

Life with Althaar

Episode 31: The Xybidont with the Golden Carapace Version 2.3 (Recording Script), 08/18/21—PC/CL (v2, BAJ)

[scene 1] The Electric Egg. XTOPPS finishes a song. A smattering of applause.

CHIP

(on mic)

Let's hear it for the one and only Xtopps, everyone! He'll be back after a short break. And while I am loving the energy in here, management of the Electric Egg must remind you that if you choose to sing along with any of his repertoire, you are doing so at your own risk. Our beloved Baronet has certain privileges, but if Security happens by outside while you're belting out an interdicted lyric, they will not hesitate to give you a plastic hassle once you set foot or other appendage out of sovereign Xybidont territory. Which is just over that purple line, in the doorway there. So let's all stay safe and live to drink another day, yeah? Speaking of which, our current buy-one-get-one special is open to any K'Chillibonts in the house, until 8:00, when we switch over to... the Sistaldians!

ALIEN IN THE AUDIENCE

What about Rubaganthi?

CHIP

Sorry, you're paying full price until... I think Wednesday at 4? You can check our HECNET site for the full rota.

ALIEN IN THE AUDIENCE

Aw, no fair!

CHIP

It's perfectly fair! Every species gets their four hours to enjoy mind-blowing bargains on our wide selection of potent potables and flavorsome foodstuffs, including our new line of indulgently thick and creamy milkshakes! What could be fairer than that?

ALIEN IN THE AUDIENCE

But there aren't even any K'Chillibonts in here right now!

CHIP

Well, that sounds like a them problem.

ALIEN IN THE AUDIENCE

Bogus. I'm out.

CHIP

See you next Wednesday!

TINY BILL

Hey, Xtopps! Killing sounds, did I hear you throw in a little “So What?”

XTOPPS

Glad you scooped it, mang. Just a little poke of the parasol at the new regime. Oh, suspend it a second, you’re Tiny Bill Tremaine, yeah?

TINY BILL

The one and only. Pleasure to finally meet you, zood. Glad to see the old place is still alive and sort-of-kicking.

XTOPPS

Right, you were gigging with Dee back in the day. How’d you swerve the arrival? The Foogs aren’t opening the door for any old Richard these days. Is this a bootleg visit? Because if you need a self-stashery, just hit me up, I got a few secret sockets I could plug you in.

TINY BILL

Oh, no, we’re vertical, mang. Special dispensation from the Committee, we’ve all got our day passes.

XTOPPS

Who’s “we”? Name three.

TINY BILL

Me, Stringus, and Diego. We had a gap in our schedules, so I was looking for a quick side gig, and wouldn’t you know it, what popped up was a booking here on the Fairgrounds for a Fugulnari group-actualization seminar and jazz brunch. Don’t ask me why, but those Foogs love themselves some bari sax.

XTOPPS

Most do.

TINY BILL

So...what’s the angular on our mutual friend? I heard she hit some slippage.

XTOPPS

Yeah, she’s in the greenhouse now. Has been since New Year’s.

TINY BILL

Voider. So, when’s she getting out?

XTOPPS

Your wiggle's as good as mine, they're gonna keep her potted long as they can. Which could be forever and a half if Xtopps can't get interventionary. They threw the book at her, mang. Or whatever a plant throws when it wants to get definitively illustrative.

TINY BILL

Any chance of a visitation?

XTOPPS

Nah, mang, They've got her twice-removed. No one's invitational to get conversational, 'cept me and my clutcher Althaar. And they'd keep us out, too, if they had the pits to cold-shoulder the ICSB.

TINY BILL

Oh, yeah, Dee wrote me about that, before this all went down. You're the grand poobah of some like, Kingdom or like Empire, some schness like that?

XTOPPS

The Baronety of Kandephaa'a, if you want to get circumscriptionary.

TINY BILL

Where's that?

XTOPPS

You're in it, mang. Or at least, its most majestic seat. That's why the Egg is sleeked-out and immune to Foogy intrusion.

TINY BILL

Sweet deal.

XTOPPS

Yeah, but that's no Secret Sand to Dee, you chom?

TINY BILL

That's heavy, mang. Send her my love when you can, yeah?

XTOPPS

Done and done, clutcher.

TINY BILL

So, with Dee in the slam, you're headlining here at the Egg?

XTOPPS

If you can call it that. Houses are thinner than a Xanthoni with the sugars, and the setlists just keep shrinking.

TINY BILL

No Dee will do that to you. That boffer can sing anything.

XTOPPS

Yeah, but it's not just the precipititious Dee-ectomy, it's the no-fly list, the hassle-ation, the culinary clamp-down... The Fairgrounds is pretty pernicious to a tune-slinger these dirty days. So, I've been woodshedding something new. In fact, I was cudding on busting it out this very shift... spoken word.

TINY BILL

For real? That's harder than it looks, you know.

XTOPPS

No skitter. But I extricated something last night that might run salutatory. You wanna harvest it? Might as well drop it in the here and now, long as I got a couple of ears professionnelles standing stately.

TINY BILL

Sure! Lay it on me!

Drums play à la "Lust For Life."

XTOPPS

(on mic)

Chom life. Chom a Baronetcy. Chom an ancient house. Chom a royal seat. Chom the exalted prerogative. Chom an army of sculls to dance attendance, chom hangers-on and kissers-up. Chom little worms that massage your pre-tarsi, chom a twice tiled thorax, chom a clean bill of health and a sparkling set of mandibles. Chom an imperial stable full of armored war snails who harmonize when you whistle. Chom the best songbird you ever knew vegetating in a crylion cage...
That ain't right. C'mon, mang!
Chom the Plant Way, chom potato bans...

XTOPPS continues as focus shifts to the bar.

EWAN MCGREGOR-BOT

Oi!...Oi! You see what he's doin', don't you! He's fuckin' rippin' me off! That's my bloody bit!

CHIP

Slow your roll, McGregor-Bot, that hasn't been anyone's bit for five hundred years.

TINY BILL

(in the distance)

Go on, Xtopps, preach it!

EWAN MCGREGOR-BOT

He's got it all wrong, though! I don't hate the Foogs, they're just stroffers. But you Humans were bloody colonised by stroffers! It's fuckin' embarassin'!

CHIP

Hey, watch it!

EWAN MCGREGOR-BOT

What? It's true, innit?

CHIP

Yeah, but *I* get to say it, *you* don't.

EWAN MCGREGOR-BOT

Aww, piss off Chip. You're a stroffer too!

CHIP

Right, that's it! You're cut off. Sophon? That was McGregor-Bot's last Electric Koolaid!

EWAN MCGREGOR-BOT

Aw, bollocks.

Focus moves back to the stage.

XTOPPS

(continuing)

Chom pheromone headbands, chom the stock-still dance, chom the unblinking eye, chom friendship committees without friends and step counters that counter stepping. Chom your future. Chom life... But why would I wanna do a thing like that? I will not chom life. I will chom something altogether else! And the reasons? There are no reasons, clutcher! Who needs reasons when you've got peanut butter?!

[scene 2] Opening credits music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...!

LIFE! WITH! ALTHAAR! Season Three!

Episode 31... "The Xybidont with the Golden Carapace"

[scene 3] An announcement from MRS. FRONDRINAX blares through corridors over the Fairgrounds PA system.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Good morning, citizens of the Fairgrounds! I hope all of you are having a productive and efficient first cycle! And if not, well, I have a very special guest with me today who I'm sure will inspire you to new heights of efficiency, as you all plow your own individual furrows toward the glorious unity of the Plant Way. Some a little slower than others, it's true, but I can promise you that you'll all get there eventually. But first! This cycle's announcements!

Mulchfest 2523 is almost upon us, and it's looking to be quite the lineup! But you can make it even more exciting, because we still have room for a few more entries in the mulch tasting event! So, if you've got a recipe you think will knock the judges' calyces off, just see Ashlee in Gimel 8 Hydroponics to drop off your samples! And we also have quite a few slots left for mulch-related performances during the festivities! Any interested performers can sign up online at MulchMe2523-dot-hec, although I would caution you all to read the rules and restrictions *carefully* before entering. We're looking for wholesome, vegetal, *quality* entertainment here, folks. Tasteful and efficient! No singing, dancing, or, Vim help me, *acrobatics* will be permitted.

And an additional announcement for those of you who may not have bothered to read your alerts: An unfortunate spike in usage has required us to implement water rationing in sectors He through Chet. For the time being, all non-Hydroponics functions will be limited to one decileter per cycle. So plan accordingly! I realize this may cause you some inconvenience, but we've all got to look out for each others' roots in this great big forest we call life, don't we? We're not certain what exactly the cause of this shortage might be, but we will keep you informed as the situation develops.

ROOTY

(off mic)

You said it was all the new seedlings chugging like fratboys!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(shut up, Rooty)

AND THAT'S ALL FOR ANNOUNCEMENTS!

And now, on to my very special guest. Oh, I'm just so excited to have him here, my pistil is about to pop! His Human counterpart was the author of 34 books and countless academic papers, and was perhaps the most famous advocate for "changing the wiring" of your Human brains back in your 20th century. And my guest has taken it upon himself to continue this ground-breaking work right here on the Fairgrounds! Gentlebeings, may I present the one and only Timothy Leary-Bot! It's such a pleasure to have you here!

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Thanks for having me, Mrs F.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Now, your predecessor's *Change Your Brain* was published over 500 years ago—Earth years that is—but it is just as relevant today as it was then! And it's such a rare thing to see a Human who appreciates just how much their brains need changing, isn't it? Such a breath of fresh air.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Well, of course I don't personally breathe, but I can grok what you're laying down.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Grok away! So, how would you advise our Human listeners to do just that? Change their brains?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Do some drugs, Humans!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Ah. Would you care to... elaborate on that, Mr. Leary-Bot?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

The universe is just one big intelligence test. Most of us are failing badly.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Why do you say that?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Well, most meat-based species make all their decisions based on emotions. And emotions are the lowest form of consciousness. Emotional actions are the most contracted, narrowing, dangerous form of behavior.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Of course! Are you paying attention, listeners? It's much more efficient just to sit still and let your chemistry do its thing!

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Well, I don't know about that, heh. You sound a little like a neurologist. And that's a good way to never fall in love.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

But wasn't your book, *Musings on Human Metamorphosis*, an attempt to prepare Humanity for adapting to all the intergalactic species they were eventually to encounter?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Well, that wasn't my book, that was the squishy guy's. But there's some good stuff in there. Did you read it?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I, uh... I only had time to skim it, to be perfectly honest. I'm so awfully busy with the work of the Committee, I hardly have a moment to myself these days! But I know your predecessor's love of plant medicines was legendary. Do you share his appreciation of the Plant Way?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Oh, absolutely! I honestly feel like plants are the first form of technology the Universe gave to us. It's through entheogenic ceremonies that Humans first got a taste of the real nature of creation.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

That is... interesting, I suppose? But not really where I was going with that.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Hey, we can talk about anything you want, as long as the payment clears.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ah hah hah hah! Very droll. But if I could just redirect the conversation a bit, Mr. Leary-Bot: the Human version of you was known for being able to stay in one room for days on end, isn't that right? Just sitting on a pillow? Not indulging in any sort of superfluous activity?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Ah, see, we were on topic the whole time! You might think it's just a cosmic coincidence, but I assure you it's not. It's through entheogens that he experienced Samadhi, which really opened up his conscious self to the dimensional bending abilities of meditation. To outsiders it might have looked like he was just sitting on a pillow, but he was scaling the 11th dimension.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

11th dimension? I thought we had all agreed that six was where it maxed out?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Oh, no. