liked it, Mama! It made Rooty feel Big Sad! That's the fun kind of sad!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Quiet, Rooty!

ROOTY

Eep!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, needless to say, you're all fired. That was a complete waste of time and bandwidth. Although I suppose it's my fault for getting my hopes up. It's obvious that you Humans just don't have what it takes when it comes to practical cognitive refurbishment. "Old days of unfettered happiness and joy?" What the frost was that? We might as well have just dragged Dee Mallory up here to recite one of her tedious cyanosite poems. *(beat)* Well, what are you all just standing there for? Don't you have mulch to be processing?

JUNE

But... you said we wouldn't have to go back there!

WARD

You said we could have solid foods!

SOOTHING P.S.A. BOOSTER VOICE

And see our families!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, that was contingent on you not completely shoveling the bulb, wasn't it? Obviously I can't reward you for that absolute fiasco. How would that look? Really. Now get out, all of you. Out!

[scene 6] Transition over the ACTORS' protests to the Electric Egg, where DREW is at the bar, sporting his brand new kinky Booster headband. As is so often the case these days, the Egg is thinly-customed.

SOPON

Hey there, sport. You know, I was thinking. Isn't it weird that "leaves," noun, you know, like you find on a plant? Sounds exactly like "leaves," verb, as in, the thing a person should do when they find themselves in a place where they are distinctly unwelcome. Nice little riff for the linguistic determinists, yeah? You could have a real field day with it. "Those leaves are Foog foliage." "He, she, or it leaves the bar when politely encouraged to do so." Right?

DREW

What?

SOPON

It's the eternal dilemma, isn't it? The easy way, the hard way, which way will you go? It's ultimately your choice, but a word to the unwise? You don't look the hard-boiled type.

DREW

Dilemma. My whole day has been dilemmas. It's a motif. Every time I get to a door, I've got a new dilemma. At least I made it all the way through the last couple of doors, so that's an improvement over where I started.

BUBBLES

Is it? You sure about that? Because you're here now, and to me that reads like something went seriously awry somewhere.

KWONTZ

(gibberish: "They just get denser every minute, don't they? What a noidler.")

DREW

Excuse me? Who's a noidler?

KWONTZ

(gibberish: "Aw nertz, he understood me.")

DREW

Of course I understood you. I can read.

KWONTZ

(gibberish: "Oh, the noidler can read! Am I supposed to be impressed?")

DREW

No, I'd say it's a pretty common skill. So, if that's why you disabled the audio on your translator, I don't think that's going to work out too well for you.

KWONTZ

(gibberish: "I didn't disable it, shness-for-brains! It's broken! I've been trying to get it fixed for forever and a half!")

DREW

Oh. Want me to take a look at it? No promises, but if it's a software problem I might be able to get you sorted out.

BUBBLES

Oh, the noidler's a scab, too! Shoulda known as soon as I scanned the headband.

DREW

This is about the headband? What's wrong with the headband? I mean, I know it's not the most flattering accessory, but—

SOPON

Look. Let me be clear here. I will serve you. I don't want to, but I will. And I won't squack in your drink, because I am a professional, and I don't stoop like that. But there is a total ban on Fugulnari on these premises, by order of the management, not to mention the Baronet of Kandephaa'a, how great his Luster to the Imperium. Now, Boosters, we don't ban, but we do discourage. For the same reason we discourage placket mold. Although unlike placket mold, we won't kill you with fire.

BUBBLES

But we'll definitely think about it. At least, I will. And I got a hand lighter and a misting attachment with a maximum spray radius of 20 meters, so *you* might wanna think about getting yourself on the other side of that purple line in the doorway there.

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

CHIP

Hey, have you two seen Vert around?

SOPON

Nope. Not for a while, actually.

BUBBLES

What do ya want Vert for, boss?

CHIP

I don't want him, it's just weird that he hasn't been around. I keep not tripping over him, it's giving me the weirds.

SOPON

Yeah...

BUBBLES

Maybe he's just off doing another reticulum cleanse?

CHIP

Well, if he is, he better not— *(takes in DREW's headband)* Who's the noidler?

SOPON

Just some headband, boss. We've been laying out the parameters for him real quick.

CHIP

Yeah, well, we've got a hat rack. If he wants to sit at the bar, he can use it.

DREW

Sure, that's— Uh. Where's this hat rack?

CHIP

Oh. I guess we don't have one of those after all. Just use the floor, then. But fair warning, we had a bunch of Gastropoids squish through here earlier, and we haven't had a chance to mop up yet. So your precious headband is going to go from kicky to sticky pretty quick. Or, here's a thought! Option B, you could just get the hell out of my bar!

BUBBLES

Oh, I like that one!

DREW

It's not my precious headband.

CHIP

Then what's it doing on your head?

DREW

I mean, yes, it's mine, but it's not like I— Look, it's just been a day. I had to pick up a parcel addressed to my boyfriend—my partner, rather. Or ex, really, because it doesn't matter because he's gone now and I don't know if the Foogs shipped him out or squunched him or what, they gave me a receipt that doesn't even say if he's alive or not and it's printed with flotting Medial S'es, which shouldn't matter but it's the last flotting chip on the whole rotten flotting motherboard. And Walken-Bot wouldn't even give me the package until I did a remote reset on some of his peripherals, and then I crossed paths with a giant corn so my movement allowance ran out within sight of my front flotting door, so I joined the Boosters to get enough jecking steps to flotting get home, but you have to make the free trip to their office for the headband before they waive your step limits, so I still haven't been home, but I figured I might as well have a drink first as long as I've finally got the step credits to get to a bar, except now I can't get a drink because of the thing that let me get here in the first place. I'm a walking O. Henry story with a stupid headband. And no boyfriend. And no drink. And a thousand days coming that look just like this one, so why bother. What's the point.

Silence.

SOPON

Mang.

DREW

(crying a little)

Sorry.

KWONTZ

(gibberish: "Can I buy him a drink?")

CHIP

Sin Kwontz here would like to buy you a drink.

DREW

Yes, I— I really do know how to read, I promise. Sorry. I mean, thank you. That would be nice.

BUBBLES

Sopon does wizard-level things with Tammuz Rum, if you like Tammuz Rum. Won't make much of a dent in troubles like you got, but it'll at least blur the edges on 'em a little.

DREW

I—yeah. Yes, please. Thank you, Sin Kwontz.

KWONTZ

(gibberish: "You're welcome. I'm sorry about your partner.")

SOPON

One O4 Tammuz of Fire, coming up.

DREW

What's in that?

SOPON

I mean, I could tell you, but once you drink it, your short-term memory formation's going on hiatus anyway, so.

DREW

Sounds perfect.

[scene 7] Maybe music, or maybe just fading into... not quite static. More like sonic mung—voices distorted over communications channels, gradually becoming intelligible. Two Humans, BOOSTER OBSERVERS 1 and 2, working for the Foogs and sharing data in a special technical patois—casual and bored, slipping in and out of tech talk with personal comment. The Banality of Evil.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Alt-1, systat, PK-4-2-1, read within callstate. Manage hepline median crosstitch. Eleven by way of corner 5. Hey, your buses charged or steady?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Board clean. Negation static. Target 4-2-1, PK, is namesent or not? Holding steady. Target also steady, Lamed 3.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Ah, Target holding in the Egg, could be teatime. You have a minor 35-slash-73 mindrest on there?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

You know it. Again, namesent on Target is a knowing positive or held in flux?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Target, ID: Scarlett-comma-Andrew, file open, level A-prime-fifty-six and below.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

What's the dope on the up-and-down focusing? Target activity in and of self?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Negative. Target former partner of degerminated subversive Wood-comma-Rufus—see file, attached as ness, details limited, level B-prime-17 and above. Within the up-and-down minorly as of circumstance. Trigger-conjunct: Inbound Freight receipt of package for Wood-comma-Rufus by Scarlett-comma-Andrew through unauthorized programming maneuver, sequenced with sudden Booster uptake. Set Layers and record incidents.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Layer 1, circumstance, partner degermed subversive; Layer 2, circumstance, Inbound Freight package acquisition and migrational program; Layer 3, circumstance, unforecasted Booster uptake. Layer 3 set to trigger backcheck on solo as Layer without, but within third level increases the extent of up-and-down.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Layer 4, circumstance, Target Scarlett-comma-Andrew acquiring service in Lamed 3 Booster-unfriendly locality. Remaining despite.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Good catch. You try that place since headbanding yourself?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

(it didn't go well)

Just the once.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Same here, likewise Brother. Hold. Up-and-down lightface on move! PK-4-2-1 on the move again.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Vidded and vidded. Check flightpath and... could be Target returning to standard bay. Continue up-and-down at premium level within available device range. You got your end, I got mine. Will check when issues become clear or clearly insubstantial. Clear channel, systat, alt-ten.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Cleared buses, maknam reversal until alt-nineteen. Take it easy, man.

[scene 8] DREW arrives home. Home doors closing the way home doors do, easily and with comfort.

DREW

Home at last. All right, I've been carrying this damn box around long enough, let's see what's inside. Hmm, tough smart-seal for a public shipment. Here's this, and... Send access confirmation? Um... no. Security fail, handshake incomplete. All right. Send access confirmation, let's try yes. Yes. Locking protocols, and... releasing security seals.

The box is sealed with paper tape and twine, but also a surprisingly tough security seal. The robust beep when it is properly opened carries weight and import. Rustling of packing paper and packing beans.

And it's... a pot. With a security— Wait, no, it's not just a pot, it's a flotting Fugulnari planter. What the frid, Rufus. What were you going to do with this? What were you thinking, swee?

Various pot-examining noises, until: Glink!—incoming message certification. Typing and mouse clicks through the following where appropriate.

Rufus, you've got mail! Anonymous mail. Sourced from the server "Weinmeisterstraße," which, let's see. Which doesn't exist. But which, hmm, Wiki check... Weinmeisterstraße was a ghost station on the transport system in East Berlin. And "East Berlin" was... Huh. Two Berlins, really? Oh, Imbalance Era, right. So, Cold War stuff? Curiouser and curiouser. Let's see what this ghost server wants you to know.

"Hello, Customer. Thank you for your Custom. Use our product in good health."

Well that's a tad anti-climactic. Nothing funny in transport level, clean header, regular gateways, no microdots—wait, yes microdot. Clever, clever. Regular scans don't see it, but let's—yes, there we go. You're a code god, Rufus. I don't think anyone else on the Fairgrounds could get this open even if they spotted it. Except me.

Diddly noises. The message is unencrypting and assembling itself.

ELECTRONICALLY-PROCESSED COMRADE VOICE

Hi Rufus. Keeping this short. We got your info-stick a few weeks ago, and this is the result: the working Shoe prototype. We're confirming that most of the Foogs don't really see much at all—what visual input they get seems to be assembled as a function of appetite, more or less, based partly on the phototropic nutrient response in their leaves. So if you're wearing the Shoe, they'll focus on that, probably to the exclusion of anything else.

The ones who've been around longer seem to have more visual acuity—maybe it's training, maybe it's an enhancement of some kind. We don't know much. But we're sure of this: when you're using the Shoe, you should stay away from their specialists, and any Foogs with high rank. Not that they seem to have ranks, but you know what I mean. The ones the rest of them don't talk back to. As for the specialists, their soldier trees can definitely spot motion and weapon flashes, and we think some have learned to pick out Human silhouettes. I know it sounds goofy, but R&D suggests wearing a big floppy hat. Or a feather cape, if you think you can pull off a retro 50's look. Anything that breaks up your profile should help, but the leafier, the better.

(cont.)

There's a lot of pheromone sensory data in the pots, but we've left most of it out of the Shoe—the less information, the fewer chances for the kind of mistake that would give up the game. The Skunk Works crew came up with a minimal signature that should still deflect suspicion as much as possible. Basically, the Shoe says you're from someplace nobody knows much about, and your job is something really boring. So you're like, Private Smith from Nebraska Granary Two, and you're in accounting. Hopefully no one will ask any questions. But if anyone does ask, your actual Foog name is Kevinyax.

Good luck on this one, Rufus. We're all pulling for you. You people at DPC5 have been a beacon for all of us. Maybe once this is all over, you and Drew can go somewhere nice for a few weeks and remember why we're people.

Take care out there. Message ends and erases.

DREW

Oh Rufus. You were a whole goddamn real-life hero, and you never told me, baby.

[scene 9] The marketplace. Fugulnari trade restrictions, which largely consist of stealing everything that comes in, have not done well by the market.

HAPPY IT-DON'T-WORRY-ME VENDOR

Everything on this table? Three beans! Three tiny credits, and I've got a smile on my face, because life is too short to worry too hard!

CURIOUS SHOPPER

Three beans? Wow! ... There's nothing on the table though.

HAPPY IT-DON'T-WORRY-ME VENDOR

We had a run on the merchandise! It was great! I love being popular!

CURIOUS SHOPPER

So...

HAPPY IT-DON'T-WORRY-ME VENDOR

I'm selling options, though! Three beans, and when something comes in, you can have it!

NEARBY MERCHANT WHO HAS HEARD THIS BEFORE

They never have anything. They haven't for months. If you want to give away free money, I could use some. I have this, well, I'm not sure what it is. I used to have it in purple, but only the plain ones are left. You could have it, for free money. If you want.

CURIOUS SHOPPER

Plain? Is that a color? It just looks dirty.

NEARBY MERCHANT WHO HAS HEARD THIS BEFORE

I like to think of it as "antiqued."

HAPPY IT-DON'T-WORRY-ME VENDOR

There was that one time I had the pen. Remember that? Don't say I never have anything.

NEARBY MERCHANT WHO HAS HEARD THIS BEFORE

By definition, a pen is something that writes. What you had was a pen-shaped piece of plastic.

HAPPY IT-DON'T-WORRY-ME VENDOR

Have to take that up with the manufacturer. They settle in shipping.

CURIOUS SHOPPER

(shrewdly)

I've had a run on my finances—how about I order something now, and pay you when I pick it up?

HAPPY IT-DON'T-WORRY-ME VENDOR

So not how this works.

[scene 10] Transition to a corridor in Vav 41. DREW is on his way to make a visit. He hears some muttering, and investigates. The muttering gets clearer as he turns a corner:

FRALL

8105. 0096. 2251. 2110. Hello, Mr. Scarlet. Please give me a moment, I need to get this recording done before 1922.

DREW

You've got plenty of time before 19:22, second cycle's only just started.

FRALL

I meant the year 1922. However, it would take me at least until 19:22 this afternoon to explain myself to you properly, so perhaps you would just take my word for it.

DREW

You must be that Lieutenant I've heard about. The energy cloud. I can tell by the... cloud. Of energy. Plus the aura of incomprehensibility.

FRALL

Most astute. Please stand by. 84791. 89982. 31415—there. I can finish the rest another time, now that I've got the heart of it recorded.

DREW

Okay.

FRALL

That last section is one of Althaar's favorites, and for good reason.

DREW

Sure. Well, fascinating as this is, I should really get going. My unlimited steps are only good til the end of the day, and I've got quite a few stops to make.

FRALL

Yes, I am aware. It's good to see you. I was dissatisfied with our other encounter, and wanted a chance to meet you again on better terms, without all the ruckus. And I thought I might take this opportunity to answer some questions you might have.

DREW

Our other—? I don't think we've met. I'm pretty sure I'd remember that.

FRALL

You will.

DREW

What?

FRALL

You are on your way to visit John B at the moment, I believe.

DREW

I— Yes, I am. Would there be any point in asking how you knew that?

FRALL

None whatsoever. Although I feel compelled to mention that even one with a much more temporally-limited perspective than my own could easily surmise as much. Vav 41 offers very limited opportunities for tourism.

DREW

Ah. Yes, there is that.

FRALL

I suppose you could be on your way to engage Sherlock Holmes-Bot to investigate one of the more pressing questions that is concerning you at the moment.

DREW

Oh. Is— Would that work? Would be be able to find out if... If Rufus is—?

FRALL

He would not.

DREW

Ah.

FRALL

So you may as well continue on your original trajectory, toward the extravagantly humble local offices of Wanting and Sustainment Systems, and their sole remaining employee: Mr. John B.

DREW

Do you know why I'm going to see him?

FRALL

You are not going to kill him, though I suspect you think you might. You will confront him about his well-publicized betrayal of your partner, Rufus, and his friends in Data Processing Center #5. You are experiencing a great deal of emotional pain, and you will try to cause commensurate pain to Mr. B. As a sidebar, the Mechanics of Pain is a fascinating field. You don't have the tools for proper analysis of the subject on this plane, of course. Which is a pity, since you enjoy pain so much.

DREW

We don't, actually.

FRALL

Really? Then perhaps you'll abandon your current course, which can have no other purpose than the needless inflicting of same.

DREW

I can't. It's not my debt to cancel.

FRALL

Isn't it?

DREW

I don't know how to answer that, actually. Did you know Rufus?

FRALL

I did not have the pleasure in person.

DREW

He was beautiful. He was. Beautiful. He should be here right now. He shouldn't be gone.

FRALL

Yes.

DREW

Then why is he gone?

FRALL

He is gone because the Fugulnari perceived him as an obstacle to the Plant Way. Their dedication to efficiency is often honored more in the breach than the observance, but with regard to potential threats to their power, they are very punctilious indeed.

DREW

Is he dead?

FRALL

Presumptively. I have not explored it. Stochastic derivations concerning the Fugulnari pose complex and non-trivial difficulties. For your purposes at this time, he is effectively non-existent.

DREW

I thought you could see through, like, a hundred dimensions or something.

FRALL

While I may be functionally omnipresent, Mr. Scarlett, I still can't be everywhere at once.

DREW

But—

FRALL

I know.

DREW

Then— Ok. What else can you tell me? Is there— This may sound silly, but I have to ask. Is there a heaven? Does— does anything like that exist?

FRALL

That's a highly subjective concept, and I don't believe we have the time for you to elucidate your personal concept of heaven precisely enough for me to give you any kind of meaningful answer. Would it matter if I could?

DREW

Wouldn't it?

FRALL

Question with a question, Mr. Scarlett.

DREW

Just call me Drew. "Mr. Scarlett" is that guy from the Clue reboot.

FRALL

As you like. Speaking in general terms, Drew, there's no pressing objective need for there to be a heaven. And yet, so many long for it so eloquently. I have never detected or experienced anything along those lines, but one could argue that that is merely due to my not having any use for it. If I had to extrapolate, I would hazard that wishing for a heaven is a way of creating one, subjectively.

DREW

That makes sense, if I understand what you mean.

FRALL

If it makes sense, then I'm probably explaining it wrong.

DREW

Be that as it may.

FRALL

Drew. If I might leave you with one unsolicited observation.

DREW

Yes, Lt. Frall?

FRALL

The utility of a fully-charged laser welder really cannot be overstated. If I recall correctly (*shimmer*) there are several lying about in the WSS offices, none of which have been used for some time. I am sure no one would miss one if it were pressed into service.

DREW

Uh, thanks? But I'm more a soldering-iron type of guy. I wouldn't have the slightest idea what to do with a laser-welder.

FRALL

(*shimmer*)

You will.

[scene 11] The WSS door opens, jankily. JOHN B is on the phone.

JOHN

No, if you have to "take a long view of it" or define your terms, it's not a beverage dispenser. You— (*response*) Yes, exactly. If you need a laboratory to extract water from it, then it's not a... (*response*) I do. Firm. You're welcome to appeal. I can't tell you how to do that, though. (*response*) No, that's not company policy, it's just that I don't know. The only thing on the WSS (*WSS!*) HECNET site is a Contact Us button that leads to a broken link, and a telephone number in Reseda. Which you're welcome to try calling if you want to wait twelve years for them to pick up. Let me know how it turns out. (*dissatisfied response, call ends*) Another satisfied customer.

DREW

So that's what "satisfied" sounds like.

JOHN

Oh, hey. I didn't see you come in. Yeah, "satisfied" if you define your terms very generously.

DREW

And take a long view of it. You must be John B.

JOHN

That I am. What can I help you with today? Windows, beverage dispensers, and very small wires our speciality. So, which one is it?

DREW

None of the above.

JOHN

Ah. Well, by "speciality" I meant those are the only things we're allowed to touch, if we don't want to instigate a Union action, so you came all the way down here for nothing. I mean, you didn't have to come all the way down here in the first place, you could have just used the paging system, but— Hold up. I thought I locked that door on my way in.

DREW

You did. I'm good with locks.

JOHN

Oh. Ok. *(beat)* Should I be calling for help right now, or running away, or something?

DREW

I'd like to introduce you to someone.

JOHN

Um. Ok. Are you sure they want to meet me? I'm generally technician-non-grata since *Triumph of Efficiency* came out. Except among my fellow Boosters, of course. Hello, fellow Booster, insert secret handshake if there is one. I should warn you, I'm not big into big displays of Booster pride or anything. I'm more of a "let's celebrate the Plant Way quietly, on the inside" type. Anyway, we don't get a lot of in-person traffic down here these days, so pardon the, uh. Wow, it's pretty messy in here, isn't it. Would you like to sit? I can move that—

DREW

I'm fine. I'll stand.

JOHN

Also I'm not, you know. Not looking to date right now. If that's what you meant. That's not what you meant.

DREW

That's not what I meant.

JOHN

Right. Do I need to spread plastic?

DREW

Spread plastic? What for?

JOHN

To, I don't know. Keep unsightly bloodstains off the Dura-Tuff floor tiles? You're looking... pretty intense.

DREW

Lieutenant Frall says I'm not going to kill you.

JOHN

Oh, good. That's a start. Can we rule out "maim" next?

DREW

I want to introduce you to Rufus.

JOHN

To Rufus? Who is... oh.

DREW

Yes. Oh.

JOHN

You mean the one from Data Processing Center #5. The one who—

DREW

The one you killed.

JOHN

What? I didn't— Look, I know what Frondrinax said, afterwards, but honestly, her announcement was the first time I heard about any of that. All I did was go down to DPC 5 on a minor wire patch. I only talked to Rufus for like, a couple minutes, tops. Small talk, you know? Nothing... political, or suspicious, or anything like that. Even if I'd wanted to report him, there was nothing to report. I thought he was just your ordinary, everyday Booster.

DREW

He was the kindest, the smartest, the nicest. He was the best man I ever knew.

JOHN

I mean, he seemed like a good guy. But I was only in there for a couple minutes, really. The Fugulnari—there's a whole Tech Branch they don't usually talk about. I guess they'd logged some sort of data processing spike, or wave, and... Frondrinax may have looked twice at that instead of once because she heard me take the call for that patch job, but that's— that's literally it. I didn't see anything weird going on down there. Maybe I would have, if I'd looked harder, but, you know, they all had Booster bands, just like me. Like you.

DREW

Frondrinax thanked you personally. Said you should get “full credit and praise” for reporting the “terrorist cell.”

JOHN

Yeah, I know, but that doesn't mean it's true. She just— She makes things up, sometimes. I think she thought it would be a nice gesture.

DREW

There were pictures of you everywhere. You were the Booster of the Day. They gave you a BONUS.

JOHN

Ok, that? That definitely didn't happen. There was no bonus.

DREW

Says you.

JOHN

Well, I can tell you I've definitely never received a single bonus here at WSS. (*WSS!*) They're big on disciplinary wage garnishments, not so much in the other direction. And the Committee's idea of a bonus is like, surprise! an extra packet of drinking goo! But I didn't even get that, not that I would have accepted it, because a) gross, and b) I never actually reported anyone for anything.

DREW

Rufus played D&D, but he didn't have time to campaign after he joined his Data Team. He preferred the 33.3 ruleset, but he knew most of them. In detail. He was a +2 INT Crystal Plate nerd. He didn't like to DM because he wanted to have the adventure, not plan it.

JOHN

Me too. I—

DREW

Rufus hated mainstream comedy vids. He thought they were mean, and if it was mean he couldn't find it funny. He couldn't watch them. Instead we watched old screwball comedy flats, the black and white American pictures and the French Comédie Loufoque films.

JOHN

That's—

DREW

Shut up, John. This is not about you. Is it that hard for you to listen to something that's not about you?

JOHN

Sorry.

DREW

Rufus was mostly a terrible cook. Except sometimes he got it right, and when he did it was like the pan was a gift of rainbows and legends, and he sang dinner right onto the table from somewhere in the Fabled Realms.

He loved to eat, so he thought he was fat. Which he was, a little, but not as much as he thought. And he was beautiful. You could hold him for an hour. I could. Sometimes I did.

Rufus loved animals, but he didn't keep pets. Too much responsibility. He was worried that they'd be lonely and afraid. He took care of everyone else's pets instead.

Rufus would go weeks without washing dishes.

Once he started growing his beard in March so that he could shave it the day before Halloween and go as "A New Man." It wasn't funny and most people didn't get it, and half our friends didn't recognize him anyway without the beard.

I hated that beard, and I'd give anything to touch it now. To have it scratch all down my neck.

What Rufus could do with a network panel and a console would set your teeth humming. He saw more in the shape of a data set than most of us will ever know about anything.

Rufus wanted to be a painter and a dancer and an actor and he had no sense for any of that stuff. He sang instead. He had a big warm loud rich voice, and the only way he could hit a note was to run straight at it for a few seconds and then knock it over and jump on it so it wouldn't get away. And he'd forget the lyrics, constantly.

It took us a while to be together, and even longer to be happy there. But he was mine, up to the end, and I was his, and that was how we both wanted it. I love him. (cont.)

Rufus was trying to save us all, and he died for it.

JOHN

I'm— I am sorry. Really. I swear I didn't report him.

DREW

Them. Data Processing Center #5 was a them. Manita, Sergio, Alice, Kousei, Tamra, Edison, and Al. And Rufus.

JOHN

Okay. Listen, I didn't report any of them, I promise. It was all just a... a stupid coincidence. I still don't even know if they were actually up to anything in the first place.

DREW

Rufus was. He was a hero. He put on that kicky Booster headband so he could... infiltrate some place, I don't even know where. Someplace important. To bring the Foogs down, or at least strike a blow, somehow.

JOHN

Okay, that's— You really shouldn't go around saying stuff like that.

DREW

Or what, you'll report me, too? Get another nice fat bonus?

JOHN

(pointed)

No, because you're obviously upset, and you don't know what you're saying. Which is why I'm not going to take any of that seriously. But a less understanding Booster definitely would. So I think you should be a lot more careful, in the future. So there aren't any more unfortunate misunderstandings.

DREW

We're past that now. Just, you know, remember him. Remember them. The next time a careless word might end someone, remember him, before you break someone else apart. *(beat)* Is anyone using this laser welder? I think I might need one later.

JOHN

I... Are you trained on those? They're not really a learn-as-you-go kind of thing.

DREW

I think I am. As of a couple minutes ago.

JOHN

...Ok. Then... go ahead, I guess.

DREW

I'm glad I met you in the end, John B. It would have sucked if I had tried to kill you after all.

JOHN

Well, thanks. I didn't get your name.

DREW

My name? My name doesn't matter. Call me Rufus. My name is Rufus.

Janky door as DREW exits. Beat. Exhale.

JOHN

Shit.

[scene 12] DREW approaches a crowded checkpoint.

FUGULNARI CHECKPOINT AGENT

If you have a Booster headband, please do not wait in the long line of rabble! Headbands and staff bots to the right, Human rabble to the left, please have your ID ready so that we can ignore it. Everyone else in the middle. Three lines! Rabble to the left, to the left.

ANGRY CROWD PERSON

Our left or your left?

FUGULNARI CHECKPOINT AGENT

Wha—? I don't think I have a left. Do I?

ANGRY CROWD PERSON

I don't know! That's why I'm asking!

FUGULNARI CHECKPOINT AGENT

Well... Then we better use yours, I guess. Over there.

ANGRY CROWD PERSON

Over—! That's not my left! That's *yours!* If you even— Culsans's doorknob. There's like one thing you need to know to run traffic in a corridor, and you can't even do that! Are you new?

FUGULNARI CHECKPOINT AGENT

Yes! I'm brand new! I just got my grown-up name three days ago!

ANGRY CROWD PERSON

Unbelievable.

FUGULNARI CHECKPOINT AGENT

All right, that's enough! Everybody listen up! No more left and right, left and right are stupid! This side is now the Good Side. That stupid side over there is the Bad Side. Everyone Good, get on the Good Side! Everyone Bad, stay on the Bad Side! Boosters and staff bots on the Good Side.

DREW

Coming through, please, headband, coming through.

ANGRY CROWD PERSON

So now you're saying THIS is the good side?

FUGULNARI CHECKPOINT AGENT

Yes, that's right!

ANGRY CROWD PERSON

What!?! No, you leaf-breather! *That's* right! This is leAAAHHHH!

Sudden roar and crash. It's an earthquake! Can there be earthquakes in space? Feels like it. Crowd sounds of fear and confusion.

ANGRY CROWD PERSON

What was that! What was that! Did we blow up?

FUGULNARI CHECKPOINT AGENT

(voice nearly lost in the hubbub)

Stop moving the ground! Anyone moving the ground goes to the Bad Side!

[scene 13] The doors open to pandemonium on the Bridge. MRS. FRONDRINAX and ROOTY are there, along with the professionals. Real alarms are blaring this time, not just the little ones.

TORIANNA

Emergency protocols, all levels, command override, Go. Main engines offline and down, my command, Go. Get the Sector Response Teams on their feet. Warm up the maneuvering thrusters, nav control to my chair.

Various Bridge crew members respond to her instructions: "Aye sir, yessir, Done!" etc. Mixed somewhere in the din, a calm station-wide announcement: "Sector Leaders, Rally and Respond, all levels. Emergency personnel on alert status."

TORIANNA

Amber, who fired the main engines? All stations report.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

(overlap is good, but with some clarity—so no panic, no shouting)

Status unknown, Sir? Following?

STALIN-BOT

Lateral structural integrity field generators failing on multiple levels, Commander.

LARRY

Signal loss on the forward sensor array. Transferring to backup.

HITHERTO UNNOTICED BRIDGE PERSON

We're venting gas to space, sir. Foamers activated.

HITHERTO UNNOTICED BRIDGE PERSON'S FRIEND

Stasis webbing deployed on ships at berth, lights are green. Fire suppression teams are responding on the docks.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Don't worry, Commander. I'll handle this. You can go back to twiddling your thumbs, or whatever you were doing to cause this mess.

STALIN-BOT

Commencing distributed field generator restart procedure, priority alpha alpha. Outer hull integrity is nominal and holding so far.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Excuse me, Stalin-Bot. I was talking.

STALIN-BOT

What?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Sir, main engines were fired from Rooty's station?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Is that a question? Because the answer is no, they weren't. Rooty would never be so foolish as to fire the main engines, would you, dear?

ROOTY

No, Mama! Unless I wanted to go look at the pretty rock.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Pretty rock?

ROOTY

Yes! It's so shiny!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Rooty! What did you do?

ROOTY

Eep!

LARRY

Status update, the forward sensor array is intact, but has partially disengaged from Fairgrounds proper. Sending out repair tugs Ray B. and Arthur C.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Good job, Larry! I'm glad to know we can count on someone down here.

TORIANNA

Frondrinax? While I certainly appreciate your very helpful advice, I would like to formally request that you temporarily cede command of the Bridge, so that I can re-establish the Fairgrounds' attitude and trajectory. (*continuing over MRS. F's protests*) Because if you don't, the entire station is going to succumb to the additional hull stresses caused by your assistant's little stunt in... How long, Amber?

AMBER

Between eight-and-a-half and twelve minutes, sir?

TORIANNA

Right. And you certainly won't be in any position to be offering advice, or have anyone to offer that advice to, for that matter, if we're all sucking vacuum!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh. Well, when you put it that way... Learning to delegate is such a vital management skill, isn't it? All right. You have the Bridge, Mindy. Temporarily.

TORIANNA

Thank you. May I have confirmations from active bridge personnel at this point? Two senior voices are required.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Logged and confirmed?

STALIN-BOT

Logged and confirmed.

TORIANNA

Thank you. Rooty, Frondrinax? Please set your pots right here, and stay out of trouble.

LARRY

Um, logged and confirmed?

TORIANNA

Coffee, Larry. Go. Now.

LARRY

Yes, sir. Is Panda's—

TORIANNA

I don't care where. Get moving.

DREW

Well, *that* was exciting!

TORIANNA

Who in Hooker's fluffy armpits are you? Never mind. Stations, are you on active response? (*They are: yes sir, etc.*) Amber, Stalin-Bot, you have priority, continue.

AMBER

Activate all auxiliary thruster systems, sir?

TORIANNA

Rotational only, until we've stabilized our longitudinal axis. We can fine-tune our orbital trajectory once we know we're not about to break apart.

AMBER

Aye aye, sir?

STALIN-BOT

Damage reports coming in, all decks. Nothing requires central response.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Sector Response teams are active and coordinating with emergency services?

TORIANNA

Are we stable yet?

AMBER

Confirmed? Activating orbital maintenance thrusters?

FRALL shimmers in.

FRALL

Logged and confirmed. The power distribution net is remarkably resilient, all things considered. The grid is up and bearing its load. There is an unauthorized civilian on the bridge, sir.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Confirming cause of orbital disruption was an unplanned engine ignition? Replaying the logs of activation sequence?

From a console, the audio record plays:

ROOTY: Oooo, I like the pretty rock! Can we go see it better?

CONSOLE VOICE: Warning. Main engine ignition sequence initiated.

ROOTY: Yaaay! Go go go go go!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Please don't discipline my assistant, Mindy. If he needs correction, I will supply it.

TORIANNA

Now would be a good time to start, before I space him. A pretty rock?

FRALL

Before it partially detached from the hull, the forward sensor array was tracking ice-field clusters in standard orbit around Teegarden's Star. The clusters are quite pretty, in their own way. Sparkly.

TORIANNA

And Rooty decided to go and visit! Wonderful.

ROOTY

Sorry, Mrs. Commander Lady!

TORIANNA

Ugh. All right, now that we've got that sorted, who are you, and what are you doing here?

DREW

I'm Drew. Hi.

TORIANNA

Oh good. How illuminating. I didn't realize we had advanced to the speed-dating portion of our existential crisis and damage control event.

DREW

It wasn't really an existential crisis, though. Was it? Sure, the sudden acceleration isn't good for anyone, but that's what the maneuvering thrusters are for, right?

TORIANNA

On a normal station, you might be right. But this is the Fairgrounds. We're barely more than one stress fracture away from disaster at the best of times. And now I'll have to send EVA crews crawling over half our hull panels just to make sure we don't— Why am I even explaining this to you? Why are you here?

DREW

Oh, I was just on my way through a checkpoint when suddenly, you know, big boom. So I wanted to know what that was, and I thought I might as well come down here and see how my tax credits are being spent.

TORIANNA

Well, the next time you're feeling curious, Booster, might I suggest you address your questions to your good friends on the Committee?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, please do! Hello, Booster! I'm Frondrinax.

DREW

Oh, I know who you are. I didn't realize you worked on the Bridge, though. I thought you were in public relations.

TORIANNA

Frondrinax does not work on the bridge. She is assigned here in a supervisory capacity, from time to time. And for today, at least, that assignment has ended. In disaster, as usual.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, someone has to be here to keep their phytochromes on you! After all, it's not as though you were doing a stellar job of keeping the Fairgrounds under control before we stepped in. Your Adverse Incident rate has gone down a full 86 percent under the Committee's supervision! A ringing endorsement of the Plant Way, don't you think?

TORIANNA

Oh, by Koko's bedclothes, I swear, if you don't—

FRALL

Pardon me, Commander, but is it Thursday today? I so often lose track. But I would say Thursday is an awfully dull day for pointlessly throwing oneself on the same old rusty swords. Isn't it?

TORIANNA

Yes, fine. Sticks and stones, Frondrinax, sticks and stones.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes? I enjoy both of those things.

DREW

Look, obviously you're busy with all of this whatever you're doing right now, so I'll be going. Thank you for such a fascinating whatever this was.

TORIANNA

Hold on. You still haven't explained how you got in here in the first place. Bridge access during an Adverse Incident is limited to Command-level crew.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And Fugulnari, of course!

TORIANNA

Of course.

DREW

I'm good with locks. And you haven't installed the last five security updates on your doors, so at this point, Bridge access is "limited" to anyone with a working knowledge of AnacondaScript. You might want to get on that.

TORIANNA

Will someone get this pedestrian off my bridge?

DREW

I'm just saying.

Door whoosh as he exits.

[scene 14] As before, the rise of not-quite-static becoming the distorted but understandable voices of BOOSTER OBSERVERS 1 and 2.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Mark, mark it. Hey, systat, alt-attention. Circumstance newly-leveled beyond-beyond. Call to action?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Observed. Target 4-2-1, PK, Scarlett-comma-Andrew in disusual pattern matrix. Incomplete and unlikely. You get anything clearer on that Vav 41 period?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Nah, Vav 41 grayly fogged on all meters. Target running blockage?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Impossible blockage for Target power potential. Standard H.E.C. mung must be as such.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Amazing what can be marked and logged as acceptable “standard,” right?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Don’t have to tell on that, friend. Stepcounter also fogged?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Stepcounter also fogged. What locale Vav 41 as possible destination for Target?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Not much potentialities Vav 41. Best case WSS office, Booster John B. Cross-check, informant responsible degerming of Target former-partner Wood-comma-Rufus. Correlation, non-causation.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

But Layer 5 circumstance to be logged.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Layer 5 circumstance, logged. Post-Vav, Target on path through marketplace.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Target passes without acquisition, log as Layer 6?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Negative Layer 6 circumstance, common shortcut, within tolerance limits of the up-and-down. Next causation action within however. Nicked by a 20-56 on the panel again. Target using correct skill in incorrect application.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Wait. Target PK 4-2-1 unauthorized Bridge access?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Unauthorized Bridge access. Smart-teched the code, lightfaced in by all accounts.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Beyond Level circumstance protocols? Kick it up to the Theater of Noise?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Negative as yet, partner. Level circumstance only. Layers 6 through 8, maysome. Target encountered Committee member on Bridge, encounter perfect within tolerance standard Booster attitudinals.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Committee member as report? Committee member identity to be recorded?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Not as important like, Committee as Committee by the numbers, but open to the viewpoint. Target perfect-encountered Frondrinax. No report therein. Hold up-and-down within this level, to be still and stilled.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Well, if Frondrinax didn't report...

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

As chief in line, if Target beyond Target-level, Frondrinax is one to word it. Ball's still in our court, friend.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Target has activated communication device. Will jump up-and-down premium level onto spoken wave. On tap, continuing, Target 4-2-1 PK. Will check on next upgrade. Clear channel, systat, alt-eleven.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Cleared buses, maknam open-slot until alt-twenty-two. Let's see who he's talking to...

[scene 15] Transition to DREW in a corridor, on his phone.

DREW

Hi, sorry to bother you. I'm not sure I've got the right number. Uh, my name is Drew. I'm trying to reach Sin Althaar? He's an Iltorian, and—

ALTHAAR

Yes! Greeting to you on Althaar's communication device! How can Althaar make assistance to you on this cycle, Sin Drew? Or is Drew your first naming? Please instruct Althaar if he is performing the incorrect address! Humanity is having such great wealth of naming conventions! Althaar is finding them of great fascination! The rules of gender, and profession, and Earth nation of familial origin, are all combining to create much complication! Oh! Apology! Althaar has once again suffered the away-carrying in his enthusings on Human culture! It would be a foolish supposing that you were desiring communication with Althaar to be providing him explanation of the terms of addressment. Although if this is the case, Althaar would be most pleased to have receiving of it!

DREW

Ha! I think I like you already. You can just call me Drew, I don't really stand on ceremony. And I don't actually know the proper term of address for an Iltorian, either.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar also is not standing on ceremony, Drew, especially if there is cake. Because a cake that is trod upon is not very celebration! (*giggles*) Please also do not be removed by the jokings of Althaar, please. The humor is a field of study most complex, and Althaar is taking opportunity to have practice of it whenever he is able. Althaar is jubilation to receive the call from a Human of new meeting!

DREW

Well, I'm... jubilated to meet you too. Over the phone, anyway. That's not you on the screen, though, right? It looks like a banana.

ALTHAAR

Yes! The Ba-na-na is yellow and delicious! And quite cheerful! It is not advisory for Althaar to be showing himself on the screen, in case it is a Human who calls. As now! So he is showing the ba-na-na, to make cheer, instead of out-freakage!

DREW

Right. Well, if you like comedy and bananas, I think I have a joke you'll appreciate. Have you run across knock-knock jokes in your studies?

ALTHAAR

Yes! But they are sometimes elusive. The timing is most crucial, yes? Who is there?

DREW

Not quite yet, wait for it. I'll start it now. Ready? Knock-knock.

ALTHAAR

Hello! Who is there!

DREW

Banana!

ALTHAAR

Ee! It is Althaar, who is hiding behind the Ba-na-na! Althaar has solved the puzzling! And now, Ba-na-nas for 600 please, LeVar!

DREW

No—I mean, ok, yes. But remember, it's a knock-knock joke. So, you already said "Who's there," and I answered, "Banana," which means you say...

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes! Ba-na-na who!

DREW

Knock-knock!

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar does not wish to make presuming, Drew, but it is belief this is not the appropriate response, according to the ancient traditions of knock-knock. Or—perhaps Althaar has broken the joke again? Frustration!

DREW

No no, you're doing fine, Althaar. Drew deliberately— I mean, I deliberately made a confusing change in the existing pattern. Which is part of what humor is, right? So what you do is, you give the usual response, even though I've given the cue out of the usual order.

ALTHAAR

This is most fascination, Drew. Yes, the surprise of un-harmfulness is crucial to the Human jokings! So, Althaar is now saying: Hello! Who is there!

DREW

Banana!

ALTHAAR

Ba-na-na who?

DREW

Knock-knock!

ALTHAAR

Who... who is there? Is this correct?

DREW

Banana!

ALTHAAR

Ba-na-na who? Althaar is pendulating it now.

DREW

Knock-knock!

ALTHAAR

Hello! Who is there?

DREW

Orange!

ALTHAAR

Oh! Confusion!

DREW

Orange! Go ahead, you've got this, Althaar.

ALTHAAR

Orange... who?

DREW

Orange you glad I didn't say Banana!

Baffled silence.

ALTHAAR

Eeee-hee-hee! Uuuuuuuuuu hee hee! Drew! It is a very strange knock-knock joke! Althaar is certain it is very humor! But... Althaar is not grasping it.

DREW

Huh. Knock-knock jokes are more culturally specific than I thought. Sorry. But you're very easy to talk to, Althaar. I didn't expect that.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, Drew! This is always the endeavor of Althaar! May Althaar enquire as to why Drew was wishing the conversation? If it is just to make sharing of jokes, that is a very good reason! And also a thing of pleasure! But it would indeed be surprise, because this is not a thing that is occurring in the usual coursing of events. A small sadness.

DREW

Yes, I did have another reason for calling, thanks for reminding me. I was wondering, um... I met someone today. John B. He's your roommate, right?

ALTHAAR

Yes! FriendJohn is the dear friend and room-mate of Althaar!

DREW

Right. Your friend John. He was... not what I was expecting. So I had some questions about what he said, and I thought you might be the best person to answer them. Do you have office hours, or something? I don't think it should take long.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar would be most willing to make conversing in the person, especially on the subject of his dear friend John! But you are understanding this must be done from behind the Curtain of Privacy, or the other obstacle to visual contactment, yes? Or else there will be *(cont.)*

a great unpleasant-ness. Althaar is imploring that you will make belief that there is no immunity from these effects, no matter how great the preparings. This has been learned with many brave Human volunteers, to great sorrow and disappointment!

DREW

I will definitely take your word for it. So, where would you like to meet? Your place, or...

ALTHAAR

Perhaps Althaar could be purchasing Drew a refreshing beverage at the Electric Egg?

DREW

You want to meet at a bar?

ALTHAAR

It is one of Althaar's favorite locations for the observation of Human social customs! And he has there found an excellent positioning of concealment, behind the *Big Blorch Hunter II* machine!

DREW

The Electric Egg it is, then. I can be there within the hour, if that's okay.

ALTHAAR

That is most okay! Althaar will be speaking at you then!

DREW

Sounds good. Thanks for meeting up with me on such short notice.

ALTHAAR

It is the pleasure to Althaar, new Human friend!

Phones off.

DREW

Good thing I didn't try the Interrupting Cow one.

[scene 16] Corridor. DREW is recording a new voicemail message, heading to the Electric Egg, when a strange day gets stranger.

DREW

Record. "Hi, you've reached Drew and Rufus. We're both out. We—" (*bleep*) Erase and Reset. Record: "Drew here, and not here. This might be the state of things for a while. To leave a message, or not to leave a message? That—" (*bleep*) Erase and Reset. I am not feeling even slightly light-hearted about this today. Record: "Hi folks, Drew here. Most of you probably know that Rufus was taken by the Fugulnari a while back, and after drifting in place for a while, I'm going off to—" (*bleep*) Erase and Restore from backup.

A voice comes from a slightly-distant TRASH DETECTOR. A mix of the standard TRASH DETECTOR voice and one that we can probably tell, although DREW can't, is H.F.

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

(Honk) Spli-i-i-tter defected. Do not la-a-a-dder. Attention. This is a t-t-t-est. Te-e-e-st. Do not glitter.

DREW

What in—

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

(Honk) Disposable waste has bee-ee-een. Please stand by. You are receiving this broadcast as a trash-detector message.

DREW

No way.

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

This is not a trash-detector message. This is a test of the ScarletLetter sub-circuit ambi-directional pulse network. This message is being broadcast in the Lamed sector.

DREW

(overlapping the previous somewhat)

Just when I think this day has gone as far as a day can go. Actually, I probably shouldn't have said that out loud. Just imagine what might come next.

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

(Honk) If you are the intended recipient of this message, please escalate this response. Message cycles. *(Honk)* Spli-i-i-tter defected. Do not la-a-a-dder. Attention. This is a t-t-t-est. Te-e-e-st. Do not glitter.

Message fades and repeats under lines until scene change.

DREW

What kind of noidler sends messages by Trash-bot? More to the point, what kind of noidler *gets* messages by Trash-bot? This place, I swear.

[scene 17] The Electric Egg. As CHIP approaches the bar, keeping his eyes very firmly on the floor:

CHIP

Hey, Sopes? Is Althaar in mufti?

SOPON

Not what that means, boss.

CHIP

Really? What does it mean?

SOPON

Civilian clothes. Or a sectarian religious scholar.

CHIP

Huh. That's not what I wanted to say at all.

SOPON

Yeah, I figured. What exactly were you going for?

CHIP

"Is Althaar safely behind a cloth-like thing that looks like it should probably be called mufti?"

SOPON

Actually, he's behind the *Big Blorch Hunter II* machine again. For future reference, you could have used "in hiding," "obscured," "concealed," "secreted," or "ensconced."

CHIP

Yeah, yeah, fine. I just liked "mufti," it's got kind of a ring to it.

SOPON

I could mix you up a Mufti, that'll cure you. Though I might have to go in back for a couple of the ingredients.

CHIP

Why, what's in a Mufti?

SOPON

Beige khakis, soaked in chartreuse. Dash of bitters. Cocktail cherry.

CHIP

You just made that up.

SOPON

Yep.

CHIP

Sopon, secretly you are a much bigger stoiker than anyone realizes.

SOPON

Secretly? I gotta work on that.

DREW

(coming to the bar)

Hi, sorry to interrupt. Could we do the same again? I wanted to pay for this one, but Althaar says he's already done that.

SOPON

He's a class act.

CHIP

Hi, Drew. Still hate the kicky headband.

DREW

Can't disagree. But I really needed the miles today.

XTOPPS arrives the bar. He is pretending to be his normal, stoned self for the benefit of DREW and anyone else who isn't in on his sobriety, but he occasionally slips, and needs a nudge back from those in the know.

XTOPPS

Hey hey, refrigeratoes! How's it chillin'?

CHIP

Hey, Xtopps. Have you met Drew? He's got a headband, but not in any serious way. *Still*. All good?

XTOPPS

Good as... uh, potato chips.

CHIP

What?

XTOPPS

You know. Crispy. And with ridges. Wish I had some!

CHIP

Ah hah, but we don't serve potatoes here, remember? Because we're certainly not going to endanger our precarious relationship with the Committee by concocting any sneaky recipes to get around their completely reasonable food restrictions. Right, Sopes?

SOPON

Absolutely, boss.

DREW

Well, that was a... very specific denial.

BUBBLES

Wasn't it? Sometimes when Chip is around our *very stoned* Baronet, he starts to talk a little funny.

XTOPPS

(the regal side takes over)

It is quite true that my mannerisms can at times become somewhat contagious to the general populace.

SOPON

Uh, what was that, Xtopps?

XTOPPS

(overshooting in the other direction)

Must be because Xtopps has got the munchies! It's deja-vu, it's not like I planned!

CHIP

Oh, that Xtopps! High as a free-orbiting kite! As usual!

XTOPPS

So high, I'm amplified! You can't be too chill, you can't be too zen!

DREW

Yeah, I get that, but the rest of you are... I mean, I'm pretty sure the rest of you can't get glitched off peanut butter, right? Like, that's not physically possible.

SOPON

Oh, no no no. Like Xtopps says, this is just how people get when he's around.

BUBBLES

Personally, I don't see any difference in how we're conversing with you, a normal Booster Human, from how we may have been exchanging remarks before, when you were in here earlier.

DREW

Really? You don't think everyone's being just a little weird? In an unusual way?

XTOPPS

Well, I'm just a lot weird, in the usual way. I'm completamente Papa-Bravo-James.

DREW

Juliett.

XTOPPS

Hmm?

DREW

Papa-Bravo-Juliett. PBJ. There's no James, it's Juliett. Jig, in the other one: Peter-Baker-Jig.

XTOPPS

Oh, right. I forgot that... because I'm *so high*. Listen, um—

CHIP

That's right, Xtopps, you're *high*! Remember that. And what do you need that J for anyway? You don't need *jelly*, you like a clean buzz.

XTOPPS

Ha ha—true! It's for “Just.” Just Peanut Butter. Whoa, are those my barnacles? I'd better go lie down. Or stand up. Or none of the above.

CHIP

Maybe you should stop talking and go play.

XTOPPS

Definitively I should do that very thing, Chorp. I'm going down the drain, again.

A very sober XTOPPS decamps to the stage, where he soon starts up an instrumental that plays through the rest of the scene.

BUBBLES

Drew, go sit down, honey. I'll bring those over to you.

DREW

Okay, thanks. (*he returns to his table next to the Blorch Hunter machine*) Thanks for the drink, Althaar. I thought I was going to get this round, though.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar did not intend to cause offense! He will allow you to make purchase of the next beverages, if this is preferment!

DREW

No, I'm not offended, it's just, you know, the custom. To take turns.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is having awareness of this, but he is also knowing that his discretionary funding is most ample, and the current finances of many Humans are not. So he is attempting to be generosity, when he is able.

DREW

Fair enough. Thanks again. *(beat, they listen to the music)* That Xtopps guy is really something. How does he manage all that while he's zonked out of his mind on peanut butter?

ALTHAAR

Oh, Sin Xtopps is a musician of very great talent!

DREW

Obviously. I've never seen anyone that jecked up who was still upright, never mind shredding on the fleezborp.

ALTHAAR

Yes, the addiction in peanut butter is a very sad thing. And very persistent. It is of great scarcity for those Xybidonts who are so suffering to be making escape from it.

DREW

Well, more power to him, I guess. It doesn't seem to be slowing him down any.

ALTHAAR

Not in the leastment, Drew! Althaar must be admitting of the concerns when he was first learning of the peanut dependency of Sin Xtopps, but it is always of friendship to be allowing others to determine their own coursings. And Sin Xtopps is handling of him-self very well, it can not be argument!

DREW

Sure. Uh, speaking of friendship. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I mean, I wanted to ask you about your other friend. John B.

ALTHAAR

Yes, you were mentioning of this earlier. What is your questioning, please?

DREW

Ok, so... I told you about Rufus. About what happened. And your friend, John B— He's the one who denounced Data Processing Center #5. Where Rufus worked. That's what the Fugulnari said, anyway. What Frondrinax said. They thanked him in their announcements, they put him in that documentary, they gave him a bonus—or, well, they said they did. Maybe not. But they definitely made him a poster boy for the Booster program. For turning in all those people. And I hated him for that. I've been hating him for months. But then, today, I finally talked to him, and... Well, he said he didn't do it. And I don't really have any reason to believe him, but... I think maybe I do.

ALTHAAR

Althaar must once again express his very great sorrow for the loss of your beloved partner, Drew. The losing of a dear one is always a surrounding sorrow, but the loss that is of uncertainty is perhaps of the greatest sharpness.

DREW

Thank you. I— Thanks.

ALTHAAR

But to make answering of the question that you are not-quite-asking, Althaar does not believe FriendJohn would be causing harm to the peoples of Data Processing Center #5. Not on the purpose. It is possibility that this could have been done as accident.

DREW

That's more or less what he said. That it was a misunderstanding.

ALTHAAR

Then it is the belief of Althaar, that it is to make belief in FriendJohn. Althaar is not always understanding the reasonings for the actions of FriendJohn, it is true. And it is a truth that FriendJohn has not made explaining to Althaar of his reasonings for the wearing of the head-band. But Althaar is trusting FriendJohn, because he is knowing that FriendJohn is a Human of great kindness, with much love in his heart for others. This is the Human metaphor, you are understanding. The actual heart of FriendJohn is filled with blood only.

DREW

Right, got it.

BUBBLES

Here's your drinks, boys. You know, Drew, that hat does something for you. I'm not sure if it's something good, but it's definitely something.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you, Bubbles! (*sips*) Drew, Althaar is not certain he can be providing satisfactory to your questions. But Althaar can say that FriendJohn is in the general minding the business that is his own, because this business is causing him many troubles. So it is very uncertainly that he would be making report of the business of others to the Fugulnari. FriendJohn is not the mouse.

DREW

Not the—? Oh, rat. Mice are tiny and timid, it's rats that are the informants and sellouts. Except, the actual animals aren't like that at all, that's just another one of our metaphors.

ALTHAAR

Thanking you for the informings, Drew. Althaar can also say that the rewarding of FriendJohn would be indeed a thing of great unlikeliness. FriendJohn is not receiving the rewards, in the general coursing. The customary is "FriendJohn saved the Fairgrounds again yesterday, Althaar, and no one even noticed" over the morning cup of ja-va. But of course Althaar can not be saying with certain-ness that the reward was not to FriendJohn. Even the very unusual is happening on some occasioning.

DREW

Right.

ALTHAAR

It is regret to Althaar that he can not provide answerings of greater completeness, Drew.

DREW

No, that's— I appreciate you talking to me. And what you're saying does match with what I was kind of thinking already, but... now I don't know what to think. I spent so long hating this John B, because the Foogs said he was responsible, and— Maybe I should have known better than to believe them in the first place, but I was just so... I mean, I just came home one afternoon and Rufus was gone. He never said a word about his real work. He never told me he was working against the Committee.

ALTHAAR

It is perhaps not best to be speaking of these things in the public, Drew. But it is the belief of Althaar that your partner was very brave.

DREW

Well, if the Foogs ask, I can truthfully say never knew about any of it. Rufus never let anything slip.

ALTHAAR

It is a very difficult thing, to make the appearance of the self that is so different from the reality. But Althaar is certainty that Rufus was keeping the secrets so that you could be protection. To keep you safe from the danger that he was choosing.

DREW

I just wish he'd let *me* choose, you know? Sometimes I'm furious with him, for that. Because I was never safe from his secrets, not really. I was just oblivious. Until they all came crashing down on me.

ALTHAAR

Yes. The feelings of those left behind with suddenness are very often of the complex, and it is not a thing of easiness to be through-working of these. It is perhaps to consider that Rufus was nurturing not only the secrets that were his own, but those of others, that were not upon him to be revealing. Althaar was not knowing Rufus in the person, but it is seeming that your partner was willing to outstretch himself very greatly, in the protection of others.

DREW

Yeah. I never understood why he of all people would put on that stupid headband. But of course he'd do anything to look out for his team.

ALTHAAR

Yes, the wearing of the head-band can have many different causings, as you have made learning of yourself today. It is not utility to judge someone by the smell of their hat.

DREW

That's a good way to put it. I think... I think I might have mis-judged your friend, Althaar. I didn't listen right. I think I'm really sorry about that.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is certain that FriendJohn was not taking the offense, Drew. FriendJohn has made endurance of the loss of his own dear one, in a different way, not so long ago.

[scene 18] As before, the rise of not-quite-static becoming the distorted but understandable voices of BOOSTER OBSERVERS 1 and 2.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Read clear, read clear. Catch new info within a blight of interference. Return to Lamed 3.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Layer 9 and rising. Circumstance. Contact with Iltorian-One. Althaar.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Iltorian-One, hands off.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Iltorian-One, eyes off, brother! Negative Booster visual on Iltorian-One, say-so. Layer 9, apparent meeting with Iltorian-One in Lamed 3 eatery.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Control, backspace, flip-flop rewind. Layer 9, circumstance, phone communication with Iltorian-One prior-like. Iltorian-One to be also Layered?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Iltorian-One hands-off, not to be Layered. Rules as be rules.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Observed phone communication, Target PK-4-2-1 and Iltorian-One, contents have been jarred?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Contents unopenable. Potential code? Parlays unintelligible. Banana talk.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Banana talk?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Banana talk. Possible japery, potentiality of code still a say-so.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Layer 9.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Layer 9, circumstance, incoherent japery in communication with Iltorian-One. Same layer or different communication unusual as a start?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Same Layer 9. Layer 10, circumstance, unlikely meeting of Scarlett-comma-Andrew, Target PK-4-2-1 in Booster-negative locale with Human-negative Iltorian-One.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Booster-negative locale count as same Layer?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Booster-negative locale count as same Layer. Target PK-4-2-1 at Layer 10 and holding.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Where Target kicked upstairs on scale for current prelim observation?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Setting for this subject-space is Layer 21. Then we're off and the Theater can handle it.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

And more power to them. Less power to us.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Fine by me, pal. Because "where there's power...?"

BOOSTER OBSERVERS 1 and 2

(completing what must be a Foog slogan)

"There's work!"

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Hold, check and recheck. Target PK-4-2-1 is on the move again. Disturbed space, unequal to previous shape. Check disruption element.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

See hat, see hat, Target Scarlett-comma-Andrew, distraction element added. PK-4-2-1 possible disguise. Shapechange within tolerance but without cause.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Follow continue, switch board to key: microchanges in air density. Follow same Target as changed Target. Key in: Funny Hat.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Keyed-in: Funny Hat. Up-and-down premium level in shapeshift mode. Tap wave, continuing, Target 4-2-1 PK. Will check again on when regraded. Clear channel, systat, alt-twelve.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Buses cleared without gain, signal-to-noise optimal, maknam closed-slot until alt-thirty-three.

[scene 19] DREW leaves the Egg. Lamed sector is still testing ScarletLetter.

DREW

Well, this bears out what they say about beggars and choosers. Ask for a hat from the Lost and Found at a bar, and you get what you get. "I WAS LATE TODAY I SUCK." Can't imagine why someone left *this* behind. Oh, and it blinks. I'll save the blinky bit for special occasions, I guess.

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

(Honk) Disposable waste has bee-ee-eeen. Please stand by. You are receiving this broadcast as a trash-detector message. This is not a trash-detector message. This is a test *(DREW starts speaking around here, broadcast continues beneath)* of the ScarletLetter sub-circuit ambi-directional pulse network. This message is being broadcast in the Lamed sector.

DREW

Still going strong with the Trash—waitaminnit. No. Noooo. Are they looking for me? Surely they—well, I *can* think of a group that wouldn't want to just call on the phone and say hi.

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

(Honk) If you are the intended recipient of this message, please escalate this response. Message cycles. *(Honk)* Spli-i-i-tter defected. Do not la-a-a-dder. Attention. This is a t-t-t-est. Te-e-e-st. Do not glitter.

DREW

Escalate the response? How do—oh of course. Litter. Where's that napkin? Ah. Hey, Trashy! Look at this! Whee! Napkin on the floor!

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

(Honk) Escalating. Please c-c-c-comply. KCHCHCH-clack. Hello? Can you hear me? I don't want to use your name in the wild—I barely know your name. The other detectors are off now, I'm only on this one. Does DPC5 mean anything to you? If it does, I need you to say something into the audio grille. This is like a little security question.

Simultaneously:

DREW

Okay. Hello?... Hello? Can you hear me?

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

(Honk) Hello? Are you there? Try yelling for a—

DREW

HELLO?

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

(Honk) Ok, got you. These detectors weren't really made for this, obviously. I need you to hook your comm to, wait, to get the housing off you'll need a multitool. Berenger's Memory, it's always something.

DREW

OF COURSE I HAVE A MULTITOOL. I'M NOT AN ANIMAL. HOLD ON.

Opening-the-housing-with-a-multitool noises, plugging in the phone.

DREW

Ok, I'm hooked in. Can you hear me?

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

OK, got you now. DPC5? What does it mean to you? Bear with me, I have to check.

DREW

It's... Data Processing Center #5. They were taken by the Foogs. I have a receipt.

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

Boy, have we been looking for you.

DREW

Are you who I think you are?

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

If it starts with Re and ends with sistance, you're cooking with gas. Though steam would probably be better, especially for seafood. Hold on, I need to pulse your location. You need to get that step-counter de-activated—if they're not after you now, they will be soon.

DREW

Pulse my location?

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

Oh, sweet. We've got someone literally a few steps away. Stand by.

DREW

Who are you?

H.F./HACKED TRASH DETECTOR

I'm a guy who is better off not having a name right now.

A wall panel opens nearby. It takes some shoving. Metal heaving noises.

STELLA

Come with me if you want to live.

DREW

What?

STELLA

I've always wanted to say that. You're Drew, right? My name is Stella Reyes. I'm from Sanitation.

DREW

Did you just come out of the wall?

STELLA

Yup, and you're coming right back in there with me, once that tracker in your step-counter's been neutralized. Hold still.

Zap and fizzle as STELLA uses some jury-rigged device to deactivate the step-counter's tracking chip in a very off-label fashion. DREW gets a bit of a zap as well.

