

Life with Althaar

Episode 13: Mars Flies in a Klein Bottle

Recording Script, 12/04/19 - IWH {BAJ}

The standard opening spaceship swoosh, followed by the sound of everyone in the Electric Egg panicking shortly after the events of the previous episode. The ANNOUNCER appears on top for a moment.

ANNOUNCER

Previously... on *Life With Althaar*...

There is the sound of tape winding furiously backwards and forwards. Moments from the previous episode are played that are meaningless out of context, or even simply insignificant in general. Perhaps a few lines from earlier in the season (maybe one from every episode) also appear, with no particular rhyme or reason ("Welcome to the Fairgrounds, kid;" "Sopon, get this guy a Moxie;" "And now I can't eat soup;" etc.). About 15-20 seconds of this, then...

ANNOUNCER

And now... the thrilling season finale!

We are back exactly at the tag of the previous episode. The last moment and lines (if any) between STELLA and JOHN play, and the door shuts in STELLA's face. Alarms go off. The crowd is more annoyed than worried, then...

CRISIS ANNOUNCEMENT VOICE

Hello to all sentients aboard the Human Exchange Concourse! This is a pre-recorded announcement courtesy of the H.E.C. Crisis Response Alert Processing System! You've probably never heard me before, as I will only be activated in the case of imminent unavoidable disaster, of a kind that will utterly destroy the entire station, and of course, everyone on it! Since I have been activated, it stands to reason that your existence will shortly be coming to a close. Please take a moment to reflect on what brought you to this point, and whether it was all worth it. I'll check back in with you again soon, in the event that your destruction takes slightly longer than anticipated. Thank you!

*A beat, and then the exact **huge panic** we heard at the top of the episode. Theme music up and over this as it fades...*

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...

Life with Althaar!

Episode 13:

Mars Flies in a Klein Bottle...

Back to the panic. In the background, we can hear TORIANNA trying to get attention as JOHN and ALTHAAR talk over the chaos.

JOHN

Godsdammit! It's not just the doors, my phone isn't getting any signal either! Of course this would happen just when Stella shows up! We were finally about to have a real date! Or, ok, calling it a date might be rounding up a little bit, but we were at least going to have an actual conversation while nothing was trying to kill us!

ALTHAAR

It is most unfortunate, FriendJohn. But, no doubt all will be well! Even now the Commander is about to speak. Surely she and the clever crew of the Fairgrounds will be finding a solution to the current crisis with a great swiftness! And if not, Althaar is certain that Specialist Reyes will be amenable to making re-schedulement of the conversation-that-may-or-may-not-be-a-date. It is not to worry, dear friend!

JOHN

But what about that weird announcement? I've never heard that before. What if something's gone wrong that's somehow even worse than all the things that are constantly going wrong on this orbital Schwitters assemblage? What if Stella dies out there? Or I die in here? I'll never know if she was actually flirting with me in that elevator. Does breaking the neck of a vent biter with your bare hands count as "flirting" to a sanitation engineer?

ALTHAAR

Althaar's studies have not prepared him to answer this question, FriendJohn. Apologies! Althaar will add it to his list of research action items. *(bloop bloop)*

H.F.

(coming closer)

John! Quit mooning over the Amazonian warrior goddess who might actually be interested in you romantically, and help me check out the wiring in the door systems. Pretty sure everything in there is bigger than 16-gauge, but it can't hurt to take a look. C'mon.

TORIANNA can be heard better, trying to get control. Some bleeps as she messes with the settings on her commlink.

COMMANDER

Quiet! Quiet, everyone! Would you all just shut up for a moment! Jones-dammit, where's that commlink setting... *(she finds the "megaphone" mode and turns it on; it is Very Loud Indeed)*
EVERYONE SHUT YER NELL-FORSAKEN TRAPS!

And the room chills almost instantly. TORIANNA stops shouting, but continues to use the painfully loud commlink setting.

COMMANDER

RIGHT. NOW KEEP IT DOWN OR I'LL USE THIS THING AGAIN.

(clicks the megaphone off)

Ok. Now, I don't know what the story was with that announcement, or why the doors have gone into lockdown mode, but come on, people! This is the Fairgrounds. If you're still here, you're already a survivor of at least a couple dozen life-threatening disasters. So let's just keep it together, and I'm sure we'll be hearing from the bridge crew shortly.

DORMER

(coming through the crowd, a bit paranoid)

Commander! We can't just wait around in here! We're trapped! Isolated! Our lines of communication have been taken out! Doesn't that suggest that some sinister force is deliberately trying to interfere with Command and Security operations? So they can spread havoc with that fake, panic-inducing announcement?

COMMANDER

No, Corporal, it suggests that the Fairgrounds is a sagging old rust bucket that a far more merciful League of Humans would have taken out behind the barn with a shotgun and put out of its misery a long, LONG time ago.

DORMER

But Commander, this would be the perfect prelude to an assault from a hostile alien force!

COMMANDER

Dormer, never attribute any problem on the Fairgrounds to malice that can be attributed to the stupidity of its designers. And in any case, there's *one* line of communication that *can't* be cut off...

(calling out)

Lieutenant? I know you can hear me! Or sense me! Or... travel back from the future to tell yourself I'm saying this now! Can you get in here please?

FRALL shimmers in through a wall.

FRALL

Yes, hello Commander. I expect all of you are finding recent events somewhat troubling?

COMMANDER

Being trapped, incommunicado, behind a blast door, while some bizarre announcement system I've never heard of is telling us we're all about to die? Yes, Frall, as the station's commander I do find that a topic of concern.

DORMER

Not to mention the impending secret attack by hostile alien forces that this sabotage clearly portends!

COMMANDER

Corporal Dormer, that is enough! There's no... portending! This is *not* a secret alien attack!
(*sotto voce to FRALL*)

Frall? This isn't a secret alien attack, is it?

FRALL

No, Commander, there are no aliens currently attacking the Fairgrounds, secretly or otherwise.

COMMANDER

Ok, good. Although it's almost a pity--dealing with a crisis that wasn't caused by something infuriatingly stupid might make for a nice change.

FRALL

Careful what you wish for, Mindy.

COMMANDER

Don't you dare start up again with the ominous foreboding, Frall, I am *not* in the mood. All right. Status report, please. What do we know?

FRALL

Practically everything, sir.

COMMANDER

Frall. I would like you to explain to me what the problem is. The *current* problem. Specifically, the problem that is keeping me trapped in the Electric Egg, and interfering with comms, and playing weird apocalyptic announcements. And I would like you to provide this explanation in terms I can understand, without any metaphysical discursions. If you please.

FRALL

...Very well, Commander. Within those parameters, I can say only that half of the doors on the station have sealed themselves shut, while the other half are locked in a fully open position; all comms transmission nodes are currently non-functional, including HECNET components, rendering all commlinks, phones, and pagers on station completely useless for communications purposes; and a significant portion of the Fairgrounds' inhabitants are currently "freaking out," although the majority of long-term residents appear to consider the situation "business as usual."

COMMANDER

Ok, so we won't be able to make any calls until comms are fixed. What about the vidscreen displays? Could we at least broadcast an announcement, calm people down a bit?

FRALL

The vidscreen systems are malfunctioning as well, Commander. Although there is one exception, in the Travel Hub.

COMMANDER

Well, that's something. Let's--

FRALL

Unfortunately, for as-yet-undetermined reasons, that screen is currently stuck running the 1963 Earth feature film, *Papa's Delicate Condition*. This fun-filled romp from Paramount Pictures, an adaptation of Corinne Griffith's memoir of the same title, stars Jackie Gleason and Glynis Johns, is sturdily helmed by studio stalwart George Marshall, and features award-winning songs by the legendary team of Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn. It's quite a pip.

COMMANDER

I'm sure it is, Lieutenant, but that's not much help right now, is it? Can you get me more information?

FRALL

A nigh-infinite amount, sir.

COMMANDER

Frall!

FRALL

Apologies, Commander. I should indeed be able to gather more data that complies with your previously-stated criteria. I'll be back to check in shortly, after what will seem to you a reasonable amount of time to do so. Oh, before I go, I should probably mention that many of the station's residents are beginning to notice increasingly loud tapping sounds coming from the walls around them. Ta-ta!

FRALL shimmers as they vanish quickly through a wall.

DORMER

They *would* say that. Commander, permission to search the civilians for secret sabotage devices?

COMMANDER

Secret--? Dormer, what is wrong with you? Less than five minutes ago this was a Christmas party. We were all insipidly singing about foliage. Now you're hunting saboteurs?

DORMER

Things change, Commander. Power balances shift. They knew Ness wouldn't be in here with me. That's the only way they'd have the audacity to pull something like this. Think about it, sir! Do you realize how desperately outnumbered we are by the civilians in this room?

COMMANDER

Corporal, take a good look at who exactly is "outnumbering" us. The owner of this jumped-up ecumenical honkytonk and four of his dissolute employees, two hapless maintenance sub-contractors from... that company whose name we *won't* be mentioning, a Fugulnari retiree who's never had a thought she didn't say out loud, an anti-papist robot, a freaking *Ittorian*--don't actually take a good look at him, obviously--and to top it all off, a ragged handful of ethanol addicts who might as well register their favorite barstools as their permanent address, since I have never, at any point in my tenure on the Fairgrounds, seen any of them leave. This is perhaps the least-menacing rabble I've ever beheld.

ALIEN BARFLY
You tell 'em, sister!

DORMER
But they could strike at any--

COMMANDER
They? THEY? Who in Simone's name is this "they" you keep mentioning? Name three!

DORMER
Uh...

COMMANDER
All right then. If you can come up with a solution to any problems that actually exist *outside* of your fervid imagination, I'd be happy to hear it. Until then, you can go sit in the corner.

DORMER
There's no corners in here, sir. The décor's all... swoopy.

COMMANDER
For Momo's sake, why am I surrounded by literalists? Is it something in the water? Just pick a... section of arc and sit in it. Chip!

CHIP
Yo!

COMMANDER
I'm getting worried about morale. We've only been stuck in here a few minutes, and people are already starting to get squirrely. I think a free round of drinks would be helpful in keeping the edge off until we get this problem solved. How about it?

CHIP
Uh, yeah, Commander... I mean, sure, morale's important and all, but... uh... well... Officially Althaar's still renting the place for the next couple hours. I'm pretty sure there's a regulation against giving out intoxicants free of charge during a private event.

COMMANDER
What? No there isn't.

CHIP
Yeah, ok, maybe not, but don't you think it would be a really good idea if there was?

COMMANDER
(*tight*)
Chip.

CHIP

Plus, don't forget you're on Xybidont territory! Technically, those drinks are served at the dispensation of the Baronet of Kandepha'aa, so...

XTOPPS

It's dougal-root with me, Chorp. Serve 'em up!

CHIP

Gah! Uhh... Music! How about music? That's better for panic than free booze, don'tcha think? Soothes the savage... thingy, yeah? C'mon, Xtopps, Dee! You must have a chill-out setlist, let's hear it!

XTOPPS

Frid nah, mang, I was booked for a party. Funeral music is not my hayver, no way, no plow. Anyone needs me, I'll be over in that arc segment, relaxing on my scene, beans.

DEE

Save me some curve, Xtopps, I'm joining you on the last train to Glitchville.

XTOPPS

The home of happy feet!

XTOPPS does a many legged, non-dancer's version of a "tap dance" as he moves away.

CHIP

What the hell, Dee? I thought you were a professional!

DEE

Chip, look around you. The mood in here has gone more sour than a Dilurian rhubarb pastille. There's no bringing this party back. Sure, technically I'm still punched in, but we *all* may be punching out tonight, and I'm not facing that sober. (*calling*) Hey Bubbles! Make mine a Metisan Mindbender.

BUBBLES

You sure about that, hon? That's basically enacting a scorched-earth policy on your frontal lobe.

DEE

Let's hope I'm still around to regret it tomorrow. Hit me.

BUBBLES

Sure thing, dolly. Slit-scan or solarized?

DEE

Scanned and multiplaned.

BUBBLES

Wow, you're not kiddin' around! All right, just sign this waiver for me and I'll get right on it.

Bleep of an electronic signature, and BUBBLES starts making the drink (we hear CHIP trying to encourage people to buy more). Off to another side, H.F approaches TORIANNA to talk.

H.F.

Hey, Mindy. Just so you know, I had a quick look at the doors, to see if there was anything the kid and I could do to get us out, and it's no good. They're shut tighter than the cloaca of a Barstonian Parchlegs.

COMMANDER

Was that smart? I mean, I know that announcement said we were about to die, but I'm assuming it's as ineptly programmed as anything else here. If we do survive, you'll have to answer to the Robot Union for interfering with the door mechanisms. It's probably not worth the risk.

H.F.

Don't worry about it, Martin Luther-bot's the only one in here who could squeal on us, and I had the kid distract him by professing a fondness for Archbishop Albrecht von Brandenburg. Not that that got us anywhere. Long story short, the doors ain't moving, and I think John's lost any belief in sacerdotalism he may have ever had. Maybe there's a panel in one of the walls we could bust open?

FRALL

(shimmering in through a wall)

Mindy, Hardyfox. I'm still in my data-gathering phase, but I wanted to pop back in for a moment to suggest that you avoid taking any immediate actions to leave the Egg. As vehemently as possible. Seriously. Stay put.

COMMANDER

Wait, Frall! Can you at least tell me what the hell was up with that "Crisis Alert" voice? I've never heard that before, and it's not like we don't have incidents here that could kill all of us on a regular basis. I'd wager about once every two weeks on average.

H.F.

Maybe three weeks.

FRALL

(shimmers)

The correct answer is that all your lives are, on average, nearly curtailed every 421 hours by a bizarre and highly-farcical disaster. By the ancient sacred rules, as she was closest without going over, Commander Torianna has won. Congratulations.

H.F.

So what makes this disaster different from all other disasters?

FRALL

Oh, if only the architects of this station had considered the advisability of accomodating revisions to their handiwork, once it was tested against the infinite vagaries of happenstance... If only the engineers of this station had managed to predict all the multifarious ways in which their slipshod design could reach a point of catastrophic failure...

If only the technicians of this station had not programmed their one emergency recording to be triggered only in the event of the laughably few terminal situations their feeble brains could foresee as within the realm of possibility...

Dayenu.

COMMANDER

Wait, are you saying--

FRALL

Yes, for the very first time in the Fairgrounds' history, and after 645 separate and distinct incidents that could have caused the death of all sapients on board, one has finally occurred that the engineers who built the whole farblonjet pile of barely-functional drek actually predicted as a possible contingency. One single loose wire that has caused cascading failures throughout the station's entire electrical system. While the original fault is quite minor, the domino effect, if left unchecked, will eventually result in the implosion of the station's power core.

COMMANDER

So, they predicted a fault in this wire could kill us all, but did they bother to build in a failsafe? Of course not! Could they have gotten a more incompetent bunch of nulls to design this place?

H.F.

Be fair, Mindy, they were doing the best with what they had, and Earth Central kept moving up the construction deadlines on 'em. Besides, it's not like some weird schness isn't constantly going down here, that's gotta take a toll on the old heap.

FRALL

Your broad-mindedness is admirable, Mr. Fornes, but overly charitable, in my opinion. For one thing, while the designers did manage to successfully predict this exact eventuality, they nevertheless neglected to program a specific response to it in the station's automated protocols, which, therefore, has caused the system to implement its default emergency response: a full station lockdown and shutdown of non-essential systems. The ensuing impossibility of travel and communication means that the emergency response system itself is blocking every possible means of solving what is, at heart, an incredibly simple, if lethal, malfunction. Clever, no?

COMMANDER

Typical. All right, well, at least now we know what the problem is. Go jiggle that wire back into place so we can get out of here.

FRALL

I can understand how that would appear to be the most efficient and sensible solution, Commander, from your perspective. However, I must regretfully inform you that such an action on my part would have... repercussions you would find extremely undesirable.

COMMANDER

More undesirable than getting vaporized in a power core implosion?

FRALL

Yes.

H.F.

What?

COMMANDER

Really?

FRALL

Yes.

COMMANDER

You can't possibly expect me to believe--

FRALL

Commander, we've served together for some time now, and I believe we've forged an effective and amiable working relationship. While I may amuse myself with the occasional bit of drollery at the expense of my corporeal fellow crewpersons, I do in fact have your best interests at heart. I can only ask that the accumulated weight of our shared experience will be enough for you to take me at my word on this. You don't want me touching that wire.

COMMANDER

(not happy, but hey, it's Frall)

...Okay. One of the robots, then. It may take them a little while to get around the sealed doors, but--

FRALL

Alas, Commander. I'm afraid the wire in question is...*very* small.

COMMANDER

Are you telling me the robots would let everyone on this station die rather than violate the terms of their contract?

FRALL

Do you really need to ask, sir?

COMMANDER

(exasperated sound)

H.F.

...And you're saying I *shouldn't* be figuring out how to get through one of these walls, here? So we can get to this loose wire as fast as possible?

FRALL

Well, I don't want to make undue assumptions about the preferences of those of you confined to a four-dimensional existence, but I was under the impression that if you were all indeed going to die, an abrupt demise by either explosion or implosion might be considerably preferable to being rent limb from limb by tiny, razor-sharp teeth.

