

Life with Althaar

Episode 21: They're Coming to Get You, Althaar **Version 2.1 (Recording Script), 10/15/20 - Linus (draft 2, BAJ)**

[scene 1] After the opening whoosh, sound rises slowly on Night of the Living Dead, starting about 5:35 (dialogue only, no music). Popcorn, audibly crunching over the movie. The tinkle of adult beverages. ALTHAAR noises.

TV

... much sense in my going to church. Do you remember one time when we were small, we were out here? It was from right over there I jumped out at you from behind a tree, and Grandpa got all excited ... *(continues at low level, we need to drop sound by around 6:25—at 6:25, wherever that falls, HECNET will announce that the movie is paused while the esteemed viewers are talking)*

JOHN

Wow, this popcorn is really good, Althaar. Much better than when I make it.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is most pleased that FriendJohn is enjoying the movie-night snack!

JOHN

Yeah, it's perfect. And the butter's just right, too. Usually it comes out either dry as a carpet or just swimming in butter.

ALTHAAR

But, FriendJohn, the dryness of the carpet is a thing that is most variable, is it not?

JOHN

Yes, all right. That was like a week ago, and I said I was sorry. I didn't know you were *titrating coffee* in that giant crate, who would think that? I thought it might be that noise-canceling wallpaper I ordered. But yes, I should have checked before opening it. I wasn't expecting a live chemistry experiment in the Room of Living, is all.

PUSHY HECNET MEDIA CONTROL

(in the background, whenever 6:25 falls)

Hey! We here at HECNET are delighted that this content pellet has inspired conversation and the free exchange of ideas. We are pausing your media selection at this time, and will be happy to continue your program when you are ready to shut up and listen to it.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar should perhaps have found a different location for his experimentings into the brewing of the optimal “cup of Joseph.” But the 1600-liter test chamber was only visiting for the afternoon, and Althaar had not expectation that FriendJohn would return so early in his work cycle! It was of great surprise to Althaar!

JOHN

To you and me both. But hey, the cleaning service did a great job, you can hardly see the coffee-level mark on the walls now.

ALTHAAR

Indeed! And a beige rug is considered most soothing, according to Althaar’s studies. So there was no harm or foulness!

JOHN

Right. And hey, it smelled nice for a couple of days, didn’t it? If you like coffee, anyway.

ALTHAAR

And FriendJohn does like the coffee!

JOHN

That he does. Anyway, I’ve learned my lesson about unexpected boxes. Something that size, I should have at least knocked first to see if anyone was inside before I opened it up.

ALTHAAR

(laughing)

Heeee! “Who is there, this is the coffee! Please do not make entrance, or there will be a great spilling!”

JOHN

(imitating Althaar)

“This is the FriendJohn! Hello, coffee!”

They both laugh.

ALTHAAR

And Althaar is promising that in the future he will be clearly labeling his experiments! So there will be no unexpected liquids in the room of living! Unless John is accidentally apprehending the glimpse of Althaar.

JOHN

Thanks, buddy. *(crunching some more popcorn)* And thanks again for making the popcorn, it really is fantastic. Even after sitting in the butter it still keeps its texture—not soggy or oily at all. How do you do it?

ALTHAAR

The pop-corns must be fresh! This is the first consideration. Also, the fresh-water ones are of inferior quality, and are thus to be avoided!

JOHN

Fresh-water? Althaar, popcorn isn't seafood. It's corn... seeds? It's corn, anyway. It just doesn't look like normal corn because it bursts when it gets hot. Which is what makes it so light and fluffy and easy to eat. Which is why I usually end up stuffing myself with an entire bowl.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn is both correct and incorrect! This is the Sea-Corn. So it is both corn *and* food of the sea! And because it is not the freshwater kind, no addition of salt is needed for maximal tastiness!

JOHN

Sea-Corn? Is that a thing?

ALTHAAR

It is indeed, FriendJohn! Althaar believes it is similar to your Earth sea-cucumber. But... corn.

JOHN

Really. Well, it tastes just like old-fashioned Earth corn.

ALTHAAR

And it is an excellent source of the riboflavin! The butter is most nutritious also. It is made from Chee's Milk.

JOHN

Just "cheese," Althaar. Cheese is always made from milk, so you don't need to say—oh no. Oh no. Please tell me there wasn't an apostrophe in there. Is this... from Chee?

ALTHAAR

It is, FriendJohn! Chee is providing a special milk most suited to the pop-corns! This milk is regurgitated from Chee's dorsal urethral pore—

JOHN

AAHHHHHHH!

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Distress detected. Activating. Please define the nature of your emergency so counter-measures may be deployed.

JOHN

What? What's going on?

ALTHAAR

Oh! It is the new system of home security! House! There is no emergency! Thanking you!

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Detected distress does not require response. Understood. Monitoring.

ALTHAAR

At this time it is only recognizing Althaar, but tomorrow a new, non-Human technician will make arrival to connect the Illudium Command Modulator. And then there will be voice control for FriendJohn also! And much safety in the home!

JOHN

Yeah, this isn't making me feel all that safe, Althaar. Just what kind of "counter-measures" does this thing have?

ALTHAAR

Oh, there are a great variety, FriendJohn! It can be making temporary sealant in case of hull breach, or extinguishing the flames that are not intended for relaxation purposes, or even incapacitating the intruder who intends a violence! Although in this last case Althaar would of course first attempt reasoning with them!

JOHN

Ok, the hull breach thing is nice, but do we really need all—

ALTHAAR

And! Althaar has made springing for the detachment and navigation upgrade! So, if all else is failing, Suite C can now have function for short periods as the autonomous space-going vessel! And if FriendJohn should ever again experience the misfortune of the deep space float, Althaar can make deployment of this system to be retrieving him!

JOHN

Oh, wow. Althaar, that's—I really appreciate that. I mean, here's hoping we won't need it, but thank you.

PUSHY HECNET MEDIA CONTROL

Hey! Remember when you were watching a movie and then you couldn't be bothered to watch it anymore? Why not buy some pretzels while we're all waiting! Everyone loves pretzels. It's been proven with 97% accuracy! By science! We can add a special value pack Pretzel Suitcase Collection to your video ticket right now, for the low low price of—

ALTHAAR & JOHN

No! Cancel pretzels. No.

PUSHY HECNET MEDIA CONTROL

Even better, you can subscribe. You'll get our hand-picked selection of delectable salty crunchy pretzels delivered right to your door every time you—

ALTHAAR & JOHN

No! No pretzels! No pretzels!

PUSHY HECNET MEDIA CONTROL

How about some plant food? Our sensors indicate a fair amount of plant material in your vicinity. They need proper nutrition to stay all green and leafy, don't they? For just a few credits a month—

During the previous line, LEAFY (the plant spy in the apartment) reacts to hearing his name: "Eh? Oops!"

JOHN

NO! No more offers. (*HECNET bleeps off*) Ugh. You know, speaking of plants, I've been meaning to say, good job with those. They really brighten up the place.

ALTHAAR

But Althaar was not purchasing these plants, FriendJohn!

JOHN

You weren't? That's... odd.

A beat while they consider the implications of this.

JOHN

You don't think...

Rustle as JOHN pokes at the nearest plant. Another beat while they wait for a response.

JOHN

Ok. Looks like it's just a plant. I'm not crazy, though, you were thinking it too, right?

ALTHAAR

Althaar was indeed! But it appears these fears were unfounded, and these are plants in only the literal sense! A great relief! ...But then how were they arriving?

JOHN

Maybe the cleaning agency left them? To kind of... distract from any of the stains they couldn't quite get out?

ALTHAAR

Ah! A most plausible theory, FriendJohn!

JOHN

Mm. All right, I guess we should get back to movie night before HECNET tries to sell us something else.

ALTHAAR

One moment, please, FriendJohn! Before the entertainment is resuming, Althaar wishes to make sure he is understanding the plot. It is the story of a sporting contest, yes? Like the Hiding and Seeking? But with violence and carpentry.

JOHN

Uh, no, it's a horror movie. You wanted something appropriate for Halloween, right? *Night of the Living Dead* is a classic. Plus I thought you might like it because you were talking about Humans using art to examine our own violent tendencies? The *Dead* movies used the narrative device of a zombie apocalypse to explore cultural and political issues.

ALTHAAR

Ooh! A Zom-bie Apocalypse sounds delicious! But very sticky.

JOHN

Ah, no. The cocktail kind of Zombie is delicious. These are “zombies” as in the undead. Although I guess they're both sticky. And fun fact, they're never actually called “zombies” in the film.

ALTHAAR

Un-dead? But of course they are not dead. A dead person could not be making performance in a movie!

JOHN

Right! No. Well, yes, but I meant the zombie characters are what we call “undead.” It's a pretty popular subject for Human horror stories: Humans who die, but then come back in a kind of... unliving life. And usually they want to consume the living in some way. Zombies tend to go for brains.

ALTHAAR

(tense, disturbed)

Ah ha ha. Ah. This is not of such amusement, FriendJohn.

JOHN

Well, sure, it's not a comedy, it's a horror movie. It's supposed to be scary. But, y'know, fun scary. If you don't like it, we can watch something else, no problem.

ALTHAAR

Althaar was not understanding that the clumsy team were dead. Distress!

JOHN

Ok, in the movie they are, but it's still just Human actors in make-up. We're not watching actual dead people. You get that, right?

ALTHAAR

This is preferable to the alternative, but... Dead people must not walk, FriendJohn! Excepting the Necrochargs. They are walking very well. But the Necrochargs are only dead. They were not once alive! If they had been then they would know that their planet smells very bad and the flowers and ozone sprays are not helping!

JOHN

I'll take your word for it.

ALTHAAR

It is natural for living things to die, but it is not natural for living things to die and then to stop dying, FriendJohn!

JOHN

Yeah, no, it's fine, nobody's doing that. That's the point. Horror movies are fun because you're getting scared about things that you don't have to be scared of in real life. If we had actual zombies, we definitely wouldn't make movies about them for fun. Listen, I can tell this was a bad idea, why don't we just pick something else to watch?

ALTHAAR

But this concept is in Althaar's thinking now and will not remove itself! This is giving Althaar a great desire to flee! But there is nowhere to flee! Because the thought is inside Althaar! Althaar is unhappy! Althaar is afraid! Althaar is— Althaar is panic, FriendJohn!
EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEGGHHHHHHH!

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Distress detected. Activating. Please define the nature of your emergency so counter-measures may be deployed.

JOHN

There is no emergency, House! There is—ah crap, it doesn't recognize my voice yet. Althaar?

ALTHAAR

WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUUGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

No command response detected. Initiating General Distress Measures. Sonic disablers engaged.

Something that sounds like Metal Machine Music starts happening in the room. It is quite loud.

JOHN

Ow, what? What in the Cult of Betsy's Uvula is that?

ALTHAAR

OOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUUUGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Sonic disablers ineffective. Commencing dihydrogen monoxide rinse.

*Explosive release of a lot of water. Like a fire-suppression system, spraying everywhere. Cacophony continues in the background, with **cries of distress from ALTHAAR and JOHN.***

ALTHAAR

OOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUUUGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
Althaar is very wet now WUUUUUAAAAAAAAAAAAEEEEEEEEEGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

JOHN

(shouting over him)

Althaar! Althaar, you have to tell it to stop!

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Saturation complete. Distress continues. Protocol: "kill it with fire" initiated. Alert: Illudium Command Modulator is not connected. Engaging non-terminal flame eradication system.

Bursts of flame flash through the room. Water continues to pour down, over the backdrop of clashing noises.

JOHN

House, this is not secure! This is extremely insecure! Stop it!

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Alert. Alert. Unauthorized command access attempted.

Klaxons begin to sound, over all of the rest of the mess. One of those rising-scale Star Trek "oooooOOOP" alarms would be fun, along with the usual blatty honk klaxon.

ALTHAAR

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH ... AHHHHH ... What is happening?

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Escalating. Preparing to engage electric arc discharge protocol.

Ominous whine of powerful batteries charging up to release electric bolts into the room. Continuing in background: Bursts of flame, pouring water, klaxons and alarms, Metal Machine Music.

JOHN

Althaar, help!

ALTHAAR

There is no emergency, House!

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Unable to parse command. Please repeat.

Those batteries are about to release their charge, we can hear it.

JOHN

Turn it off, turn it off!

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Speargun!

A speargun is fired into the television.

JOHN

Speargun?

ALTHAAR

HOUSE! THERE IS NO EMERGENCY!

HOUSE SECURITY ACTIVATION

Detected distress does not require response. Understood. Monitoring.

Immediate silence from alarms and klaxons, jets of flame, gouts of water, Metal Machine Music. Batteries audibly wind down. Background: hisses of steam, water dripping on the wreckage.

JOHN

Well, it shot the tv, so I guess we're safe from zombie movies.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn? Althaar hopes you have not experienced injury?

JOHN

No, I'm ok. You?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is uninjured also! But the Curtain of Privacy has sustained some damaging, so it is best if FriendJohn is not looking in this direction, please!

JOHN

Great.

ALTHAAR

Much calibration is most obviously needed before the system of security is increasing and not decreasing the safety of Althaar and FriendJohn!

JOHN

It could use a couple of adjustments, yeah. Although I think all that water got out the last of those coffee stains, so that's something.

ALTHAAR

Indeed!

[scene 2] Main title music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...

LIFE WITH ALTHAAR! Season 2!

Episode 21... "They're Coming to Get You, Althaar"

[scene 3] There is a bleeping control alarm indicator alerting the Bridge to the sudden eruption of emergency procedures at ALTHAAR and JOHN's place; it is silenced as the dialogue begins.

SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR-BOT

And so to darkness fades this small light of hope, this faint plaint for notice from the mighty, settling so briefly with such warmth and vigor in its tentious trip across my system status board.

AMBER

I'm going to put that as "Alarm Reset" in the log?

SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR-BOT

Words, words, words.

AMBER

Okay? Also, why is there a big yellow box where the Commander's chair used to be? She's going to be really mad about that? Were you here when it was delivered?

SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR-BOT

So sayeth the Shepherd, so sayeth the Flock:

When spry breeze stirs the wind of commerce bated
And three-fold forms to their respective hands
Are sent in triple, to compass points unknown—
Unknown the servers, and the routes dispatched,
Couriers blank, and options unavailing—
The wise one signs and turns his head away,
Better that we onward toil and so,
In our small part, we turn the greater wheel.

AMBER

She's still going to be really mad?

Door whoosh as the COMMANDER enters.

COMMANDER

Good Mor— Foggy's deflected tail. Is there diludium exhaust leaking into the air supply again? Or is there actually something that looks remarkably like a large pink and yellow box in just the spot where I generally, if perhaps foolishly, anticipate seeing my chair? Amber?

AMBER

I noticed that myself, sir? But I don't know anything about it? The yellow is very cheerful, though?

COMMANDER

You know, I was actually feeling chipper on my way in this morning, so really all we had to do to keep that rolling was maintain equilibrium. A good mood tends to stay good until it is acted upon by an external force. Although I suppose the Fairgrounds always supplies its own external force sooner rather than later. *(sigh)* I was picturing starting my day with a quick browse through the shift logs, perched comfortably but authoritatively on the firm and welcoming cushions of my command chair. Perhaps pulling some hapless peon off some superfluous Bridge panel to go pick me up a hot Arisian Press. Like, say, you there.

SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR-BOT

(exiting)

On the bat's back I fly!

COMMANDER

Double time! (*calling after him*) And have them shake it! I'm in the mood for a coffee as agitated as I am at the moment. I want my caffeine shattered. In shreds! (*door whoosh as the bot exits*) All right, Amber, now about this box. Did anyone else see them deliver it? Where's Stalin-bot?

AMBER

He's not on shift this cycle, sir? He said he was taking a hangover day? But I didn't think robots got those?

COMMANDER

Oh, right. No, they don't, but any HistoriBots with a Russian personality template are permitted up to three "disruptive expressions of mournful and/or soulful discontent" per year, according to their contract. It's a pity, because I think he'd enjoy this box. Insofar as he enjoys anything. He'd certainly enjoy how much it's annoying me. So is that his replacement who went for coffee? What's his deal?

AMBER

I'm not sure? He never gave us his name? He just said he was a Shakespearean Actor-bot? But he keeps mixing up his lines? I had to take him off docking comms? The pilots were getting really confused?

Incoming call bleep.

COMMANDER

Great. (*answers the phone*) Bridge. ... Delfinia, hi, what—yes, Arisian Press, shaken. ... I know, I'm just in a mood. If—what? I don't know, some sort of Actor-bot. He's new to us ... Seriously? No, tell him it's "lender." Not "blender." Lender. ... Yes, I'm certain. It's absolutely not "Neither a borrower nor a blender be." Look, just tell him to put it on our tab and quit being weird. (*she hangs up*) Maybe he's just a *Bad Actor-Bot*.

AMBER

But that doesn't make any sense? Who would deliberately program a *Bad Actor-bot*?

COMMANDER

Only a complete null, Amber. A fool. A gonif. An over-educated, under-qualified twit. In other words, exactly the kind of brainiac you'd expect to find on the Fairgrounds' Design Committee. (*raising her voice a bit to address the whole room*) Was anyone here when this box arrived? The one that's conspicuously taken the place of my command chair? Which all of you helpfully allowed me to discover on my own instead of sending a simple message?

AMBER

I think everyone was afraid you'd yell at them if they told you?

COMMANDER

Well, I'm yelling at you now, aren't I? So as a yell-avoidance strategy, I'd say that was sub-par.

AMBER

But you're yelling at everyone together? Not just me? So I stand by it?

COMMANDER

Fair enough. Frall!

FRALL

(shimmering in)

I believe I had selected Tuesday, Commander. Oh wait—that's from a few weeks ago. I don't want to do that one again now, amusing as it was at the time. This is a Friday, isn't it? Let's take that again. Good morning, sir.

COMMANDER

Frall.

FRALL

You already led with that. Now you say, "Would you stop that."

COMMANDER

Would you stop that? I—dammit, Frall.

FRALL

Mm. What can I do for you, Commander?

COMMANDER

Lieutenant, do you know anything about this box?

FRALL

Yes.

COMMANDER

Let me rephrase. Lieutenant, do you know anything *useful* about this box?

FRALL

Yes.

COMMANDER

(beat) I asked for that. All right. Lieutenant, I would like you to tell me something about this box. And I would very much like the thing you tell me to be both readily comprehensible to the Human brain, and immediately useful to me personally.

FRALL

The box has a note attached to it, sir. I believe listening to that will go some way toward answering your questions.

COMMANDER

Oh, for— where?

*Door whoosh as the ACTOR-BOT returns. During his speech (at *) an exchange occurs in the background:*

HITHERTO UNNOTICED BRIDGE PERSON

I kind of resent that. I mean, it's easy to be noticed if you're interrupting all the time. Where's the notice for someone who just does their job?

HITHERTO UNNOTICED BRIDGE PERSON'S FRIEND

Right? Someone has to actually run things while everyone is all "Emergency alert this" and "Oh no, I'm on fire that." Divas.

HITHERTO UNNOTICED BRIDGE PERSON

Seriously.

HITHERTO UNNOTICED BRIDGE PERSON'S FRIEND

Maybe I should learn to make coffee.

Meanwhile:

SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR-BOT

The land unquiet, my journey made through these halls untrammelled has fallen, 'pon the final construct, in victory, and this battered tonic I bear shall warm your heart and bones.

And so, in final count, shall my name ring,
Familiar in the mouth as household words—
And in your shaken cup freshly 'Risian.
From this hour to the ending of the shift,
We few, we happy few, we band of sibilings,
The fair Amber, and this trembling ent'ty;
And those who in the back rows seemly toil,
Unnoticed in their daily assignments;*
Shall be my brothers; be they ne'er so vile—
um, be they ne'er so vile—

Uh, was I supposed to get change? I didn't.

COMMANDER

It goes on our account. Give me that. It's not borrowing when it's charged to our account, and I'm reasonably certain you're not a blender.

SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR-BOT

I've always appreciated blenders, though. They're so useful. In form and moving, how express and admirable.

COMMANDER

Yes, fine, thank you. Now please sit down, shut up, and tend to your panel. All right, where's this note... Ah! (*rummaging with the box, ripping open the e-envelope, ripping away the e-tape*) There we go. Ha, well I know it's not from Earth Central, they spelled my name right. And it's in a nice semi-formal font.

AMBER

Is that Bembo SemiBold?

COMMANDER

It might be. Definitely something close to the Garamond family, very distinctive. Good creamy paper, too, luxurious card stock. Pleasant texture. Someone actually spent time and money on making this look nice. What's it doing here? This better not be more Dilurian shenanigans.

AMBER

I haven't seen Bembo in ages? It does look really good? Nice and classy?

COMMANDER

Well, let's see what's what.

Bleep as she activates the note. It has little sound effects interspersed throughout the message.

BEAUX SEVERAL RECORDING

Hi Commander. Can I call you Commander? (*glink!*) That there's the Wink Soni-mote. I don't love these emo-cards, but The Kidz tell me it's how we get things done these days. And hey, we all need a little of that personal touch when we're drifting along in the lonely void of space, right? (*echo effect*) In spaaaaaaace! (*back to normal*) Ah, I never get tired of that! Here, let's do it one time together. Ready? (*echo effect*) "In spaaaaaaace!" (*normal*) Yeah, I know, you probably didn't fly along with me on that one, but hey! You can replay this and give it a shot any time you're ready. Seriously, it's so much fun. And it's the little pleasures that get us all through this crazy thing called life, you know?

So anyway, If you do better with the face-to-face, believe me, I'm in that boat right along with you. (*splash!*) But we use what we've got, amIrite? Press "Continue" for more!

AMBER

That voice? Is that Beaux Several?

COMMANDER

Who?

Bleep as she presses “Continue.”

BEAUX SEVERAL RECORDING

I’m Beaux Several. You may know me; I may know you—honestly, I feel like I already do. I won’t be on The Fairgrounds in the personal flesh for a little while yet. I’m punching through time and space and the light barrier right now. (*zoom!*) But I wanted to get ahead of myself and make a few intros (*high five!*) while the iron is nice and hot. Press “Continue” for more!

AMBER

It is him? Ashlee loves him? She’ll be so excited?

BEAUX SEVERAL RECORDING

And hot is where we are right now, speeding your way at maximum burn! Time is money! Time is distance! No time to lose, and no time like the present! I know I don’t need to actually tell you this—you’re busy! You’re busy! You’ve got things going on! And I’m just Beaux. One in a million, one in Several. I may have fiery empires blazing on my tail (*sizzle!*) and a subscription list as long and deep as the event horizon at Galactic Black (*falling, aaaaaah!*), but you’ve got the Fairgrounds spread out at your fingers, waiting and ready for your next move. And pardon my saying, but that is some spicy stuff (*orgasmic gasp!*). Press “Continue” for more!

AMBER

Commander, is Beaux flirting with you? Can we look you up on HECNET Hotz and see if you’re Trending Hearts? I bet Beaux is registered with them?

COMMANDER

Can anyone tell me who this person is?

SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR-BOT

In a tree by the brook, there’s a songbird who sings:

By night we might the fangéd dark avoid,
Our hearth akindle, safe inside our walls—
Our minds at rest, our mettle unalloyed
But thoughts will wander whither— uh, whither,
... something ... *balls*.

What has two syllables and—oh nonny on it. Onward:

(cont.)

From gen'ral rage alight with foulest sharts,
All spots and fragments, foolscap, stinky parts.
Our message from the depths at last will go:
Don't watch this! Or that! Just watch Beaux!

COMMANDER

...Anyone else?

AMBER

Beaux Several is the host of The Beaux Show? He talks about lifestyle? And politics? And has interviews? And is like a huge crazypot jerk?

SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR-BOT

Hey, don't knock Beaux 'til you've worn his shoes. He's got serious feet.

COMMANDER

Beaux Several? ... oh! I've seen security flashes about a Several. I thought it was pronounced "Byooks," like it's spelled. Let's see... *(she types in his name as she speaks)* Byooks Several.

"Putting that file up on the screen" noises.

HITHERTO UNNOTICED BRIDGE PERSON

Beaux Several. Alias: "Byooks" Several. Tags: XV-7-alpha, Red Stripe, Circle Circle Dot Dot. Halt, Detain, and Notify. Wanted by: Mebsutan Lava Folk, charge: War Crimes. Reptonadon Disparity, charge: Persuasive Genocide. Inspiritron Ltd. (Dilurian Ancillary Type 47 Corp A), charge: Inadequate Retention of Profits. There's a lot more, that's the most recent. Oh, here, at the end: Notes: Very friendly. Cautions: Very friendly.

Note: It does not actually say the "Alias," they're making that up for the Commander's sake. Career move. In the background as the scene continues:

HITHERTO UNNOTICED BRIDGE PERSON'S FRIEND

Nailed it! Nice one! Career move!

HITHERTO UNNOTICED BRIDGE PERSON

T00ts! Thanks, mang!

Meanwhile:

AMBER

Yes? That's him? He showed up at the Mebsuta Peace Summit and told them to stay frosty, cool their jets, and chill out? And then he passed around frozen Stick-O shots to celebrate?

COMMANDER

I'm sure that went over well. And he must be the same cragger that convinced that lost Reptonadon settlement on Roanoke V that if they sacrificed a season of litter-eggs to appease the fertility gods, they wouldn't have to plant any crops for the next three flood-moons.

AMBER

Totally? But everyone still loves his show? I don't get it?

COMMANDER

Frall? Where's Frall?

FRALL

Still here, sir.

COMMANDER

What's going on with you? You're too quiet.

Quick snippet of music, probably big-band, possibly jazz. Or bagpipes.

COMMANDER

You know that's not what I meant. Everyone else seems to have an opinion about this Beaux Several, so what's yours?

FRALL

My opinion is that it's taking you an inordinately long time to open up this box for which he is apparently responsible.

COMMANDER

Right, the box.

FRALL

On some of the more Structuralist planes, the box actually manifests with a sign that says "MacGuffin" on it.

COMMANDER

What? No it doesn't. How would that even happen?

FRALL

I taped it there. On the chance you might come to visit one day, and the box still isn't open.

COMMANDER

Uh huh. All right, to the box. Or does this card have anything else to say first?

Bleep as she activates the card again.

BEAUX SEVERAL RECORDING

But that's enough about me! Let's wrap up the intros, so you can *un-wrap* your very own Bit o' Beaux. And get your comfy on!

Roses are red
Veracidines are blue
If you're lost in the fog,
Just call out, "Beaux who?"

Like the people say: What's in the box? *What's in the box?*

COMMANDER

"Beaux Who." Ha! I have to admit, he's got a certain style. Let's see what's—

Rendering of future-cardboard. A moment of stillness. Oh, look at that.

COMMANDER

Oh. Look at that.

EVERYONE ON THE BRIDGE

Ooooohhhhh.

COMMANDER

That's... That's quite a chair.

SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR-BOT

'Zounds. For all impediment seeks to furnish—

EVERYONE ON THE BRIDGE

Sssshhh, shut it!, *etc.*

FRALL

The inductive coiling is a particularly nice touch.

COMMANDER

Inductive coiling?

FRALL

Yes. It routes body heat through to an internal power cell, where it's applied to a latent reservoir system that—well, in short, I'd surmise it can make a damn fine cup of coffee. Let me check. (*shimmer*) Yes, very good. Not quite up to Delfinia's high bar, but robust and layered, nutty and floral in the front with end-notes of vanilla bean and dark woe. Or is it the other way around. You will get the mix and brewing times about right by next Thursday. (*shimmer*) Yes, Thursday. Though Monday's mid-cycle macchiato will mark an unexpected high.

COMMANDER

Frall, did you just put your lack-of-mouth around my future coffee?

FRALL

Of course not, Commander. That would be impractical. Not to mention unsanitary.

COMMANDER

Well... fine.

AMBER ON THE BRIGE

Are you going to sit in it, Commander?

COMMANDER

Why would I—? Oh, in the chair. It does look comfortable. I suppose I might as well check it out before I— (*she sits*) Oh. Oh my. That's ... oh.

THE BEAUX CHAIR

(luxurious welcoming beeps. Like Windows 7 should have sounded.)

Hello, Commander Torianna. Please relax while I run a few pressure point diagnostics.

COMMANDER

You somehow spelled my name right. When you said it just now. That's... *OH* yes ouch that's ouch yes no *OH* not on the bridge stoppit

THE BEAUX CHAIR

Mmm, you've been working out! Analysis complete. Adjusting Sitzvergnugen Fleischgeist receptors, aaaaannnndd ... you're good!

[PRONUNCIATION: SITS-ferg-new-gen FLYSH-geist—gen with a g like good, flysh = fly + sh, geist like "iced" with a G at the start]

Slight humming or pitter-pat as the chair adjusts

THE BEAUX CHAIR

Does that feel good, or better than good?

COMMANDER

That's ... yes.

A fanfare from the chair.

THE BEAUX CHAIR

Beaux knows best! Please let me know if there's anything else I can do to support you today. Engaging silent mode.

AMBER

Are you all right, Sir?

COMMANDER

Ahem. I ... uh ... I don't know what to say. I feel like every annoyance that's been plaguing me for the past seven years has just drifted away in a Bembo cloud. I feel like... I feel like drinking a glass of water.

FRALL

It makes one wonder, doesn't it. So much discontent can be addressed by the simple solace of a truly comfortable chair. And much of the rest by not wearing pants. If you had the wherewithal to experience both, would any challenge be beyond Human reach?

[scene 4] Fade into static. All along the Fairgrounds, Princes keep the view. Beaux is advertising for his arrival, everywhere he can find a space to push in a few words. Cut among a few snippets, and then static-out into the next scene.

FRGD-WAVE DJ

...to the top of the hour, Qats and Qittens, just a reminder that soon the waves will never wave the same—Beaux Several is on his way to the Fairgrounds, so you'll be sipping his news and color-commentary straight at the source, with no de-lay from the re-lay! And you know he'll have his wacky team of cohorts along for the ride! Because Several is never Alone! And as you know, you Rox and you Rolls, Beaux is never gonna give you up, he is never gonna let you down; Beaux is never gonna run around and... *(static)*

QUEUE-TUBE STREAMER

...and tap the naughties to subscribe *(the same orgasmic gasp! as we heard from the Soni-Motes earlier)*. Count on this: we here are never coming back to life once we leave it! No zombies? No sombrero! And here's a treat: one lucky new subscriber, this week only! wins a special Breakfast with Beaux at the morning nook of your choice. If you dare, take the Beaux Pancake Challenge! True Living only, no undead allowed! Can you eat more pancakes than Beaux Several, while breathing? No no Nanette, you cannot! But go on, try your very... *(static)*

ANGRY BROADCASTER

...Q-lluminati Nexus, and keep asking. The truth is out there! Just look at this Vine-tok of the Honch of Lizard Rebo Galactic here, tripping over a carpet at the lizard company gala! *(he plays a recording: "Eeks! Crash!") Tripping for no reason over the edge of a carpet. ("Eeks! Crash!")* Riiiiight. No one trips like that—Boom! *("Eeks! Crash!")* Over he goes!—No one trips like that, *on a carpet*, especially not a Honch of wealth and taste. But we know what's what. *We know! ("Eeks! Crash!")* That's not a lizard-man falling like that. That's a *zombie human in a lizard suit! ("Eeks! Crash!")* Look at that! No control over the tail! That's a dead guy in there! *("Eeks! Crash!")* It's just like Beaux said after Roanoke—they practically ask for it, and yes you better believe we know how to... *(static)*

*[scene 5] Static fades into a meeting room, where MRS. FRONDRINAX is debriefing her ranks of small-plant spies. They are a young, eager, and clueless crew, and the flow of **nattering and peeping from the baby spies** runs in the background. She is addressing one in particular, who we will be calling RHUBARB for reasons that will soon become apparent.*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right, tell me again. Yes, you. YOU, dearie. The little one with—ha! I was going to say the little one with the droopy leaves and the gormless expression, but that really describes all of you, doesn't it? What's your name? Yes, still you. Still—WHAT'S YOUR NAME.

RHUBARB

Leafy!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Leafy! Awful. I detest these nursery names. Oh, I suppose it's perfectly adequate, a little obvious maybe, but for a bunch of cliplings with barely a neuron among the plot of you it's the sort of thing that serves its purpose. Very well, Leafy. And you like that name, do you?

RHUBARB

Leafy! Yes!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(addressing all of them)

How many of you are named Leafy? (**LOTS OF THEM: Me! Me! Me! Me!**) Right. I cringe to ask this, I'm honestly holding my stomata closed so they don't shiver and chafe. How many of you are named ... Rooty? Or Stemmy? (**SUPER LOTS OF THEM: Me! Me! Me! Me! Me!**) Of course. And I wish I knew this would come out differently, truly I do. I wish I could even pretend. But finally ... Twiggy? (**LOTS OF THEM: Me! Me! Me! Me! Me!**) And we are the superior beings. Vim have mercy. It makes me question my stemline, it really does.

CORKY

I'm Corky!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

How exciting for you. Fertilize it, Corky.

CORKY

Okay.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right, then, back to work. Leafy?

ALL THE LEAFIES

Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

NO! Just this one. THIS ONE RIGHT HERE. Leafy. Just you, dear, just this Leafy. Do you know whom I'm addressing, you with the conceptual capacity of a blade of grass, yes you, with the singed crispy leaves? Do you know what? No more of this nonsense, I'm giving you a proper name right now. Henceforth, you will be known as... Derflinoox. Can you remember that, Derflinoox?

RHUBARB

(distressed)

Nooo!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What's wrong? You have a lovely grown-up name at last.

RHUBARB

But I'm not a Derflinoox!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right, that's fair. I am open to your feelings on the subject, for about ten more seconds. Who would *you* say you are?

RHUBARB

...Leafy?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No! Now I'm going to give you one more chance, here. Just one! So. Keeping in mind that I am probably never going to address you by name after today, that I am not in the calmest sunshine of mind, and that I'm Rixlar-37 certified to deploy lethal defoliants, what do you think I should call you? Quickly, now!

RHUBARB

...Rhubarb?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Rhubarb?

RHUBARB

Rhubarb!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Rhubarb. But Derflinoox, you're not a rhubarb. You're not even a ginger.

RHUBARB

I just like the sound of it. Rhubarb!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Words mean things, you know, you can't just—oh, mulch it. Congratulations, Rhubarb. Say hello to Rhubarb, everyone!

LOTS OF THEM

Hello, Rhubarb!

RHUBARB

(immediately taking advantage of the public forum)

Hi everybody! Wow, I guess I've dreamed about this moment—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Rhubarb! This isn't about you! We're still in a debriefing here! Now tell me again what you saw on your reconnaissance mission.

RHUBARB

Oh! It was gruesome! It started out as a relaxing evening in the apartment. They were sitting around watching the tv, hardly moving at all! But then John B. invoked the powers of the dead, and destroyed the room with powerful eldritch forces!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, that's what you said before, and I didn't like it then either. Did you dream this, or did it actually happen?

RHUBARB

Look at my leaves! I was burned, and soaked! I... may have been napping a little bit, but that was part of my deep-cover disguise! As a plant!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You *are* a plant.

RHUBARB

That's why it's such a good cover! I was really getting into it, too!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Rhubarb. I'm going to need some more details here. I want you to tell me exactly what it was you saw last night. But don't make it too long. Omit needless words. Omit needless words! Omit needless words!

RHUBARB

You got it, chief! Ok, so. At first they were watching their movie, and John was eating bowls of “popcorn,” or animal seeds. He said they were delicious. Their ruptured bodies were soaked in a pungent urine. Then Althaar started imitating Atrocity Coffee, ok I know that’s weird, I didn’t get all of that part. They agreed they didn’t want pretzels... and then John struck me! But I didn’t blow my cover! I remembered my lessons, and I stayed mum! Ooh! Can I change my name again?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No! Get to the powerful eldritch forces!

RHUBARB

Oh, yes! After that, John began to speak of raising the dead, and Althaar screamed! And John, his belly stuffed with corpses, called for the dead to rise! He might have risen himself, I’m not sure. It all happened very quickly. But John demanded that Althaar join with him in invoking the dread powers of the elements, and then he practically exploded with the thunder of a thousand cruel machines, blasts of water, and terrible storms of fire. And that’s when I fled my post! I hate fire.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Everyone hates fire. Now, you’re sure about all this? Althaar *screamed*? He didn’t giggle, or squeak, or make heeplly excited noises?

RHUBARB

Yes! I’m absolutely sure that’s what happened.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Mm hm. Well, to be frank, Rhubarb, I think your story is the biggest load of compost I’ve ever heard. For one thing, I’ve been here for years, and I’ve never seen a Human call down thunder, floods, or fire. And if they had the power to do that, or to return from the dead for that matter, I should think we would have seen them do it by now, don’t you? There’d certainly be a lot more un-cooperative members of the Hydroponics staff wandering around, and a lot less fertilizer in those flowerbeds at the back of the Tav 48 gardens, if that were the case. Besides, how could John rise from the dead while he was still alive?

RHUBARB

Maybe he took a class?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

A class? What kind of class? “Invoke the Powers of the Dead from the Comfort of your Own Pot, textbooks and materials not included”?

RHUBARB

It sounds silly when you say it like that.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes it does, Rhubarb. Yes it does. But then again, there are a lot of silly folks on the Fairgrounds, aren't there? People who are willing to believe just about anything... especially when it comes to those Humans and their weird hobbies... Yes! Rhubarb, you may turn out to be less than completely useless after all.

RHUBARB

Yay!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, you've got a kind of genuine, unforced stupidity that simply can't be duplicated by other means. If this dead-raising theory makes sense to you, then I could probably get it to latch on with the general populace. But the real trick to sowing conspiracy theories is to make the hayseeds believe it's their own idea... Has John done anything before that led you to think, for lack of a better word, that he might be capable of raising the dead?

RHUBARB

Mmm... Oh! The incantation! Yes! There's a big, clunky charm the Human always wears on his belt! And it glows when he invokes it with a chant! Very spooky!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

A chant? What kind of chant?

RHUBARB

"WSS"!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

WSS?

RHUBARB

(singing)

WSS!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

W.S.S. is where John works, Rhubarb.

RHUBARB

That must be it, then! It's a cult! Or a coven! Or a coffee klatch! WSS!

The other cliplings meep at this a bit (this is exciting! and scary!).

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Mm hm. Now, I'd like to point out, Rhubarb, that we just invoked this "chant" ourselves, didn't we? Several times. And there wasn't any thunder, fire, or rain, was there? And certainly no rising dead. Did anyone here see any gouts of fire? Crushing thunderous machines? Anyone?

LOTS OF THEM

No. Not so much. I didn't. No. Wait, fire? Did I miss something? I hate fire. *etc.*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

So, my fine striated sizzle-fringed friend, has this perhaps shaken your belief in the ability of Humans to wield occult elemental powers?

RHUBARB

No!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Perfect. Let's see what else about these Humans piques your imagination, shall we? Grab hold of your cambium and keep up, everyone, I have some new assignments for you.

LOTS OF THEM

Ooo, exciting! Yay! Assignment! Wow! *etc.*

[scene 6] Transition to Customs and Arrivals area.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Please-enjoy-your-stay-at-the-Human-Exchange-Concourse-and-share-in-the-many-wonders-Humanity-has-to-offer-NEXT!

BEAUX SEVERAL

Next!

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Yes, Gesin, you are the next! NEXT!

BEAUX SEVERAL

No no, my good Bot! I defer to you!

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

But Gesin, it is you who are in the line of abdication! I am already at my post. So, it is you who are next! Embarkation is what I mean, of course. For embarking. Not abdicating.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Don't sell yourself short, my friend. Don't count yourself solely, when you can be Several! If Time is a River, cry me a few moments we can spend in good company.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Time is a River?

BEAUX SEVERAL

If you say so. Either that or it's sand, or blind zoods and an elephant. Depends where you're going with it. But if you insist, I'll come to you—mountainously! Spangles, this is a nice desk you have. It suits you.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

It... suits me?

BEAUX SEVERAL

That's right. You've got an honest face. And your mustachios! What a glorious plumage! It's a face where a vagabond knight-errant might place some trust. Or a vague bon-vivant on some trusty night errands. Or a pilgrim soul on a wayward voyage. This kind of face might make a hungry man buy a shrimp dinner. I like classic better than spicy, as a rule of thumb. Let the record reflect. It's a kind of philosophy. You know what I'm talking about, my Bot-friend, and don't tell me you don't. Beaux knows spicy, and Beaux is classic. Like rock, in a hard place.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Beaux? Not ... Beaux Several?

BEAUX SEVERAL

Not Beaux Several? Belay me belie me, if you say so. But reconsider: if you'll let me, I'll Beaux your strings 'til we both sing tenor. A perfect tenner! Say, look at that fine sheaf! Do you use *paper* here? How marvelous. How retro. How—what's the word I want? "Refined," isn't it?

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Jawohl! "Refined" is exactly it! That is the word I am always looking for when travelers come at me with their pass-chips or D-wands or suchlike. Paper is simply more refined! So many sapients today have no appreciation for the inherent dignity of smearing pigments on mashed fibers.

BEAUX SEVERAL

I couldn't put it better myself.

*A nearby aquatic customs tank springs a leak. There's a spray of fluid under pressure, and **alarmed voices**.*

CUSTOMS TANK WORKERS

Valve 4 blew again! The gasket is loose! Ah, I'm soaked! Lock down that spray! Give me a hand! Turn that off! *Etc.*

BEAUX SEVERAL

Oh, hey, excuse me a sec, I just want to say some hello to these, yikes, it's wet over here. Shouldn't the—hey wow, sea foam and orange! Lok-Sleeve Bionutral! That's a scent you don't forget—wait, is this a Glub Tank? It's a Glub Tank! Here, let me give this a—

The valve closes, liquid stops spraying out, everyone is relieved. Ad lib.

CUSTOMS TANK WORKERS

Wow, that was fast! Thanks! Wait—are you ... Beaux Several? Who? Wow! *Etc.*

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

We call them WOTs now, of course. WetHab Occupancy Tanks. For our aquatically-inclined visitors.

BEAUX SEVERAL

They were Glub Tanks when I worked them. I know, it's not CP to say that any more, but words are history, not intent. I mean, Constructive Phrasing is a beautiful thing, you'll never hear Beaux say otherwise. But a Glub Tank is a Glub Tank, yeah? It's a thing and a place and a time, and I should know because I was there, and that was my time. I am what I am because I was what I was, and I don't like to give up any of my precious parts.

What did you call it? A WOT? Well, WOT-ever, my botly buddy! Good thing it wasn't occupied, those Glubs hate when they leak from the bottom!

Non-verbal flinching. Saying Glub Tank is one thing, using the word right out like that is going too far. Not in this crowd. Beaux notices.

Ah, that wasn't cubic, I'll eat those words. I'm a modern guy, and a modern guy can get stuck in the past sometimes, but if he gets left behind that's on him. Micro by nano, we change our spots. Now me, I used to work a room just like this one. I wasn't always Beaux Several, you know—I came from working folk, just like you all. Like all a' y'all. I get it.