DREW

Ow!

STELLA

Sorry. All done. Come on, we need to get out of sight. Through here.

They climb through the panel, which STELLA closes up behind them.

DREW

You can actually walk around back here? I thought it was just pipes and ducts and such behind all those panels.

STELLA

Depends on where you are. Sometimes, you'll find yourself floating through some huge open vault of an old staging area, and then the next thing you know, you're crawling through a maze of twisty little passages, all alike.

DREW

This is why no one sees the Resistance working most of the time. You've got a bunch of... secret warrens back here. Amazing.

STELLA

Don't romanticize it or anything. It's not a place anyone was supposed to go once the Fairgrounds came online, let alone try to live in. It's cramped and blunt at the best of times. But it's been our salvation so far, having a way to get around without drawing attention to ourselves. We're never going to beat the Foogs with numbers, so keeping out of sight is pretty much all we've got.

H.F.

(now coming over STELLA's comms device)

Which is why we were in such a rush to find you. You, my friend, are not a shadow-master of the subtle art of blending in.

DREW

Oh, hi. Are you the one who was trying to talk to me through the trash detectors? What's the deal with those?

H.F.

Yeah, that was me. The deal with the TDUs is, I've been trying for a while to figure out a way we can actually communicate with people on the outside, without giving up our location. I mean, there's Radio Free Fairgrounds, and the HECNET proxies when we can keep them up and running, but those are both more of a one-way thing. Not so great when it comes to real-time conversation. I've been burning through burner phones like a Mebsutan gobstopper since New Year's.

STELLA

And even that's risky, because if the Foogs manage to triangulate the signal precisely enough to realize it's coming from behind the walls...

H.F.

...and it's goodbye the Ferrari. So we really needed an off-grid alternative. I figured piggybacking off the existing infrastructure would be way easier than trying to install something ourselves. And when I started looking at networks that cover the whole Fairgrounds, but are small enough potatoes that I could poke around in them without attracting attention, the Trash Detection Units were the obvious choice. Plus, they're constantly getting busted up anyway, so I figured I could grab a few to experiment on without sending up any flags.

STELLA

And it doesn't hurt that trash disposal is one of the few departments the Committee has actually left in Human hands.

H.F.

Right.

DREW

Okay, but why would the TDUs be networked in the first place? I mean, people call them trash-bots, but they're not actual bots, they're just a simple sensor array hooked up to a playback circuit and a speaker. Right?

H.F.

Right, but it turns out these TDUs weren't custom-built for the Fairgrounds, they were outsourced to KronosCo. And *they* include a standard demo package in every unit they ship—a fancy integrated active circuit, to collect information on each unit and carry back limited commands.

DREW

A sub-circuit ambi-directional pulse network. Huh. Kind of overkill for a litter-prevention system, but I guess I can see it. It would tell you where you needed more trash cans, at least.

H.F.

Well, it would have, if the HEC Design Committee had picked up the option. So this network has just been sitting there for fifty years, doing nothing. Well, not *nothing*—it's been pulling power from the station grid to send trash data to nowhere several times a second. Literally worse than useless.

DREW

Of course. Standard ID-10t error.

H.F.

You work I.T? Forward-facing?

DREW

Design and engineering. Messing up your work, my specialty.

H.F.

Black hat or white?

DREW

If you did it right in the first place, I wouldn't need a hat!

H.F.

Ha!

STELLA

Hey, fellas, shop-talk is always nice, but can we keep it on track right now?

H.F.

Fair enough. Sorry, Stel. Won't happen again.

DREW

So, Stella, you're the one who's in charge around here?

STELLA

No, no one's in charge, Drew. We're all equals here in the Resistance. Working together to oppose the Committee however we can, with whatever skills we can bring to the table.

H.F.

I mean, sure, no one's in charge, but Stella was the head of Sanitation back in the day, and she saw more than her share of vent-biter raids before that. So when she talks, people usually listen.

DREW

Really? Fan-tasia! I saw a team of you folks take down a breeding swarm in the Mem 3 food court once. It was amazing. Also terrifying, obviously, but really, really impressive.

STELLA

Aw, thanks. Sometimes I miss those days. Isn't that bizarre? But everything seemed a lot simpler back then. Wading in together, shoulder to shoulder, protecting our fellow Humans from the toothy menace. No such thing as a veeb collaborator, right? Really though, we lost so many good people. It was an ugly fight. People died. A lot. I was lucky.

H.F.

But anyway, yeah, the nice thing about the trash detectors is that they can't be traced once I get them talking station to station. They don't know where they are themselves, since their network wasn't ever hooked up to the station's comms stacks. So they can't tell anyone else either.

DREW

I wasn't going to answer at first. A trash-page. Definitely a new experience.

H.F.

I'll be honest, I wasn't really expecting you to. That was kind of a hail-Mary pass.

VERT

Hi, boss!

STELLA

Not your boss, Vert.

VERT

This guy bothering you?

STELLA

No, it's more like we're bothering him, actually.

VERT

You want I should take care of him? I got nearly everything grown back since that last time with the smasher.

STELLA

No, thanks. We're all good here.

VERT

Ok, boss! Catch you later!

DREW

Smasher? What's a smasher?

STELLA

Capacitor panel. Vert was sure they must be little accessways and wouldn't stop trying to climb through them, right up until one blew and punched him all the way down a drop channel. Anyway, we've heard a little of your story, Drew, and I'm not going to press you for more of it. All of us are a little dazed back here, with people gone or people dead or people who just stopped answering one day and who knows what happened.

H.F.

It's hard times. For everybody. Even Vert. Which doesn't make it any less hard for you.

STELLA

What we all agree on, though, is we don't want to lose any more than we have to. Which is why we wanted to get hold of you, PDQ.

DREW

PDQ? My mom used to say PDQ. Haven't heard it since I was a kid. But... why me? I haven't been doing anything dangerous. Just talking to people.

H.F.

Yeah, you've just been talking to people, but most of those people are the kind of people that can attract the wrong kind of attention your way, if you're not really careful.

STELLA

And you have not been careful. At all. Look at it like this. We've got kind of... an ecosystem going, here. Little by little, we've been building something that runs as a function of all its parts, and for the benefit of everyone in it as well. And then you came blazing out of nowhere this morning.

H.F.

You've been rocketing through the Fairgrounds like heavy ordinance, you know? You wake up as just some guy, but then halfway through second cycle, you've got a headband and you're showing up on the Bridge. "Oh, hi there Commander, I was in the sector, just thought I'd drop in." You've got a one-on-one with the Iltorian, which most Humans in their right minds can't even think about without leaving squirt trails to the nearest dark corner. And in the Electric Egg, of all places.

STELLA

We normally don't get anywhere near the Egg, for their safety and ours. Chip and Xtopps have got enough eyes on them already.

DREW

I just had a couple of drinks! Shit. Sorry, it never occurred to me anyone might be watching me. Just the opposite. Usually nobody notices me at all. Why would anyone be watching me? Like you said, I'm just some guy.

STELLA

Just some guy who lived with some guy who ended up getting publicly denounced as an anti-Foog terrorist. Did you really think the Committee wouldn't be tracking known associates?

DREW

I wasn't... I just came home one day, and he was gone. I thought he was just out having some hang time with a couple of friends, you know? And then— then I heard the announcement. I couldn't—I wasn't really thinking clearly for a while after that, I guess. I wasn't really thinking much at all, if I could help it.

STELLA

Yeah. It can take you like that.

H.F.

Tough as free-range Ballimoe. Sorry, pal.

STELLA

And I've been there, and I know some of how you must be feeling, but we all need you to get your head straight. Because you've been burning a very bright line straight across the Fairgrounds today, and the brighter you get, the more you risk shining a light in some corners we very much need to stay dark. Remember, when you're walking a road, that somebody built that road. And other people besides you need to use it. So, I don't know what exactly your play is here, but I'd like you to consider scrapping it and working with us instead. We can always use another smart hand. I think it was you who spoke to Delly at HECNET this morning? He's a great recruiter. He said you seemed pretty skittish about joining up, but... there's a community here, you know? A solid one. And whatever you're trying to do right now, you've got a much better chance of actually pulling it off with some friends at your back.

DREW

I was— I feel like a Lood. Just a few hours ago I sat down with the guy who denounced Rufus and DPC5. Or, the guy who got blamed for it, anyway. I'm pretty sure now that was all just propaganda. But I didn't know that then, and I made a speech just like yours, telling him that that stupid little thing he did without thinking about other people? Turned out to be the biggest thing in the world to the people he wasn't thinking about. The people he destroyed. And now you're telling me I've been doing the exact same thing.

H.F.

Ain't it the way.

STELLA

So, what are you thinking now? Do you want to stick around? If you're going to go back into the world, you're going to want to report that "malfunction" in your tracking chip as soon as possible.

H.F.

Tell them you caught an arc from a shorted-out terminal, that shouldn't raise too many leafy eyebrows.

DREW

I think... I think I'd like to finish Rufus' last mission. Whatever it was. He never told me, you know. I had no idea he was working with you.

STELLA

He wasn't. We had eyes on him as a potential recruit, but the Foogs got to him before we could make contact.

DREW

Oh.

STELLA

We thought he might have been trying to get word off-station to someone, though.

DREW

Yeah. Yeah, he was. Someone on Mars. I don't have any names or anything like that, though, sorry. Whoever it is, they're really careful about cleaning up their breadcrumbs.

H.F.

Inconvenient for us, but at least they're keeping their heads down.

STELLA

And at least this confirms they exist. That's not nothing. You don't have any idea what Rufus was working on?

DREW

Well, they sent him this pot. It's supposed to be some kind of disguise? It's scented, to fool any Foogs who don't look too close into thinking I'm one of them.

H.F.

Huh. We've been working on something like that ourselves, but those pheromone signatures are really tricky to get right. Voussh almost got busted the last time she tried it.

DREW

Whoever put it together seemed pretty confident. I'm willing to take the risk.

STELLA

It's just the pot? Nothing else? That might work on a Foog, we know how nearsighted they are, but what happens if you run into a Booster?

DREW

I don't think that's going to be an issue. I know where I want to use it, now.

STELLA

Which is?

DREW

I'm going to sneak into the Rehab and Detention blocks, see if I can find out where Rufus was kept. See if I can find anyone else from 5. Someone might still be alive.

H.F.

Streez, when you go high security, you go high security.

STELLA

Are you sure about this? You're biting off a lot with your first mouthful.

DREW

I have to know. I have to be sure.

STELLA

...Ok. Well, we've got a friend locked up in there, so we can give you a few details about the layout.

DREW

You mean, whassername, the singer. Dee. Dee Mallory.

H.F.

Right. She's in the inner section, just inside the main doors. There are usually only a couple of guards in there, and they're generally pretty thick, and not just around the trunk. We think the Foogs might be using it as a punishment detail for screwups, actually. Still, you should be careful. Frondrinax visits at least once a day.

STELLA

And we don't have any details about anything beyond the main brig area. You'll be flying solo once you get past that point.

DREW

You can't get there through these tunnels?

H.F.

Believe me, we'd love to. But the outer brig isn't part of the original Fairgrounds, it's entirely new Foog construction. Started out as a loading dock, but it's anyone's guess what it is now. Whatever it is, though, it's big. Big enough that they had to expand past the outer hull. You can see the addition from the external cameras—it's like some big metallic mushroom sprouting out of Bet sector.

DREW

Do you know anything about... alarms, patrols, hidey holes, that sort of thing?

STELLA

Sorry, no. That whole extension is a black box.

H.F.

We've got a tap on some of the inner-brig cameras, so we've seen some of the higher-up Foogs pass by sometimes, on their way in and out. No Boosters, though.

STELLA

Which is good news, as far as your disguise goes.

H.F.

But we have seen some other Humans being taken in there. Not too many come out. And the ones that do are in... pretty rough shape. So I gotta ask, are you sure you're up for something like this?

STELLA

It's not like it looks in the vids, at all. Infiltration is combat, and combat is hard. Sanitation might have made it look easy, but you have to remember that we drilled constantly. All the time. And we still lost people. *All the time.*

DREW

I've got a couple of tricks up my sleeve. And a couple of fingers to cross.

STELLA

...All right. Well, if you're set on pushing ahead solo, we can get you partway there via the In-Betweens. Not inside, but close.

DREW

Close is close enough. Thanks for helping out, and calming my head.

H.F.

Make sure your heart is ready too. You'll need it. Hope you make it out of there in one piece. We can meet up on the other side.

DREW

I don't know your name.

H.F.

You know Stella, and she knows me. And once you're out of there, I'll find you. Keep your eyes open.

