

Life with Althaar

Episode 10: Our Man in the Fairgrounds **Recording Script, Draft 2.2, 10/6/19 - Linus (draft 2, BAJ)**

A slow shift on the bridge; the crew has progressed from smoothly-oiled to fretful and a little cranky. Routine computer noises and self-satisfied humming. Nothing is on fire or about to explode, and a good shift is one you can walk away from. There have been Discussions to pass the time. We're in one now.

STALIN-BOT

No, no, no! The capitalist is riveted to profit and nothing can tear him away from it. This is the reason.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Really? Again? Everything's just a matter of economic determinism to you?

STALIN-BOT

And what else should it be? The class struggle is the driving force behind all of History! This cannot be disputed!

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

It's just I think that individual motivation and representation can contribute as much to the stream of history as the disposition of a society toward how it deals with wealth and resources?

Bleep of a call coming in on the traffic control comm system.

STALIN-BOT

Those who are prepared to reconstruct the world will of course never be found among the ranks of those who faithfully serve the cause of profit. This is a matter of principle, vision, and selfless dedication. A gift for all the future!

COMMANDER

(approaching)

...Is that a docking call?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

I mean like what about Henry Ford? And Stan Lee? And Mrs... Rocket?

COMMANDER

Can somebody please answer the-- ...Mrs. Rocket?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

She made the rockets?

STALIN-BOT

Under capitalism, all innovation is devoured by the insatiable voracious hunger of capital. And this is why! This! After all these centuries! This is why we *still do not have jet packs!*

COMMANDER

Amber! Stalin-Bot! Nell's beans. How many times do we have to have this conversation? We're never going to have jet packs. We are NEVER GOING TO HAVE JET PACKS. Let's move on. Comms-bot, please answer that line.

STALIN-BOT

(bloop) Fairgrounds Control. What.

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

Helloooo. Is this Fairgrounds Control?

STALIN-BOT

Da. That is why I said "Fairgrounds Control. What."

COMMANDER

Stalin-bot. Take a less surly tone with the tourists, please.

STALIN-BOT

Surly? Who is surly? I am businesslike. Must I pretend it fills me with joy to be speaking to this идиот осел? [*Idiot donkey: "idiot osel," pron "idYOT usYILL," roughly.*]

COMMANDER

Yes, you must! Just because you're built to look like a Russian doesn't mean you get to adopt their traditional attitude toward customer service. You're representing the Fairgrounds here. Acting like this isn't the worst place in the Galaxy is an occupational requirement.

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

Fairgrounds Control? Request docking assignment please. This is LHS Totally Legit, free cargo freighter out of Skatepark Depot. Is there a problem?

STALIN-BOT

Eh. I don't care. Pick empty spot, go to empty spot.

COMMANDER

Stalin-Bot! We have traffic protocols!

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

You're one of those Histori-bots, aren't you! *(aside)* This is why I love coming out here, mang, these boffers are flotting cautious.

STALIN-BOT

(speaking over end of aside)

Yes, fine, fine. LHS Totally Legit, heave to on Peorth 3 and make fast.

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

Peorth 3, copy that. Peorth is the one that looks like a C with a fold at the ends, right? Got it. Also, heads up Control, we have an crate on board addressed to Fairgrounds Command. Where do you want us to drop that?

STALIN-BOT

What is that to me? Do what you want, I'm taking break.

COMMANDER

LHS Totally Legit, this is Commander Torianna. What's this crate?

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

Some ICSB clerks brought it on board while we were clearing Lading on our end, said it was for express delivery. It's marked "Courier" on the outside.

COMMANDER

It's marked in Courier?

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

No. No, it's not *in* Courier. It's *marked* Courier. I think it's *in* Bookman.

OTHER PERSON ON THE ARRIVING SHIP

(in the distance)

That's not Bookman. I think it's Garamond.

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

Oh, you might be right. It's, anyway, it's a classic serif face, moderate stroke contrast. Very legible. *(aside)* Isn't Garamond a little spikier?

OTHER PERSON ON THE ARRIVING SHIP

Yeah, maybe it is, I'm not sure now.

COMMANDER

Totally Legit, Is the box hot-sealed?

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

...Yyyesssss. Ish.

COMMANDER

Is it sealed right now?

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

...Mmmmmostly. It's *closed*, anyway.

COMMANDER

I see. Well, leave it in the docking area, please. I'm sending someone down to fetch it.

STALIN-BOT

I know I'm not going to go fetch it.

COMMANDER

You certainly are fetching it, Sin Stalin-Bot. You wanted a break from the comms desk? Well, here it is. Get up to Peorth, swaddle that crate in your discontented Soviet soul, and bring it straight back here. Carefully. Thank you, Totally Legit. We're sending a crew-bot to pick it up as soon as you're secure. And welcome to the Fairgrounds.

ARRIVING SHIP PERSON

Patic, thanks! Over and out!

STALIN-BOT

(heading for the door)

Глупые капиталисты. [*Stupid Capitalists: "Glupyye kapitalisty," pron "GLOE-pe kapitaLEEte," roughly.*]

Door whoosh as he sulkily sulks out. Theme music:

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...

Life With Althaar!

Episode 10:

Our Man in the Fairgrounds

*The Electric Egg: It's not showtime at the Egg, but it's a moderately busy part of the day. Beverages pour, **background of chat** if we need that, probably one broken glass somewhere in the scene, with appropriate **oopsy exclamations**.*

SHADY ALIEN

... just hit the docks in Peorth 3, and called me on the way in. I figured you would want to know. But you didn't hear it from me, right? I got mouths to protect.

CHIP

My lips are sealed.

SHADY ALIEN

Lips? Ewww.

CHIP

Hey, you got your mouths and I got mine. Isn't evolution a beautiful thing?

SHADY ALIEN

Wouldn't know. We Myxolidians were life-seeded by an ancient and mysterious progenitor race who abandoned the known Galaxy, leaving nothing behind but a few enigmatic ruins. And us, of course, their hapless spawn, cast adrift to grope our own haphazard way through existence, with only a vague, cobbled-together concept of our purpose in this cold and unfeeling universe.

CHIP

Huh.

SHADY ALIEN

Pretty standard deal, really.

CHIP

Sure. Well, anyway, I appreciate the heads up. Here's a Chip chip, you drink free this cycle. Onna house.

SHADY ALIEN

Oh yeah! Thanks, Cooter. Much obliged.

CHIP

Sure, you-- could you not call me that? It's uh... never mind. Skip it. And hey, nothing from the aquarium, I can't discount that stuff.

SHADY ALIEN

Nertz.

CHIP

You'll do fine. Hey, I'ma call you Pointy. Sopon! Pointy here has a Chip chip, it's up and up.

SOPON

No Sombrero!

CHIP

I know, right? Hey, Dee. Dee! You have a second? You and Xtopps? Let's talk for a minute, if you're free.

DEE

Do I have a second, Chip? Let me check my Ephemeris. Oh you're in luck, I still have EIGHT YEARS on my frilling contract. Unless you're ready to clean me some slate.

CHIP

Great, come over here you two, always a comedian, step into the office. (*analog door*) Xtopps, you on the way to spry right now? If you can ride a clear line, I've got a private treat: new top shelf peanut sampler, a snack-hitter of GooGoo Tennessee Original Cluster Roast. Oiled in Nashville in a remake of the original vats. But if you're wrecked, there's no point.

XTOPPS

I'm the flip side of the Edmund Fitzgerald, lay some sugar on me.

CHIP

OK, but try to savor this, don't just snorf it. It's a nibbling nut.

Sound: electronic drawers unlocking. CHIP keeps a small bowl of roasted peanuts in there. We hear him scrabble in the bowl for a few.

XTOPPS

Mang yaz. How about one for each hand? 'Cause a nut in the hand is worth--

CHIP

(overlapping)

Nnnope!

DEE

(overlapping)

Whoa! Censored with an R!

XTOPPS

I got more hands than you need, and plenty of happy nuts to feed!

CHIP

He's pretty pixelated, isn't he?

DEE

You gotta ask?

CHIP

Ah well, here's one. ONE. Keep the dragons at bay. Can I get you something, Dee?

DEE

From the aquarium?

CHIP

Let's not get crazy.

XTOPPS

I hear you. But we're never gonna survive unless. We get a little paisley. Admission is easy, just say you wewease Bwian--I got a lifetime lease. Lease lease me, oh yeah, I like pea soup. By which I mean, thanks mang. Please, can I have some more?

DEE

Throttle back those jets, palomino.

CHIP

How does he keep it up? Every time I talk to him he's got the pedal floored in the center lane. He leaves me in the dust with all that.

XTOPPS

You know, Chorp, I can hear you. I'm right here.

DEE

My theory is that you need a busy busy brain to keep twenty-eight limbs on deck. It makes him one hell of a backing band, though. Sometimes I wonder if his Peanut Butter junkie-monkey smashes him up or if that's the only thing keeping all his wheels on the road. I mean, you saw what his folks were like--higher-strung than the Flying Zindosans and their Amazing Orbital Tightrope. Anyway, Chip, what did you want to talk about? It can't be good, or we'd be shooting this shit at the bar.

XTOPPS

Still right here. Let me check--yup, right here. Oh, wow...

CHIP

So yeah. Wait. Do I only talk bad news in the office? I, uh. Hmm. What a giveaway. I better work on that. But yeah, I just got some fresh dish--it's not general yet, so we're ahead of the curve, which is good. But we need to tweak your set lists a little.

DEE

Since when do you interfere with our set lists, Chip?

XTOPPS

Since the Xtopper turned transparent, mabes.

CHIP

Sorry, folks, but this hot tip means that we gotta get cool fast--your act, my act, our act, pretty much all scenes here at the Egg need a serious scrubdown. It's not just you. But let's start with the set list, because that's at least simple.

DEE

Not that simple. Remember the Mebsutans?

CHIP

And that's exactly the kind of thing we're not going to be mentioning this week, yeah?

DEE

Ok, what has got you so spooked here, Chip? You're starting to nerve me out.

CHIP

I just heard there's an ICSB Inspector coming to the Fairgrounds for a general compliance review, and that means they'll be taking real close looks. At everything. If I know inspectors, they'll mostly turn their lights on all the stuff we like dark. And I do know inspectors.

Muffled hubbub in the next room. Chip opens the office door. (Fugulnari rustling as Mrs. Frondrinax sneaks out of the office a bit later.)

CHIP

Hold on. (door) What's going on out there?

SOPON

Oh, uh, yeah, the seltzer machine's doing the thing again.

CHIP

See, this is the kind of nonsense we can't be having right now. No matter how you slice it, there's no way that thing is ICSB compliant. You know the drill, Sapon, give them a call at WSS (*WSS jingle*) and get someone down here before that compressor gets us all killed. And is there a way to undo that WSS (*WSS jingle*) software update? Can we disable it? Or... I don't know, put tape over the sensor or something?

SOPON

I mean, we could, but that'll violate the terms of service, so then it's sayonara seltzer. You're only allowed to call in repair orders through the WSS (*WSS jingle*) app now--oh, thrab it. This is like one of those things that you say its name three times into the mirror and it haunts you for the rest of your tragically-truncated life.

Transition to:

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention all Fairgrounds staff and motile life-forms. This is your Recreation Director-bot. There are a number of exciting and educational activities taking place today on the Human Exchange Concourse. Please be advised that many of these events are celebrations and appreciations of local and interstellar culture as required by the ICSB Cohabitation Code, so they will be held daily until someone shows up to celebrate and appreciate them.

Hands Across The Fairgrounds will take place during Second Cycle. Please gather at the Smaller-Than-Expected Stone of Translation Errors Memorial in the Plaza of Regrets to participate in Hands Across The Fairgrounds. At least three non-aggregate life-forms must be present to launch the event. Protective gear will be available free of charge to ensure the safety of all participants. Hands are optional, but very much appreciated.

Also, I am informed by Maintenance that they have yet to locate the source of the recent glitches in the Announcement System. Until this malfunction is tracked to its fetid electronic lair, please disregard any announcements which may seem weird. (*beat*) This announcement has not been weird.

Transition to a hydroponics park.

ALTHAAR

It is a great delight to Althaar to be relaxing in this approximation of Earth Nature, even while concealed within this large container of card-board. Althaar is imagining fresh breezes on his ventral furrows! (*small pained noise*) The card-board is causing some discomfort in Althaar's flixators, but Althaar is doing his best to ignore this! Althaar thinks he must coat his flixators in a soothing lanthanide unguent when he emerges. FriendJohn would perhaps say that this is Too Much Information. ...Althaar is sometimes struggling to determine the appropriate amount of information for Humans. Althaar is always pleased to be receiving information!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, who isn't? But you're right, dear, the park is particularly pleasant this morning. And there isn't any rain scheduled until later, so you can use the box another day if you don't get it wet. Aah! I love to stretch my stalks. When I'm in charge, we'll have plenty of days like this! If, I mean. If I were in charge. *(brightly)* Yes, it's a lovely day all right! I'm glad so you were free to enjoy a snack in the simulated sunshine with me. You look quite dashing in your disguise!

ALTHAAR

Mrs. Frondrinax is very kind!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(continuing, no break)

And today is particularly special, because it's the holiday of Morning Root! Of course, it's our best holiday, so we celebrate it quite often. I'm so flowery that you could share it with me.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar does not know of this custom, Mrs. Frondrinax! What is the Morning Root?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Morning Root is very important! It's when we commemorate our blooming and liberation as masters of Fugulnar, and beyond! And of course we thank and praise the Boxes. It all comes from the Boxes, when you get down to it. That's why it's sometimes called "Boxing Morning."

ALTHAAR

Ah! Is this why Mrs. Frondrinax today suggested that Althaar wear the Box of Disguise? It is in service of the "Boxing Morning?"

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Not really dear, I just thought it would help you to get out for a bit without having to listen to all that screaming the Humans usually do when you're around. But boxes are very important to us Fugulnari. It was Boxing Morning when we first came out of the yards, and into the world! We were aware before that day, of course, but everything was a bit ... hazy. As if we were dim, and dormant, and sessile, which maybe we were. I think we just weren't ready to step out yet.

ALTHAAR

And what is the source of these boxes, Mrs. Frondrinax?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Why, The Gardeners, of course! We never met them after their work tending us was done, but we found their buildings and roads, and the wonderful piles of tasty rich meaty fertilizer they left behind. And most importantly, the nutrient boxes. A bit cramped, but they sure did do the job! Some of us believe the Gardeners will return one day to guide us, but we've never seen a hint of them. So we make do with the messages they left us.

ALTHAAR

Oh! What are these messages saying, please?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

“Now with Extra Improved Vim! Upgrade your PlantFeeds today! The miracle of Green in every Home!” Our sacred gospels. The Gardeners worshipped us with great devotion, and cared for us above all others. Which is how it should work with one’s gods, I always think. It’s odd how many cultures get that wrong.

ALTHAAR

So the Box of Disguise is worn to return honor to the Gardeners?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, we don’t usually *wear* boxes for Morning Root, but there’s no rule that says you can’t! It’s our holiday, we can celebrate it however we like. And I think boxes are quite festive!

ALTHAAR

Then Althaar is pleased to participate from within the Box of Disguise! Althaar had never considered the masquerade in the form of a nitrogen-fixing coolant processor, but the Box does seem to be making success in preventing the expulsion of fluids from Humans in the park of hydroponics. So Althaar is being the best coolant processor he can be! “*Grrrb grrrb grrrb pokka pokka fwoosh.*” (or whatever.)

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That’s a very good imitation of a nitrogen fixer! I’m sure no one would guess there’s an Iltorian in there!

Disturbing sounds of jocularity, Fugulnari and Iltorian. They both think this is a silly, funny situation. Grown beings, hiding in a box!

ALTHAAR

Althaar is very grateful for the advice of Mrs. Frondrinax! It is not a thing of Iltor to make the disguise, so Althaar would never have been conceiving of it himself. ...Mrs. Frondrinax is certain that this form of deception is considered acceptable among Humans, yes?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, for peat moss’s sake! For the last time, Althaar, wearing a disguise isn’t the same thing as lying! It’s fun! Anyway, I don’t know why you’re so worried about lying to Humans, they do it all the time. I would think you’d have noticed that by now.

ALTHAAR

Oh no, Mrs. Frondrinax! Althaar does not believe his dear Human friends would make lies!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, you don’t think so? Just you wait until that ICSB Inspector gets here, and you’ll see just how dishonest Humans can be! Every last one of them is going to be scrambling to cover up whatever root rot they’ve got going on before it turns into collar crack, you can take it from me!

ALTHAAR

An Inspector is coming? Althaar was not informed of this!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, it wouldn't be much of a surprise inspection if they told people about it first, would it? They may be here already. The new Inspectors, you know, the secret ones they send out these days? They're hard-boiled and loaded for mynok. They can destroy whole space stations with a single word! And they absolutely can't be reasoned with, so I would imagine most people will be deported. Or killed. They'll probably sleep-mode most of the robots, too. Look at that one!

STALIN-BOT

(muttering to himself as he passes nearby)

As easy as easy as Babka, if I had a jet pack. No walking, no transit tubes, no wasting the time. "Comrade Stalin-Bot, there's a box for us at Peorth 3." "Of course, Commander! Let me put on my jet pack, I'll be back before you know I've gone." "Comrade Stalin-Bot, are you back already? Let us celebrate with some Mtsvadi Chashushuli, and a glass of Kvass." "За ваше здоровье!" [Za vashe zdorov'ye, "Za VASH-e zdoh-ROH-vye"] But no. Nooooooooooooo.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I bet he'll have plenty to say to The Inspector, before he's shut down! Or destroyed.

ALTHAAR

Why would The Inspector be angry, Mrs. Frondrinax? The purpose of ICSB regulation is to ensure the safety and happiness of all member beings. To assist other beings in making compliance with these is a gesture of great friendship!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Althaar, you sweet summer bud. Inspectors are always angry. That's how they're chosen. That's what I've heard on the grapevine, anyway. Not *from* the grapevine, mind you, those vitaceous snobs will never give me the time of day. And I've never been anything but polite to them! Some people. But no, this Inspector won't be here to make friends. When an Inspector shows up, you can be sure they've come to settle everyone's mulch. They'll probably start at the Electric Egg, if they know their business. Leaf, Limb, and Xylem Tubule, who knows what they'll find in there! That place is a greenhouse of depravity, Althaar. Serving their filthy alcohol. Do you know where it comes from? The Humans BREED it in MANGLED PLANTS. It's simply grotesque. Also quite tasty, though, so one must pick one's battles. And Chip is a dear, even if he is an Enemy of the Future.

ALTHAAR

But... Althaar has enjoyed many happy visits to the Electric Egg with Mrs. Frondrinax! And Mrs. Frondrinax was the "With the Bullet" star at the Night of Open Mic! With your public ridicule!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Stand-up comedy, dear. Stand-up comedy. Public ridicule has consequences. Stand-up comedy, for better or worse, does not. But it's an awful place, mostly. Shouldn't be allowed. Mostly. And you should make sure your roommate John doesn't drink any of that liquor stuff. It's poison, you know. He could get very sick.

ALTHAAR

Althaar believes the Humans are aware of this, as they are asking “What is your poison?” when it is served. But then they are drinking it anyway. It is another Human mystery!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No common sense at all, really.

ALTHAAR

Mrs. Frondrinax, Althaar regrets to say he has consumed the Earth brandy. Althaar has also horked the Earth brandy. It tasted the same in both directions.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I forgive you, dear. I’m sure that was John’s bad influence.

ALTHAAR

Oh no, FriendJohn’s influence was of great goodness! He was attempting to apply traditional Human under-weather remedies to Althaar. It is not the fault of FriendJohn that they did not have the desired effect. ...Mrs. Frondrinax, Althaar has confusion. Did you not participate in the preparation of alcohols in the Electric Egg, during the last strike of the Robot Union?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, of course, but that was different. I had some... thought experiments that needed testing in real-world conditions. And I learned quite a lot, as it happens! *(if we need pull-back-and-fade-out lines:)* You know Althaar, since it’s Morning Root, there’s a story we like to tell to beds of sprouts when they first pull their roots out of the communal source of shared dreaming...

Transition to an open mall or outdoor market. Panning from the previous park to the market would be cool if it’s not too much work. Large, friendly, and busy. Mercantile background chatter, crowd noise.

DEALS DEALER

Fiiiiive beans! Five credits! Everything on the table, five beans! If I’ve got it and you can see it, you can buy it for five beans!

CURIOUS SHOPPER

Five beans for everything?

DEALS DEALER

Like the sign says. Flush five, far as the eye can see. Five each, not five for *everything*, but five apiece and everything is five.

CURIOUS SHOPPER

Five. Wow. That’s ... five. Anything on the table is five?

DEALS DEALER

Anything on the table! Five beans!

CURIOUS SHOPPER

How much is, um, this one?

DEALS DEALER

...That one?

CURIOUS SHOPPER

Yes, this one.

DEALS DEALER

...Ten beans.

CURIOUS SHOPPER

I'll take it.

Meanwhile:

CHECK THIS OUT VENDOR

You don't think you need this, but oh-ho-video, you really do need this. I know! I know! It's just a topiary point rehab blade, but check this out--when you twist, no watch this, when you twist the top counterfactually, there's a whole 'nother one hidden in the sleeve. Try it!

MINE IS PURPLE VENDOR

That looks so good on you. Really, it just fits right over, I mean it *covers* ... that's just so, so flattering. But look! This one is purple!

I'VE GOT THE SAME ONE VENDOR

Don't eat that. Don't eat that! Eat this one! Because I'm selling it. I've got an honest face! On some planets.

Transition to the WSS office. We've been here before. We'll be here again. Door.

H.F.

Top o' the shift to you, John B. How'd it go at the Egg?

JOHN

Fine, fine. You know, seltzer machine wired to the life support coolant regulators, loose connection that needs to be popped back into place every couple weeks so we don't all die pointless deaths, the usual. I still wish we could just do a bypass on the coolant circuit so we could downgrade the problem from "lethal" to "annoyingly persistent."

H.F.

I can't believe you're still talking about that circuit bypass thing. You know we can't do that--we'd have to throw the Infrastructure Stylebook right out the airlock. You know this. But you're still talking about it. You're like a psychology experiment.

JOHN

Sorry, I guess the Fairgrounds hasn't completely broken my spirit yet.

H.F.

Give it time. Here, this'll help: even if you got the go-ahead from the Committee, messing around with a bypass would put you on 10-gauge, 8-gauge wire junctures. So there's no way the Robot Union lets us touch a job like that. Not today, not tomorrow, not over the weekend coming up when I'm probably going to have to ask you to put in a couple of extra shifts.

JOHN

You just slipped that right in there. Very smooth.

H.F.

I thought so.

JOHN

Anyway, yeah, I know. That seltzer machine's just going to keep on keeping on. Except for when it doesn't. Besides, the coolant management panel's up on the bridge, and I've been trying to stay away from the Commander as much as I can, just in case she's come up with some other ridiculous thing that's somehow my problem. Also I think the bridge Robomechanic still hates me. Whenever I'm down there he looks at me with those baleful, murderous, unblinking eyes.

H.F.

Nah, those are just his eyes. All of the tech-bots have their blink cycles suspended, so they don't miss anything. Unless you got an Official Notice of Grudge-Holding from the Union, I wouldn't worry about it. Speaking of bots, I got called over to Hydroponics on a micro-fissured flow distributor earlier today. I said was out of our jurisdiction, but the robot steward wouldn't let their plumbing teams even look at it.

JOHN

They won't fix a faulty distributor node? Why not?

H.F.

Beverage dispenser.

JOHN

Beverage dispenser? Wait, is this another pineapple juice leak? I thought they finally got that system drained out.

H.F.

Nope. Tomatoes.

JOHN

What?! There are tomato sauce pipes too? Please tell me you're kidding.

H.F.

No, no pipes. But the whole pineapple thing got the bots' processors stuttering, and they started taking a second look at anything that could possibly be drink-related. Which led them to the tomatoes. Now they're in talks with management, claiming that tomatoes are--wait, I have it here--"nascent static beverage-dispensing tap modules." Until the collective bargaining is done, the Union is taking a no-touch position.

JOHN

Oh come on. Tomatoes are vegetables. Or fruits, I guess. But they're definitely not drink machines. Are we even equipped to fix a distributor node?

H.F.

Nope.

JOHN

And why just tomatoes? Surely they know about oranges? Apples? Snozzberries?

H.F.

Maybe they just don't like tomato juice. I can see it. You know how you have tomato juice in a bottle, and there's that awful red lumpy scum sticking to the glass, and later you forget it's in the fridge and you open the door to get a nice Caltonian clam knob or some leftover pie, and *there it is*, and dinner is ruined because I know I'm not hungry after I see crusty half-caked moist tomato pus stuck to glass. Probably like that.

JOHN

So, not a fan of tomato juice.

H.F.

Not as such. Anyway, temporarily we're keeping an eye on Hydroponics from here at WSS. (*dual WSS pagers*) Oh spit me out from the mouth of Meshe! Wish we could undo the last software update on these things.

JOHN

If we pop the covers off, I might be able to--

H.F.

Kid. They'll know. Any unauthorized access of WSS (*dual WSS pagers*) property, and the thing files an alert on the local node, then bricks itself. So you'll be on the hook for a replacement, not to mention the fine for abuse of WSS (*dual WSS pagers*) equipment, and whatever else they can think of to charge you for. You'd be hocking your grandkids' parts to organleggers to pay off the fees by the time they get done with you. We'll just have to avoid the W-word as much as we can.

JOHN

Maybe we should come up with a code phrase we can say instead. Like "Our Magnanimous Overlords."

H.F.

You want to get docked again for 'unsanctioned sarcasm?' Let's just stick with 'the W-word.' Probably we'll get another memo in a couple weeks saying they'll charge us a 'Branding Avoidance Fee,' but that's a problem for future us.

JOHN

Right. ...So, anything on the schedule today?

Appropriate bleeps & bloops as John calls up the day's schedule on the Scheduler. Diddly scientific noise as a lot of entries load.

JOHN

Wow, H.F., this is a lot of calls for a Tuesday. I'm already booked solid, assuming we don't get any emergencies. What's your day like? (*clicks over to H.F.'s schedule*) ...Huh.

H.F.

Yeah, well, that Hydroponics call. I bruised my, you know kid. My ribs are just like glass these days. Gotta take special care when they're feeling fragile.

JOHN

Glass ribs. Yah, I've heard about that. Is there a good rib-ologist on the Fairgrounds? Or will you be home-treating that with rib-oflavin maybe. Or a nice Kansas City Dry Vapo-Rub. You should get your vision tested too, in case it turns out to be a Rib-Eye thing. High *steaks*, you know.

H.F.

Ha ha, rev it up, B.

JOHN

Just teasing, H.F. There's nothing here I can't handle, and besides, it's nice to feel useful every once in a while. But this many calls in a day is pretty weird.

H.F.

Yeah... Ok, listen, I'm not the one who's telling you this, but I've been hearing there's a secret Inspector coming in from the ICSB, and apparently they can *shut this whole place down* if we aren't in full interstellar compliance from Kether to Malkuth and Alef to Tav. Maybe even scuttle the place. Which seems a little far-fetched to me, but who knows. So we're getting calls from anybody who might not be up to ICSB code, and on the Fairgrounds, that's everybody. They're all scrambling to make sure they've got their Venusian Webfoots in a row.

WSS pager rings.

H.F.

Wanting and Sustainment Systems, how may we reduce entropy in your immediate vicinity? ...Uh huh. ...Uh huh. ...Foam? Is it supposed to do that?

Transition segment: Comms below overlap in the normal LwA manner; COMM3 should be audible, since it's the very thing that the Inspector will be looking for, and will not find. Foreshadowing. Well, spoiler, actually.

COMM1

Systems Analysis, Gordian speaking. Is there something systemic we can analyze for you? We're very good at that. It's our thing.

CHIP

Hi! Eeeee-lectric Egg! Music and munchies for all palates and most orifices. Probably 80, 85% of the orifices. You have chosen: *(system bloop)* Note to self, record a new response library for the voicemail holo. While sober. That thing is a social crisis waiting to happen. Maybe Dee will help record some for me.

COMM2

First Fairgrounds Savings, please have your account balance ready so we may prioritize your call.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

This is Amber on the Bridge, please hold?

COMM3

(machine voice, unrecognizable) agent drop. cycle. initiate response, coding. load gamma matrix, waiting for response. transmission sent. waiting for response. transmission sent. waiting for response. *(maybe an open line sound here, if it sounds right)*

Sound: The COMM3 line atmospherically disconnects, like the phone line in Pink Floyd's The Wall. Yes, they have dial tones in the future. The line below starts in a Comms effect, and then broadens out into The Bridge for the next scene. It's busier than usual; at this point, nearly everyone except Torianna has heard about The Inspector

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

This is Amber? On the Bridge? Thank you for holding? Hello?... They disconnected?

COMMANDER

Their loss. Say, Amber, is there something going on? Something that the commanding officer of a busy if underutilized space facility really ought to know about? Because if there is, it would be nice if the Commander's staff would tell the Commander, so she could be in on it too. I've had this feeling all shift that something's off. And Frall hasn't even been in the room, so... Amber?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

I don't know?

COMMANDER

Asking or telling, Amber? We've talked about this.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Telling?

COMMANDER

...All right. Please do let me know if you hear something.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Commander, may I speak freely? About one of the bridge crew?

COMMANDER

Is it Stalin-bot? I know he can be a bit... irritable, but that's hardly unusual for the bots around here. I'd strongly advise you not to start any more political discussions with him.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Yes, sir? But, there might be something really wrong with him? I know he was designed for the Pageant of Tyranny exhibit, but maybe I.T. could adjust his personality now that he's working in a visitor-facing position? He's so mean?

COMMANDER

Actually, he's the least unpleasant one we could have ended up with. Most of the tyrant-bots are so eccentric that they're completely useless.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Sherlock-Holmes-Bot has a menu? You can pick from different versions of Sherlock Holmes if you don't like the one he's doing when you talk to him? I'm just saying?

COMMANDER

Because he's one of the FictionBots, Amber. Most of the HistoriBots weren't programmed with those options, unless they represented someone particularly controversial. No, I'm afraid we're stuck with Stalin-bot's winning personality as is. Besides, all he can do on Comms is cause traffic problems. Would you rather he was working Life Support? Annd he's almost back, so let's change the subject.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

He's coming back? How do you know?

COMMANDER

Tiny stealthy tracking chips, on a tiny, stealthy frequency. When you have a crazy cat, you bell the crazy cat.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

I'm not a cat person?

COMMANDER

Crazy Kzinti then. (*door whoosh*) Ah, welcome back, Stalin-bot. Did you enjoy your break?

STALIN-BOT

Thoroughly, sir. I had plenty of time to reflect on how much less time I would have had to waste reflecting on how much time I had to reflect, if only I were traveling by jet pack.

COMMANDER

Well, next time you should take a hoverboard. There's a pickup station right outside the bridge. You can always pretend you're rolling off to the nearest collective farm. Is that my delivery? Good, let's have it, and then you can resume your station, please.

STALIN-BOT

Hoverboard does not even hover. Typical Capitalist fraud.

The COMMANDER opens the hover-crate: the electronic hot-seal on the box has been broken, but it has been e-tied shut. Or something.

COMMANDER

“To the attention of Commander Toriana,” with only one N, you’d think they’d know how to spell it by now. Still, it must be important, they’ve written it on paper.

The envelope has been opened too, and then re-sealed with e-Scotch tape. Or something. Paper sounds.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

(overlapping, the word INSPECTOR should sync up)

Commander, is this something about the Inspector?

COMMANDER

(overlapping, the word INSPECTOR should sync up)

Oh, by Simone’s toe-beans. The ICSB is sending an Inspector--AMBER.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Commander?

COMMANDER

Am I shedding coolant into my oxygen supply, or did we just talk about this.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Asking or telling?

COMMANDER

Both.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

I didn’t know if it was important? My sister heard something about it?

COMMANDER

I am the commanding officer of this--all right. How did your sister--all right. Amber. Your sister, where is she working now? Still in Hydroponics? Get her on the line, please.

Bloop of the call being made.

ASHLEE IN HYDROPONICS

Hi, this is Ashlee! In Hydroponics!!

Slow fade out, over reactions from the Bridge:

COMMANDER

Oh, Hazel give me strength.

STALIN-BOT

Late-stage capitalism, when class consciousness fails. Not a pretty sight.

BRIDGE PERSON WE HAVEN'T HEARD FROM YET

Dang, zood, your sister is hot. Is she single? Or does she have a clone?

*Transition to a public hallway. An advertisement for a commercial production plays over the p.a. **People are passing by.***

PEPPY ADVERTISING BARKER

Get out of your house, and get in at ours! Art in Public! presents: a Public Theater Performance! When staying home is not enough. See theater the way theater is meant to be seen--*with an audience and in the flesh!* But not in a pervy way. You've had it streamed and cast, jacked up, and phoned in. Now join your fellow Fairgrounds spacefarers in a Real Room™ with actors *right in front of you on a stage!*

Come out for the Concourse premiere of *The Nine are Abroad*, based on the works of famed author of classical dead-tree books, J.R.R. Tolkien. Starring, for a limited run only, everyone's favorite nonet: the Supreme Court Justice-Bots as the Dark Lord's black-riding Ringwraiths. Featuring a guest AI vocal appearance by Britney666 singing her Galaxy-Class hit, "It's Always Night on Weathertop"!

Art in Public! is a real-life experience. There is no talking during the performance. Please do not attempt to offer advice or assistance to the cast or crew while the show is in progress, even if you don't intend to charge for your services. Please do not utilize strobe lights, gunshots, or loud noises during the performance. These are reserved for use by the production staff. Please be considerate of adjacent life forms. Please do not wear strong scents or large hats. Species with flatulence rated Class 4 or above must furnish their own containment devices. Species with extremely crinkly skin may not be admitted.

We end in the Customs area of the travel hub.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

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

THE INSPECTOR

Hello. I didn't see a Priority Bypass lane, where--

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

That is because there is no such thing at Fairgrounds Customs! All entering sapients must register. No exceptions are permitted.

THE INSPECTOR

Really. All right then, I have my ICSB credentials here...

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

League of Humans official entry papers should have been issued to you before your departure from your port of origin, sir. These are required for entry.

THE INSPECTOR

That's adorable, but no, really, this pass is valid everywhere. Let me just activate it...

Whinng as he activates the holo-pass.

ALIEN PASS RECORDING

(alien gibberish)

THE INPECTOR

Oop, no, hold on-- English, English... *(bloop)* There we go.

ENGLISH PASS RECORDING

The bearer of this pass is entitled to swift and unobstructed entry at all ICSB member planets and stations. Any attempt to interfere with the free movement of the bearer of this pass will be considered a violation of ICSB Cohabitation Code 3821-shmelk-3. Thank you for your co-operation, and have an enlightening wakefulness cycle.

THE INSPECTOR

And there's the holo-seal there, see? So I really will have to insist you let me through.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

...Very well. Is this all your luggage, sir?

THE INSPECTOR

Yes, I prefer to travel light. I can generally requisition anything I may have need of locally.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

If you say so, sir. Name?

THE INSPECTOR

Ben. Ben Richard Potato.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Ben for Benjamin?

THE INSPECTOR

Benevolent. Ben for Benevolent.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Species?

THE INSPECTOR

Human.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

You're not coming up in the system, sir. What ship did you say you arrived on?

THE INSPECTOR

Actually I came in as a non-manifest passenger, so I won't be in any ship's registry. As I said--

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Ha! A stowaway! We have ways of dealing with miscreants like you, Mr... Potato!

THE INSPECTOR

Uh huh. Listen, this has been fun, but I really do have to be getting to work. I think if you just scan my pass it should clear a few things up for you, yes?

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

What could be on this pass that would possibly-- (*bloop*) oh.

THE INSPECTOR

There you go.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

You're... an Inspector.

THE INSPECTOR

That I am! Flagged as "No Customs Registration," I'll hazard to guess?

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Yes, sir. Er. May I carry your luggage, sir?

THE INSPECTOR

Don't have any, thanks!

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Of course you don't. Yes, we already did that part. Hypothetically, Herr Inspector, sir, had you brought luggage, might I have helped you carry it? Because I certainly would assist if asked. I am very helpful.

THE INSPECTOR

No, no, please don't put yourself out. I want everyone here to just go about business as usual! Helps me get the feel of a place, you know. All I need from you right now is your signature and registration mark on this Non-Adherence to Travel Protocols citation--you're my first logged violation here on the Fairgrounds, how about that!

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Yes, sir. It is an honor. Of sorts.

THE INSPECTOR

Very good. And initial here, please.

*The usual beepy-stampy customs stamp. Perhaps a quill-scrawl as well.
Off to one side, several voices in a nearby room are heard in a sudden outburst.*

THE INSPECTOR

Well that sounds interesting, doesn't it? What's that about, do you know?

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Ah, yes, Sin Inspector. That is the central office for Customs and Arrivals administrative staff. The room is equipped with a League mandated power-saving circuit that shuts off the lights and ventilation service when it is unoccupied. Very efficient!

THE INSPECTOR

I was more referring to the frantic shrieking, my good bot.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Ah, well. The sensors for the power-saving circuit are somewhat... less sensitive than they might be. Which *very* occasionally leads the system to mistakenly classify the room as unoccupied and extinguish the lighting and life support until the occupants, er, activate the sensors. But once everyone screams and waves their appendages about for a bit, it's all right as rumtopf! Heh. Perhaps I could scrounge up some bags for you, and then carry them? As a demonstration of my helpfulness? Or I could give you a horsie ride?

THE INSPECTOR

Maybe later, thanks. I'm just going to pay a quick visit to your friends flailing around in the dark over there. *(door whoosh)* Hello! Hello, yes, ICSB Inspector Potato. But call me Tater! What exactly goes on here now?

Cries of "oh no" and "busted" and the like take us on a fade back to the Bridge, where Ashlee! has been speaking.