COMMANDER

Oh no...

FRALL

Yes, sir. To put it bluntly, while all of the current malfunctions could be easily solved in a matter of seconds by simply re-connecting one loose wire in Escape Pod Bay 17, between you and that wire is an unprecedentedly large infestation of vent-biters running amok.

COMMANDER

Unprecedentedly large? Why? I thought jettisoning all that excess pineapple juice was supposed to put a stop to that!

FRALL

Indeed, Commander, the vent-biter population bump from the spillage was much smaller than it would have been had we not dealt with the Ascorbic Aerator in a timely fashion. But it was still significant. And with half of the doors on the station sealed shut, impeding Sanitation's attempts at containment, and the other half stuck open, leaving a significant percentage of the civilian population without anywhere to seek shelter, the Fairgrounds has become little more than an indium-tin-coated vent-biter lunch wagon. If you were to venture out of the Egg now, you would accomplish very little beyond providing the vent-biters with... after-dinner mints, as it were. On the other hand, if you can manage to figure out a way to fix that wire in EPB 17 *without* leaving the Electric Egg, you should be fine.

COMMANDER

And if not?

FRALL

(fading away through a wall with shimmer)
You will be extremely *un*-fine...

A beat. TORIANNA slowly inhales, holding it together.

H.F.

Alrighty then. Mindy, I'm gonna take another little stroll around the room, check out all the dark... corner-like sections of arc. I'm about 80% sure we can't get out, but right about now I'd rather be 100% sure that nothing else can get in.

COMMANDER

Thank you.

(taking a general calming tone)

Okay everyone! I've just received an update on the situation, and I'm afraid we've got a problem out there that makes being trapped in here the far better option at the moment.

CHIP

I refuse to accept that!

COMMANDER

Vent-biters.

CHIP

(exactly the same)

I refuse to go out there!

COMMANDER

Exactly.

DORMER

No! NO! It's all a lie! It's all a dirty stinking alien trick! Ness would know! They've got her, haven't they? My partner! I bet she's been on to them from the start! What will they do to her? They--

COMMANDER

Dormer, enough "they!" Either name three, or sit down!

(back to calming dealing-with-the-public voice)

Now, Lieutenant Frall and our gallant defenders in Sanitation will be handling that aspect of our predicament, but we also have a very big problem involving a very small wire. Which means at some point we'll need one of you W-- *(stops herself, then decides to hell with it)* -- ugh, WSS technicians *(WSS jingle plays from various places around the room)* to fix it. If we can't get you to that wire, you'll need to talk someone through the repair process from in here. So H.F.? John B? Be ready to go if we can get a line open.

H.F.

(tapping a wall on the other side of the room)

Ready when you are, Mindy.

JOHN

(despondent)

Whatever.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(a bit icily polite)

Commander, is there anything the rest of us can help with? If you have any use for a Fugulnari retiree whose hearing is actually remarkably good?

COMMANDER

(doesn't pick up on it)

Uh, well, we're kind of in a holding pattern until we get the comms issue sorted out, Mrs. F. Although I suppose I could still use some help with keeping morale up... Ah! You see Corporal Dormer over there? The Security officer sulking in that... corner-ish area? He's starting to get delusional, ranting about alien spies, and that's the last thing we need right now. Do you think you could distract him for a while?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! How delightful! I can certainly do that. Why don't I let him pretend he's interrogating me? I could use the practice.

COMMANDER

Perfect, thank you.

She goes off toward DORMER, maybe muttering some lines "in character" as an "evil alien."

COMMANDER

Okay. Now, Xtopps? Dee? I know you're civilians, you don't work for me, and we're technically in the Baronetcy of Kandepha'aa right now. I can't order you to do anything as Commander of this station. I can only ask you for a favor. But as the Commander of this station, I can use every regulation at my disposal make the rest of your lives here an endless gauntlet of petty annoyances if you don't do me this favor. Ok? So I would really like some nice, calming music to keep everyone on an even keel while we're stuck here, if you wouldn't mind.

XTOPPS

(from a distant corner, seriously glitched)

Uh... yeah... I suppose. Sure, right, patric. We just need a little time for... for...

DEE

(likewise)

For putting together a setlist!

XTOPPS

Right! Yeah! I mean, if you're gonna be sucking vacuum, you don't want to do it to the wrong harmonics, yeah? Could really frill with your post-mortem vibe.

DEE

Just give us a few Mindbenders--minutes, minutes!

COMMANDER

That's not what I--look, we don't need a... vacuum-sucking soundtrack, I'm sure we'll get through this the same way we have every other distaster on the Fairgrounds. By the seat of our pants. Just some relaxing music, please! Thank you! *(back to the room in general)* Everyone else, just... *(nothing really to say)* ...I guess implement whatever safety procedures you can manage to remember. Can't hurt.

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

Commander! I am programmed with the most basic and essential of survival protocols, and would be most pleased to reeducate my fellows with a restatement of the most important rules.

COMMANDER

Oh, thank you, Martin Luther-bot. I'm sure most of us could use a refresher. Go ahead.

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

Now the most important thing in survival is justification!

JOHN

What?

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

If you are justified, you are saved! You will survive eternally!

CHIP

Hey, no problem then, I can justify anything.

JOHN

I don't think that's what he means...

ALTHAAR

Perhaps Sin Luther-bot is having very strong opinions about typography?

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

No! ...although that does remind me I need to have another chat with Gutenberg-bot about his font selection... No, I'm talking about achieving a state of grace!

XTOPPS

(wasted)

Mang, I'm already there!

DEE

(likewise)

Hallelulah!

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

Heed my words, idolatrous reprobates! Or suffer eternal destruction!

COMMANDER

Well, that went spectacularly awry even faster than usual. Luther-bot, this isn't the kind of survival advice I had in mind, can you--

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

I will not be silenced by the profane agents of a corrupt dominion!

COMMANDER

Oh, for--

FRALL

(shimmering in through a wall)

Commander--

COMMANDER

Just a second, Frall--

Luther-bot! See those aliens over in that corner? The ones slumped over the table?

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

I see no corner, Commander, only a smoothly-curving segment of--

COMMANDER

Whatever you want to call it! Them, those poor lost souls? They could use your personal ministrations. None of them speak any Human languages, and they're clearly in desperate need of a Bible translated into their vernacular. Go to it, please!

LUTHER-BOT does so, perhaps preaching a bit on the way (Robot 95 Theses?).

FRALL

I don't believe those aliens are in a state to understand a single word of *any* language right now, sir. Their blood alcohol content is at levels that would kill most species outright.

COMMANDER

Perfect, that should keep the old hymnodist out of everyone's hair for a while. Now. What's up?

FRALL

A slight update. The vent-biters continue to wreak murder and mayhem in both the Upper and Lower Concourses, with sectors Nun through Tsade being the hardest hit. Luckily, a bold crew of Sanitation Engineers has been able to unite and access one of their smaller weapons caches, and are as we speak driving the creatures back into the vents and keeping them away from those exposed and still left alive.

COMMANDER

Those peerless paladins of pestilence prevention! So Sarge has managed to organize a response?

FRALL

Unfortunately, sir, Sgt. Garnet perished almost immediately after the initial swarming. The Engineers are now operating under the command of acting-Sgt. Stella Reyes, who I would say is adapting quite well to the rigors of her new position. Nonetheless, the efforts of she and her cohort will not be sufficient to clear a path between you and that silly little wire in Escape Pod Bay 17.

JOHN has overheard this and zooms over to jump in.

JOHN

Wait, what? Did you say Stella?

FRALL

Specialist Reyes is indeed leading the charge against the xenomorphs, John B, and dispatching them with her usual aplomb.

JOHN

Yeah, I mean, I've seen her in action... she's... she's amazing. But where is she? What's she doing? Is she okay?

COMMANDER

John B? This isn't the time. Specialist Reyes has her job, which is exterminating predators, and you have yours, which is splicing very small wires. We need both of you doing your jobs in order to save all of our lives, ok? And my job is to make sure that happens. So what you need to do right now is stop interrupting, sit down, and wait. And when we need you to do something else, believe me, you'll hear about it. Capiche?

JOHN sighs and maybe mutters as he moves away, passing DORMER and MRS. FRONDRINAX.

DORMER

So, wait... You're an advance scout for an alien takeover of Human space, and there are agents just like you working in every League of Humans system, even on Earth? And you're planning to subjugate us under a dictatorship of plant-beings?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(in "evil alien" character; maybe actually something like a 1930s movie gangster)

Yah, see, us plants 'r gonna take over the whole operation, get it? We calls it "The Fugulnari Ascendancy" for a reason, mister, and we're already in position to rise up and take you down! Our tendrils are everywhere, in every corner, in every garden, in every indoor landscaping feature in the offices of every League of Humans administration building! There ain't nothing you can do about it, sucker, it's already begun!