[scene 20] And one last time, the rise of not-quite-static becomes the distorted but understandable voices of BOOSTER OBSERVERS 1 and 2. They are a bit more urgent than before.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Now mark! Now mark! Target PK-4-2-1 Scarlett-comma-Andrew has left the board!

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Layer 11 or beyond?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Beyond circumstance now, Target has entered zone of deliberation. Target is lost.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Stepcounter fogged again?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Stepcounter beyond fogged, stepcounter is voided. Scarlett-comma-Andrew, Target PK-4-2-1 has vanished from Observer reach. Cut strings and pass on. Layers not within this nohow.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Kicking it up. Theater of Noise has been alerted, files and circumstances transferred. Target PK-4-2-1, Scarlett-comma-Andrew is no longer concern of our Layers. The Theater can take it from here.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

And pardon, but fine by this Observer. Target of great confusion. Disunderstandable.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Agreed and cleared, brother. Glad to have him off my bus. You off-shift at next cycle?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

Off-shift at next cycle, positive.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Meet up, Gimel 14? Booster-friendly locality. You know it?

BOOSTER OBSERVER 2

You know it, pal. Closing out the board. Clear channel, final show of the day, systat, alt-thirteen and streamed back to zero. All cleared, buzz-negative.

BOOSTER OBSERVER 1

Bus cleared without gain, signal-to-noise optimal, closed-slot nammed and diluted, past alt-forty-four passing back to zero. Next shift in and open to newness. See you in Gimel, partner.

[scene 21] And they fade away for the last time as DREW squeezes out of an access panel hatch—wall, floor, whatever. He is near the guarded entrance to Rehab and Detention. There's a shabby victim here, a DAZED & CONFUSED ZOOD.

DREW

All right, here we are. Stupid hat, check. Feather cloak, check. Mysterious pot that I am trusting with my life because what else is there left to do, check. And just around that corner, my personal Mordor. Into which I am about to simply walk.

DAZED & CONFUSED ZOOD

Are you a plant?

DREW

What? Am I a *plant*? No, I am not a plant.

DAZED & CONFUSED ZOOD

Am I a Human?

DREW

I... would assume so? Unless you're a bot I don't recognize. It's possible, History was always my worst subject.

DAZED & CONFUSED ZOOD

Are you sure you're not a plant? You have a pot.

DREW

Oh! Right. That's not a pot, that's a costume. I'm a... stripper. Not a stripper, no. I meant a singing text message. You know? Some people get a kick out of it. Like, a member of the Committee came to your door to sing you a message! Get it? ...Different strokes.

DAZED & CONFUSED ZOOD

That's weird. *(beat)* They let me out. At least, I think they let me out. It was dark for a long long time, and then it was always light for a while. They said I was helping everyone with my cooperation and that the tests would be over soon. And then they let me out. I think. Is this out, or is it some kind of trick? I'm not talking! You can't make me talk.

DREW

You're out, my friend. Listen, you should get away from here. It's not safe. Here's what I want you to do, ok? Just go straight down this hallway, and turn right at the first junction. Then knock a few times on the left-hand wall. Someone should hear you. Someone who can help.

DAZED & CONFUSED ZOOD

...Okay.

DREW

How long were you in there?

DAZED & CONFUSED ZOOD

Two days. The dark day, and the light one. Look how much my hair grew in two days! I'm special!

DREW

Sure. Listen, you'll remember what I said, right? Look for someone who can help.

DAZED & CONFUSED ZOOD

Okay. ...I'm sorry you were late today, gesin. But I don't think you suck.

DREW

Thanks.

DREW enters the front doors of the Rehab and Detention wing. The Skunk Works people have done some magic, so The Shoe does not make pesky scrapy sounds as it moves along. I am sidestepping the problem of Fugulnari locomotion here.

GATE GUARD

Hello, Kevinyax. Is this your first time here?

DREW (as KEVINYAX)

It is, yes. I studied the floor plan before coming, of course. For efficiency.

GATE GUARD

Of course!

DREW (as KEVINYAX)

I'm here to make a finance assessment of per-prisoner expenditures. Where is the Dee Mallory?

GATE GUARD

Straight on, then to the right. Here, I'll mark a point for you. *(nothing happens)*

DREW (as KEVINYAX)

Uh, thank you. I'll go straight there.

GATE GUARD

Accounting, eh? Lots of beans to count!

DREW (as KEVINYAX)

There sure are! No shortage of beans! Ha! Ha!

They laugh, the way you do at something that is completely not funny. The inner gate rolls open. Maybe a buzz at the end.

GATE GUARD

Careful with that Mallory one. I hear it moves a lot. For no reason.

DREW (as KEVINYAX)

How terribly inefficient. Thanks for the warning, friend.

GATE GUARD

Not at all! We angiosperms have to look out for one another, right?

DREW (as KEVINYAX)

I couldn't have said it better myself.

DREW moves through the gate, which closes behind him, and then down a corridor.

DREW

And I'm in. Huh. Looks just like a normal corridor. Well, what was I expecting, a big neon sign that reads "Incriminating Evidence This Way?" Although I guess for evidence to be incriminating, the stuff you're doing has to be considered a crime. And the Committee are the ones who decide what is and isn't a crime these days. They'd definitely include what I'm doing right now, though, so let's see if we can't make this quick.

(cont.)

Aaaand I have followed that guard's directions, straight into a dead end. Of course. They can hardly tell left from right on the best of days. Let's head back the other way, shall we? Probably the guard was actually making some kind of pheromone map for me, which would be very helpful if I had any way of reading it. Maybe the pot can do that, and I just don't know how to turn it on. But I didn't see any controls. Well, here's a door, but I don't have any way to— Hm. Maybe they're keyed to pheromones, too? Only one way to find out.

He approaches the door, and it opens.

Praise be to my magic pot. Door opener, all-around disguise. I wonder if it flosses. Ha, my magic planter. Time was if someone made an album named The Magic Planter, I'd have been all over it. Oh, another guard station. *(puts on KEVINYAX voice)* Hello? Kevinyax here, to conduct a— *(back to normal voice)* Oh, it's dark. Okay. I guess they're not too worried about keeping fully staffed in here, since they only have... one prisoner. And here she is.

The door to DEE's anteroom opens, and DREW enters.

DEE

Hello? Who are you? And what is that on your— “I was late today I suck?” If you're my rescue mission, then I'd say your hat has it at least half right. I've been waiting for someone to bust me out for like eight months.

DREW

Dee Mallory, in the person. I saw you at the Egg a couple times, you were great. Long-time fan, first time breaking into a prison. Sorry, I'm Drew. Everything else is kind of a long story.

DEE

Hi, Drew. Thanks. So, is this actually a rescue? Because I have to say, the outfit is not exactly filling me with confidence. Setting aside the whole “I suck” thing, you really should lose the feather cloak, because you are definitely not pulling off that retro Potiguara-chic look.

DREW

It's supposed to disguise my silhouette. Um, I hate to say this, but I'm not actually here to get you out. I'm actually on more of a recon mission. And I only have the one pot. But if you wanted to try making a break for it... give me a second, let's see what we see. I'm good with locks.

DREW scans the door with his super-plot-device handheld.

DREW

Ah, but alas. This door isn't responding to my pheromone key, and of all the locks in all the sectors I have waltzed through today, this is the only one with up-to-date firmware over the latest drivers. I'm sure someone can open it, but I'm not that someone.

DEE

Seriously sub-par marks for planning there, Mr. Drew. ...Or is it Booster Drew? Is that a kinky headband I spy under that peculiar hat? What the frid? Is this some new Frondrinax psyops smark?

DREW

No, no, I'm not really a Booster. I just joined for the miles. A lot of ground to cover today. But I think the road is winding down now.

DEE

Ah. Well, that's what they do in this place, wind down roads.

DREW

Specifically, I'm looking for my boyfriend, Rufus. Have you seen him? He's a big friendly guy, with sort of a—

DEE

Can't help you, Drew. I don't see anyone but the only two friends of mine the Foogs can't keep out, for political reasons. I definitely haven't seen another Human since— He was Human, right? Your boyfriend?

DREW

Yes. Partner, I should say partner. Because we moved in together, before they took him. So he always wants me to say partner.

DEE

I'm sorry, honey. That's— I'm really sorry. If I do see him, I'll tell him you broke in here to try and take him home.

DREW

Thanks. I— Now I kind of don't know what to do. I haven't seen any other prisoners at all. Or any kind of... records room, or anything.

DEE

Did you tell him you loved him before they took him?

DREW

I did. I said it all the time.

DEE

Then he knows it, Drew. I know just what you're saying. I've been afraid for my family, on Tammuz. And I've had a lot of time to think, about love and regret and fear. *A lot* of time.

DREW

Yeah. Radio Free Fairgrounds tells us every day how long you've been in here.

DEE

Right. And after a few months, I couldn't stand being afraid any more. It's just... exhausting. Fear eats away at love, you know? Turns it into something angry. The thing is, there's nothing I can do in here that will change what happens to my family. Or what already happened. Their fate is just not something I can control. So once I let go of that constant, gnawing fear, it was like dropping a massive weight. So much weight that without it dragging me down, I felt like I could fly. If they're alive, they know I love them. There's never been a doubt about that. And if they're not, they knew that I loved them when it turned into the end. Sometimes in a war, that's the best we can do.

DREW

You're amazing.

DEE

Thanks, zood. But can we not get all sticky now? Because I've been locked up too long to handle this kind of sticky thing. I'll just lose it.

DREW

Of course. Of course. I made this all about me, didn't I.

DEE

It's sort of about all of us, these days. Besides, I don't see anyone else here.

DREW

Do you— do you know that song, by Bastard Mojave? It's, uh... I always forget what the actual title is, it's nowhere in the lyrics, but everyone calls it—

DEE

The HeartFall song. Sure. It's a standard. Are you making a request, Drew?

DREW

Is that— Would you mind? Just the chorus, maybe? It was Rufus' favorite. He used to sing it to me, and he—he just couldn't sing. I mean, bless him. But it was terrible. I'd just... really like to hear it, one more time.

DEE

I'd love to.

(sings)

Now it's over and it feels like it barely started
I remember the first time I ever touched your hand
I'm bursting with love and I'm broken-hearted,
All at the same time—
How can I feel both at the same time?
How big is the heart that it can be so big?
How full that it bursts when the sun goes down?

How empty that we can fall right into it
And never touch bottom?

DREW

Thank you. You don't know how much I needed that.

The scratchy audio tap we heard in Ep. 29 comes to scratchy life.

H.F.

(over the tap)

Dee? Can you hear me? You got Drew there with you, yeah?

DEE

Well, he's with me in the sense that he's on the other side of my cell door, with no keys to open it. 2 out of 10, would not jailbreak again. Though he's making me feel emotionally shattered and incredibly Human right now, which I kind of missed, in a weird way.

H.F.

Yeah, he's been doing that all over.

DREW

Sorry, but he didn't actually send me to break you out. Hey, why don't you send someone to break her out?

H.F.

Love to, but it's not that simple, kid. Anyway, that's not why I tapped in. Drew, you need to get away from Dee's cell, asap. Looks like you're about to have bad company. Frondrinax just entered Bet sector, with that little guy, Runty. And if she's headed for the brig, that can only mean one thing: she's about to spend the next hour or two talking Dee's ear off.

DEE

Greeeeeat.

DREW

Oh, shit. Okay, I'm on my way. Hang on, how did you know I was here with Dee?

H.F.

I told you we had a tap on their surveillance system, yeah? Dee's cell camera was the first one we chipped.

DREW

Ok, but are you running some kind of off-band aggregator conduit? Because those chips can be pulled in as open relays, and they can turn two-way without letting you know there's an outside line piggybacked on your signal.

H.F.

We're good, we've got a local setup, put in during a camera blackout.

DREW

Zood. No. If there's anyone on you, they can track those right back to your call-in line. Stay spare on them unless you're using a *universal* conduit. That's one of the big bug-shielded installations. With the local ones, the right technician on the wrong conduit circuit can drop your firewalls like a conjugal visit.

H.F.

That's... that's bad news, and also a horrifically inappropriate image. Ok, I'm gonna sign out. Drew, you gotta get moving. If you're still heading where you said you were heading, you're going to want to take a right out the door, then a left down the first corridor. You'll know you're at the right place when you see some huge no-jecking blast doors. Good luck. And Dee, I'll try to check back in later with the inducer, so keep an ear out, ok?

DEE

Will do.

H.F.'s comms feed cuts out.

DREW

Ok, I better go. Sorry for getting your hopes up about the jailbreak. Maybe... maybe I can make that my next mission. If I get the chance.