And you know what? You deserve better. You're just making your way to the end of the day, on your break you'll grab a coffee, chew some gum, lap up some lactifrassy, if you like your lactifrassy. And sloosh, here's a spill and you're soaked. At least this was water! Could be liquid methane. Could be silica slime. Could be amniotic nutrient bath, try to get the smell of that out of your pants. It's not mission-crit. But you're at work, and you have to squish around in wet pants? Where's the dignity? If they cared for you right, they'd have set this straight long ago.

CUSTOMS TANK WORKERS

(muttering)

It's true. That's right, fix it. All true. They should fix it. It's not fair. Don't we matter? *etc.*

BEAUX SEVERAL

Let Beaux share a little of the juice of the pickle about your WetHab Occupancy Tank. This is Valve #4, you said. And you might as well call it Valve # Good-4-Nothing, amlrite? The one that always blows? Let me ask—there a conduit panel near a vent where sometimes there’s a whiff of vanilla, or mint? With a flickering tell-tale, violet or maybe blue? I’m talking about those old ones, with the facets on the indicator, not one of the bright new steady lights—

CURIOUS WET-TANK SPUNT

Like this one? It doesn’t do anything. I checked it once, couldn’t find it in the schematics.

BEAUX SEVERAL

That’s it! It’s not in the plots because it was a fixer tell-tale, just a placeholder. This WOT is a refurb, you can see it used to have an older tank, look at the runner marks. The contractor should have slotted it into the sensor rack before signing off, but when they’re rushed, this kind of thing can roll right under the sofa, y’know? And that means— here, give me a hand...

They pry the cover off the conduit housing. Other sounds follow as BEAUX continues—pulling out the multi circuit, messing with it, putting it back.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Great. Now inside this should be a circuit coil that ... right. See how this one has a cap that doesn’t connect to anything? So we pull this off and toss it, lock that back in, and Bob’s your clutch-bearer. See, this was cutting off the flow cycle that—there it goes!

Liquid surges through a pipe, clearing out all those pesky cloggy bits.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Aaand you see this indicator here? The tank sensors are tracking valve maintenance on #4 now, you can see it lighting up ... *(beep)* now.

CUSTOMS TANK WORKERS

(amazed)

He fixed it. Beaux just—that was incredible. He just reached in and fixed it. That thing’s been jecked up for years! Wow. *etc.*

BEAUX SEVERAL

Had a feeling that might do it. Glad to help! Just doing my bit, you know.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

I would like to give you a sheet of paper. Our good paper. It is nothing, I know. But to express our appreciation.

BEAUX SEVERAL

That is nice paper. I shouldn't take it, but I love paper like this, so I will. But only because you're my friends now.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

I would also like to honor you as our Traveler of the Season.

CUSTOMS TANK WORKERS

(enthusiastic)

That's patric. Jets on! Good idea! Give him a traveling star! +2 armor! *etc.*

BEAUX SEVERAL

You don't have to do that. Just being here with you spunts is all the plus I need.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Nevertheless. It is a small thing, but it is an honor we yearn to bestow. Traveler of the Season!

CUSTOMS TANK WORKERS

Traveler of the Season!

BEAUX SEVERAL

Aw, thanks so much. So, do I have to finish checking in, or what? At Customs, I mean.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Nein. The Traveler of the Season is our Guest. Please, be on your way, with our best wishes.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Well, if you insist. I'm honored. I'm really touched. You don't need to, but I'm glad you want to. Oh, hey, can my team join us? They're back there, didn't want to be a bother before. Tess, Todd, Marty, get down here, join the party. Come meet everyone.

Hey, isn't it interesting that they decided to put all the Customs kiosks crammed together like this? Humans and Bots, air-breathers, water-breathers, and I bet you get some other atmo types, too. Seems like they'd have separate areas for separate needs, y'know? Keep the methane for the folks that breathe it, keep the water away from shorting out you bots? Not that I have a problem with Customs, you do a great job! Well, except for that Tank, and it's not like that was your fault, right?

But call a spork a spork, you know? Sometimes the best way for everyone to get along together is to stay apart. Oh, this is Tess! You probably know her. Tess, say hi to the gang. This guy, this guy! He helped out so much just now. And where are you from?

[scene 7] Fade out on his chit-chat as we transition to the W.S.S. office, where there's some occasional rustling and eeply-eeply-eeply in the background from a small forest of spy sprouts. Janky door whoosh as JOHN enters.

JOHN

Hey H.F., I wrapped up that call in Ayin, every one of those windows is clean enough to see yourself... through.

H.F.

Good to know. But speaking of seeing through things, I can barely see *you* through the sylvan glen you've installed in here. So I'm sorry, kid, but I'm gonna have to put my foot down about all these plants. They were a nice touch at first, but this is getting out of hand. And out of hand means I put my foot down.

JOHN

Well, it'd be hard to put anything down around here without knocking over another plant. But—

H.F.

Exactly my point! We're crammed in here tight enough as it is. Plus, I didn't want to drain coolant on your cornflakes before, but I gotta warn you, any plant that sticks around me for long is living on borrowed time. Plants and me, we go way back. I'm an inadvertent botanical serial killer. I kill cereals. And legumes. And nightshades and cucurbits and amaranths, and even dandelions. So I don't want yours on my conscience.

JOHN

But I thought you were the one who—

The pager rings.

H.F.

One second. *(answers it)* Wanting and Sustainment Systems, how may we reverse entropy in your immediate vicinity? ... Yes? ... What color is—oh, that doesn't sound good. Hang on, is this coming out of you, or out of the wall? ... Uh huh. And would you happen to be a drinks machine, by any chance? ... Made of meat. I see. Then I'm afraid we won't be able to help you with that today. But please have someone look at it. ... No, not me, I have absolutely no interest in looking at it. But thanks for the offer.

What? Why would you even ask me that? Of course not. Invoking the power of the dead is not a thing, and if it were a thing, we still would not be doing it in any professional capacity. ... No. Maybe YOU have special undead powers, but we Humans—well fine, you go ahead and hang up.

Second call this shift asking about Humans raising the dead. Someone's being weird out there again.

JOHN

Well, we Humans do *talk* about it a fair amount, I guess it can be hard to separate fact and fiction sometimes. Althaar had some serious trouble with that last night, actually—we were trying to watch a monster movie, and he got incredibly freaked out at the concept of zombies. Apparently Humans are the only people who have stories about the dead coming back? Anyway, he had a full-blown panic attack when I explained it to him. I'd never heard him scream like that before.

H.F.

Wow. Althaar was literally *screaming*? He didn't giggle, or squeak, or make heeplly excited noises?

JOHN

No, it was like, existential panic, just screaming in terror. Like I'd introduced him to an idea too horrible to even think about. I felt awful. Then the security system he just had installed tried to kill us, but that's another story.

H.F.

Ooh, yeah, if he got one of those WatchTower Moat systems, you may actually have to maintain a cheerful affect until it's fully calibrated, otherwise it'll try to "rescue" you from everything in the vicinity. They try to make those things seem smart, but of course it's not a real AI, just a set of scripts. Get too far down a script tree, and you're toast. Better make sure sealing the exits isn't one of the active response options, that scenario can turn out nasty.

JOHN

I think it's getting calibrated today, actually? But thanks for the heads up.

H.F.

No problem. In fact, I'll cover for you if you want to go check up on that right now, as long as you take the opportunity to relocate some of this foliage of yours.

JOHN

No, I was trying to tell you before, H.F., I didn't put these here. The only attempt at decorating I've made is that Ferlsdegam print on the wall. The one of plants in an office? You can't see it right now because of all the plants in the office. But yeah, none of these plants are mine.

BOLD WSS FUGULNARI SPY BABY

(impulsively, quietly)

WSS!

Both JOHN's and H.F.'s pagers go off. The spy babies are (quietly) delighted.

H.F.

Wanting and Sustainment Systems, how may we— Huh. No one there. Weird. You don't think the head office sneaked in something to make these things go off at random in that last software update?

JOHN

If they did, I'm Faraday-ing mine, I don't care how many "branding avoidance fees" they slap on me.

H.F.

Right there with ya. So if these plants aren't yours, whose are they?

JOHN

Good question. We had a bunch of unexplained plants show up at home, too, actually.

H.F.

I mean, they do give a nice feel to the office. It's just overkill, which is a term I use judiciously. Usually I like too much of a good thing, but this is an exception.

JOHN

Yeah, we thought the ones back home might have been left by the emergency cleaning service, but they... obviously haven't been here.

H.F.

Hey, if you don't like the look of the place, Probationary Mechanic's Under-Assistant, you can pick up a sponge and get scrubbing any time you want.

JOHN

I've got enough futility in my life, thanks.

H.F.

That's what I thought. So why did you need a special cleaning service? You catch another glimpse of Althaar?

JOHN

Oh, no, we've got that cleanup procedure down to a science. No, there was a, uh, incident last week. You remember we had that slow day, and you said I might as well knock off early? I found a little surprise waiting for me when I got home, in the form of 1600 liters of coffee. Which ended up flooding the entire living room. Hence the specialists.

H.F.

Wow. Good thing you don't take it with sugar. Wait a minute—sugar! I bet it was Sherlock Holmes-bot who dumped all these plants here! One of those hare-brained "experiments" he's always got going.

JOHN

Oh, that would make sense. Although this one's a lot less smelly and explode-y than usual.

H.F.

That's gotta be it. The nerve of that guy!

JOHN

So... do we want to go next door and talk to him about it?

A beat while they consider willingly subjecting themselves to Holmes-bot.

JOHN and H.F.

Naaah.

[scene 8] Transition into static. Emerging like a slow voice on a wave of phase haze, we join The Beaux Show, not yet properly licensed and certified, broadcasting from an undisclosed location on the Fairgrounds.

BEAUX SEVERAL

... a new room in a new home. The Fairgrounds! Prepare to be boarded: Beaux is here with his Merrie Band of Ruckus-Makers, Tess and Marty and Todd. Say hi to everyone, Pranksters. Everyone, say hi back. Our names haven't changed, because we were never innocent: Doddering Marty is trying to figure out where we are right now (**MARTY: Hmm? Are we live?**), Tess with Balls is probably plotting your demise (**TESS: Betcher life!**), and Incontinent Todd is, well, he's doing his usual (**TODD: C'mon, Beaux, don't tell them that, it's supposed to be a private gag**), yes, right Todd, just a gag. We're kidding! Or are we? Let Todd sit on your sofa to find out!

No secret that we last left Mebsutan space with all rockets at eleven. The Mebsutans? Gotta tellya, and if you've ever met one you know: these are a people that can't take a *joke*. COOL YOUR JETS, Mebsutans! (*burst from a terrible laugh track*) We were in such a rush to leave with our skins unroasted that we didn't have time to line up the proper permits and permissions for our time here, so we're starting pirate because we couldn't wait to start. We Jolly your Rogers, right out of the gate!

UNAUTHORIZED! Here we are, fresh-washed squeaky faces in our new school shoes, pencils sharp and eager in the skillet. Speaking for all of us, I'm thrilled to be here. This place is a legend. It is! You are! Unique in all of Human space. A monument to folly, and a tribute to foible. The Fairgrounds! Who could imagine a place like this?

[scene 9] During this next section, we transition to the Electric Egg. The show, previously live in the airwaves, limits down to a screen broadcast, just one element in the busy sonic environment of the bar doing medium business.

Which makes us go right to a question that should be obvious: this place, this place! Why is it such a dump? We walked through the Central Promenade after a sweet welcome party with Kaiser Wilhelm and the snazzy spunts down in Customs and Arrivals, and the place was like a —what’s the word I’m looking for.

TESS WITH BALLS

(on the broadcast)

Souk.

BEAUX SEVERAL

(on the broadcast)

Really? Souk?

TESS WITH BALLS

(on the broadcast)

A souk. In a Medina.

SOPON

Shots of Aqua Screamo half price every time Beaux Several blames something on a sect, sub-culture, or sinister alien plot! Next 30 minutes strict, and that’s well Screamo only.

General acclaim at the bar. This could turn into a good deal, knowing Beaux.

BEAUX SEVERAL

(on the broadcast)

But I like the Souk. I like the Medina. The Concourse had this post-apoc bazaar feeling, like you get after a Drafter smash-bomb goes off. Everything scattered around, people looking lost and bleak. The sense that everyone was happy, but now it’s all broken.

BEAUX continues (see below), but as soon as “Drafter” is heard:

HOPEFUL AQUA SCREAMO FAN

Ooh! Does “Drafter” count?

SOPON

Mm, that’s political, so it’s right on the edge, but I can’t call it a hard no. What flavor?

HOPEFUL AQUA SCREAMO FAN

You got Sunflower Despair?

SOPON

No sombrero! Shot of Sunflower Despair, half price!

HOPEFUL AQUA SCREAMO FAN

Hoots!

CHIP sneezes.

CHIP

Did someone say “half price”? My allergies just went turbo. If I knew there was going to be “half price” in the air, I would already have pounded myself on the head with a Wallbanger. That usually blunts my delicate financial condition.

SOPON

Special promotion, boss. The Beaux Show just went live, broadcasting pirate from an undisclosed location, but definitely local. Which means the good folks of the Fairgrounds are about to experience a serious uptick in outrage, and plenty of them will be in search of solace, or even the sweet kiss of oblivion. Why not encourage them to find those at the Electric Egg?

CHIP

Oh. Yeah, ok, I guess I can get on board with that. Just don't you go overboard with the handouts.

SOPON

Sure thing, boss. So, did you want a Bubbles 'Banger, or can I get that for you?

CHIP

Yours is fine. Bubbles is power-saving, don't wake her up for a single cocktail. And chase it with a Screamo, since we're apparently having a special on it. Gimme a Chocolate Bruise. Put it on Beaux's tab.

SOPON

Beaux doesn't have a tab with us.

CHIP

Yeah, but I'm guessing he will.

BEAUX SEVERAL

(carrying on from above, under the bar conversations)

There was that time, and this is a while back, before Todd was on the team. You and me, Tess, and Marty was with us, the very first time we were on Roanoke V. Remember then? Way before that mess with the Reptonadons. We were in Tamadint, during the dust bowl season, and they had—well you called it a medina, but it was more of a DMZ really. The Reptonadons had a few slices of the action, and the colonials had their stretch and were trying to keep the place nice, you know? Painting it, cleaning it, like people do.

(cont.)

But then the Tonnies had this, what, some kind of holiday ancestor dance one afternoon, and knocked down a few of their stalls for a renewal ritual. Which is fine, but then they got all “sacred ground” and went after a couple of colonial places, and, you know, can’t just knock over a guy’s store, amIrite? Even if your Lizzie god says it’s time for a change. Ended up with like 30 bodies down, and half the Tonnie sectors burning. Cause whadyaspect.

That’s the vibe I had on the Promenade, like it was the aftermath. But aftermath of what? And all that crap all over the floor. Litter on the ground, practically blowing in the breeze. Storefronts dark, locked up. People looking down at the deck, like if they met your eye something would come of it. Trash waiting for trash fires. I kept thinking everyone would be happier if the place wasn’t such a hole. How can people be proud and prosperous when they’re squatting in bunkers? Hoping the water is still clean, that there are still jobs, that Security can still answer when they call? I mean, Welcome to the Fairgrounds, mang. It’s not what I pictured.

BAFFLED EGG PATRONS

(chatter, ad lib, pattered over the above, not all at once)

That’s not what I heard went down at Tamadint. Is he talking about the *Central Promenade*? There aren’t any trash fires. Stores were open last time I looked. What stores are dark? *etc.*

SOPON

All right! That rant gets an Aqua Screamo special for everyone who wants one. Let’s make an easy line, OK?

Bustle of BARGOERS flocking to the bar for their shots as BEAUX continues:

BEAUX SEVERAL

(continued, at least until SOPON shuts off the screen)

But hey, maybe you don’t notice it after a while. Maybe the Fairgrounds just does something to people. I mean, look at the Dilurians. Or don’t, if you just ate. *(fart noise)* But word is, after a skreb of D-butt venture capitalists moved in here, it took all of one day before they were running a non-profit. What kind of place does that?

Meanwhile, during the above:

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Sopon dear, don’t you think we’ve had enough of that noise? Something about that man’s voice just rustles my stems. And if you hand out shots every time he says something specist, you’re likely to run through your entire stock before the cycle’s out!

SOPON

Yeah, good point. *(shuts off the screen, groans from the bargoers)* Yes, I know, but you’re all getting a Screamo out of it, let’s not get crazy.

The BARGOERS grudgingly accept this as they crowd in to get their shots.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Speaking of crazy, Sopon, what do you think about this nutty new fad the Humans have got going? You know, the one where they invoke dread eldritch forces to raise the dead, and then wield the fearsome elemental powers they gain from the ritual against all who oppose them? Ha! Ha! I don't know much about it, but it sounds like a hoot! Maybe a little irresponsible, though, don't you agree?

SOPON

Uh, yeah, Mrs. F. I'll get to you in a minute, ok? Little busy right now.

DEE

Hi there, Mrs. F! My, you are looking particularly plump and well-watered today. Did you just get your leaves done, or did you roll out of your bed looking like that?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh Dee! You're so sweet. If only more Humans were like you! But then I'm sure they all will be, someday!

DEE

Aw, thanks!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(raising her voice a bit to ensure she is overheard by the other bar patrons)

Now, Dee, do you think you could explain to me this new Human craze? This thing with raising the dead? And blasting elemental powers all over the place? I hear it's the bee's pajamas! I'm dying to know more. Ha ha. Dying. It must be a Human thing, so a silly little Fugulnari like me could never really master it, but I'd love to hear all the details so I can be just properly GREEN with envy.

DEE

Mrs. F., I have no idea what you're talking about.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You know, the thing you people are doing now, with the spooky chants? And the fire, thunder, and lighting? When the dead come back to life? I must say, it's terribly exciting, when you think of the possibilities!

DEE

Uh, no, that's not a thing. Unless— are you talking about Halloween? You know all those scary stories are just for fun, right? They're just stories. "Undead" don't really exist. I mean, unless you count the Necrochargs, but they're not undead, they're just dead-dead. Decent tippers, though.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

So you haven't got your own undead army yet? Well, I'd get right on that, dearie. You don't want your fellow Humans to get ahead of you, now do you?

DEE

I promise you, Mrs. F., no one is raising an undead army. Where did you even get that? Have you seen any zombies shambling around?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, no, but obviously there's no point in letting people know you have an undead army until they're ready to spring!

DEE

(playing along)

Or lurch!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Right! Of course you'd want to keep the whole thing under wraps!

DEE

Wait, is this an army of zombies, or mummies?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I don't know the technical terms! All I know is what I've heard! That you Humans are making the dead walk!

A few BARGOERS have started to pay attention, and react to this.

DEE

Ok, seriously, there are no undead. Look at it this way: if there were any monsters wandering around the Fairgrounds, they would definitely have shown up at the Egg by now. Everyone else does, right? And the only zombies I've seen around here are made with pineapple juice. So you can relax, ok?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, you have a point, I suppose. But then again, that's just what a Human *would* say if they wanted me to stop asking questions about their secret undead army, isn't it?

This sounds pretty reasonable to the BARGOERS.

DEE

All right, if you won't believe me... Hey, Xtopps!

XTOPPS

Hoodie-oodie-oop, Dee! The chills that you spill up my back are back. Hot! If I have twelve multi-function limbs theorems, does that mean unexpected good fortune is my serendip-dip-dip-dip-dip-dip-dip-dip-dip-dipity? Just so you know, I am not afraid to eat a peach. But cheese dip is a little unsettling.

DEE

He's got his bread buttered a little heavy today.

XTOPPS

Love the skin you're in today with a splash of oil of Oh, hey, PBJ! And a hint of the satisfaction of what's to come. I couldn't ask for another. But you could. Sapon's got a flash dash of my cache stashed by the brash trash bin today, could you see if I can get a lick and a little? I was trying some "out of sight, out of mind" fu. Didn't work.

DEE

Sapon's busy, Xtopps, and you're already on the beach. Ride out what you've got before you saddle up for more. Question. Mrs. F. wants to know if you've seen any—what was it? Armies of the dead?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes! Humans bringing the dead back to a shadowy half-life where they eat the flesh of the living. And gaining destructive elemental powers too! It sounds so fun, I wanted to see it for myself. I just wish someone had mentioned it to me before now.

XTOPPS

Lady Mondegreen, I may be glitched, but you are crazy. Though now I stretch my noodle, a there's a couple Human religions that groove on the necromantic chow-down, so who am I to fudge.

DEE

What? Oh, right. That's not the kind of "flesh-eating" she's talking about, though. Most Humans would say that's just like, metaphorical "flesh." Although I guess once you start transubstantiating, you never know where you'll end up.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

So it is true!

DEE

No, no, it's nothing like that. This "undead" stuff is just a kind of scary story Humans like to tell ourselves, ok? It's not, like, real. And it certainly isn't happening here today.

XTOPPS

(wandering off)

Back to back, belly to belly, don't give a frid 'cause I'm stoned already...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That's too bad. I thought there would be roaring sounds of chaos, blasts of water, and bursts of searing fire. Did I leave any out? None of that here today, oh well. I was hoping we could put together some raise-the-dead-smash-everything community nights here at the Egg. For beginners, to learn the basics. Like a sewing circle, but with necromancy. I mean, *(raising her voice again a bit to encourage eavesdropping)* it's certainly not fair for you Humans to be the only ones with undead armies, is it? How would the rest of us defend ourselves?

DEE

I promise you, Mrs. F., if I ever start a necromancy circle, you can be my very first initiate. Ok? But right now, Xtopps is looking a little asymmetrical, and I want to grab him before he finds his way back into Chip's retirement bingeo-theca. Gators!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

All right, Dee. Best of luck! *(to a bystander)* Well how about you then, gesin, undead Human armies ring a bell? No? No. All right. What's your name? I've seen you here before, but I thought you might be a decoration, I wasn't sure.

RUTLEDGE

Rutledge.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hello Rutledge. I'm Mrs. Frondrinax. So! Beaux Several is in town now! I think he makes some pretty good points, don't you? The Central Promenade is filthy, you have to admit that. Last time I was there I thought my pot would soil. I mean—not the soil IN my pot. That's nice and clean and comfy. It's, and I'm going to be confidential with you Rutledge, because you have honest eyes and—those are eyes, right? I thought so. It's very good soil, Rutledge, the best I can get. I won't just stick myself into any old patch of ground, oh my no! Standards. Having standards frightens those lung-breathers sometimes, Rutledge. If I have standards it means I don't just wallow any time I want. And when I stand firm, well, some lungers judge themselves by *my* behavior. That doesn't make a pretty picture, Rutledge, does it? No, it just doesn't. And that's—I don't think it's self-indulgent, do you? I just need to be sure my roots are being cared for properly. Fed, and supported. Nurtured. It's not luxury, it's refinement.

I'd show you my roots, but we'd have to be—no, no, it's too soon. I can't, not yet. I was, I'm sorry if I dwell on this, Rutledge. I was—I can only call it love. It was like a sudden clean green shower on a balmy sunny day, it was love. Like the fingertip touch of a gentle breeze on the secret underside of morning leaves. I was in love with the most wonderful creature. He was taken from me. Too soon, too cruelly. I can't talk about it. He gave up his life for me, Rutledge.

I wish I could get to know you better, but it wouldn't be fair to you. The memory of Steve—I want to, but I can't. I hope you can understand.

RUTLEDGE

Pleased to meet you. I'm a browsing herbivore.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well! Dodged a caplet with you, didn't I, Rutledge? As if you'd even be worthy to lick Steve's butts! Anyway, the Human Exchange Concourse *is* filthy and dirty and dangerous, you'll probably like it up there if you like trash and broken dreams, and I say the problem has everything to do with how the Humans are running this place. A smarter, sterner hand would make all the difference in the world, and I think that will be obvious to everyone very soon!

Now, Rutledge, I have one thing more to tell you, and then as far as I'm concerned we'll never have to speak again. Do you see those charming young sprouts over in the corner? Well, along that corner-like stretch of curved wall? Those are not snacks. You just keep your filthy mouth off them. Am I understood?

RUTLEDGE

Ok. Bye.

FUGULNARI SPY BABIES

(background, unheard, unnoticed, and undercover)

Eeply-eeple-eeple oot oot!

[scene 10] Transition to a public area, where an announcement is heard:

BORIS KARLOFF-BOT

Good evening, Fairgrounds residents, and visitors with blood of many colors, flavors, and factors. This is a public service announcement from the HEC Office of the Paranormal. We at the H.O.P. pride ourselves on providing information that is factual and not based in imagination, rumor, misinformation, or obvious lies, here in the Twilight Z—I mean the Fairgrounds. On the Fairgrounds.

Pursuant to various recent inquiries, we feel it necessary to inform you that Humans cannot raise the dead. Undead zombies that once lived among us and now crave the taste of living flesh are not real! Also, Humans can not turn into werewolves under the light of the moon. And the next full moon that will be visible from the Fairgrounds will be in... 16 and a half years, so in any case, you have plenty of time to prepare. Furthermore, there are no Humans who prolong their immortal existence by consuming the hot, pulsing, delicious blood of the living. That could never happen! And finally, ghosts are purely a product of folklore, conceived as manifestations of grief and the fear of death. Alien pods that can absorb your appearance and basic memories do of course exist, but they are prohibited on the Fairgrounds under the Finney Act of '56.

(cont.)

Once again, any stories you may hear about the undead are exaggerated or entirely fictitious. Humans do not rise from the dead. They do not eat your brains or otherwise devour your flesh to slash out a seething and foul simulacrum of life in their rotting, malevolent frames. Thank you for your attention. All of us at the HOP wish all of you the happiest and safest of Halloweens. OR DO WE...

[scene 11] By the end of this announcement, we're hearing it at the fancy restaurant where JOHN and STELLA are out on a date. It's fancy. Bustling, efficient waiters. Flatware, prompt service. Sentient napkins.

STELLA

That was weird.

JOHN

I mean, by Fairgrounds standards?

STELLA

Good point. Still, this is the first I've heard of any Office of the Paranormal. What do they even do?

JOHN

Make announcements like that, I guess. We've got an entire Timekeeping department that exists just to frill with the calendar on a semi-regular basis, so why not an Office of the Paranormal that just reminds people there's nothing paranormal going on every once in a while?

STELLA

I can't argue with that. So, how'd you find out about this place? I didn't even see a sign outside.

JOHN

Yeah, according to Althaar, this place is so fancy it doesn't have a name. You just refer to it with a gesture. I got H.F. to show me the Human version, though—you hold out one hand like this, palm and fingers flat, as if to shush someone, flatten your lips, and nod confidently. That's right. It looks better when you furrow your brow, I think. So tomorrow if you ask me where I had dinner tonight—

STELLA

And where did you have dinner last night, you devilishly attractive meat robot?

JOHN

Why I dined at (*he makes the gesture*), you deadly and delectably-fierce janitor.

STELLA

And if I hadn't been here already, I would have no idea what you were doing and would think you are a little jagged. But since I have, I think I would say that I am mighty impressed, and I would wonder which bank you knocked over to get us a table.

JOHN

Oh, that's all Althaar. I could never afford this. But he really wanted to treat us to a night out. Actually, what he said was that we should infant ourselves, but you know.

STELLA

Aw.

JOHN

Yeah, I think he wanted to make up for the whole *Night of the Living Dead* security-system debacle, which was pretty harrowing for both of us. And maybe also get me out of the apartment so he could do some gyro-yoga. But I certainly don't mind, if it means I get to eat somewhere non-verbally expensive with the prettiest Human on the Fairgrounds.

STELLA

Oh, come on. Do you really think I'm the prettiest Human? I'm a little serious here. Not let's-fight-about-it-later serious. But a little serious.

JOHN

I'm not sure how to answer that. I mean, I say you're the prettiest because to me, you are the prettiest. But I'd guess that those lobster-y looking folks over there in the Aqua-Liner banquette might not agree. The whole question is pretty subjective. And it's kind of a chicken-and-egg thing, too, like, when we first met, I thought you were gorgeous, but you were also saving my life at the time, so it's hard to say what made more of an impression.

STELLA

Right, that skirmish in Vent-Biter Alley. I, uh, I have to admit I didn't really notice you much at the time. In my defense, I was a little busy.

JOHN

Right, swooping in on that hot-wire thing—

STELLA

The fast-rope, yeah. It's a pretty slick maneuver. Also saves lives, including mine. So I like it.

JOHN

And as first impressions go, it was a big Wow. I don't blame you for not being too impressed with me back then—screaming and flailing like a colicky infant isn't all that impressive.

STELLA

Hey, you gave me plenty of chances to be impressed later on. And as far as I'm concerned, *you're* the prettiest Human, whatever those Nephropidoids over there have to say about it.

STELLA'S NAPKIN

I'm glad that's sorted out. Are you hungry? We could get you another round of drinks if you want to linger before ordering. The Ballimoe is especially good tonight; it is raised from several varieties of planetary maize, united with a strain of sweet strawberry.

STELLA

Uh, John? My napkin is talking to me. Is that supposed to happen, or did someone slip some Bhangzilla into this delicious cocktail?

JOHN'S NAPKIN

If I may answer on your companion's behalf, the Diner's Napkin is a new feature at *(there is a gentle fabric-y noise of a napkin gesturing and nodding confidently)*.

JOHN

Wow. My napkin just did that thing with the hand and the nod, despite its complete lack of hands, head, or chin.

STELLA

Wow. I have no idea what's going on here, but whatever it is, it's got to be crazy expensive.

JOHN

Yeah. Uh, napkins? What's your deal?

JOHN'S NAPKIN

Allow me to reassure you, John B, that our Sentient Serviette™ program is fully endorsed by the Robot Union. We are registered as a single-source mind represented in multiple instances. We are also a fully bonded Discretionary, and as a further guarantee of privacy, our memory log is isolated after each meal and stored under a joint secured account for retrieval, should the two of you choose to return together.

STELLA

Ok, privacy and confidentiality, and you won't tell anyone what's going on in my lap. Nice. But I have to ask, where do I wipe my mouth?

STELLA'S NAPKIN

Our cognitive functions are independent of our soft and absorbent fabric bodies. Please do not hesitate to use us as napkins—that is still the primary role we have been designed to fill.

JOHN

Now, this is the kind of weird I can get behind. Hey, napkin, do you mind if I try you out now? Let me, hang on, let me just butter this roll, and—

Butter butter butter, crunch, wipe wipe wipe.

JOHN'S NAPKIN

Please do! I assure you, I don't mind at all. Oh, you missed a little spot... here.

JOHN

Oh, thanks! And that's a spectacular buttered roll.

JOHN'S NAPKIN

Thank you so much. The butter is synthesized from a blend of lab-cultured garbanzo bean analogs.

STELLA

I love this! Pass me one of those rolls please, John.

There's a staccato tapping noise from the vent, rapidly approaching, which STELLA recognizes immediately.

STELLA

What the—

*The crash of a vent, wrenched from its housing, crashing to the ground. A sudden impact sound, like the sound of a few fistfuls of sharp, vicious claws suddenly hitting a fancy floor. **Hissing. Sudden screams from the nearby tables. "Vent Biter! Vent Biter!"***

JOHN

Stella, behind you! It's a—

STELLA

(snapping into action like it's something she trains for every damn day)

I know what it is, babe. *(shouting)* Sanitation! Take cover, everyone! Sorry 'bout this, Napkin...

STELLA's chair crashes to the ground as she leaps out of it. She snatches the delicious bean-butter and in one hand and pulls the Napkin taut through her buttery fist, slathering it.

STELLA'S NAPKIN

Oh, my! This is exciting!

*Leaping toward the Vent Biter, STELLA dodges to one side of its swiping claws. Jaws snap shut a moment after she is clear. From her spot at its side, she whips the napkin around the Vent Biter's exposed neck, snatching the other end as it circles the throat. **The Vent Biter gently sneezes in rage, then hisses.** Slick with butter, STELLA's napkin garotte slips between the creature's neck scales, and its hiss is cut off along with its air supply.*

STELLA

Everybody maintain your position, please. Almost done. Not quite.

A choking sharp snap, as she breaks the Vent Biter's spine.

STELLA

Aaaand that should do it. Sorry for the mess, did I get butter on anyone? I had to lube up the cloth enough for it to slip between the Veeb's neck plates.

JOHN

Sanitation Supervisor Stella Reyes, everybody!

Cheers and applause from the restaurant patrons (and their napkins).

STELLA

Aw thanks, everybody. Uh, I think I might need a new napkin.

MAITRE D'

Gettem a glass wine, onna house!

STELLA'S NAPKIN

(a little broken, maybe it lisps or something)

That was incredible! That was absolutely incredible!

JOHN'S NAPKIN

Not in my wildest exigency subroutines was I prepared for something like this!

JOHN

I can't believe you just leapt at a snapping Vent Biter and choked it to death with a greased-up semi-sapient napkin.

STELLA

Well, I had to improvise a little. But you know, we do train a lot.

JOHN

That was the most amazing thing I have ever seen. And this is the best—I'll try to stop with the superlatives now, but it's going to be hard. But why use your napkin? Wouldn't the butter knife have let you, you know, keep your distance?

STELLA

John. You're so cute. You can't kill a Vent Biter with a butter knife, sweetie. That's for butter.

[scene 12] ALTHAAR is humming as he decorates the apartment.

ALTHAAR

Ee! It is a great hope that FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes will be enjoying the Halloween Party of surprise when they make return from their dining at *(some sort of scraping rustle as he does the Confident Nod)*! The surprise is always of some risk. The distinction between the happy surprise and the unhappy surprise is one of great delicacy! This is a difficulty. But, if permission is asked for the surprising, then there can be no surprising! So risk must be taken by Althaar! But he has prepared also the fruit-basket of apology, to be given if this surprise is one of unhappiness. So all the bases of Althaar have been shielded!

Yes! Althaar and FriendJohn and their friends will make celebration of the Halloween, and it will be the kind of scary that is pleasant! And not the scary that is scary. This is a concept most wriggly, but Althaar believes he has researched enough examples to get the hanging of it. So! Althaar has secured the artificial spider-webs to the ceiling, and carved the hyena lanterns, and suspended the Human skeletons in the corner, from where they will not move, because they are made of hard durable plastic! And certainly they will not be eating of any brains! Because that is a thing that occurs only in Human stories, and will not make scaring of Althaar! So the only screaming heard in the Room of Living will come from the Halloween novelty song play-list that Althaar has prepared! Ee!

And all refreshments are ready to be served to his guests by Althaar! It is to be hoped that he has secured sufficient pine-apples for the making of zombies, which are not the zombies that Althaar does not think about, but instead are the very tasty cock-tails which are festive and do not reek of despair and horror from beyond the grave, which is why we put the happy colorful shirts of Hawaii and big hats next to these zombies! For not thinking of the other.

Oh! Althaar must soon apply the clavola unguent to his flixators, to shield them from the chafing of his Costume of Halloween! The container of the nitrogen-fixing coolant processor! It is not so much the traditional Costume, but it is one Althaar knows he can be fitting into. And, if anyone is asking, Althaar has created the Back Story! He is the nitrogen-fixing unit who must stay in his box, because his central cycle coil is making a strange noise that is to the other coolant units the scary kind of scary. So until he has discovered a method of making repair to this coil, he must be hiding from them! The name of the nitrogen-fixing coolant unit is "Alfie," and it will be a day of great joy for Alfie and all his friends when he can once again walk among them! It is a happy story. Althaar hopes someone is asking about it!

*[scene 13] ALTHAAR imitates Alfie a bit as he finishes his party preparations.
Transition to a quiet shift on the Bridge.*

STALIN-BOT

Hello, *RXS Nofumar*. Your Escape Wector, I mean Departure Wector, is go out of docking bay and turn left. ... What do you mean which left. You are sitting in chair facing pointy part of wessel? You have window in front of you? You have bilaterally-symmetric anatomical structure? So, you have right hand, yes? ... Ok, right tentacular club, then. ... да, хорошо [*Da, khorosho*]. Turn in other direction and press “go fast” button. Thank you!

COMMANDER

Stalin-bot, it is good to have you back at your usual post. As inappropriate as you, and that, may be. Did you enjoy your scheduled hangover?

STALIN-BOT

Very much, Commander. It afforded me many opportunities to discover and refine grudges against careless, heartless treatment by capitalist drones and faceless taskmasters.

COMMANDER

It’s good to have a hobby.

STALIN-BOT

Speaking of which, when is it that Command will be installing such impressive and colorful chairs for entire Bridge Crew, to reward us for our tireless exertions?

AMBER

That chair isn’t an official upgrade? It was a private gift to the Commander from Beaux Several? And when I say “private gift” what I mean is an obvious bribe?

STALIN-BOT

BEAUX SEVERAL gave you BRIBE? Incredible! He was named Best Traveler by Kaiser Wilhelm-bot in big party celebration, you know. I was not invited. To get a bribe from Beaux Several! Hydraulic bucket list! That is beautiful chair. Is... Stetson chair?

COMMANDER

I don’t think Stetson makes chairs, Stalin-bot. I’m pretty sure they confine themselves to the other end.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Sure looks like good sitting, though. Energized your Sitzfleisch, didn’t it?

STALIN-BOT

Oh! ... Is Beaux! Is Several!

COMMANDER

Ah, the elusive Mr. Byooks, at last. Yes, the chair is very nice. Comfortable, authoritative, and a solid fit with my workout regimen.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Much like myself then, wouldn't you say? *(you can hear his grin from here)*

AMBER

That's definitely flirting, sir?

COMMANDER

I know what flirting is, Amber. What I would say, Mr. Several, is that I instructed Customs and Arrivals to notify me as soon as you set foot on the Fairgrounds. And yet here you are, unannounced, and on my bridge.

BEAUX SEVERAL

As the poet said: I'm there when every tear is being made, and absent when it falls. It's a kind of philosophy.

Commander, let me be frank with you. Let me be Beaux. I love authority. I really do. Authority has made my whole career possible. I just don't ride with authority. I ride opposition. If I didn't know how at very least to *try* to give official Arrivals the slip, I wouldn't be Beaux Several. And for better or worse, I am.

Right now I'm here to ask for pro-tem permission to broadcast. I'll do it anyway, but I thought you might want to give me a hot yes. Olive branch, right?

I'm not your enemy, Commander, though I may look like it. I'm actually your opposite ally. I'm Magnetic South to your Polar North. Yes, I got onto your station off-scanner. Made some friends on the way in, and got a nice piece of paper for my trouble. It's what I do. Want to slap my wrist? Go ahead. I'll have it on the air before Earth Central gets your log entry. We'll both ride that wave for a bit. You'll be the righteous paladin, I'll be the scruffy-looking—well, you get it. We are what we are. It's all good.

But Beaux wants you to know that my anima isn't holding any animus against you. We're on a collision course. We can like it or lump it. I know my choice, howbout you? Who knows, maybe this even counts as meeting cute.

After a beat or so, there's the quiet sound of a call being surreptitiously placed.

AMBER

(whispering, hand over mouth)

Hello? HECNET Hotz? Is this the tip line?

COMMANDER

Well. Mr. Several. That's not what I was expecting. Usually my daily irritants aren't nearly so self-aware and well-spoken. I quite like you when you're frank. Maybe even better than when you're Beaux.

And I've already heard a few clips from your pirate broadcast, so let's clear some snow. The Central Promenade felt like Roanoke V after the Reptonadon Massacre? Storefronts locked up? Trash waiting for fires? That doesn't sound like the Promenade I know. It's no Illudium Gardens, true, but it's a perfectly pleasant venue to do a little shopping and perhaps pick up some ludicrously-oversized produce. Just where did you see all this chaos and devastation?

BEAUX SEVERAL

You got me, Commander. Maybe I didn't "see" any of that as such. Maybe it was all in my mind's eye. Maybe I'll do a segment later about how much things have stepped up since I lit a fire under station management by airing how broken it all was. The thing is, people hear what they want to hear, whether I say it out loud or not. They hear it faster when it comes from me, but I don't start the fires. I just go where I see smoke. I'm told there is a lot of trash, though.

COMMANDER

I'll admit we've had a problem with someone going around smashing all the Trash Detection Units faster than we can replace them. It's not exactly easy to get spares, those things are dinosaurs. I don't think they even make them anymore.

BEAUX SEVERAL

I've always kind of hated those TDUs. Not a big fan of nanny-care for grown-ups. Show me your respect, and I'll respect your showing. Tell me you're escalating when a piece of paper falls out of my hand, I change the channel.

COMMANDER

But as soon as that "nanny-care" stopped, we had trash all over the decks. So much for your channel.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Agree to disagree.

COMMANDER

All right, let's talk about some of your other "disagreements," shall we? There's quite a few alerts in your ICSB Event Attractor file. Interesting reading. Your mistake with the Mebsutans was going there at all, of course, they've never reacted well to outside interference. So just what did you think you'd get out of intruding on their peace talks? As for the other charges, well, if you managed to scam some Dilurians, good on you. But what was your business on Roanoke V? You devastated that colony. Made them smash their eggs, told them not to plant crops. No reason for it. Was it just to show you could? Was it mockery? Paranoia? Bigotry? That makes you persona non patica in my book.

FRALL

(shimmering in)

I'm afraid it's a bit more complex than that, sir. Good afternoon, Sin Several. I am Lt. Cmdr. Frallen Br'ar. Long time listener, first time caller.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Thank you, Lieutenant Commander. A pleasure. Though you're hardly a first-time caller, since you haven't called in yet.

FRALL

Haven't I?

COMMANDER

Frall, you listen to Beaux Several?

FRALL

Oh yes. Beaux Knows Best—Accept No Substitutes. He is what he is. Which is true of everyone to a certain extent, but very much more so in Beaux's case.

COMMANDER

O-kay. What did you mean by, "it's more complex than that?" The Roanoke incident seems straightforward enough. Outright predatory manipulation of an entire planetary culture, leading to total extinction.

FRALL

The manipulation is inarguable, sir, but at the same time, the extinction was almost certainly inevitable. The Reptonadons believed profoundly in signs and prophecies. From the moment they founded that settlement, they believed it to be doomed. They always intended for it to vanish in a questionable manner. That's why they named it Roanoke.

COMMANDER

The Reptonadons don't call it Roanoke. We call it Roanoke.

FRALL

Yes, sir. But "Roanoke" is a fairly accurate translation.

COMMANDER

What?

FRALL

In their language, it was called, "Colony That Vanishes in Mysterious Circumstances Comma Nefarious Stranger."

COMMANDER

Did we know that when we started calling it Roanoke?

FRALL

Somebody did.

COMMANDER

Well— Hang on, the original Roanoke colony didn't vanish in mysterious circumstances. They went to live with the nearby Croatoans. It wasn't mysterious at all. They left a note!

FRALL

Mm. Truth rarely obscures a good mystery, in the long run.

COMMANDER

All right, fine. What about “Comma Nefarious Stranger”? You're telling me that's in their actual name for the place?

FRALL

The Reptonadons do love their punctuation. Very nitpicky. You wouldn't have liked them. I didn't. Nevertheless, I would agree that the whole affair was a deeply tacky move on Beaux's part. But if it hadn't been him, it would have been someone else.

COMMANDER

A great deal of evil has been excused under that banner, Frall.

FRALL

Oh, absolutely, sir. Nearly all of it. But again, if it hadn't been under that banner, it would have been another. I'm not sure I'm getting my point across, so I'll stop trying.

BEAUX SEVERAL

If it helps, I felt really bad about it. I mean, I didn't expect them to *do* that. Who would *do* that? Doesn't “too stupid to live” count for anything? I didn't *mean* it. It was mostly a joke. I'd been drinking.

COMMANDER

The thing is, Frank, that kind of “joke” just doesn't occur to anyone with a heart. Which brings me to another question. There's no physical description of you in your ICSB file. But there's certainly no mention of you being Human. And no record of you in any League of Humans records that I can access, which is more of them than you might think. You seem to have a very easy time ingratiating yourself with sapients all over the galaxy, certainly an easier time than a Human could reasonably expect. And yet you look at least as Human as anyone here on the Fairgrounds. So just what are you?

BEAUX SEVERAL

Oh, you know. What does that even mean? Is Beaux Human. Is that what it comes down to, Commander? Where did I first see light, who gave me skin? The best parts of me are Human, I'll stand by that. In the company of Humans, I feel Human. When in Rome, amIrite?

COMMANDER

Mm hm. When on the Fairgrounds, Mr. Several, watch your step.

BEAUX SEVERAL

I'll be sure to. Maybe you'd like to watch with me some time? But right now, I'll take a few steps off of your Bridge, I can see you've got a lot in your queue.

STALIN-BOT

Before you go, Mr. Several, may I give you paper? I think there's some around here. Or perhaps First Annual Galactic Fair commemorative pencil-holder? I simply wish to be part of the Beaux Show.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Next time, friend bot. And I'm sure there'll be a next time, for a soul as great as yours. We'll talk about it then.

STALIN-BOT

I ... I have a great soul.

BEAUX SEVERAL

So long, zoods! You all keep on keeping on, now. You're effervescent in my book, I don't care what anyone says.

Door whoosh as BEAUX leaves the bridge. His absence is suddenly large. A beat of background noise.

AMBER

Wow? What a dick?

[scene 14] Transition to a Hydroponics workroom, where MRS. FRONDRINAX is debriefing RHUBARB.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Rhubarb! I thought I sent you to keep an eye on Althaar. Why aren't you at your post?

RHUBARB

But I had to report in, chief! Althaar is preparing his home for ... THE RITUAL.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Now you've got Althaar in on this? You do understand, Rhubarb, that you are the only Fugalnari agent who has observed any kind of supernatural tomfoolery going on. I'm starting to think you've been drinking the brown water.

RHUBARB

It's true! Althaar sent John and Stella away, and while they were gone, he moved the furniture around, and placed piles of Human bones, and colorful worms all over the room, and hung arachnid habitats on the walls! And then he prepared to don on his dread sorcerer's armor, by smearing himself with foul unguents!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Foul unguents I'll buy, but Althaar in armor? He's an Iltorian, Rhubarb. How would he wear armor? Why would he *need* armor?

RHUBARB

I know what I saw! He assembled his brown armor of mashed plant pulp, covered in arcane inscriptions, all while invoking a deformed mechanical deity named "Alfie."

MRS. FRONDRINAX

...This "armor," Rhubarb. Did it by any chance resemble a shipping box? A large regular reinforced cuboid made of, yes, tree pulp, I'll admit that's a little off-putting, used for moving mechanical units from place to place? An object which, for future reference, looks nothing like "armor" as any sentient being would use the word?

RHUBARB

I'm... not sure I know what a "box" is. Have I ever seen one? I'm only two weeks old.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(very tired)

"You'll love working with cliplings," they said. "It's like watering the future," they said. "You'll be able to shape the coming generation, in your image," they said.

RHUBARB

What?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Never mind. Do you know, Rhubarb, I think your obvious talents are being wasted in your current position. Yes, it's long past time you had a promotion! Especially now that you've got your very own name, we can't just leave you doing a simple clipling's job, can we? So I've got a new, very special mission for you. There's a suspicious engineering sub-module down in Samech 56 that could do with some careful watching. Do you think you could handle a stakeout, Rhubarb?

RHUBARB

Sure thing, chief!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Very good. Now, it's vitally important that you keep a close watch on the place at all times, do you hear? And no breaking your cover! You just stay down there until I make contact, do you understand? And don't tell any of the other cliplings about this. We don't want them getting jealous of your Very Important Super Special Secret Mission!

RHUBARB

Yay!

[scene 15] Transition to another live broadcast of the Beaux Show.

BEAUX SEVERAL

... catching us in motion here, from place to place and the next. I've just left Commander Torianna, Head Noodle of the Pasta Authority on this dusty jewel. Asked her if we could work under license, and she didn't say no, and if you don't say no to Beaux, it's official!

So, listen folks, I feel for the Commander, I do. I do! I really do-doo-doo-doo. Let's riddle this one, you and me. Where do you start when you're cleaning up a giant? The head or the feet, I say—pick your preference, then work straight to the other end until the job is done. Someone needs to crack the whip here, amIrite? You know it's true. Too much foosball, not enough maintenance. Case in point, the Fairgrounds would make for a majestic sight from the window of an inbound sharp ship, if you could see it through all the escape pod debris. Still don't have working escape pods here on the Fairgrounds, what, almost a year later? But foosball? Sure, you can get that any day.

But never mind maintenance, let's get back to simple trash management. Whose job is that? Sanitation, right. But I guess Sanitation has other plans. Sure, they held back the vent-biters when they needed to, and I'll stand a Sannie a drink for that any time. Call a hero a hero, and never stop. But most of the veebs are out there keeping company with those pod parts in free orbit, so isn't it time to take out the trash again? Beat those swords back into brooms. Go on now. Try it—hold that broom. It's a good look.

One thing Beaux will tell you, sure for sure—the Death Cult terror sweeping this station doesn't have roots on the Bridge. Say what you will about the Commander and her staff, they don't raise the dead, they don't eat the living. We hear your whispers: death rituals in the dark station corners. How can anyone be so Anti-Life? How?

Beaux's been walking among you, and the people we've met and love—and love!—would never be part of that shness. But it's true, as a people, Humans love monsters. Undead tales reach as far back as reaching goes. Ask yourself this—would it be such an easy step to the

Death Cult, if the Death Cult wasn't in you already? The truth will set you free—but only if you know it, in and out. Hey—the more you Beaux.

But hey, opinions are like reticulums, everybody's got one. What's your take, Beaux Nation? How should the Commander take out the trash? What *is* Sanitation spending that big fat vent-biter budget on these days? And why *do* we keep hearing about Human death rituals? Where there's smoke, there's some unseen censer, amIrite? Tess, have we got anyone on the beam?

TESS WITH BALLS

I got a couple of Security grunts with a grudge, how's that float your bob?

BEAUX SEVERAL

Absolutely, let's hear the score from Security! How's it swerving, officers?

NESS

Oh! Uh, are we on?

BEAUX SEVERAL

You are on and up and out to here, my friends.

DORMER

Wow! It's you! It's really you! This is just... I can't even... I've been a fan since the Beaux Talks days. This is amazing!

BEAUX SEVERAL

It is, isn't it?

DORMER

I've got the Beaux Knows T-shirt, and the "Don't Ask Me, I Heard It from Beaux" mug, and the full set of Bobbleheads, including the Wet-Me Wipe-Me Todd limited edition!

A distressed "Awww!" from INCONTINENT TODD in the bg.

BEAUX SEVERAL

And I couldn't begin to tell you how much we at The Beaux Show appreciate that. So, what've you got for the Beaux Nation today? What's the word on the corridor from my zoods in blue-ds?

NESS

Oh, yeah! We've got an announcement! "Security would like to reiterate that there have been no confirmed sightings of zombies, mummies, vampires, liches, ghouls, ghosts, jiangshi, vrykolakas, or revenants of any kind."

DORMER

But even if there were, Security would handle it!

NESS

Right! Because we are vigilant!

DORMER

We're ever-vigilant!

NESS

And right now, we're even more vigilant than that!

DORMER

Exactly! So there's nothing to worry about.

NESS

If we see any of those zombies, they're dead.

DORMER

Well, yeah, of course they're dead. They wouldn't be zombies if they weren't dead.

NESS

No, they're undead.

DORMER

That's the same thing!

NESS

It is not!

DORMER

Ok, look, if you—

The call is cut off.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Thanks, Tess. Well, Fairgrounds, now that you know exactly who's defending you from any possible undead menaces on board, I'm sure you're all feeling a lot more certain about your future safety. Let's hear from another local with some opinions and a functional communicator, how about it? You're on the Beaux Show, hit me with the hot goss.

CHIP

Hi there, Beaux. This is Chip Frinkel, big fan, and proprietor of the Electric Egg.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Uh oh, I smell promo.

CHIP

Ha ha, I don't know what you're talking about, Beaux! I just wanted to mention that I certainly haven't seen any zombies anywhere in the spacious and relaxing confines of the Electric Egg, conveniently located off the shuttle atrium on Lamed 3. But we are serving a classic rum-based cocktail we're calling the "Zombie but not Really Because Humans Don't Do That Kind of Thing!" Half price all this week!

BEAUX SEVERAL

That name doesn't exactly roll off the mouthparts, Chip.

CHIP

I can't disagree, Beaux, but I can promise your listeners that my bartender's skill at mixing drinks is inversely proportional to their skill at naming them. So everyone can— *(to someone in the bg)* What? Oh, yeah, good call. *(back to the phone)* Plus! We'll be donating all proceeds from this drink special to the zombie victims! If there are any. Which there won't be! Because that's not a thing! Which means everyone should just come out and have a good time!

The call is cut off.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Well, it sounds like not even the threat of undead annihilation can slow the roll around here. I like your hustle, Fairgrounds. And I think we've got time for just one more caller before Todd needs a change. *(TODD: Aw, c'mon, Beaux!)* What do you know, you're on The Beaux Show, so say hello!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, hello, Beaux, first time long time. This is Mrs. Frondrinax. I'm a Fugulnari, but I've been on the Fairgrounds for, oh donkey's-tail's years now. And I've seen plenty of strange behavior from these Humans, but I'm absolutely certain they're not raising the dead!

BEAUX SEVERAL

That's good to hear, Mrs. Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I mean, sure, my Human neighbor in Alef 1, Suite C, may have put up a lot of strange decorations, bones and worms and spiderwebs and whatnot, but that's hardly a crime against nature, is it?

BEAUX SEVERAL

I couldn't put it better myself.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And there's obviously a perfectly good explanation for his ability to call down fire, thunder, and lightning at will, besides some sort of profane ritual to bring the dead back to a shambling twilight existence. I mean, he hasn't *given* me an explanation, but I'm sure he could if he felt like it.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Stands to reason.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

And yes, the weird chanting at all hours does get to be a little tiresome, but that's just the kind of thing you have to be culturally sensitive about when you're living among aliens! Isn't that what they say? So I try to be tolerant, I really do. No matter how much ominous screaming I hear from over there. In Suite C. On Alef 1.

BEAUX SEVERAL

Cultural sensitivity is so important these days, isn't it? You're an inspiration to us all.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, you're too kind! But I just had to speak up, I wouldn't want anyone to think that my darling Human neighbor, John B, could be putting them in any kind of danger with some sort of unholy summoning of hideous ghoulish thralls! The very idea is just absurd! He's probably on his way home to Suite C right now, with no idea anyone is saying all these terrible things about him! The poor dear!

BEAUX SEVERAL

Well, thanks for straightening that out for us, Mrs. F.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

My pleasure, Beaix. And I do hope you and your crew will be with us here on the Fairgrounds for a good long time. You perform such an important public service.

[scene 16] Transition to the hallway near Suite C, as JOHN and STELLA return from their dinner.

STELLA

That dinner was amazing. I wish we could eat like that every night.

JOHN

I don't think even Althaar's discretionary fund could stretch that far. Although stopping a vent-biter from eviscerating an entire roomful of diners ought to be good for a few complimentary appetizers, at least.

STELLA

Eh, Sanitation has a policy about accepting freebies, we don't want to look like we're playing favorites with people's lives. Or, well, these days, with people's ground-in grease and grime.

A couple of aliens in the middle distance:

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 1

Look! Humans!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 2

Sh! Don't let them know we're on to them!

JOHN

Ok, that's like the third group of aliens tonight that's given us the hairy eyeball. Or hairy... visual receptor. Do I have a big blob of Elysion gravy on my face or something?

STELLA

Nope. There's a little Necker-cake icing on your tie, though.

JOHN

Ah, crap.

Futile tie-wiping noises.

STELLA

But I doubt that's enough to piss off a bunch of total strangers, unless there's like, a haberdasher's convention in town.

JOHN

So you've noticed it, too?

STELLA

Yeah, I have, and it's giving me the serious weards. Let's just try to get back to your place without attracting too much attention, and then I'll make a few calls.

As they pass by couple more aliens:

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 3

There's two of them now! What do we do?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 4

Just keep moving! Don't let them look you in the visual receptors! That's how they get you!

JOHN

Let's maybe walk *really briskly* the rest of the way back to my place?

STELLA

Right there with you.

[scene 17] Transition to the COMMANDER, in her office.

COMMANDER

Commander's Log: Personal. I hate saying that. It makes me feel like I'm on an old tv show, doing a blatant plot dump or doling out some ham-handed philosophical blather about the adventures of the day. But it's that or "Dear Diary," and I'd rather sound like a rusty old cliché than a lovestruck 13-year-old.

(sigh) Losing Bigelow hit harder than I thought it would. He lived way out on the edge, for so many years—it should have come as no surprise when someone finally knocked him off. But he was so *good* at the edge. I suppose it was hard to imagine he could ever really fall. He came here to tell me—what? Something. Did he leave a hint somewhere? A sign? If I could find the shape of it, I could pry it out. But nothing. I've got nothing. An empty cipher.

And now this Beaux Several business. I wish I could blame him for all the discontent I've been seeing around here, but no. He's just tapping into it. Which is enough to make him a problem, but it means just getting rid of him won't be a solution. I don't know where this feeling comes from, but it's everywhere, now. We're all unsettled, myself included. We're braced for a blow. Maybe we'll welcome it when it finally comes. Once it hits, we can stop wondering how bad it's going to be. I've got good people here. On the Bridge and off. But there's nothing I can do to prepare them for what's coming when I can't see it myself. Nothing to do but watch, and wait, I suppose.

And nothing to do about Beaux Several either, as far as I can see. Maybe he'll get bored with the Fairgrounds quickly enough to move on *without* leaving behind the usual trail of disaster. That would be best for everyone, of course. So why does that thought make me uneasy?

(frustrated sigh) Dear Diary: I've met someone. A man, maybe. An asshat, by all accounts. But there's something about him. I don't have the time, or the space, in my life for that kind of thing. I've put myself through that particular wringer enough times to be sure of that, at least. But of all the Command Decks on all the space stations in the Galaxy, he walks onto mine. And for some reason, I find myself wondering what he's doing right now. Something appalling, probably. With repercussions I'll have to deal with in the morning.

Someone gave me a plant for my office. I don't know who. It sits on my desk and keeps itself alive. What a world we live in, all the way out here in the dark.

Torianna out.

[scene 18] Transition to JOHN and ALTHAAR's apartment. The front door whooshes open and JOHN and STELLA bustle in.

STELLA

Shut the door shut the door shut the door shut the door

JOHN

(simultaneously)

Yeah, I'm on it, just let me— There! Ok. Ok. We made it. We're ok.

The door whooshes shut and there are some bleeps of JOHN engaging additional locking systems. JOHN and STELLA breathe a sigh of relief. There is a beat of silence, and then a novelty Halloween song begins with a loud wolf howl (or other startling spooky noise).

JOHN and STELLA

AAGH!

ALTHAAR

Ee! FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes! You are returned in perfect time! The party of Halloween is soon to commence!

JOHN

Streez, Althaar, you scared the crap out of us!

ALTHAAR

In the way that is fun, or the way that is like seeing Althaar?

JOHN

The second one!

ALTHAAR

Oh no!

STELLA

It's ok, Althaar, we're fine now. We just had a kind of unsettling trip back here after dinner— thanks again for treating us, by the way—

ALTHAAR

Oh! It was a great pleasure to Althaar! But as you can be seeing, it was also the subterfuge! So that Althaar could prepare for the surprise party of Halloween!

JOHN

A surprise... Halloween party? I had a lot of theories about why you wanted us out of the apartment, but that definitely did not make my top ten.

ALTHAAR

Then surprise is success! Althaar is very pleased.

STELLA

You should be, you've really gone all out with these decorations.

JOHN

Yeah, you've got the black cats and the skeletons and, well, Hawaiian shirts, we'll work on that. Oh, is that why there was that note stuck to the front door?

ALTHAAR

No, FriendJohn, Althaar did not make affixing of any note to the door. What is the message?

JOHN

"Don't dead open inside." Or, wait. I guess, "Don't open, dead inside."

ALTHAAR

It is not a decorating of Althaar. Oh! Is this perhaps the "trick" of Halloween? But Althaar has made preparation of many treats, they had only to ask! And Althaar has prepared also... the costume! Do *not* be shielding your eyes, please, as Althaar makes emergence!

Rustle of the privacy curtain and cardboard-y clunking as ALTHAAR emerges.

STELLA

Oh, wow! You're a... *(reads)* nitrogen-fixing coolant processor!

ALTHAAR

Who is remaining inside his packaging, so as not to cause distress! His name is Alfie! Althaar has prepared the back-story, should you be wishing to hear it.

JOHN

Maybe later. So, quick question, is everyone else at this party going to be in costume? Because...

STELLA

Yeah, I wasn't going to say anything, but that's part of why the concepts of "surprise party" and "Halloween party" don't usually mesh.

ALTHAAR

Ah! Please be observing the garments on the sofa, FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes!

STELLA

Oh, Dave and Z'Wizzlinarp costumes! Cute! Looks like they should fit, too.

JOHN

Wait, you're Dave?

Doorbell rings.

ALTHAAR

Ah, the other guests are arriving for spooky fun!

ALTHAAR clonks toward the front door.

JOHN

Wait, Althaar! Before you open the door, let's make sure it's actually a party guest.

ALTHAAR

Who else should it be, FriendJohn? Mrs. Frondrinax is already on the list of guests, so she can not be arriving unexpectedly!

JOHN

Yeah, I don't know, but... things were getting spooky out there before, in a distinctly not-fun kind of way.

Doorbell rings again.

ALTHAAR

Althaar does not wish to cause the not-fun fear in FriendJohn, but he does not make opening of the door soon, he will be committing a rudeness!

JOHN

Just... let's just find out who it is first.

ALTHAAR

Very well!

*Bleep of the front door intercom. **An angry mob of aliens can be heard outside.***

ALTHAAR

Althaar is welcoming you to the party of Halloween! Who is arriving, please?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 1

(over the intercom)

We know what you Humans are up to in there! You'd better come out!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 2

Yeah! With your tentacles up!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 3

Wait, do they have tentacles?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 4

No, they've got those weird creepy things. Uh... hands!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 2

Who cares what they're called? Whatever you've got, come out with them up!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 1

And no funny business! We'll have our visual receptors on you!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 4

Your fearsome elemental powers don't scare us!

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes there has been perhaps a confusion, friends! The Halloween festivity of John and Althaar is making the fun kind of scariness only!

Confused murmurs over the intercom.

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 3

The fun kind of scariness? What's the fun kind of scariness?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 2

Never mind that now, it's some kind of Human trick!

ALTHAAR

There are no tricks at the party of John and Althaar, dear friends! But many treats are provided!

More confused murmuring.

ALTHAAR

(quietly to JOHN and STELLA)

Perhaps, dear friends, it would be wise to make trying on of the costumes now, behind the door shut.

JOHN

(also quietly)

Good call.

Bedroom door whoosh as JOHN and STELLA duck out.

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 4

Hang on, that didn't sound like a Human. That sounds like—

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 1

It sounds like an Iltorian!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 3

The Humans trapped an Iltorian in there? Those bastards!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 2

Will they stop at nothing!?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 1

Sin Iltorian! Please be brave! We'll rescue you from these Human dead-summoners!

ALTHAAR

But Althaar does not require rescuement! You can be seeing for yourselves!

The door whooshes open. A beat as the suspicious aliens stare at a nitrogen-fixing coolant processor box.

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, unexpected new friends!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 2

By Febulon's reach! The Humans used their eldritch powers to turn that poor Iltorian into a nitrogen-fixing coolant unit!

ALTHAAR

Not in the least, new friends! Althaar is wearing... the costume! It is like the disguise, which is like the lie, but these are all different in a way that Althaar must admit he has yet to be grasping. But Althaar *is* grasping that it is most essential to the practice of the Halloween! And it has happy side effect of allowing Althaar to share the room of living with his dear Human friends!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 4

Human... friends?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 3

You have Human friends?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 2

I thought they hated Iltorians!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 1

Yeah, and that's really creepy, even before you get to the dead-summoning thing.

ALTHAAR

Oh, yes! Althaar has many wonderful Human friends! It *is* a sad truth that they cannot be seeing Althaar without experiencing the consequences most distressing, but they have been so very generous in sharing their time with Althaar nonetheless! Althaar finds the Human culture to be of much fascination! So he is very pleased when he can make participation in the Human celebrations like this one! With his dear Human friend and room-mate, John B! And Althaar would very much wish to introduce you all to his room-mate, but he would like you first to put down your blunt instruments, please. And while you are waiting for the other guests to make arrival, you can be tasting of the "punch!" That is just a name, it will not strike you about the face.

Another beat as the now-less-suspicious aliens look at each other. They're starting to feel a bit dickish about all this.

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 1

So, uh... yeah. Should we...?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 3

I mean, this all seems really, uh... not nefarious? At all? And I don't see any dead people or anything, so.

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 2

There are bones all over the walls!

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 4

Yeah, but I don't think those are real. They look like they're made of hard durable plastic.

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 3

Are Human bones... not?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 4

Pr...etty sure.

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN 1

Well, I say this spread looks amazing, so if the Humans *are* going to summon an army of the dead to destroy us all, we might as well face them on a full stomach. Right?

SUSPICIOUS ALIENS 2, 3, and 4

Right!

ALTHAAR

Please be enjoying the spread of Althaar, new friends! And Happy Halloween to you all!

[scene 19] Closing credits music.

ANNOUNCER

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

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

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

John Amir as John B

Berit Johnson as Althaar

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

Zuri Washington as Dee

Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

and Eli Ganiyas as H.F.

and also featured

Jessica Stoya, Ian W. Hill, David Arthur Bachrach, Olivia Baseman, Linus Gelber, Phil Cruise, Lex Friedman, and Anna Stefanic.

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

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

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

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

Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanic

Life With Althaar logo and illustration by Dean Haspiel

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We'll be back in two weeks with another Tale from the Fairgrounds, but right now, it sounds like Althaar's getting ready to make some kind of announcement to all the guests at his Party of Halloween...

[scene 20] Back up on the party. Alien Halloween sounds.

ALTHAAR

And now, Althaar has made preparation of one more Halloween surprise! One of the cherished customs of this Human holiday is the playing of the “novelty song!” These humorous compositions are usually detailing an ecumenical gathering of the classic Human monster archetypes, but in an unlikely and most jocular context, where rather than cause the hideous violence and death, they are sitting down to a spooky meal or enjoying a popular dance craze! Often both! So! Althaar hopes you are making enjoyment at his attempt on the traditional Halloween novelty song, “(It Is) A Fairgrounds Halloween!”

JOHN

Wait, what?

Music starts to a “spooky” Halloween novelty song. A good beat that you can dance to. JOHN is stunned.

JOHN

Althaar? When did you have time to study Halloween novelty songs? Let alone write a whole new one?

ALTHAAR

Althaar found the Human concept of “fun scariness” to be of great fascination, FriendJohn! So Althaar wished very much to attempt a new song to test his knowledge! FriendJohn must tell Althaar if it is success, please.

The BACKING VOCALS start up, rather nasally. JOHN and ALTHAAR keep talking over them for this part of the intro.

JOHN

Where the hell did you get backing vocalists?

ALTHAAR

Oh! Ms. Mallory had recommendation of a very helpful agency who were able to supply as many singers as Althaar was requiring!

JOHN

How many was that?

ALTHAAR

One moment please, FriendJohn, it is time now for Althaar to perform the traditional “sing-talking.” ahem...

BACKING VOCALISTS

(under the above)

Oh!

The rite's begun!

It's spooky fun!

At a Fairgrounds Halloween!

A creepy place!

In outer space!

It's a Fairgrounds Halloween!

ALTHAAR

(sing-talking in, yes, the traditional style)

Althaar was in the room of living, late one night

When his visual receptors gave him a terrible fright

Althaar thought he saw Humans who could rise from the dead

And he could not get the scariness out of his head!

JOHN

(interjecting, spoken)

Do you... have an actual "head," Althaar?

ALTHAAR

From his home Althaar bolted, hoping to beg

Some comfort from his friends at the Electric Egg

But there he found spooky monsters all over the place,

All looking like creatures from *(spooky voice)* Outer Space!

JOHN

Althaar, *you're* a creature from Outer Space! Almost everyone here is!

During the next chorus, even more BACKING VOCALISTS join in, including a doo-wop bass and a wordless keening soprano part, which JOHN reacts to.

JOHN

(re: vocalists & soprano)

Even more singers? How much did you spend on this?

Whoa. Bet *she* was expensive.

BACKING VOCALISTS

Oh!

The terror grows!

Your blood is froze!

At the Fairgrounds Halloween!

The monsters dance!
They're in a trance!
At the Fairgrounds Halloween!
Bring lots of spare
Space hats with air!
To the Fairgrounds Halloween!
The bloody toasts!
Vent-biter ghosts!
At a Fairgrounds Halloween!

ALTHAAR

It was a monster party at The Electric Egg
The Wolfman gnawed on ten Xybidont legs!
Dracula enjoyed a hemoglobin dessert
While a ghoul was consuming the eyeballs of Vert!

VERT

(interjecting)

It's okay, they grow back!

ALTHAAR

When the monsters felt they'd had sufficient to eat
They began to dance to the rock and roll beat...

JOHN

(interjecting, over)

This really isn't a rock and roll beat, Althaar.

ALTHAAR

And when it came time to crown the King of the Ball
All the Humans said Althaar was scariest of all!

BACKING VOCALISTS

(scream in terror)

ALTHAAR

(breaking "character")

Oh, no no no, friends! Please do not have fear! Althaar wishes only to make the fun-scariness!

JOHN

Althaar, they know that, they're just doing it for the song.

ALTHAAR

Oh! That is most appropriate! Ee! It is the chorus again!

BACKING VOCALISTS

Oh!

The Mummy grooves!

Did that plant move?

It's a Fairgrounds Halloween!

In space no being

Can hear you scream!

At the Fairgrounds Halloween!

Wear your spacesuit!

We'll bob for fruit!

At the Fairgrounds Halloween!

We'll trick-or-treat

With Zoogametes!

On a Fairgrounds Halloween!

As the chorus keeps repeating, with a key change, more and more and more BACKING VOCALISTS keep adding into the song. MRS. FRONDRINAX, JOHN, and ALTHAAR are heard speaking over the ever-increasing number of singers and new vocal parts being added.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Althaar, sweetie, I think that modulation was a little excessive. Efficiency, I keep telling you people!

JOHN

Althaar, how many backing vocalists did you hire?

ALTHAAR

ALL of them!

JOHN

Yeah, I think you might have gone overboard a little bit.

ALTHAAR

But they were all so very talented, FriendJohn, and Althaar could not bear to cause feelings of rejection!

JOHN

It's just that the arrangement's getting a little crowded! You can't really understand any of the lyrics with all these parts going on!

ALTHAAR

Althaar has created a past-ISCHE!

JOHN

What? I can't hear you!

ALTHAAR

Do not have concern, FriendJohn, it is merely the out-chorus!

BACKING VOCALISTS

The monsters dance!
They're in a trance!
At the Fairgrounds Halloween!
The rite's begun!
It's spooky fun!
It's a Fairgrounds Halloween!
The terror grows!
Your blood is froze!
At a Fairgrounds Halloween!
A creepy place!
In outer space!
It's a Fairgrounds Halloween!

ADDITIONAL BACKING VOCALISTS 1

(a counterpoint to the above)

Morgus, Morgus!
Zacherley!
Ghoulardi!

ADDITIONAL BACKING VOCALIST 2

(another counterpoint to the above; drawn out "rock voice")

FAIR-GROUNDS-HAL-LO-WEEN!!!
It's a Fairgrounds Halloween!

ADDITIONAL BACKING VOCALISTS 3

(another counterpoint to the above)

Althaar, Althaar, funny little zood
He scares all the Humans and he makes them lose their food
Althaar, Althaar, what's your plan?
It's so sad, you're the Humans' boogey-man

*The song ends to **wild applause and alien cheers.***