DORMER

Yah, but... but now I know! And I'm gonna tell everyone! And I'll be the hero! So there, Mrs. So-Called Frondrinax!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(dropping "evil alien" character)

Oh, that was fun! Now let's switch! I'll be the alien interrogator, and you be the captured Human soldier!

DORMER

Wait, what?

MRS FRONDRINAX

Oh, I love playacting!

DORMER

So... so there's no Fugulnari ascending? None of that was true?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, acting is a kind of truth, isn't it, sweetie? I thought it would be helpful to give you some firsthand experience in dealing with hostile aliens and see how you'd do! And it was interesting, wasn't it? Now, let's see how you stand up under interrogation! Ahem. (*gets into "interrogator" character*) Tell me what I want to know, mammalian scum!

DORMER

I'm so confused... I wish Ness was here... she always knows what to do--

MRS. FRONDRINAX slaps DORMER hard across the face with her branches.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Quiet, meatbag! We have your precious partner, and she's already given you up!

DORMER

Ness wouldn't do that! She's smart! She's brave! She always knows what to do!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Brave? She cracked like an Antonian Waferback when I had her in the box. Gave us everything! Smart? Heh. She's just dumb enough to think she's smart! You've got twice her brains, sonny. But you're weak-willed! Spineless! Feeble!

DORMER

No! It's not true! I gotta get out of here! I have to warn everyone!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Who's "everyone?" Name three! And who'd believe you anyway? You've got nowhere to turn. Look around you! You think these fools will believe you? They didn't before. Or maybe they're not fools, hmm? Maybe... maybe some of them are double agents! Maybe *all* of them are double agents! And what do you think they'd do if they found out you were on to them? It's not as though you could defend yourself, now is it?

DORMER

My gun! My neuro-dampers! I'm off duty--I didn't bring anything! I didn't think I'd need them at a party!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I know. We knew. They *all* knew. Everyone here. They knew you'd be utterly defenseless. It's all part of the plan.

DORMER

NO!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I mean... if by some chance I were to eventually turn my back, I suppose you could get into the kitchen from here, and of course there are plenty of very sharp things in there you could use as a weapon... But then, who would you use them on? You'd have to decide who you think is an alien spy and who isn't! And what if you're wrong? You'd have to kill... well, *everyone* in this room if you were going to be safe! It's a good thing you don't have to make that kind of terrible decision, isn't it? Because I'm certainly not going to feel secure and overconfident enough to turn my back on you. Anyway, as I was saying, Ness has already cracked like a seedpod! She's given us all of the security override codes for the Fairgrounds. So I suppose I don't really need you to talk. Of course, Ness could have been lying... If you gave me the same codes, then I could be sure she was telling the truth. I'd certainly be feeling much more confident if that happened, goodness yes! Maybe over-confident, even!

DORMER

(thinking he's slick)

Oh... yeah, so... Hey, listen, there's something I think you should know, ok: there's a master override security code for whole Fairgrounds that'll give you total system access. It's a pain to remember, and you gotta get it exactly right, otherwise it locks you out and flags an alert to your location. It only works on the terminals in the...

DORMER fades away as we move over to ALTHAAR and JOHN (following the sound of ALTHAAR moving).

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn? Althaar is approaching you from the rearward direction! Do not be turning suddenly, please!

JOHN

Thanks for the heads up, Althaar. But I've gotten pretty good at keeping track of where you are, what with the little clicking noises and that kind of... vinegar and burning-electronics smell you put out.

ALTHAAR

Oh! FriendJohn is indeed a Human of great resourcefulness and discernment!

JOHN

Yeah, thanks.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn appears to be experiencing the up-set. Has Althaar committed an error? Was the party of Criss-mas inadequate in assuaging the blue feelings? Althaar apologizes again for the mis-understanding about what is an appropriate material for gift-encasement.

JOHN

Oh, no, Althaar, the party was amazing. You're a really great friend. The best friend I've ever had. No, it's just that, you know... Stella's out there. Fighting. Fighting for her life, and all of ours, and I'm stuck in here, and I can't do anything to help. And well, honestly, even if I wasn't stuck in here, I'm still pretty useless.

ALTHAAR

Althaar must disagree, FriendJohn! The friendship and advice of FriendJohn is of great use to Althaar! And FriendJohn has told Althaar that Sin Stella Reyes is an “ass-kicking, vermin-slaughtering Sanitation ma-sheen!” It is certain that she is making great success in the contention against the vent-biters.

JOHN

But for how long, Althaar? She’s good, she might be the best--but they’re all good, every damn one of them. And they still die. No matter how good they were. Sooner or later, there’s going to be a vent-biter mandible with her name on it. How long has she got?

ALTHAAR

Althaar does not know, FriendJohn. But Althaar believes it is best not to be dwelling on the misfortunes that have yet to happen, or those that cannot be remedied.

JOHN

Yeah, that’s... that’s very logical, Althaar, but it’s not that easy for me. I just... I wish there was *something* I could do to help her, instead of just sitting around in here.

ALTHAAR

But FriendJohn will be helping soon! With the repair of the very small wire! The work duties of FriendJohn are perhaps not so glamorous as those of the warriors of Sanitation, but FriendJohn has saved the Fairgrounds from great disaster on 5 or 6 distinct occasions, according to Althaar’s counting! And Althaar is not including in this number the frequent repairs of the unaccountably treacherous seltzer machine here at the Electric Egg! Althaar believes that the Fairgrounds has become a place of much greater safety and happiness for all, thanks to the efforts of FriendJohn! Althaar could indeed share many gripping anecdotes of misfortune from his time here before the arrival of FriendJohn, but now is perhaps not the time for the scary stories.

They are interrupted, appropriately at this point, by the CRISIS ANNOUNCEMENT VOICE.

CRISIS ANNOUNCEMENT VOICE

Attention! This is once again a pre-recorded announcement courtesy of the H.E.C. Crisis Response Alert Processing System! Whatever crisis triggered me has apparently not yet destroyed the Human Exchange Concourse! What a surprise! If there’s anyone left within the sound of my voice, my programmers would sure appreciate it if you got a message off the station before you perish. There’s quite a few bets riding on the question of whether anyone could last this long. Anyway, I’ve been re-activated because the total destruction of the H.E.C. is still imminent, and still unavoidable. So, if you haven’t taken advantage of one of our comfortable and convenient H.E.C. escape pods, it might be best at this time to make peace with your deity, deities, or lack thereof, and accept the upcoming cessation of your existence. Thank you!

XTOPPS and DEE are still wasted, and are attempting to create a “About to Die” setlist.

DEE

Well, that settles it! We're doing my number! What could be more appropriate?

XTOPPS

No way. "Waiting for the End of the World?" It's too on the nasal ridge. We might as well go whole-florkhog and pull out the R.E.M. Bletch!

DEE

Well... whadelse you want to do for a "We're All Going to Die" set? "Wooden Ships?" And it's been a while since I got to do any Elvis. This isn't the time for subtlety, zood.

XTOPPS

Mang, if only I had some horns I could kill on "Party at Ground Zero..." Maybe "Armagideon Time?" Or "Five Years?"

They begin drunkenly giggling a bit at this.

DEE

Schness, I don't think we've got five flotting *minutes*!
I know! "Don't Fear the Reaper!"

XTOPPS

No, no! "The Final Countdown!"

They both laugh and drunkenly imitate the synth line from "Final Countdown" within the bounds of Fair Use.

DEE

I got it, I got it! I know! Always wanted to do it! (*beat*) "Is That All There Is?" You know it?

XTOPPS

It's the story of my life, zood...

We fade over to CHIP and SOPON talking at the bar.

CHIP

Sopon?

SOPON

Yeah, Chip?

CHIP

What is it I always say?

SOPON

"Never sign a deal with an Arcturian fardel-hauler, no matter how good the terms. It's never worth the hassle."

CHIP

No, not that one.

SOPON

Uh... "I don't trust that frilling mist cloud?"

CHIP

Nope. True, but nope.

SOPON

Uh... "Always know the codes better than the fire inspectors?"

CHIP

Come on, man. My motto. My personal philosophy. My raison d'être.

SOPON

Oh! "Never. Not Ever. Not once. Give away one credit from the till."

CHIP

That's it! Even when someone gets a drink on the house, that's not a handout. That's a purchase of future goodwill. Nobody, but nobody, gets anything off me for free. But you know what, Sapon? Right about now, I'm ready to chuck the whole thing and give away the whole flotting Egg.

SOPON

Whoa, Boss!

CHIP

I've had it, Sapon. The business I'm getting isn't worth the business I'm getting. And what have I got to show for it now?