ASHLEE IN HYDROPONICS

...who crews on a cargo ship called Totally Legit! And he called me--I thought he might! Because we had an awesome time!--I guess he was like showing off! You know! Because he let me know there was an Inspector coming! And he told me not to tell anyone! So I told Amber right away!!

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Wait this is the one from that time at the Sammy's Whiches? He was so nice? I really liked him?

ASHLEE IN HYDROPONICS

Did you!! Did you really!

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Yes? Oh I'm so glad that worked out? Anyway, the Commander wanted to know how you heard about it? So that's how that happened?

ASHLEE IN HYDROPONICS

Yes! I should get back to the job, though! Did you need anything else! ... Hello! Commander!

COMMANDER

Yes. Yes. I'm right here, pardon me, I was... just imagining what an interesting time your parents must have had of it.

ASHLEE IN HYDROPONICS

What!

COMMANDER

Never mind. But no, please, get back to the vats and sprinklers, thanks for your absurdity. I mean "assistance," thanks for your assistance.

Comms bloop off. FRALL appears.

COMMANDER

Lieutenant Commander Frall. I'm glad you're finally what.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Is?

STALIN-BOT

Going on?

COMMANDER

...Frall?

FRALL

(with something Western in the tinkle mix, or harmonica, if that can be done, banjo or harmonica maybe?)

Howdy, podners. I'm a stranger in these parts, can one of you good souls point me toward the canteen and the drive boss?

COMMANDER

Remind me to mark this date on the calendar, so we can make sure never to have any more of them in other years.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Is that a... hat?

STALIN-BOT

Is a Stetson. A Soviet design. Mastery and nobility condensed into a single long glorious sigh of millinery. Stolen of course by corrupt and debauched American colonial power to represent symbol of American politics, Cowboy.

COMMANDER

Are they... wearing it? Or just... holding it there? Or is there a difference?

FRALL

It is a hat, sir. Traditionally worn atop the head. I've settled on the nearest approximate portion of my physical manifestation in this timeline as a suitable location in which to display it. *(ahem)* I reckon y'all must be the cow boss of this here operation. I'm looking for work as a hired gun.

COMMANDER

Lieutenant, I'm not sure what's going on, but I'd really like it to stop going on. *(to the room at large)* Can someone who isn't critically needed on the bridge right now run up to Tixondu's and grab me a macchiato, please? Not a suggestion.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Me?

FRALL

(fully back to normal)

That shouldn't be necessary, Commander. The espresso machine on the bridge is atypically functional at the moment. John B attended to it during a recent preventive visit to check on the status of a number of very small wires, that number being 22. He missed one, but that oversight won't be pertinent for quite some time.

Door whoosh somewhere during the above, as AMBER goes to get coffee.

COMMANDER

Amber, you can cancel that-- She's gone. Eh, I like Tixondu's better, anyway. They draw those cute little stellar devourers in the foam. So do we have you back, then, Frall? The Energy Cloud Without a Name has returned to the Wild Western Spiral Arm without firing a single shot?

FRALL

Yes, Commander, I've suspended the cowhand persona for the nonce. I am a bit curious though, sir. How did you know it was me?

COMMANDER

How did I know it was you? How... did I know it was you. It wasn't exactly difficult. You do tend to stand out.

FRALL

Do I indeed?

COMMANDER

You are not unlike a sore thumb, Frall.

FRALL

Ah. Well, I wouldn't know about that, sir. I've never tried having thumbs.

COMMANDER

Not actually necessary, Lieutenant. It's not actually necessary. You know, it fascinates me how a possibly omniscient energy being, capable of perceiving 27 dimensions, and possessing nigh-unlimited powers over space and time, can be so completely lacking in common sense.

FRALL

It does take some skill, sir. It requires a great deal of effort for you Humans to achieve the same effect in four dimensions, after all, and at higher strata, the process becomes geometrically more complex.

COMMANDER

I'm not sure how to take that.

FRALL

I know.

STALIN-BOT

I know how to take that.

COMMANDER

Thank you, Stalin-bot. That was also not actually necessary.

Door whoosh, as AMBER returns with coffee and the INSPECTOR.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

(in the background)

Commander? I have your coffee? They drew a little sand-squid in the foam this time? And also this is--

FRALL

(continuing from the COMMANDER's last line)

Nevertheless, I am somewhat *fertummelt* by your swift appraisal of my identity. I altered several of my salient features. And provided visual distraction in the form of an extremely stylish hat. **(STALIN-BOT: Stetson!)** I had hoped that some enjoyable minutes of confusion and social chaos might ensue. To humorous effect.

COMMANDER

Oh, you're trying your hand at comedy now?

FRALL

I'm reliably informed that a certain degree of japery can, somewhat paradoxically, make for a more productive workplace, by decreasing tension among most sentient species. Wouldn't you agree, Inspector?

COMMANDER

(startled)

Wha--?

Spilling coffee, clattering (or breaking) coffee cup.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Oops?

INSPECTOR

Here, let me help you with that.

*Transition to a busy hallway. People passing by. Establish for a sec, then a sound of littering. Paper or spill, either is cool. **LITTERER is humming/whistling to themself, waiting for an elevator, or somesuch.** The trash is detected by a **TRASH-DETECTOR** (a subroutine running through a janky wall-mounted speaker).*

TRASH-DETECTOR

(Honk) Litter detected. Do not litter. Attention. Do not litter. Disposable waste has been detected in the corridor. If you are responsible, please retrieve your item and deposit it in an appropriate waste container.

LITTERER

(during the above)

Ugh, when'd they start with this shness? ...Yah yah yah, bite me. *(ad lib)*

TRASH-DETECTOR

(Honk) Escalating. Please comply. Disposable waste has been detected in the corridor. Please retrieve your items and deposit them in an appropriate waste container. Do not litter. *(continues repeating)*

LITTERER

Ah yeah, now the wall speaker's escalating. Yah yah yah. You don't got arms, whatchugon dooboutit.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, it might call the secret ICSB Inspector, for one thing, you little scofflaw! Those Inspectors can tap into all kinds of monitoring systems, you know. That's how they see everyone's code violations! And these secret Inspectors, well! They'd just as soon scrub you from the timestream as charge you a fine. They are on *deadlines*. And I do mean *DEADlines*, dear. Their training only allows for two considerations, keeping to their mission schedule and eliminating problems. Better hope this one's feeling generous when they find you! Otherwise, ZOT!

LITTERER

ZOT?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

ZOT, dearie. They have weapons *we know nothing about*. We can't even *see* their weapons. But they point one of those things at you, and ZOT! Your grandparents never met! Your parents were never born, they never met, fell in love, and had a baby that they never taught how to use a trash can! And don't think you can run--Inspectors's images can't be recorded by security cameras, because they're secret. They might as well be ghosts. They might as well be black ICE! So watch your step.

LITTERER

Whodahellayou?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Concerned citizen. I just hate the smell of street disintegrations. On such a pleasant day!

LITTERER

ZOT? F'real, ZOT?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Who would ever even know? Or care? People go missing on the Fairgrounds all the time. If anyone asked, they'd probably just say a vent-biter got you. Maybe they'll have you thrown to the vent-biters, it wouldn't surprise me one bit!

Picking-up-rubbish sounds. Properly disposing of rubbish sounds.

LITTERER

Oh look, I musta dropped this. Silly me.

TRASH-DETECTOR

Thank you for not littering.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, isn't that nice!

LITTERER

Yeah, sure. Uh, bye.

Fleeing footsteps. Vigorous rustling as MRS. F waves goodbye. Some leaves are dislodged, and fall.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Bye-eee!

TRASH-DETECTOR

(Honk) Do not litter. Attention. Do not litter. Disposable waste has been detected in the corridor. If you are responsible, please retrieve your items and deposit them in an appropriate waste container.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What? I just shed a few leaves, that's all. That's not litter.

TRASH-DETECTOR

(Honk) Escalating. Please comply. Disposable waste has been detected in the corridor. Please retrieve your items--

Metallic crunching and sparking of a wall-mounted speaker being ripped off the wall and thoroughly crushed by an enraged houseplant.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No good deed left unpunished. Hmmph.

*Transition to the Electric Egg: Few customers, but busy with getting ready for the monthly auditions in the Egg, and also somewhat **stressed and disorganized efforts** to clean up or hide anything objectionable before the Inspector shows up.*

CHIP

(on mic, or just shouting to the room)

... cannot stress this enough, you are not hearing this from me, ok? You are not hearing this from me! Because I don't know anything about ICSB inspectors, I just run a clean, healthy, happy establishment for patrons from all walks of life (*unhappy yelp from the crowd*)--and death, I see you Necrochargs, I don't know how you work but I see you--so, try to take any of your business out of my business, for a little while. Anyone gets busted in here, don't look at me, because I am definitely not sticking my neck out for any of you. Ok? That's this bit here, under my chin, and I like it the length it is.

Ok. Our monthly auditions are going on as usual, the list will be ready in a few minutes. So, once you're signed up, be flush when your name is called. Yes, Vert, you know how it works, there are already some people ahead of you from last time, we'll get to you when we get to you, ok? *(mic off if it was on, bad disconnect)*

VERT

Yippee!

XTOPPS

I'm doing the sign-up list this time, right Chorp? Because I'm already listing a little to the left, so I could easily put it right.

CHIP

Hang on, Xtopps, I've got a couple things I need to straighten out with you first.

XTOPPS

The doogs are dropped, mang, Xtopps is straighter than a laser-level on the Imperturbian Salt Flats. Woo!

CHIP

Yeah, I can tell, that's what's worrying me. Xtopps... you need any help with anything that needs to be moved, or stashed, or...? You know what I'm saying. Just pop it in my office, then for all the Inspector knows I'm just planning on making a lot of sandwiches, yeah?

XTOPPS

Solid, mang. Message received. Ten hands on Jones for your concern, and you know Jones loves a skritch from any hand that comes his way. You came in for a soft landing and stayed in your lane. 'Preciate it. Hey, you got to hide your love away. Which I did and done, and done which horror needed doing. Doinng! And the way I like it is the way it is: I got mine, don't worry 'bout his. Boop boop be doop.

CHIP

Xtopps, that was--I have no idea what that was. I really wish you were in a tighter orbit right now, I've got enough problems. Speaking of, that... parchment you gave me when you made the Egg your Seat of Governance? I ran it through the Legalese Translator, and it gave me a couple ideas. So if anyone asks, you're asserting your sovereignty over everything in the place that's not clearly visible from the main dining room. Got that?

XTOPPS

Well-pinned and iced-over, my protofrix.

CHIP

I'll choose to take that as a yes. So that just leaves us with out here to worry about. Which means we really do need to talk about your set list. I know, but we have to get to it sometime, and it might as well be now. We got some real dust when you did "Roll Away the Stone" that night the Plinthoid charter was in. They sent me this giant tablet that says "Stone Don't Roll." And they call it a "living stone" message, so until we can prove it's not sentient, I have to keep it in the back. Some of these tests for stone awareness? They take years. Years. Meantime I'm stuck with this huge boulder in my storage room, and now the Gendarans won't even go in there because they say it's silently judging them, so now I have to run into the back myself every time we run out of paper towels.

VERT

Uh, hey, Sin Xtopps?

XTOPPS

Settle your gizz, Vert.

CHIP

Annd... Oh, right, for now I'm going to have to ask you to pull "Blue Velvet" if you see any Aqua-Rovers in the house for the show. We've had bookings from Splishy-Splashy VII--

XTOPPS

Splishy-Splashy VII?

CHIP

I don't name 'em, I just sell 'em seats. Or Aqua-Rover parking slots. Anyway, the Splashese are this strain of surface-dwelling ocean carpet moss that extrudes a blue velvety mast to lure some sort of fatty food fish. They claim the song is giving away their trade secrets and if the fish figure it out, the Splashese might starve.

XTOPPS

Aw, come on, Chorp.

VERT

Hey, can I--

XTOPPS

I'm in flotting conference here, Vert! Streez!

CHIP

Actually the fish *are* sentient. They're just really really laid back and haven't figured out their place on the food chain yet. So we have to honor the Splashese claim, sorry. Then there's... Let's see. *(he scrolls through a long list)* The Crimson Head avians of the Rubicund Belt in the Chazagrolin system are unhappy with "Roxanne" because they only see in the red spectrum, and the song causes them to "shiver and quake with existential fear" quote unquote. Their near cousins, the Kanatooter vultures, think that "Rockin Robin" may violate the terms of their travel contracts with ICSB, which I can't check because they don't have a written language and the translator module they want to sell us is, well, we're not buying it. I think the whole thing is a scam, but we'd have to pay in to find out for sure. And *(scrolling sounds)* oh boy, there's more. There's a lot more. Basically, until we clear inspection, we just have to--

XTOPPS

We just have to hurf everything that's not an instrumental. Voider. You're the boss, Chorp, but you know this'll put the vonch on Dee, triple-time.