DEE

Looking forward to it. I'll be keeping my fingers crossed for you, Drew. Here's hoping you've got more road than you think.

DREW

Thanks. And thanks for— for everything.

Anteroom door opens and closes as we follow Drew back into the corridor.

DREW

Okay. Right, then left, then what sounds like some pretty obvious doors. And since I got those directions from someone who actually has a right and left, I'm going to assume they're accurate. So... I'm almost at the end of the line. One way or another.

Look at me, swee! Look where I am, look where I made it. You should be here. You are, in a way, I think. This is— probably this is my last day, Ru. So, at least it's an adventure. I'm so proud of you. I hope you're proud of me.

(cont.)

Ah. Those are indeed some huge no-jecking blast doors. Do they recognize our good friend Kevinyax?

They do. Huge no-jecking door whoosh. DREW crosses into the unmapped area.

Nice. *(door whooshes shut)* Huh. Dark back here, isn't it? I guess they disabled the sensor lights. Is there—aha. *(turns on the kind of light you pull a string to turn on)* Huh. Well, I don't know what exactly I was expecting to find in the heart of greenness, but it definitely wasn't a bunch of boxes that look like they just got pulled out of my great-aunt's attic. Is there a terminal somewhere in all this mess?

DREW scans with the super-plot-device handheld. There's a chirp.

There we go. Back behind these boxes of—Are these leftover decorations from that Christmas pageant disaster? Ribbons, giant candles... Must be. *(rummaging)* Oh, look! A sled. Huh. Why would they keep—“Cameron, comma, Candace, Docket #825923b”, Exhibits H through M.” Huh. All right, enough sightseeing. Here's our terminal, let's have a little look.

Powering up a terminal. It's been in sleep mode for a while. DREW blows dust off the screen. Keyboard clattering as necessary below.

Station locked, please log in, right. Come to papa. My admin access is... still active, yep. They haven't spotted me yet after all. Kill the monitors, lock the remote, pin the screensaver, alias a local sysop login: now I can see you and you can't see me. My favorite. One for the money, two for the—crap. No access to the central database from here. Where can I get a good feed into—there it is. If I take this travelator to the end of the passage, then the room at the end should have a cargo lift down one level to the, okay, there's the loading dock, in case I feel like loading, and that has a control terminal. Right. Kevinyax, let's you and me travelate.

He shuts down the station, opens another door, and takes the travelator down a long passage into the next chamber.

I must be outside the hull proper, now. Whatever's out here, it's something the Foogs definitely didn't want anyone just stumbling across. Which means I just may be getting—

The doors open into a massive chamber.

Close. Oh mang. This is huge. And all these—they must be using these as cells. Stacked five high and running all along, wow, they could stuff hundreds of Humans in here. More than hundreds. But they're all empty now. Maybe—Is this where all those missing people from Vav ended up?

DREW boards an industrial elevator, the sort of thing that has yellow spinning work lights on it. It's not enclosed. DREW yanks a lever or clacks a control button to get it moving.

Down please. Sub-basement: Men's Haberdashery, Kitchen Supplies, Home Furnishings, Industrial Bric-a-Brac. All abooooard! Please keep your hands and feet inside the ride at all times. Whew, this isn't just a loading dock. I thought they meant a little airlock in the wall where a cargo-puller could drop off a few boxes. This setup could fit a shuttle tug in those berths, and have room left over for a salt-water taffy stand and a coffee pop-up.

With a sharp clack, the room is activated. Lights, air, the dozens of small machines that are part of docking and lading.

Oookay. So someone just turned on all the lights, and I'm assuming it's no one I want to see right now. This place is active, look at all those crates and lifts. Ok, this isn't anywhere I want to settle in, swee, so if it's alright with you I'm just going to crack that terminal and then make for the open road.

Powering up this terminal is much like powering up the other, but this one hasn't been moribund for any time. There's no dust on it. Keyboard sound as needed. Maybe a "nope, can't help" fizzle sound when searches don't work?

Second verse, same as the first. Get in and isolate... and... here we are. Let's see what we can see. Prisoners—nope. Odd. Maybe... Interrogations? Nope. Espionage? No. I know, Resistance—no, not that either. Ok, let's go over to command line. Can we run xgrep here? We can, and Rufus doesn't come up. But there's—there's Data Processing Center #5. Some of them anyway. Sent to Farm, Central Hold, R&D... Mulch. That's why there are no prisoners. Kousei and Edison are *mulch*. I'm going to be ill. That's just—

Impotent keyboard clacking. This terminal has been turned off from inside the network.

Hmm. I've got local schematics, but I'm frozen now. That's... not good.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(over speakers)

Hello, Drew. It is Drew, isn't it? Or do you prefer Kevinyax? We met on the Bridge this afternoon, you and I. Of course you weren't wearing that nifty little pheromone badge at the time. But we did speak, briefly, just after those misfits of Torianna's tried to double-park the station on an ice ring, or something.

ROOTY

(also over the speakers)

It was Rooty, Mama! Remember? Rooty pushed buttons to see the pretty rock! And then Rooty had utility-closet-time to think about what he did.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Quiet, Rooty. Well! You've been a busy bee today, haven't you, Booster Drew? In your own loose-rooted way, at least. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, but really, it does get exhausting. The sort of nonsense we have to deal with, just, all the time with you Humans! We offered you a day of free travel, and what did you do? You took advantage of our generosity to run around *spying* on people, breaking into restricted areas, and to accomplish what? For what possible reason? All we're trying to do is help you Humans! To make your lives better!

DREW

You can't possibly expect anyone to believe that.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Why shouldn't they? It's the absolute sunlit truth! It's just that you're too primitive to know what's good for you. And I suppose that's not your fault, not really. I do try to keep that in mind. To be understanding of your natural shortcomings, no matter how frustrating my work can be.

DREW

And you expect us to be grateful for that.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, you certainly *ought* to be, but experience has taught me not to expect anything of the kind. You people so rarely take the sensible view of things. So we'll just have to keep showing you a better way. Over and over and over, if that's what it takes. We can take our time. A plant is nothing if not patient.

DREW

Is that what happened to the Humans in these cells? You showed them the glory of the Plant Way?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, actually! There's no need to be sarcastic. Plenty of our guests here do realize how foolish they've been, and renounce their obstructionist ways. Eventually. And once they do, they're free to go back to their lives, with a renewed sense of purpose and newfound devotion to efficiency! Under heavy surveillance, naturally, we're not about to take any chances with known counter-productives. But I can say with some pride that we have yet to see a single incident of recidivism from any of our graduates from the Cognitive Restructuring Program. Of course, they're not exactly what you'd call sparkling conversationalists either, but that's hardly necessary to the efficient operation of a mulch extractor, now is it?

DREW

Right. Mulch. Which is what becomes of anyone who doesn't "graduate." I saw the records, Frondrinax. I know what you've done here.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, yes, there are some unfortunate cases that simply refuse to be helped. And it's not like we have infinite storage available, after all, or infinite resources to expend on those who won't contribute. So we have to deal with the irredeemables somehow. The less disruptive elements are shipped off to help out on secure farming facilities back on Fugulnar, where they can at least support the Ascendancy with manual labor, while their education continues. But for the truly unrepentant... Well, some people just have nothing to offer the galaxy but their basic nutrients.

DREW

You're a monster.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, let's not be melodramatic, please. It's not like I *enjoy* seeing someone go down the mulch chute. But there's only so long we can allow them to continue willfully trammeling the Plant Way, after all. And as long as they have to be terminated, there's no need to be wasteful about it. If you're going to be cross with anyone, it should be these Humans who kept on causing a fuss, even after they knew the consequences! They had no one to blame but themselves, really.

DREW

I'm going to kill you.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No, I don't think you are, dearie. You're in a restricted area under full lockdown, after all, and we've finally taken care of that pesky admin access of yours. Whereas I'm sitting here in my office, with my favorite sun lamp and a nice cup of glycosides. So I don't think you'll be seeing me in person anytime soon, let alone committing any sort of foolish violence. But let's talk about something more interesting, shall we? I'm very curious about that pot of yours. Where did that come from?

DREW

I got it in the mail.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You got it in the mail. Wait, don't tell me. There were elves involved, weren't there? This feels like the sort of Human thing that involves elves.

DREW

Yes, it's an early Christmas present. You'd look pretty good replanted in it and stuck in my back closet, actually. I'd have to prune you down, of course. That would be fun.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ah. More empty threats. A typical, disorganized Human response. It's a wonder you didn't all kill each other off before we came along, really. Anyway, diverting as our little chat has been, Kevinyax, I do have other things on my agenda this cycle, so I'm going to leave you to one of our auxiliary security squads. The troop transport should be docking in a minute or two, and they'll be taking you into custody as soon as they disembark. Don't worry, you'll be treated very well. Although perhaps not for very long. I have the feeling you're going to insist on being difficult.

DREW

Troop transport?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, you should be able to see it through the vacuum screens in a few moments, if you can't already. We always keep a few squads in orbit, in case of emergencies, and since you've conveniently delivered yourself to their main docking area, it's much simpler to just bring one of them in to apprehend you. Here it comes!

DREW

It looks like a... giant ball of dirt. With engines.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I suppose that's because that's what it is, basically. I've never understood why you people insist on building your spacecraft out of stuff you can't even eat.

DREW

This... This is your main supply depot, isn't it? It's got to be, there's no other reason you'd need such a massive shipping and storage capacity. And that would explain those massive trunk cables bolted into that box multi over there. You must use an enormous amount of power—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

We do! We had to add an entire secondary power station when we built this addition, just to handle the docking facilities. And to make sure we were able to maintain functionality if the main grid went down, of course. Wouldn't want any nasty surprises!

DREW

Surprises. Right. You know what I hear? That the utility of a fully-charged laser welder can't be overstated.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hm? I didn't catch that. Never mind, it doesn't matter now. The transport is almost in position. I suppose I should say it's been a pleasure talking to you, but it hasn't really. You're obviously beyond help at this point.

DREW

Because an arc welder can make just a couple of cuts into a circuit like that—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Like what? What circuit? What are you talking about?

DREW

—and that’s all they wrote.

DREW races out of the control room to the nearby power cables. We hear him turn on the laser welder.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Why are you running? There’s nowhere for you to— What are you doing? What’s that?

DREW

THIS IS FOR RUFUS, YOU FLOTTING FOOG BASTARDS!

*He starts cutting into the main power conduits with the laser-welder, causing a sharp electric snap with a haze of sparks. **Shouting from MRS. FRONDRINAX and questions from ROOTY over the intercom before it is cut off** by an explosion that destroys DREW, the transport, the Foog soldiers, the docking bay, and the rest of the Fugulnari security pod, including the nearby power plant, which also detonates. It dies into silence. A beat.*

[scene 22] Closing credits music.

ANNOUNCER

You’ve been listening to *Life With Althaar*, episode 32!

This episode was written by Linus Gelber for Gemini CollisionWorks and starred

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Zuri Washington as Dee

Berit Johnson as Althaar

John Amir as John B

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant Frall

Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

Eli Gantias as H.F.

and Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

and also featured

David Arthur Bachrach, Ian W. Hill, Jessica Stoya, Linus Gelber, Olivia Baseman, Holly Pocket

McCaffrey, Anna Stefanic, Leila Okafor, Lex Friedman, Fred Backus, Clara Francesca, Leila

Okafor, Dean Haspiel, Rolls Andre, and Philip Cruise

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

Berit is the supervising producer, showrunner, and script supervisor
Ian is the audio producer, sound designer, and technical supervisor
The writers' room consists of Berit, Ian, John, Philip, Lex, Linus, Amanda, and Chris
Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanic
Life With Althaar logo and illustration created by Dean Haspiel
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We'll be back in two weeks with another "Tale from the Fairgrounds," but first, it appears that someone is making a phone call to the former home of Rufus Wood and Andrew Scarlett...

[scene 23] A ring, and a bleep, as the voicemail picks up.

DREW

Hi. You've reached Rufus and Drew. We're not home right now—or rather, we are. We're not in the apartment, though, and we probably won't be again. If you've heard something about our recent activities, most of it probably isn't true, although a little of it might be. History is written, after all, by those who live long enough to hold a pen. As I'm recording this, it doesn't look like that will include either of us.

Please know that when we had to make our most important choices, we made them as people—as Humans—putting our whole selves in, for the future of Humanity, for the freedom of the galaxy, and for each other. As partners. Thank you for calling. If you were a friend, we loved you. I don't know where we are, but I think we're together. At the end of the day, we did what we could, and we did our best. Let's love each other the same way, always.

Click.

For Caroline.