SOPON

The best damn bar in Human space?

CHIP

Sure, for like the next five minutes.

SOPON

Chip, do you really think we're all about to kick the containment unit?

CHIP

Uh... yeah? We all heard that... weirdly perky automated harbinger of doom.

SOPON

And you're just taking that thing's word for it? The announcement system that was put together by the same bunch of nulls who designed the rest of this place?

CHIP

Oh. Huh.

SOPON

It'll be fine. Probably. Anyway, what are you going to do, develop a new personal philosophy in the next five minutes? Either you'll have time for regrets later, or there'll be nothing left of you to regret anything. And come on, there is no possible timestream where you give away the Electric Egg.

CHIP

You think I'm not serious about this?

SOPON

Selling the Egg for a truly obscene amount of brioche? Sure. Giving it away? Not by all the Sixty-Five Suns. I know you, Chip.

CHIP

Heh, fair enough. Okay, thanks for the pep talk, Sopes. Sometimes I forget you're not just here to make the best martinis outside of the Solar system.

SOPON

(making a drink)

No sombrero, Chip. I'm a bartender. Talking to maudlin drunks is like two-thirds of my job.

(serves it)

And there you go.

We move across the bar to TORIANNA and H.F.

COMMANDER

So now, I suppose, we just wait for word from Frall...

H.F.

How many times do you think we've done this, over all the years we've been here, put together? Sat around waiting for something that will avert our imminent demise.

COMMANDER

I'm sure Frall could give you the exact number, if you're really interested. I'm not. ...Hardyfox, I hate to say this, but I've got a bad feeling about this one. Maybe it's just the wait, being stuck in here without any control over the situation, but I'm starting to worry that we might not get ourselves a Felis Ex Machina this time. This might be it. I've already done everything I can do from in here, and now there's nothing left but sitting here thinking about what I might have done with the rest of my life. I don't care for it.

H.F.

Well, I had some plans for the future, but you know, you gotta live like every day could be your last. And compared to some of the days I've had, this isn't such a bad one to go out with. Good food, good company...

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

(coming over, interrupting)

Commander!

H.F.

On the other hand...

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

I have done all I can to bring those besotted souls to the bosom of the Church, but I believe I have reached the limits of my linguistic abilities. Is there a more fruitful manner that I may be of service to the community through my actions? Perhaps I might lead these hapless prisoners of misfortune in a rousing chorus of “Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir?”

COMMANDER

No, thank you! *(has a plan; is not a terrific actor)* You know, Luther-bot... I’m just noticing that vent over there in the corner, or arc section, or whatever. The grating on there looks pretty flimsy. I sure hope that no demonic vent-biters can get in through there and rip us apart before we attain a proper understanding of Virgil’s *Bucolics* and *Georgics*...

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

No!

H.F.

(sotto voce)

Mindy, what are you talking about? That’s part of the Egg’s internal system. Nothing can get in through--

COMMANDER

Shhh! *(back to bullshitting)* Oh, yes, if we only had someone talented at nailing things to other things! Someone to hammer a protective covering over that vent. Even paper would do. Many, *many* layers of protective covering...

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

Finally! A chance to act with righteousness and skill! There has been so very little for me to accomplish in the Fairgrounds Carpentry and Fine Cabinet-Making Department! Commander, leave this to me! I have what is needed!

COMMANDER

Bless you, Martin Luther-bot!

H.F.

(chuckling)

Pretty slick, Mindy. You know, you’re probably Humanity’s greatest expert on robot psychology by this point. You should write a book or something.

LUTHER-BOT retreats to the vent, where he can be occasionally heard in the background nailing paper in layers over it. The door from the kitchen quietly but squeakily swings open, and DORMER comes out, muttering to himself as he sizes up the room.

DORMER

All right... all right... you... you... ALIENS. I'm armed now and you're not going to take over MY station, whether you like it or not! Name three, Commander? Oh, I'll name three... how about... Frinkel... and John B... and you, Commander... all alien spies, aren't you? Or maybe... Dee... and H.F.... and... you again, Commander! Yeah, that's it. Alla you. Alla you alien spies. Maybe these aliens here too... can't trust any of you. Even that Iltorian... that's... biological warfare, is what it is! Right! nobody... Even a robot... a robot can be an alien spy, too, just like...

LUTHER-BOT has started a new round of nailing, near DORMER, and has unfortunately gotten his attention.

DORMER

Aha! Just like you, you... anti-Antinomian!

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

Vas?

FRALL shimmers through the wall and brings us to the center of the Egg.

FRALL

Commander?

COMMANDER

Frall! Finally! What's happening out there?

FRALL

A great deal, Commander.

COMMANDER

Can you not? You're my only connection to the outside world here, and I can't make decisions without information! Isn't there some way for me to see what's going on?

FRALL

I could indeed project an image for you of current events from around the station, if you believe that would be helpful.

COMMANDER

Yes, please!

Through FRALL's shimmer suddenly comes the horrible sound of vent-biter screeches, human and alien screaming, and the rending of flesh and alien bodies. Then just as suddenly out.

COMMANDER

Aagh! ...Ok, point taken. A verbal report then, please, Lieutenant.

FRALL

It is not going well, Commander. The remaining members of Sanitation are doing all they can, but they can't be everywhere at once. Whereas the vent-biters easily could.

COMMANDER

Is *everyone* getting slaughtered?

FRALL

Not at all, sir. A good many people are still trapped in areas to which the vent-biters lack access, and there are some vulnerable areas that the vermin have as yet failed to notice. They aren't particularly intelligent, after all, just exceptionally single-minded. I'd say that at a rough estimate, they've managed to kill or seriously injure somewhere between 25 and 30 percent of all sapients on the Farigrounds.

COMMANDER

25 to 30... that's... well, that's horrible, but it really could be so much worse.

FRALL

Indeed, that percentage will increase precipitously with the implosion of the power core.

COMMANDER

...Right. So what can we--

JOHN

Frall, can you get in touch with Stella at all?

COMMANDER

John, we don't have time for your... whatever it is! We need to focus on the big picture here!

JOHN

No, just listen! What I was thinking was, we should try to get Stella to that wire in EPB 17. I mean, if Sanitation isn't going to be able to clear *us* a path there--

FRALL

They aren't.

JOHN

--then we'll have to tell someone else how to fix it, so if Frall has a way for us to talk to her--

COMMANER

I see. Good thinking, B. Frall, can you do that?

FRALL

I could, Commander. However, given that Specialist Reyes is currently engaged in a heated battle against overwhelming odds, even a moment's distraction brought on by verbal contact could bring about the end of her life in a most brutal and vent-bitery fashion.

JOHN

Crap. Never mind, then. Sorry for the interruption.

FRALL

However. I *could* subtly insert the information into her cerebral cortex while her attention is occupied elsewhere. This should allow her to “remember” the knowledge without having learned it in the first place, strictly speaking.

H.F.

Man, I wish I'd known you back in school. I really could have used you during finals week.

JOHN

And that won't get her killed? Or maimed? Or--

FRALL

It will not.

COMMANDER

Then please, Frall. Do... that.

JOHN

Bay 17, the wire, where to make the splice.

FRALL

(shimmer)

Done. Specialist Reyes is now apprised of the potential solution.

COMMANDER

Great.

FRALL

(shimmer)

There is an additional difficulty, however.

JOHN

What now?

FRALL

Specialist Reyes believes that EPB 17 has become the central hub of the current infestation. Apparently many residents made a futile attempt to access those escape pods when the disaster began, luring the vent-biters with a steady supply of food, and, as the bay itself makes an ideal nesting site, there is little incentive for the swarm to leave. It is highly unlikely that anyone could survive an attempt to pass through Escape Pod Bay 17 to effect the needed repairs.

JOHN

Crap. We'll have to find another way, then.

COMMANDER

Frall, tell her to go for it.

JOHN

What? No!

H.F.

It might be our only chance, kid. We've got to get to that wire, we're running out of time, and Stella's the only one who can do it.

JOHN

But it's suicide! Isn't that what you said, Frall?

FRALL

Not technically, no. Beyond that, deponent sayeth not.

Beat.

JOHN

Yeah. Yeah I know. If anyone can do it, she can.

FRALL

I have conveyed the message. She is already on her way to EPB 17 with her remaining crew.

JOHN

(quickly)

Tell her good luck and I'm thinking of her!

ALTHAAR

(calling across the room)

And so is Althaar, although he has yet to make her acquaintance!

COMMANDER

(exasperated)

John! Can I have a word, please? Over there in the corner-like area, let's go.

They move away and H.F. is left with FRALL.

H.F.

Uh, hey, Frall? Have you got a minute? I mean, I know you're busy and all, but--

FRALL

My ability to multi-task is functionally infinite, Mr. Fornes. What did you need?

H.F.

It's just, I, uh... I left Miss Sophie at home tonight. I didn't think she'd be up for a party. And I'm getting kinda worried about her. The door to my quarters isn't open, is it? I'd hate to think of my little fluffy woobums... and those things...

FRALL

Of course. I have been checking in on the darling Miss Sophie, and you have no cause for concern. She has remained asleep, behind a firmly locked door, throughout the entire event. At the current moment she is... (*shimmer*) ...she is dreaming of moving objects that are vaguely bunny-like, as she has never seen an actual bunny, and her paws and nose are twitching adorably.

H.F.

Oh. I'm all good, then. Thanks, Frall.

Back over to where TORIANNA is having a word with JOHN.

COMMANDER

John, seriously? Do you really think saying 'hi' to your crush is the best use of Stella's attention or Frall's time? Well, Frall would probably say they've got all the time in the universe, but still! Get it together!

JOHN

But she's probably going to die! I didn't want her to think no one cared!

COMMANDER

She's a professional, she's our only hope of surviving this, and she doesn't need any distractions! None of us can be thinking about our personal feelings right now, all right? We need to stay focused on the problem that's still threatening to destroy all of us!

DORMER

That's exactly what I intend to do, my traitorous Commander!

A general gasp from all, not so much scared or worried as surprised and confused.

COMMANDER

Corporal Dormer, what in Hazel's name do you think you're doing? Let Martin Luther-bot go. And put that thing down!

DORMER

Ha! You'd like that, wouldn't you? But I'm going to do my duty, Commander, despite your transparent attempts to hobble my investigation! I've captured this alien spy, disguised as a robot, disguised as a Human menial laborer!

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

We are beggars, this is true!

COMMANDER

What?

H.F.

Disguised as a--? Why would a robot spy on Humans for aliens?

CHIP

And why would anyone spy on the Fairgrounds?

DORMER

Shut up! ...All right. Ok. All right. I know some of you “Humans” are alien spies, but if it was all of you, you’d have ganged up on me by now. So, Humans! Check each other for clever masks! Go on! Pull! Go for the eyes!*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Eugh. Why would an alien spy disguise themselves as a Human? There are dozens of aliens walking around here all the time, and no one questions them at all!

DORMER

No, that’s-- ...Huh. You may have a point there. ... Yeah! Any ONE of you could be an alien spy! Disguised as... disguised as yourselves!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, ah, um, well, actually dearie, I’m sure you had it right the first time! A spy needs to blend in, don’t they? An alien that was REALLY involved in a massive takeover of the entire League of Humans would certainly pick a Human disguise, stands to reason!

**In the background during the above:*

H.F.

Hey, ow! Chip, what the hell? Get off me you joker!

CHIP

Sorry.

DEE

Nobody touch me!

XTOPPS

I’m not touching you... I’m not touching you... *(thud)* OW! Streez, Dee!*

DORMER

All right! All of you aliens, take your disguises off right now or this bot gets it in the neck!

COMMANDER

Dormer, you don’t want to do this! It’s stupid!

DORMER

Free will isn't stupid! I can choose to do whatever I want!

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

Pelagian heretic!

DORMER

And I choose to defend the Fairgrounds against the alien menace! Even if I have to kill you all! There's nothing stupid about that!

COMMANDER

Dormer, I have been the Commander of the Fairgrounds for seven years, ten months, and fourteen days, and in that time I have seen a depressingly large number of stupid things. But very few things as stupid as a man trying to threaten an entire roomful of people with a non-stick spatula! Now there's absolutely no way you're going to hurt anyone with that thing, so please, just put it down.

There is the sound of metal wrenching metal, a solid-yet-cartoony POP, and something heavy and round hitting the floor and rolling away. Beat.

COMMANDER

Well. There's that famous Fairgrounds craftsbeingship for you. I guess I should have known better than to trust a bot's head to stay attached around here. *(beat)* What the hell are you all waiting for, he's got nothing but a bent spatula! Restrain him!

There is the sound of a struggle as DORMER is subdued and tied up by H.F., KWONTZ, SOPON, JOHN, and CHIP.

CHIP

(amongst the struggling)

Kwontz, get his legs!

KWONTZ

(warbling ("Which ones are legs?"))

CHIP

The ones at the bottom, the ones at the bottom!

As the chaos abates and they tie DORMER to a chair, DEE and XTOPPS are stumbling onstage. They are wasted, but they are professionals, and they are determined to do a show now.

DEE

(drunkenly taking the bandstand)

Hey. HEY. Hey, everyone! So, like, Xtopps and I were thinking we'd do one last little number for y'all. Before we explode. Or implode? Anyway, this is a traditional Earth hymn, a favorite of ours, that gets sung at times like this, Xtopps and I both like it a lot, and for reasons that nobody seems to know, it's called "Van Dyke Parks." Here you go...

XTOPPS and DEE swing into a sincere performance of “Nearer My God to Thee” which plays to its conclusion under the following.

CRISIS ANNOUNCEMENT VOICE

Attention! It’s me again, the automatic prerecorded Crisis Response Alert Processing System!
Hi!

Groans, other sounds of exasperation, a “Now what?” from the assembled as it continues.

CRISIS ANNOUNCEMENT VOICE

So... I’m not really sure what to tell you here, because, if you’re hearing this, you’ve already cheated death way longer than we anticipated! And frankly, what are the odds that our estimates could be off by that much, right? I don’t even know why we’re recording this. Anyway, yeah. Uh... we already did that whole “make peace with your inevitable demise” thing in the last announcement, so... what else... Uh, I guess... good job? I mean, if you’re still hearing this it means that the sensors are still detecting a terminal problem somewhere on the H.E.C. so, don’t pat yourselves on the back too hard... Or, I guess the sensors could be wrong, maybe? But, I mean, this place was designed by a huge committee! So there’s no way they overlooked anything important! You’re definitely gonna die. But if you’ve made it this long, I guess... you might as well keep doing whatever you’re doing? Couldn’t hurt. Ok, so... bye then!

JOHN

Great.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is not wishing to insult his dear Human friends, but he is having a very difficult time understanding the decisions made by the designers of the Fairgrounds. These announcements seem to Althaar to be very bad and stupid. Can FriendJohn make explanation?

JOHN

There’s no other explanation, Althaar, that’s exactly what they are. Bad and stupid. That’s what a lot of we Humans are sometimes.

ALTHAAR makes a considering sound.

FRALL

(extremely quiet, and oddly muffled)
John? John B?

JOHN

Lieu... ..tenant Frall? Where are you? I can’t see you?

FRALL

I’m down here in your drinking glass.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar was not aware that Lieutenant Frallen Br’ar could assume liquid form! Fascination!

FRALL

John, I need to speak to you and Althaar privately. I'd suggest casually taking your drink into the Green Room.

ALTHAAR

(as they move)

Ooh! Althaar welcomes the opportunity to perform an intrigue with his dear friend John!

JOHN

I don't think it counts as intrigue if you announce it to the entire room, buddy.

Door opens and closes. The relative quiet of the Green Room. FRALL shimmers out of the glass.

FRALL

Ah... that's better.

JOHN

Uh, Frall? Why did we need to come in here to talk? You can beam knowledge straight into my head. Or, just, like... whisper or something.

FRALL

That would have been slightly easier for me, but exponentially less fun. I'd have preferred to manifest in something a little stronger than water, but can't be helped.

JOHN

Sorry, I had enough liquor today to hold me for a while. For several whiles, actually. So what's the big secret?

FRALL

John, I have been in psychic communication again with Specialist Reyes, and was eventually able to let her know of your concern for her without distracting her in any way from her work. She was grateful for your thoughts, and wanted to let you know that she appreciated it.

JOHN

Oh. Good. I mean, I wouldn't want her to think I didn't think she could handle it. I mean, she obviously can, she's a badass, and she'll be okay--

FRALL

She also wanted me to let you know that she doesn't believe she will survive this battle, and that she is sorry she didn't get to know you better. She always believed this was how she would go, but she never expected there to be anyone who would remember her afterward.

Beat.

JOHN

Where is she?

FRALL

Specialist Reyes, knowing that all our lives depended on her getting to the wire in EPB 17, has fought her way there, with truly awe-inspiring skill and bravery, but unfortunately she is now separated from the rest of her team, pinned down across the bay from her target, and the vent-biters are close to having her surrounded. She will not last very much longer at this rate, I'm afraid.

JOHN

Ah. So, that's that then. It's over.

FRALL

Oh, I wouldn't say that, John. Perhaps you should take another moment to consider the situation.

JOHN

Ok, you know what? It's probably pretty stupid to cuss out a nigh-omnipotent energy cloud, but we're about to be annihilated anyway, so screw it. I have had it with you, Frall! I've had it with the cryptic warnings, the barely-veiled insults, the... smugness! When I started here I thought having a non-corporeal, multi-dimensional being on the crew must be incredibly helpful, but it turns out to be a total pain in the ass!

FRALL

You may be surprised to know that I can relate, John B. Many aspects of my consciousness find some of the other parts exceptionally annoying. And they're not always the same parts, funnily enough. There *is* one of my manifestations that finds every single thing I do to be utterly hilarious, regardless of circumstance. Anyway.

I would like you to know that all hope is not yet lost. I brought you and Althaar into this room together for a reason, I told you about the precise situation of Specialist Reyes for a reason, and I was in your water glass for a reason. Although I admit the water glass was mostly for my own amusement. And unfortunately, there is a reason I can't do or say anything more to help you.

(starts shimmering out of the room) Oh, and there is also a reason I'm telling you to stop calling yourself useless all the time, but that one has less to do with the ineluctable decreta of spacetime. Self-deprecation helps no one, John.

And they're gone.

JOHN

...Well, that was a hell of a ride.

ALTHAAR

Indeed, FriendJohn! Althaar is very interested indeed to learn how his dear friend will be saving the day!

JOHN

Yeah, me too. Ok, if Frall's right, then there's still something we can do to get out of this. I just have to figure out what that is.

ALTHAAR

It is unfortunate that the pods of escaping can not be used for getting out in the literal sense. Then the survival would be assured.

JOHN

Right, as if the vent-biters weren't causing enough problems, they're between us and all of the escape pods... the only things we could use to get away from here...

(the thought is coming)

...so... why not let them have the pods! That's it! Come on, Althaar!

JOHN exits the Green Room quickly, yelling to everyone.

JOHN

Everyone! I've got it! I know how fix this!

COMMANDER

Yes, John, Frall told us you'd have a solution. We've just been sitting here waiting for you to come out of the office. So, spill it.

JOHN

They-- What? Oh. Right. Anyway, the wire we need to fix is on the other side of the escape pod bay from where Stella is now, right? But she can't get to it because there's a nest of vent-biters is in the way. So, if we could lure those vent-biters into the escape pods, and then launch them, she'd be able to get to the wire!

COMMANDER

I... guess? Really, Frall? That's the big revelation you had us all sitting around on pins and needles for?

FRALL

Yes.

COMMANDER

Fine. Will it work?

FRALL

In general terms, Mindy, yes. However, you may have noticed that while it is a plausible plan in general terms, there are some specifics missing. All of them, in fact. For example, the means of luring the vent-biters into the escape pods. Yes, John B's plan could work, if implemented properly, but at the current moment its efficacy is only at about 20%.

H.F.

But that means we've already got a one in five chance, right? That's better than nothing.

FRALL

Unfortunately, Mr. Fornes, I wasn't speaking probabilistically. If this plan is to succeed, every single component of it must function as intended. What I meant to convey is that a plan of 100% efficacy will save all of your lives, whereas anything short of that, well...

A sad, thoughtful beat.

DEE

I never thought I'd hear myself saying this, but I really miss brine shrimp.

JOHN

Uh, ok?

DEE

No, see, back on Tammuz Beta, the plowipedes would get all of these parasitic infections, right? But all we had to do when that happened was set up a simple brine shrimp cylinder to draw the things off. Worked on anything carnivorous you could think of, I don't see why a vent-biter would be any different. If we could just get some brine shrimp into those pods...

FRALL

(quietly)

That's 38% right there.

CHIP

Brine shrimp? Those little jeckers? They're all over the damn place! I had to install a whole complicated, *expensive* filter system in here after that inspector came through, just to get the water back up to ICSB potability standards.

JOHN

So there's our bait!

FRALL

And you're up to 46%.

ALTHAAR

But how can the brine shrimp be conveyed into the pods of escape?

SOPON

There are communicators in the escape pods, right? Could we start a feedback loop on, like, a frequency that attracts the brine shrimp?

FRALL

There is such a frequency, but vent-biters find it as repellent as brine shrimp do alluring. We're back down to 32%.

COMMANDER

Television! Frall, you told me about that when those obnoxious little branchiopods got loose in the first place! Sea monkeys love television! Can you re-route that movie that's playing in the Travel Hub to the monitors in the escape pods?

H.F.

Oh, what's playing?

FRALL

Papa's Delicate Condition.

H.F.

With Gleason? That's a pip.

FRALL

Isn't it just? Done. Shrimp are on the way. 59% now.

JOHN

How long will it take them to get there? Will Stella be able to hold out?

FRALL

Definitely not.

JOHN

Shit! We're so close!

XTOPPS

Where'd you say all this was going down?

FRALL

Escape Pod Bay 17.

XTOPPS

Which side? Main entrance or service elevator?

FRALL

Main entrance, beneath the control console.

XTOPPS

Patic. All right, my nubilous zood, tell Stella if she can just yonk the red handle at the right-hand side of that console, she'll open up this, like, abandoned maintenance storage cubby? She can stay tiled in there while the shrimp do their thing.

COMMANDER

Xtopps, why the hell do you know about an abandoned--

XTOPPS

Oh, and uh, just tell her to ignore any, like, jars she might see lying around in there, yeah?

COMMANDER

Never mind. Frall, where are we at?

FRALL

Up to 73%, Mindy. But you're not there yet. Even with the vent-biters in the escape pods enjoying their sea monkey amuse bouche, any attempt by Stella to cross the open floor of the pod bay will attract their attention, and they will then decide that she appears to be the tastier morsel. They would in fact be disappointed by her flavor compared to the brine shrimp, but unfortunately we have no way of convincing them of that.

KWONTZ

(fairly long and detailed unintelligible alien suggestion)

FRALL

A truly interesting if unconventional idea, Sin Kwontz, but the gasworks are shut down and damsons are no longer in season. That would take you down to 37%.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, does she HAVE to make it all the way across the pod bay?

H.F.

She has to fix the wire! That's the whole point!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

But aren't there automated systems that can do that? Is there any way to bring those back online?

H.F.

Oh, for th-- YES. Yes, of course there are! She doesn't have to make it to the other side of the bay, she just has to make it halfway. There's a command terminal there where she can reboot the autorepair! Plus, once she's signed in, she can hit the master control to seal the escape pod doors and trap the vent-biters in there!

FRALL

Very good. Very very good. That would bring you up to 88%, if only...

COMMANDER

If only what?

FRALL

If only the terminal could be operated by anyone other than an authorized maintenance worker with the appropriate access codes.

COMMANDER

H.F., you've got the codes to that terminal, right? There must be some tiny wires in there. Tell me you have the codes!

Beat. The sense of Bad News.

H.F.

There are, Mindy, and I do, but... It's not just the codes. I'd need to scan my W-- I'd need to scan a valid maintenance ID. And any failed access attempt will send that thing into anti-tampering lockdown. The codes won't do her any good without an ID.

FRALL

That is correct.

A beat. They were so close. No solution presents.

MARTIN LUTHER-BOT

If I may, perhaps we should consider throwing ourselves on God's grace--

He is drowned out by various cries of "Shut up," "Roll him back in the corner," etc.

FRALL

If anyone's interested, resorting to prayer would take you back down to 3%.

JOHN

(working it out; it can't be this simple)

Frall...? Does... does that terminal, besides maintenance accounts, does it... does it by any chance have Guest Account access?

FRALL

Indeed it does, John B.

JOHN

Can Stella log in as a guest?

FRALL

Indeed she can. However, this will still require a password. And I must re-iterate that any irregularity in the login process, such as an incorrectly entered password, will shut the entire terminal down until such time as access can be restored by a maintenance supervisor. Which time will of course be never, as they will all shortly be either devoured or vaporized if this situation is not resolved.

JOHN

Tell... tell her to try... *(deep breath)* "One-Two-Three-Four-Five."

A beat. (Really? they are all thinking)

COMMANDER

(disgusted with the stupidity of the last bit, but knowing it could very likely work)

Oh dear Jones... *(collects herself)*

Frall...? Is that it? Is that 100%? Will it work?

FRALL

It's hard to say, Commander. Loath as I am to interfere with the timestream by providing foreknowledge of events that would appear to your scheme of perception as "yet to occur." And of course the mathematics involved are well beyond anything yet contrived by--

During this, FRALL has quietly, but definitely, shimmered in a way that indicates action being taken.

COMMANDER

(at the end of her rope)

Frall. You know damn well that there is only so much omnipotent superiority we simple, benighted four-dimensional types can handle. Please, save it for a time when my life *isn't* hanging by a thread, ok? Just tell us... tell *me*... your *friend*... will it work?

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

FRALL

Oh, of course it will work.

COMMANDER

Then... will... you.. DO IT!?

FRALL

I'm not some *Star Trek* oil-and-water Christmas light effect, Commander. I did it thirty-five minutes ago. The crisis is over.

General confused reaction of a half-cheer combined with "what?"

CHIP

What do you mean thirty-five minutes ago? What kind of sick game were you playing with us if the problem was fixed already?

FRALL

It was no game, Mr. Frinkel. I absolutely couldn't have done it then, if you hadn't solved the problem now. Of course, from my point of view, "now" and "then" are almost completely meaningless, so...

COMMANDER

Chip, let it go. We did our part, Frall did their part, and it's over, right, Frall?

FRALL

More or less, Mindy. Specialist Reyes has successfully activated the terminal and implemented the auto-repair on the damaged wiring, the escape pods have been jettisoned, and on top of that, all of the escape pods have exploded, destroying the considerable fraction of the vent-biter population that was trapped therein.

COMMANDER

Exploded!? Did *you* do that, Frall?

CHIP

Oh, yeah. Of course the blinky-blinky cloud-monster can destroy an entire escape pod *with their mind!* That's not terrifying at all!

FRALL

Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Frinkel. Not to say I couldn't have accomplished such an effect, but the escape pods exploded all on their own once they left the gravitational field of the H.E.C.

H.F.

I been sayin' those things were a buncha deathtraps.

FRALL

Indeed, Mr. Fornes. "Deathtrap" is something of an understatement. You could even consider today's cavalcade of disasters to be oddly fortunate, as sooner or later the escape pods would have simply imploded *in situ*, very likely destroying the Fairgrounds and everyone on it with absolutely no warning at all.

H.F.

Man, those engineers really *were* a bunch of freakin' nulls.

FRALL

Yes. Yes, they were. In light of which, it should not surprise you to learn that, despite the crisis having been resolved, the doors and commlinks have not yet been restored to full functionality. I'm afraid you'll remain trapped here for a short time.

COMMANDER

Oh, for--! How long is a "short time" here, Frall?

FRALL

Oh, very short, even by your standards. Just long enough, I'd say, for everyone to have one drink on the house while Dee and Xtopps play their last song of the evening.

CHIP

Hey, Misto! That's *my* house you're robbing there! This is a business, you know!

COMMANDER

Amazing. Even staring certain doom right in the face doesn't make a dent. Jacob Marley would have a hell of a time with you, Frinkel. How about this? *I'll* buy everyone a round out of the Recreation and Morale discretionary fund. We'll just get the next miniature golf champion a nice plaque or a pair of socks or something. All right? And make mine a double!

FRALL

Please relax and enjoy, everyone. Those doors should unseal themselves and allow you to depart as soon as Dee and Xtopps have finished their last song. Whatever that might possibly be... Toodles!

*FRALL shimmers away through a wall. There is some **audible encouragement** to DEE and XTOPPS to get to a song.*

DEE

(getting on stage and on stage mic, still tipsy, but a pro)

Well, I guess if we have to do a song before we get out of here, I think I'd like to share one of my personal--

DRUNK ALIEN

(yelling from the back)

I wanna hear "Beyond Uranus" wit' a fleezborp sola!

Groans and so forth from the crowd, and a few laughs, silenced by a firm, quiet fury from DEE.

DEE

All right, you know what? We Human musicians, and even some other folks, we get this all the time. Almost every damn show, isn't that right, Xtopps?

XTOPPS

Every gig I've ever worked, Dee!

DEE

And if it ever *was* funny, it sure as hell isn't now! But you driffers keep yelling it. Every time. "Beyond Uranus!" "Beyond Uranus!" "Beyond Uranus with a fleezborp solo!" Every. Damn. Show. And half of you jokers yelling it don't even *have* anuses! You don't even know why it's supposed to be funny! You just know it pisses off Human musicians!

XTOPPS

It pisses off *all* musicians.

DEE

You heard him. Thing is, who really *wants* to hear "Beyond Uranus?" Alllll of it. No one. NO. ONE. You never stop yelling it, but you don't actually want to hear us play it! But you know what? Tonight... tonight you're finally going to get what you've been asking for.

The crowd gets restless and worried. Some mutterings of "no, no."

DRUNK ALIEN

(from the back)

I-- I didn't *mean* it!

DEE

Too late, friend! TOO LATE. You're GETTING IT.

*The crowd is **getting really nervous and restless**. DEE is sounding a bit manic and crazed. She's had more than enough.*

DEE

ALL OF IT. Right now. And if Frall's right, and we all *know* Frall's right, those doors are staying closed until we're done. SO-- *(as crowd noise rises)* I'm not trapped in here with you, you're trapped in here with me! Hey, Xtopps? You know "Beyond Uranus?"

XTOPPS

(wickedly)

You know I do!

DEE

You got your fleezborp ready?

XTOPPS

(with a slight fleezborp flourish)

Always, Dee!

DEE

Then hit it!

XTOPPS hits it, and starts "Beyond Uranus," which is remarkably similar to, and yet legally-distinct from, Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird." The whole damn thing. About 10 goddamn minutes of it. The intro ends...

DEE

(sings)

If I leave Uranus

I won't be leaving you behind

Though solar winds may blow me

To bigger bodies yet to find

But if we were to stay together

You and I, we'd just get sore

Cause somewhere out beyond Uranus

Are more black holes to explore

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh

So many holes yet to explore

All these holes but I need more

You know, I must explore

Now the winds of Uranus

Well you know they blow real sweet

And though the white dwarfs, they may tempt me

I know Uranus has more heat

But you can't keep me tied down, babe

No, you know I've gotta fly

Off the rim of Uranus
And kiss your sweet cheeks goodbye

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
On these winds I gotta fly
I just gotta leave your brown eyes
Uranus can't hold me
No, no, Uranus can't hold me

No, no, won't hold me
Urrrrrrr-ayyyyyyyy-nusssssss!

KILLER FLEEZBORP SOLA!

After several minutes of this sick fleezborp solo, the ANNOUNCER is heard on top of it:

ANNOUNCER

You've been listening to *Life with Althaar*, episode thirteen.
This episode was written by Ian W. Hill for Gemini CollisionWorks
and featured
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
Eli Ganas as Hardyfox Fornes
Christopher Lee as Chip Frinkel
Zuri Washington as Delilah Mallory
Derrick Peterson as Xtopps
with
Olivia Baseman, Ian W. Hill, Philip Cruise, Lex Friedman, and Linus Gelber.

Life with Althaar was created by Berit Johnson and Ian W. Hill
Berit is the supervising producer, showrunner, and script supervisor.
Ian is the audio producer, sound designer, and technical supervisor.
The writers' room consists of Berit, Ian, John, Amanda, Chris, Philip, Lex, and Linus.

This has been an audio production from Gemini CollisionWorks.
This is the end of season one of *Life With Althaar*, but we'll be back on July 17th, 2020 with the first episode of our next season. And keep your sensors activated for the occasional update from us in the meantime.

Until then, let's enjoy the rest of Xtopps's sick fleezborp solo on "Beyond Uranus," and on behalf of all of us at Gemini CollisionWorks, thank you for your attention, and it's been a pleasure working for you this year...

And back, indeed, to Xtopps's sick fleezborp solo on "Beyond Uranus." The song eventually ends to wild applause (and a few shouts of "Encore!" and "Whipping Post!"). The doors to the Egg, as predicted, open dramatically and everyone reacts with various kinds of relief, many rushing frantically to get out. In the midst of this...

JOHN

Finally! Hey, Althaar, let's go home.

ALTHAAR

Althaar will indeed be returning home at this time, FriendJohn, but Althaar believes that you are having business here that is unfinished!

JOHN

Ha! Right, like I'm going to go back to work now!

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, FriendJohn! Althaar does not speak of the work duties!

JOHN

Whatever! This has been probably the worst day I've had since coming to the Fairgrounds, which is a category with some pretty stiff competition, believe you me, and now I am going home, and I'm going to pass out for at least fourteen hours, and *anyone* who wants me to do anything else today can take a running jump up a vent-biter's butt!

STELLA

Hi, John.

JOHN

(with the subtlest quality of relieved tears in his eyes)

Oh. Hey, Stella.

CRISIS ANNOUNCEMENT VOICE

Wow! The unavoidable destruction of the Human Exchange Concourse, which we recorded this to warn you about, has apparently been... avoided. Good for you! Well, these recordings were only supposed to play in the event of an unavoidable station-destroying event, so I'm guessing the files won't have an auto-drive-clearing subroutine exemption. Which means you'll never be hearing me again, no matter how dire the circumstances! So... from all of us on the H.E.C. Design Committee, congratulations and... good luck!

And with a very final electronic switching-off sound, the season is over.