CHIP

I know, I know, I don't like it, no one likes it, but it's only until this Inspector effoes, yeah? And hey, if I manage to qualify under the ICSB Species Exchange and Tolerance Initiative guidelines, we get a serious break on the annual music royalty nut for the year.

XTOPPS

Speaking of nuts, you want I should uh, do a little Control-Shift-Stash?

CHIP

Sooner the better. Like I said, just leave it in my office. Bottom left desk drawer. *(louder, as XTOPPS is heading off toward the greenroom)* And don't touch anything else in there! I'll know!

VERT

Hey, Mr. Xtopps! Mr. Xtopps! Where are you going? I still need to sign the list! I brought my own pen!

XTOPPS

Bleech, Vert! Don't crowd me! ...Oh. Come on, mang, don't cry. ...Ah, nertz.

Transition to the bridge: sound of cleaning up the spilled coffee/broken cup.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

(fading in)

...just butterfingers? I thought you had a better hold on it?

THE INSPECTOR

Happens all the time. For some reason, I make people nervous.

COMMANDER

Is that before or after you cite them for violating one of several million obscure ICSB regulations written by sentients completely unfamiliar with their species, let alone their situation?

THE INSPECTOR

Both, generally. An Inspector's work is never done! Speaking of which, I made a brief review of the facilities and procedures in Customs on my way here.

FRALL

Yes, Commander, the Inspector paid a visit to the broken room off the main Customs intake area.

COMMANDER

You mean the staff Break Room?

FRALL

I do not.

COMMANDER

Then what--oh. The admin office. Uh, yes, we've had some trouble getting that system serviced, Inspector. The problem is that when the robo-mechanics show up, they trigger the EM sensors, so the room activates normally, and then they claim there isn't any issue for them to fix. Of course the problem is with the *biometric* sensors. But robots can be, well...

THE INSPECTOR

Yes, I've met robots.

FRALL

On that note, the Fairgrounds' first logged violation was against Kaiser Wilhelm-bot, which does seem fitting.

COMMANDER

What was he cited for?

FRALL

Being Kaiser Wilhelm-bot.

COMMANDER

The ICSB has a regulation against being Kaiser Wilhelm-bot?

THE INSPECTOR

I am granted a certain degree of latitude in the execution of my duties, Commander. And I think most beings would find Kaiser Wilhelm-bot's extreme... *him*-ness to be worthy of censure, yes?

COMMANDER

Well, I can't argue with that. But seriously--

STALIN-BOT

Commander, if I may. Status update on Fairgrounds Docking and Traffic Control. LHS Totally Legit has completed unloading and has entered a standard maintenance cycle. The vessel is booked for a tentative departure four days from now, and berthing fees are settled on account. Activity among smaller ships is nominal and limited to standard traffic lanes, and all large liners and cargo haulers are secured. Request permission to launch a standard custodial debris sweep of central lateral access zones using Drone Wing 4.

The sound of a moment suspended in surprise, suddenly uncertain of where it is.

COMMANDER

(what the hell is happening)

Er... yes. Permission granted. Thank you. For... doing... your job.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

(under breath)

You have got to be kidding?

STALIN-BOT

Aye, Sir.

FRALL

Even a stopped clock is right five times a day.

COMMANDER

Twice a day, Frall.

FRALL

If you like.

COMMANDER

Well, excellent. Very nice. As you can see, Inspector, things here at Fairgrounds Control are running... quite smoothly. Now how can I help you? Naturally all of our resources are at your disposal while you're here, but you don't need me to tell you that.

THE INSPECTOR

Yes, thank you. What I need just now is a moment to speak to you alone, away from the rest of your crew.

FRALL

If you'll excuse me, Commander, Inspector, I've already been through this bit, so I'll withdraw. There's a personal project of mine that could use some attention. It was a pleasure to meet you at last, Sin Inspector.

FRALL out.

THE INSPECTOR

"At last?"

COMMANDER

Lieutenant Frall has an unsettling habit of saying things like that. I find it's best not to dwell on it. Any explanation you get out of them only ends up being more disturbing.

THE INSPECTOR

I'll keep that in mind. Anyway, as I was saying, I really do need to speak with you in private. The station should be equipped with a secure Diplomatic Communications Chamber, yes? As mandated by Cohabitation Code 173-whoomp!-2?

COMMANDER

Oh! Of course we do, yes. It's just over, uh... it doesn't see a lot of use, is the thing, Inspector, and--

THE INSPECTOR

Please, just call me Mr. Potato. Or Tater, no need to be formal. Ben Richard Tater. Pleased to meet you.

COMMANDER

Ben as in Benjamin? Lovely name. You don't hear it much these days.

THE INSPECTOR

Ben as in Benevolent. None of those is my birth name, of course. We Inspectors are required to leave behind any attachments to our civilian lives when we take up the sash. Now, the Chamber?

COMMANDER

Of course. It's... right through here.

Door whoosh. A bit of clonking and bonking as they enter and push various bits of equipment out of the way.

COMMANDER

I apologize for the mess, Mr. Tater. It's just that, well, we don't get very many actual diplomats needing to use this thing, so it was just sitting here empty, and the maintenance bots got into the habit of dropping off their equipment in here to save themselves a trip, and it's hard enough to keep them happy at the best of times, so...

THE INSPECTOR

Lulu lulululu lulu woowoo

COMMANDER

No, Inspector, really, most of our rooms are fully-functional, you don't have to--

Hidden, dangerous computers spin up after a long time lying fallow. They are suddenly and smoothly on-line, purring in the background with a hint of malice. Secret-hideout-type consoles rotate out of their hidden compartments.

COMMANDER

Sweet Koko's teeth! Who knew that *this* was in here?

THE INSPECTOR

Well, I did. And anyone else with Priority Wimbloth clearance, naturally. System, secure and confirm.

SYSTEM

Secured and confirming. Welcome, Agent.

COMMANDER

Agent?

THE INSPECTOR

Yes, Commander. There's something I have to tell you, in your complete confidence. I am not an Inspector.

Brief music sting, dramatic reveal music. THE INSPECTOR's voice changes into his SPY PERSONA.

THE INSPECTOR

Or rather, I am not only an Inspector. I am also a duly commissioned Surveillance and Scrutiny Agent, working on a critical assignment from the ICSB Office of Equilibrium. And I need your help. (*sting*)

COMMANDER

What was that?

THE INSPECTOR

Your help. I said, I need your help.

COMMANDER

No, what was *that*. I heard what you said. What was *that*.

THE INSPECTOR

You mean this? (*sting*) It's called a sting. It's not important. Implanted environmental control suite. It's pretty standard gear for field agents. I like the drama. Some people might overuse this sort of effect, sure, but--I think the key is not to try and tell people what to feel, you know? What you want is an occasional accent, to garnish or underscore important narrative moments. Here, this is what I mean, check it out.

Tiny interface bleep as THE INSPECTOR shuts off the effect. He clears his throat.

THE INSPECTOR

I am also a duly commissioned Surveillance and Scrutiny Agent, working on a critical assignment from the ICSB Office of Equilibrium. And I need your help. *(beat)* You see? It doesn't carry the same sense of urgency and import. It's a small thing, but when it's used correctly it can be terribly effective.

COMMANDER

Well, I'm glad to see the ICSB isn't spending the money from all those fines on anything frivolous. So, what do you need from me, Agent Inspector?

Transition to a public area. People passing by. The announcement is made by a thinly-disguised MRS. FRONDRINAX, imitating the usual bot, with less leaf-effect. The announcement glitches, plenty.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(imitating WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT)

Attention all Fairgrounds staff and motile life-forms. Ahem. This is the Recreation Director-bot. We have a Traveler among us today: John Titor, you are far from home. If you still need the electron injection manifold to fine-tune the traction of the singularity in your temporal machine assembly, you may pick one up from a supply drop in the Engineering sub-module in sector Samech-56. Also, there is a Secret Inspector patrolling the station. We do not know if he is looking for you, or just spreading terror, but he is heavily armed and very angry. DO NOT PANIC. There is no need for anyone to panic. So far, the Inspector has hardly shot down anyone in the street in cold blood with advanced military-grade weaponry. There is--*(KSSHHK wa-ow zaz GROWK)*

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention all Fairgrounds staff and life-forms. This is your actual Recreation Director-bot. That announcement was weird. We told you there might be weird announcements, and that was one of them. Please disregard that message. Any time travelers who do find themselves in the unlikely position of existing on the Fairgrounds, please register with our designated Temporal Welcome Officer, who this week is... Assistant Pool Disinfection Specialist Third Class Nestor Shmeltz, currently on duty in the Yod 14 Natatorium. You will receive a news-cycle briefing and a free orientation goodie bag. That is all.

Transition back to the Diplomatic Chamber/maintenance closet. The INSPECTOR has concluded his Secret Exposition. Dangerous computer sounds persist, and we cut in on the briefing.

COMMANDER

...be sure I'm getting this. You are telling me that someone's been sending high-bandwidth, undetectable, supraluminal transmissions from this station, beaming out into the depths of inter-system space to destinations unknown, for over year. These transmission can't be traced or decoded, and you have been tasked here, under the cover of a routine inspection visit, to find the operative who sent the signals. Using a secret computer system that's been hiding on my bridge since it was built. And I was only alerted to this an hour ago, by a box from Skatepark Depot. With my name spelled wrong.

THE INSPECTOR

Precisely. In my guise as an inspector, I have unquestioned access to all active parts of the station. Citizens stay clear and leave me room to work, for the most part, if only to avoid being cited. The ICSB welcomes the extra revenue. And I get a commission! So there's really no downside.

COMMANDER

Unless you live here.

THE INSPECTOR

Sorry? Oh, yes, I suppose. But who lives here, really.

COMMANDER

Who does. I ask myself this.

THE INSPECTOR

Beg pardon?

COMMANDER

Never mind. I guess I could assign Ensign Mondeuse to serve as your escort. She has great taste in off-world bourbons. Which is not to say that she would ever distill any on the station, or that they would be delicious. And she was a cartography major, if I recall correctly.

THE INSPECTOR

I'd prefer someone who wasn't an official member of your crew, Commander, to avoid the appearance of favoritism. And preferably someone who arrived on the Fairgrounds sometime after these transmissions began--with this sort of case, there's a high risk that the hostile operative or operatives will attempt to insert themselves into the investigation, and I can't rule out anyone as a suspect just yet.

SYSTEM

Alert. Disturbance imminent. Be advised that my response systems have not been armed.

COMMANDER

Response systems?

Through the door, the Althaar Alarm can be heard.

COMMANDER

Oh. Mr. Tater, I'll need to deal with this. The Fairgrounds, as you probably know, has been given the honor of hosting the only Iltorian in Human space, and apparently he'll joining us on the Bridge shortly, for some reason. Why don't you stay here, there's no need for you to risk catching sight of him.

THE INSPECTOR

That's very thoughtful of you, Commander, but I'm not exactly a run-of-the-mill Human these days. My position with the Office of Equilibrium has given me access to the absolute top of the line in wetware upgrades. I'm sure I'll be fine.

COMMANDER

(to herself) Why do they never listen? *(to INSPECTOR)* Suit yourself. *(chamber door whooshes open, bridge noise more clearly audible)* All right Amber, we all know he's coming, you can kill the alarm.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Yes sir?

Alarm stops. Ongoing sounds of Human bridge crew prepping (opening umbrellas, putting bags over heads, etc.) ALTHAAR can be heard over the bridge door intercom.

ALTHAAR

WSS! *(WSS jingle)* Althaar requests permission to enter the Bridge! Althaar is playing the happy WSS *(WSS jingle)* music to warn Humans of his approaching! WSS! *(WSS jingle)*

COMMANDER

All right, eyes down, everyone, you all know the procedure by now! *(beat)* We're all set, Althaar, you can come in.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is thanking the Commander! WSS! *(WSS jingle)*

THE INSPECTOR

It's funny, isn't it, that of all the places for me to first encounter an Iltorian, it should be when I'm back in Human spa-- *(sees ALTHAAR)* Aiggh!

ALTHAAR

(overlapping the previous, door whoosh and:)
Greeting from Althaar!

Unexpected fluids from THE INSPECTOR, and the background sounds of ALTHAAR in dismay. Musical sting triggers a few times, uncontrolled.

COMMANDER

Well, I think we've all learned a valuable lesson about hubris. Amber, you already put the cleaning-bots on call, yes? Let them know their services will be needed, please. On the plus side, Inspector, this has brought to mind the perfect companion to send with you on your travels. Inspector? *(he's still in audible distress)* Right, then, you just sit there facing the wall, and... *(calling across the bridge)* Are there any of those croissants left? Get one of those for the Inspector, please. *(back to the INSPECTOR)* Now don't try to eat yet, just enjoy the smell, ok? You should be fine in a few minutes. *(exhalation as she settles herself)* Hello, Althaar. Sorry to keep you waiting.

ALTHAAR

It is of no trouble to Althaar! But Althaar is most repentant for causing expulsion of fluids from the guest of the Commander!

COMMANDER

Not your fault, Althaar, we all tried to warn him.

ALTHAAR

Yes, the Human crew of the bridge is already knowing the boring device!

COMMANDER

The--? Oh. The drill, Althaar.

ALTHAAR

Ah, yes! The dr-ill! Thanking you, Commander!

COMMANDER

(to the INSPECTOR)

Feeling better? Good. Althaar, may I introduce Inspector Ben Potato?

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar was given presentiment of the visit of the Inspector! But a Human Inspector is of much surprise! This is a most unusual thing, yes? As an Iltorian that is living among Humans! *(Iltorian chuckle)* It is a great pleasure to Althaar to be meeting you, Inspector!

THE INSPECTOR

...Likewise.

ALTHAAR

It is unfortunate that the Inspector did not encounter Althaar earlier in this cycle. Althaar was making the disguise! Which is different from lying, in a way that Althaar does not fully comprehend. But the Box of Disguise would have prevented the distress of the Inspector! Althaar must make apology for the distress. Althaar would like to pay for the laundering of the Sash of Inspection.

THE INSPECTOR

That's... quite all right, Sin Althaar. It's really on me. Apart from what's on the floor.

COMMANDER

Althaar, as long as you're here, I have a question for you: what's your roommate John up to right now? Do you think he might be free to do us a favor?

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar is certain that FriendJohn would be most pleased to do the favor for Commander Torianna! FriendJohn is the most generous of Humans! But, FriendJohn has commenced his work cycle, so it is Mr. Fornes that the Commander must be asking!

COMMANDER

Right. Amber, open me a line to WSS *(WSS jingle)*, please oh by Jones's stripy tum!

Transition to the Electric Egg. DORMER is in his cups, soulfully confiding in an alien at the next stool. DEE is talking to an alien we can't hear (let's say they have a text-only translator).

DEE

What do you mean “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” is offensive? It doesn't mean *you* have to have hands. It's just talking about this one particular person who wants to hold another particular person's-- *(response)* No it's not! Humans hadn't even made it off Earth yet when this was-- *(response)* Ok, but they didn't know about Amelia Earhart back then.

DORMER

But you know? When they stopped my squad from busting the same PBJ Toms over and over, it changed me. Inside. I started to feel their plight, you know? Their PLIGHT. My heart started to go soft, a little. So I got myself a bigger gun. That worked. Felt better right away.

QWONTZ

(gibberish question)

DORMER

‘Course I don't have ammo! On my salary? Ha! That's not the point. It's just... having it.

QWONTZ

(gibberish)

DORMER

‘Zackly. ‘S like with these PBJs. You have to feel the--well, not empathy, it's... I'm busting them, yeah? But what I'm saying is, it's a social ritual, right? And like, I'm, I'm responding to them. We're responding to each other, like, secretly, you know? There's, like, a vibe. An understanding.

QWONTZ

(gibberish)

DORMER

No, no, no. Of course I don't let 'em go! That's not... See, here's the thing. They'll tell you they don't want to get clicked, but that's a load of shness. If they didn't want it, they wouldn't get caught, right? But there they are, every time, mandibles covered in telltale Abba-Zaba crumbs. And there I am, to shut them the jeck down. So really, it's a, whaddayacallit. Symbiosis.

QWONTZ

(dubious gibberish)

DORMER

Ahh, what do you know about it?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I think you're doing a wonderful job!

DORMER

WHAT THE--oh, you're that Fullgul-whatsit, scheisse I thought you were a plant.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I am a plant. I'm all plant. I'm probably more plant than you can handle, big boy. I am a plant through and through, down into the dirt and then down deeper. And you know what they say--once you go green, you'll never be seen. (*rustling as she tries to strike some kind of alluring pose*) Again. I mean, you'll never be seen again with, you know, regular breeding partners of your own--not like you'll disappear, more that you'll be so satisfied that--you know what? Never mind.

DORMER

Yeah, uh, I don't... Um. Whatever this is. I don't.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You are Human, aren't you? I was just trying to get on your level, you know, try to blend in with the locals a little bit, but forget it. I don't know why I bother sometimes, really. But there is something I think I should warn you about, because you know, I have the greatest respect for Security, you people are terribly important, I don't care what anyone says! And here you are, right on the front lines, and they haven't even told you, poor dear. I mean, this could be your last cycle doing that "breathing" thing. With those adorable little face-holes of yours. (*imitates breathing*)

DORMER

Face-holes? Last cycle? What are you talking about?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I'm talking about (*whispering*) the INSPECTOR. You see, dearie, I happen to know there's an Inspector on the station, a secret ICSB Inspector. And well, when an Inspector goes into Castigation Mode, taking out Security is their very first priority! To ensure there's no resistance, you know. There's never any official record, of course, an Inspector knows better than to leave survivors! But I hear things, oh yes! And when a station goes dark without warning, or you've got a sudden cloud of asteroids where a planet used to be, well! That's how you know an Inspector's been at work! Oh, those poor, poor people. Colloidal damage, you know. Not colloidal, er... Collateral! Collateral damage. Terrible.

DORMER

An Inspector? But they--they just look at things, and write up citations and fine people. They're not dangerous, they're a bunch of wusses. They don't even carry neuro-dampers!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ha! Why carry a neuro-damper when you've got access to destructive powers the likes of which most beings can't even begin to conceive? Anyway, I just wanted to let you know. Thought it might help. I'll be off. You take care of yourself, now, and keep a sharp eye out! Remember, these Inspectors are trained to act friendly right up until the moment they're ready to strike! Taking the first shot is the only way to be sure.

DORMER

Sure of what?

QWONTZ

(gibberish)

DORMER

You got that right, buddy. Hey, where'd she go?

XTOPPS

(in the distance)

Yo, Dee, we got another one. That zood in the banquette says no soap to Happy Birthday. Says her planet's orbital period is 1,447 Earth years, so there's only one member of her species who's lived long enough to have a birthday. Says the song's, uh, "a crushing reminder of the monstrous injustice of the universe." Which is crazy, because she's wearing a really mountainous hat, so she's gotta be doing pretty flush. Hey--whoa, Dee, put down the milkshake, palomino. You'll get everything sticky, come on.

Transition to the Bridge. Perhaps the cleaning-bots are still at work on the puddle of hubris.

H.F.

(on comms)

...a very busy day up here, you know. And now you want me to take on our full workload by myself, just so John can babysit some VIP? You've got an entire crew to order around, how come the two of us at WSS (*WSS jingles: H.F.'s over the phone, and the CMDR's app*) always end up on the hook for this stuff?

COMMANDER

I take your point, H.F., but the individual in question specifically wants someone who isn't on the crew. So to anticipate your next objection, no, this won't cause you any trouble with the Robot Union. It's just a simple favor. Well... as simple as anything gets on this scrap heap. If it would help sweeten the deal, I can arrange to reassign 50 credits out of the Unpopular Artform Sustainment Fund for John's services. Plus a... 10% finder's fee for yourself?

H.F.

...20%.

COMMANDER

Done. I'm authorizing it now. *(bleep)* Before you go, H.F., can I ask a question? Is there anything we can do about the recent... ubiquity of your corporate jingle? Preferably before we all go insane?

H.F.

Driving us twisty as well, Commander. Obviously there's no official method for shutting it down in the, uh, in the corporate manual, but if I come up with a workaround I'll let you know. I mean, another workaround, besides--

THE INSPECTOR

It really plays every single time you say “WSS”? (*WSS jingles, plus JOHN’s outside the door*)

H.F.

--besides just *not saying it*.

COMMANDER

I hear another one outside, that must be John B arriving. Thanks for your help, H.F. And please do let me know right away if you manage to disable that... feature, ok? Bridge out.

Bloop of call ending, door whoosh of JOHN entering.

JOHN

Hi everyone. Oh, aha, I can see from the mess Althaar’s been up here. The pager didn’t work, huh? We thought maybe if he used a spare WSS (*WSS jingles: JOHN’s and the CMDR’s app*) Page-o-Matic it might work as a kind of early warning sytem.

COMMANDER

So he’s walking around screaming “WS--“ ...you-know-what, instead of walking around screaming “Althaar is entering the... wherever”? That seems like a lateral move at best.

JOHN

Yeah, I don’t know. He likes the jingle, at least. Probably the only sentient left on board who can still stand the sound of it. Anyway, what was it you needed from me?

COMMANDER

Oh, yes. John B, this is Inspector Potato.

THE INSPECTOR

A pleasure, John B. Interesting name, is that Minoan?

COMMANDER

Mr. B, the Inspector has requested a civilian escort and guide while he’s here on the Fairgrounds. He needs someone who’s familiar with the layout of entire station, including the downshifted sectors, so naturally I thought of you. I’ve worked it out with H.F., you’ll be officially listed off duty in the doub-- in your employers’ system for as long as this takes.

JOHN

Uh, ok. I guess I can do that. Where do you want to start?

THE INSPECTOR

Ah, yes. I think we should begin in Kaf sector, floor 12. I want to find out why cracked corn is being routed--

COMMANDER

Oh! Ah, I’m afraid Kaf 12 is locked down for repairs, Inspector.

THE INSPECTOR

Really. I didn't see any notifications of that in the maintenance system.

COMMANDER

And quarantined. For Vidorian Flux.

THE INSPECTOR

I don't have a reticulum, Commander. And in any case, I'm fully vaccinated.

COMMANDER

Oh, Kaf 12? My mistake, it's actually been vented to vacuum.

THE INSPECTOR

The Life Support computers don't seem to think so.

COMMANDER

It's on fire.

THE INSPECTOR

On fire! You don't say. Well, I suppose that'll to make for a few particularly exciting rounds in the cock-fighting ring that those K'Chillibonts have got going up there? In the disused molasses reservoir?

Beat.

COMMANDER

It's the sport of kings!

Transition to a retail-y area. As yet, no one has been gunned down in the corridor with military-grade weaponry. Traffic, open space.

FASHION POLICE-BOT

(over p.a.)

Attention, mes cherries. For those of you using auto-translators, please add "cherries" as an exception, as a separate entry from "cherries." It's French. I'll wait. No, I won't wait. You'll have to catch up. *Attention, mes cherries!* Life in the Fairgrounds can be drab. Don't fall into the drab-bag trap. For a quick solution to any fashion quandary, we recommend the all-purpose no-drab so-fab go-grab-a-Sharp-Tarp adaptive drape! Sharp-Tarps are voice-controlled peep-weave light-sensitive fabric throws that add vibrant color at your command. Don't fade into the scenery. Stand out in an outstanding visual treat! Or toggle the optional Hide-Me mode to blend in with your favorite hidey-spot. In case, you know, you need to conceal yourself from an Inspector, or *quelque chose comme ça.*

Door whoosh as THE INSPECTOR and JOHN enter a concourse pod selling cheap electronics.

THE INSPECTOR

Door functional and entryway free of obstructions. Full marks for that! Shame about the merchandise, though. Now, what is this supposed to be, a Day Klassy chrono-stud? In a discount pod like this? I don't think so. Excuse me, hello?

NOT-WHAT-YOU-THINK MERCHANT

Yes? Oh! The Day Klassy. You spotted that right away! Fine eye for quality. And how about you, sir? What kind of chronometer can I set you up with today?

JOHN

Oh, nothing for me, thanks. I just use the clock on my phone like a normal person. And my work pager tells time, too, so, yeah. I'm good.

NOT-WHAT-YOU-THINK MERCHANT

Wow, that's an antique! If you've gotta wear that thing, I could probably at least get you a modskin for it, oh, wait, is that a WSS (*WSS jingle*) internal--yes, I guess it is. Not much I can do for you then. How about you, sir? Can I wrap up that Day Klassy for you?

THE INSPECTOR

Well, no, actually, you can't. Because this is not a Day Klassy.

NOT-WHAT-YOU-THINK MERCHANT

Sure it is. Says right there. And look at the craftsmanship on the--

THE INSPECTOR

I know the brand. They shut down production of chrono-studs several standards back.

NOT-WHAT-YOU-THINK MERCHANT

They're a leader in chrono-studs! And it's--well, this is an old shipment, of course. By the time goods get all the way out here! They're collectible, too--they only appreciate in value. And, uh, it's made under license. We don't get the Charonian ones. Obviously. At this price.

THE INSPECTOR

Obviously. At that price. Day Klassy doesn't issue make-licenses. If it's not Charonian, it's not Day Klassy. And I'm an ICSB Inspector.

NOT-WHAT-YOU-THINK MERCHANT

You don't mean--I've been tassled?

THE INSPECTOR

These are either pirate goods, or jacked goods. Either way.

NOT-WHAT-YOU-THINK MERCHANT

It's not what you think! I run an honest shop. They told me it was a floor sample. What am I, an expert? Someone must have tampered with it in transit. I didn't know. I got it at auction, unclaimed shipment. But that's what it says on the manifest. It's not pirated, it's an homage.

THE INSPECTOR

Is that one long excuse, or several small ones all run together?

NOT-WHAT-YOU-THINK MERCHANT

Whatever works?

Distinctive sound of THE INSPECTOR issuing a citation. Slight time jump (w/ music?) to a door with a jingly bell as they enter Sammy's Whiches.

THE INSPECTOR

Wow, it smells good in here!

SAMMY

Welcome to Sammy's Whiches, gentlebeings! What can I get you?

JOHN

Oh, uh... Do we have time to grab a sandwich, Inspector? I've heard about this place, but it's my first time here.

THE INSPECTOR

Inspecting is hungry work, sure. Hello--yes, I am an ICSB Inspector, as you can tell from the sash, ha! Just ignore the stain there. Anything here I should know about? Or rather, anything I shouldn't? Ha ha.

Doorbell jingles as some other customers enter.

SAMMY

Oh! Hello, Inspector. Welcome, welcome! What you see is what we do. Inspect away!

OTHER CUSTOMERS

(in a gaggle)

Did he say "Inspector"? Let's get outta here./Oh, crap, it's true, he's got a sash!/Move, move! Before he opens fire!/Bye, Sammy! Gotta run! *etc.*

Door bell jingles as the group exits.

THE INSPECTOR

Sorry about that. Hazard of the trade. How's the Philly Cheese Steak?

SAMMY

That's one of our best sellers. People like it, you're people, you'll like it, right?

THE INSPECTOR

One of those, then. John, one for you? Fine, make that two cheese steaks. And I'll just take a quick peek at your kitchen while we're waiting.

SAMMY

Suit yourself, it's right through there. Two Philly Cheese Steaks, coming right up.

THE INSPECTOR

(heading through the open kitchen doorway)

I love a good cheese steak. Ah, nice and orderly back here--well done! I've been to Philadelphia, you know. Had a couple of the originals, not enough to take sides but enough to appreciate the treat. The thing really is the Cheez Whiz. You can't get that stuff out here, can you? Cheez Whiz is the heart of the deal, if you ask me. Real cheese just isn't the same.

SAMMY

Nah, you're right, they don't ship Cheez Whiz at all. That's Earth-only. It's legally classified as a contaminant vector, freight companies won't touch it. We were lucky enough to find a great local substitute, though!

THE INSPECTOR

(returning)

All ship-shape in the back. So you have a secret family recipe, eh?

SAMMY

Well, kind of. I mean, it's not exactly the original. But here you go, see what you think!

Sandwiches arrive. Unwrap, savor, chomp. They are sticky and joyous.

SAMMY

We got the flavor and consistency nailed, if I do say so myself.

THE INSPECTOR & JOHN

Mmmm. MMM. These really are good. Delicious. Yup. This is great. *(ad lib)*

THE INSPECTOR

This is--I have to say, I didn't think you'd really ace it. But this is a great sandwich.

JOHN

(mouth full)

Delicious. I never thought I'd taste another one of these after I left Earth.

THE INSPECTOR

Whatever you got for the Cheez Whiz is just right. Holds it all together, right taste, right texture. The Cheez Whiz really makes it.

SAMMY

Like I say, we really lucked out on that score. Our Chee's Whiz is just about perfect. You want to meet him? It, really, not him.

THE INSPECTOR

Meet? Meet whom?

SAMMY

Do you want to meet Chee. He lives in the back. Really he's an "it," not a he, I mean, he's not sentient or anything. But we can't help but think of him as a member of the Sammy's family.

Beat.

THE INSPECTOR & JOHN

AAHHH
HHHH

Time jump to a door opening onto Curly's Old-Fashioned Fruit and Non-Sapient Vegetable Stand.

JOHN

“Curly’s Old-Fashioned Fruit and Non-Sapient Vegetable Stand.” This place looks safe. But I’m not eating anything else today. Or possibly ever.

THE INSPECTOR

Chee turned out to be quite a charming little creature, though, didn’t you find? And the whole process is well within code, as it happens. I suppose we could think of milk the same way, though it comes from a, well, it’s sourced differently.

JOHN

Molto less gross.

THE INSPECTOR

That’s a matter of perspective, I suppose. But Chee’s... product is entirely natural.

JOHN

So are cows. I don’t eat their pee.

THE INSPECTOR

I admit it sounds better if you call it “whiz.”

JOHN

Not that much better.

CURLY

Hi there, can I help you? Special on raspberries today: the regular ones are the regular price, but the Giantizer experimental crop is in, and those are on sale. Thoroughly tested and totally safe! We only sell ‘em whole, though, no slices, sorry. But they taste great, and I’m not just walking your dog.

JOHN

How big are the Giantizer ones?

CURLY

‘Bout twenty kilos each, on average. I can do you a discount on a couple pie crusts to sweeten that deal if you’re interested. Heh, sweeten, get it?

THE INSPECTOR

About your bananas.

CURLY

Yes! Fresh from hydroponics this morning. Highly recommended.

THE INSPECTOR

Are they--how to put this. Are they bananas?

CURLY

Um, yes. What do you mean? They're bananas.

THE INSPECTOR

But you call them "bananas."

CURLY

Because they are?

THE INSPECTOR

Open quote B A N A N A S close quote.

CURLY

Yes?

THE INSPECTOR

Well, Curly--you are the eponymous Curly, yes? Good. My question is: are they in fact bananas, or are they quote bananas close quote? Because if we are *calling* them bananas, using the quotation mark or double inverted comma structure to denote that the appellation is applied and not native, then I'd like to know what they actually are, rather than in fact being bananas.

CURLY

It's for emphasis. They're very good bananas. What is your problem?

THE INSPECTOR

For emphasis. I see. ICSB Inspector Potato, my holo-badge. (*whuzzz*)

CURLY

Oh God, please don't shoot. Please. I haven't done anything.

THE INSPECTOR

Shoot?

CURLY

I heard the announcements. And those people came by. They said you were going to obliterate us all, except the ones you ship to the protein mines. I'm strong--I really am. I can work. I can work for food. Please don't kill me.

THE INSPECTOR

Don't be silly. I'm not even armed. Well, yes I am, but not much.

CURLY

I'll change the sign. I'll do it right now. Just tell me what you want it to say. Please, just tell me.

THE INSPECTOR

Well this isn't nearly as much fun as I thought it would be. And I haven't even gotten to the apostrophes. All right, all right, get up, will you? It's just a citation, you can take care of it at any ICSB authorized payment kiosk. There's no need to be so dramatic about it. Yeesh.

Another citation is issued. Transition to the Electric Egg.

THE INSPECTOR

So! This is the Electric Egg. Your local den of iniquity, I assume?

JOHN

I mean, it's a bar? People come here to get drunk? Or the equivalent? I don't know how much iniquity goes on. The big draw is really the music--the house band is incredible. Dee's the singer, she's a Human--you name it, she can knock it out of the park--and her backup's this Xybidont, calls himself Xtopps, who plays like, all the instruments. When he gets all twelve hands going at once, it's indescribable.

THE INSPECTOR

You don't say? Do they get a lot of Xybidonts in here?

JOHN

Yeah, sure. The Egg's popular with all kinds of aliens, Chip's got something for just about everybody.

THE INSPECTOR

Mm. So they're no doubt racking up the Class F controlled substance violations. Good to know.

JOHN

Uhhh...

VERT

Hey! Hey! You the Inspector?

THE INSPECTOR

That I am. And you are?

VERT

I'm Vert. I'm on the list. And I'm getting near the top. The boss says maybe this month I'll finally get to audition! Oh, and, uh, he wants you to meet him at the bar.

THE INSPECTOR

All right, Vert. Let's meet the Boss at the Bar.

As they cross the room, we encounter DEE and a couple of customers, in the middle of a discussion that has been going on for some time.

DEE

Ok, never mind that, let's move on. Oh! Here's one you can't possibly object to. Take a look at the lyrics.

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN

"At words poetic, I'm so pathetic, That I always have found it best..."

DEE

Yeah, that's just the intro, they're saying they don't know what to say, and then there's the verses, where they say all this stuff, about how great the person they're singing to is. It's a love song, get it? But the whole thing's basically just a long list of names and places and people and things that pre-Contact Earth folks used to think were great, like, 600 years ago. So none of it could possibly mean anything to any non-Humans, right? So, there's no way it can be offensive, yeah?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN

Sublime was a band, I know that. Wait. Who's this one?

MISINFORMED ALIEN

Cellophane? Wasn't she that Barovian warlord who conquered Plendus back in the Century of the Sand Otter?

SUSPICIOUS ALIEN

My father's third clutch-bearer was from Plendus! Shame! Shame and castigation!

DEE

But that's not-- oh, jeck it. Moving on. ...How about "Night and Day?"

MISINFORMED ALIEN

Yeah, no. My planet's tidally locked.

DEE

(noise of frustration)

Over to the bar.

CHIP

Inspector! Welcome, welcome to the Electric Egg! Chip Frinkel, owner and proprietor, at your service. I'm afraid I'm going to have to stop you before you get too far into your, you know, your inspections.

THE INSPECTOR

Stop me? On what grounds? I have full ICSB authorization; all persons and facilities belonging to member states fall within my purview. Well, there are a few treaty exceptions, of course, but those would hardly apply to a bar and multi-cultural eatery, now would they?

CHIP

Au contraire, mon cher autoritaire. As you can see from this parchment, the Electric Egg is officially the governing seat of the Greater Baronetcy of Kandepha'a, and is thereby a sovereign protected zone of the Xybidont Imperium. The Baronet has requested that you limit yourself strictly to the public areas.

THE INSPECTOR

Has he indeed?

CHIP

Er, yes. Through me, that is. As his factotum. Anyway, everything that isn't out in the open must, uh... must be assumed to pertain to the honor and security of His Well Learned Radiant Splendor, and shall therefore be considered immune from extra-Imperial scrutiny. Apart from the rest rooms, which are for customers only. But hey, have a drink on me. Nothing from the aquarium, though, let's be real. That stuff doesn't grow on, on, on coral. Doesn't grow on coral.

SOPON

Actually most of it does, boss.

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'im, sister!

THE INSPECTOR

Wait. Sopon?

SOPON

Yeah? ...Well, thing me in a thing and thing me thingy! Dick? Dick Benny? *You're* the Inspector?

Friendly meeting after so long noises--a hug over the bar, maybe thumping.

CHIP

Sopon?! You know this guy?

SOPON

Sure, we used to work together three, four metrystals back. He did door by the entry pads at a place I managed in the Buttress resorts. Nice joint, a LaGrange-Point fixed club over a water planet. Incredible free diving, if you could afford the insurance. All the way down from orbit.

THE INSPECTOR

Hey, remember this? Say it once, Sopon. For old time's sake.

SOPON

Don't know what you mean, Dick.

THE INSPECTOR

C'mon, say it...

SOPON

“Of all the gin joints in all the stations in all the systems in the galaxy, you walk into mine.”

THE INSPECTOR

Achievement unlocked!

High five, or something like it. Jocularly.

CHIP

I don't get it.

SOPON

Mang, Xtopps is right about you, Chip. It's a sad thing to see a zood so ignorant of his own culture. Anyway, Dick, you owe me dinner. Or do I owe you?

THE INSPECTOR

I won't have time on this trip, I'm afraid. I'm just passing through. But next time.

VERT

Is this guy bothering you, Boss?

CHIP

Vert, for the last time, you don't have to call me Boss. You don't work here.

THE INSPECTOR

Yes, what exactly is his function? I kind of hate him.

CHIP

Yeah, he's... he's just Vert. He does that to people. Vert, you're running out of road, ok? Just go and... be elsewhere, please.

VERT

Ok!

THE INSPECTOR

Actually, Vert, I'd like you to stay right there. I think I should have you taken in for questioning. An Inspector can't be too careful! (*maybe Dick Tracy radio newsflash sounds as he calls it in*) Fairgrounds Security? Inspector Potato here. I'll be needing to requisition an interrogation suite. The subject is a patron here at the Electric Egg, humanoid, approximately 1.1 meters in height, mass unknown, answers to 'Vert'. Arrange a pickup right away, please.

VERT

But--no, but I'm next! I'm next up on the list! It's my turn!

Sad Trombone sting plays.

JOHN

Wait, what was that? Was that you? Did you just make that noise?

THE INSPECTOR

What noise?

JOHN

That... “womp womp” noise.

THE INSPECTOR

Hmm... I don't see anyone in here from the Womp Womp system. You must have imagined it.

Transition to a deserted hallway outside an abandoned sector.

DOOR THAT HAS YOUR BEST INTERESTS AT HEART

Warning: decommissioned area. This door is currently locked, as this Sector may or may not support life at this time. Please find an alternate route to your destination.

THE INSPECTOR

(entering an override code)

And this code ... should take care of that. *(door opens)*

JOHN

What are we looking for down here, exactly? Most of Shin's been closed off for years. Although, well, I guess they've got Life Support running on this floor, since we're not sucking vacuum right now.

Walking noises. These are bare metal corridors.

THE INSPECTOR

The truth is, John, that I haven't exactly told you the truth.

JOHN

Oh. Ok.

THE INSPECTOR

(a bit thrown at the nonchalance)

You don't find that upsetting?

JOHN

I mean, most people don't think I'm important enough to lie to, so it's kind of flattering, to be honest.

THE INSPECTOR

Well, that's... that's very sad. Anyway, I'm not just here as an Inspector. Although the inspections have been going rather well, I think--

JOHN

Yeah, you've given out a lot of citations.

THE INSPECTOR

A smidge over 160,000 at last count--the setback at the Electric Egg has put me slightly behind quota, unfortunately. I had them pegged for 14,851 at a rough estimate, but with that whole Imperial exemption business, I only managed to actually log about 100. Remind me, on the way back to the bridge I'll need to make a long-ish stop at Poppy's K'Chillibont luncheonette, they should be good for a few K at least.

JOHN

14 thousand? Just at the Egg?

THE INSPECTOR

It's a bar and a music venue, my friend, catering to patrons from all over the galaxy. Generally speaking, the odds of committing a code violation increase by an order of magnitude every time you get any cross-species contact. With so many commingling at once, you're pretty much guaranteed to get the ICSB barking down your snorkel. Which is pretty ironic, considering that the entire point of the ICSB is supposed to be fostering harmony among its members. But that's interstellar bureaucracy for you. In any case, routine inspection isn't the primary purpose of my visit. Some months ago, the Office of Equilibrium detected an unusual new kind of transmission emanating from this station. These transmissions are being made with an unknown but very advanced supraluminal technology, and are both extremely dense and curiously intermittent. Most disturbingly, we've been completely unable to trace their destination. This has raised some obvious concerns at the O.E. (*data chime. Pause walking.*) Go ahead.

SYSTEM

This is System. Agent, you are approaching a densely-probable area of event potential. I have back-traced available traffic logs and am not able to identify a target. Be advised that observation and tracking points are quite limited in this sector.

JOHN

(*to himself, during the above*)

Ok, I know I'm not imagining *that*.

THE INSPECTOR

Thank you, System. Update as possible. Proceeding to event site.

JOHN

Is that... You've got a captive AI? That's like... 17 hundred kinds of illegal.

THE INSPECTOR

For you it is. My position exempts me from local regulation on these matters. Just one of the many perks that come with my work for the Office. Speaking of which, (*walking resumes*) what I'm looking for out here is anything unusual that might fill in the gaps in what we know so far. And what we know so far is mostly gaps. So please keep an eye out. I'd like to go past these suites here all the way to the outer wall, to see if there's anything to be seen over there.

JOHN

Uh, you do know about the vent-biters, right? If you're going to be, like, blasting through the interior partitions, you should definitely make sure not to hit any of the ductwork. I don't think Sanitation gets out here very often.

THE INSPECTOR

Uh huh. Well, I thought we might just go down this way, turn left, follow the hall and open the door on the right hand side at the end. This map would seem to indicate that's the easiest path. But I'm open to other suggestions. Where do you people get your ideas?

JOHN

Oh. Right. That makes sense. I guess I just assumed--I keep hearing about all these scary things Inspectors do when they're activated, so.

THE INSPECTOR

Activated?

JOHN

You know, triggered into flaming-fascist-death mode. People have been saying that you'll blast us all into smithereens or like, de-introduce our grandparents or something if you don't like what you see here.

THE INSPECTOR

That's crazy talk, John.

JOHN

Yeah, I guess it does sound pretty silly when you say it out loud like that. Ok, I think if we go through this door, that should get us near the hull. *(beat)* Oh, right, the doors are off-line. Crap. You wouldn't have, like, a super-secret-agent-winch hidden in your hat or something, would you?

THE INSPECTOR

That's... not a thing, sorry.

JOHN

Worth a shot. Ok, just give me a minute to engage the manual... controls... *(effortful grunting as he ratchets the door open. Beat.)* Wow.

THE INSPECTOR

What a lovely view. This was an observation court and meditation zone, according to the original schematics. Shame the windows are so dingy, don't the maintenance crews tend to that?

JOHN

The Robots don't do windows. It's actually our job at W... it's our job, but obviously no one's been down here to call in any maintenance requests, so.

THE INSPECTOR

Hm. Not much here to help us out, alas.

JOHN

What's that over there?

THE INSPECTOR

Trash, looks like. Beat up can and some wire.

JOHN

Yeah, but why would it be here? Wait. Look, this wire is fastened to the central pane of this big window, fastened on with a, with a, it looks like a bulb of data cement? The cable, this is a progressive circuit filament (*slight hissy electric noises*), and, yep, still under power. It's pretty new, they go dead in a year or so without a power source. And it's epoxied onto this can, which does look like trash. "SuperGro. Now with Extra Improved Vim." Wonder what that is. (*sniff*) Doesn't smell like much. Just trash. (*the small can is heedlessly and portentously tossed aside.*) HEY! Wait a minute!

THE INSPECTOR

What is it?

JOHN

This circuit filament! It's exactly what should be in the regulator conduit that controls the biometric sensors in that wonky admin office off Customs. No wonder the robots couldn't get it working! I thought they were just being dicks about it. Or, I guess... vibrators.

THE INSPECTOR

If you say so. (*data chime*) System, are you watching?

SYSTEM

This is System. I am recording and referencing.

THE INSPECTOR

All I'm seeing here is a tin can on a string. Not the sort of hot site we hoped.

SYSTEM

Agent, the powered cable discovered here could be used to convey an audio signal to the observation window, for natural amplification along the surface of the safety pane. However, the signal could not be boosted beyond this deck without an acoustic data net deployed on the hull, and such a net would be detected as soon as it became operational, if not before.

THE INSPECTOR

System, I don't think this is or was an active data launch site. It strikes me as a feint. Could someone be drawing us off and wasting resources? Tin can and a string, it feels like a taunt.

SYSTEM

I concur.

THE INSPECTOR

See what you can line up for transit off-station. I'll make another ticketing loop and then return to the Bridge. *(data chime out)* John, just take that cable to the robots. They'll give you grief about it I'm sure, but I'll send a note to WSS *(WSS jingle)* about your initiative. Thrab it! I had just forgotten about that thing.

Transition to the bridge. Everything's cleaned up and running normally. The Commander is in the tactical closet trying to get System to respond.

COMMANDER

Lulu lulululu lulu woowoo! System, Awake! Computer On! System, Activate! *(deep voice)* I am a very important Agent with the ICSB! ...Typical. I've got a comprehensive, state-of-the-art surveillance apparatus sitting right here on my own bridge, and no way to access it.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Commander? The Inspector says he'll be returning here momentarily?

COMMANDER

(emerging into the bridge proper)

Thank you, Amber. And, uh, if he asks, I definitely wasn't messing around in the Diplomatic Chamber in his absence, capisce?

FRALL appears, splendidly.

FRALL

I have returned for the long drive, pardners. I'll ride point, swing, or even drag if you'll have me. My shooting iron is as steady as my rope hand, and as long as y'all keep the vittles and six-shooter skink fresh and hot and flowing, I'll wrangle them to the end of the trail. Giddyup, little dogies!

COMMANDER

The Lone Hat rides again! Wait. What.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

There's a--what is that? Is it part of them?

STALIN-BOT

Commander, is Lieutenant Energy Being wearing ... mustache?

BRIDGE PERSON WE HAVEN'T HEARD FROM YET

I don't... That feels... real inappropriate. Somehow. Can you make it stop?

COMMANDER

This is... unexpected, Lieutenant. Not to mention inexplicable. It... looks... nice?

FRALL

Thank you, Commander. The trickiest bit was getting the hairs to grow uniformly, without the benefit of follicles, or indeed, skin. Note the constancy of color throughout the contours.

COMMANDER

Is it... is it real?

FRALL

Of course, sir. The moustache is fully concrete and entirely corporeal. It would have been the work of a nanosecond to create an illusiory cookie-duster, of course, but that would somewhat defeat the purpose.

COMMANDER

Taken together with the Stetson, you have crafted something iconic.

FRALL

And yet you still knew it was me. Curious.

COMMANDER

It was the hat. The hat gave you away. With that mustache, for a second I really wasn't sure. But the Stetson just screamed, "Frall." Otherwise I might have had to call security to escort this unknown hirsute interloper off my bridge.

Door whoosh as THE INSPECTOR returns.

THE INSPECTOR

Good afternoon, Commander! Permission to enter the Bridge?

COMMANDER

You don't need my permission for that, Inspector.

THE INSPECTOR

Well, I don't need anyone's permission for anything, really, but I find people like to be asked. I just wanted to stop by on my way out and thank all of you for your invaluable assistance. I have only a few moments, I'm afraid--System has put me on a black freighter running radio silent and, oh, I shouldn't really mention that here, should I. Just pretend you didn't hear that, I'm on a tight schedule.

COMMANDER

A black freighter running dark? Amber, do a full 360 scan and find me that vessel.

THE INSPECTOR

Please, happens all the time. They're hooked into, well, that would be telling. They won't interfere with your operations, it's nothing to worry about.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Sir, I'm not seeing any unregistered freighters?

THE INSPECTOR

Well yes, that is the point of being a *black* freighter. You see. Anyway, must fly.

FRALL

May I congratulate you on your successful visit, Inspector? 182,557 citations issued. You must be very pleased.

THE INSPECTOR

Oh, ah, was it? (*zoosh, click*) Why, no, Lieutenant, I'm afraid you're just a titch off. My records only show 182,556.

STALIN-BOT

Ha!

THE INSPECTOR

Oh! How could I forget? Comrade Stalin-bot, yes? I came in on the Totally Legit, if you'll recall. So I was able to observe your... singular approach to docking safety procedures firsthand. Here you go! (*ticket-issuing sound*)

STALIN-BOT

Ёб твою мать. [*yob tvoyu mat*]

COMMANDER

So, Inspector, you'd say your... mission here has been a success?

THE INSPECTOR

Yes, Commander, thank you for asking. Although that person I'd been hoping to meet seems not to have been here after all. But we can't have everything, can we?

COMMANDER

Do you think they've left, then?

THE INSPECTOR

You know, I'm not sure they were ever here at all. I may have been misinformed.

COMMANDER

I see. Well, I suppose that's for the best. If they should turn up, is there some way I can get in touch with you? Some... system I can use?

THE INSPECTOR

Ah hah hah. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about, Commander. If they were here, I very much doubt they could have escaped my highly-trained scrutiny! But don't worry, if you *really* need a contact system, well, the System will contact you. Now, it truly has been a pleasure, but I really, really must fly.

A lightweight, rigid framework unfolds and snaps itself into place securely around him, with its motors, guidance planes, and space helmet.

THE INSPECTOR

(over helmet intercom)

Forgive me for this overt display of unlisted technology--but rank does have its privileges, no?
And I really do need to catch this boat.

The jet pack ignites, and THE INSPECTOR jets away. It's an elegant and advanced technology, and sounds graceful, strong, and super-cool.

COMMANDER

So that's a jet pack.

STALIN-BOT

Oh! Oh. It's ... beautiful.

End credits music.

ANNOUNCER

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

Our Man in the Fairgrounds

This episode was written by Linus Gelber

featuring

John Amir as John B

Berit Johnson as Althaar

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Philip Cruise as Hardyfox Fornes

Christopher Lee as Chip Frinkel

Zuri Washington as Dee

{etc. with other parts}

and Ian W. Hill as your announcer, William S. Burroughs-bot, {etc.}

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

This has been an audio production from Gemini CollisionWorks.

Tune in again in two weeks for our next episode, but until then, who's this approaching that mysterious pile of flotsam in the Shin 23 Meditation and Observance Solarium?

Rummagy noises.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, deary me. What a tangle this is. I'd just better shut this down in case that silly Inspector comes back. Pity I couldn't get that riot started--then I could have torn him to bits and put all the blame on these wretched, rootless, hairy beasts. They panic so easily, no one would have questioned it! But, all's well that blooms in the end, and I've still got 83 more covert transmission sites to be getting on with! Now if I could only pry that Iltorian away from his stupid roommate, everything would be in place for the next phase of Operation: Ascendant Harvest!

Clank as she casts the can aside.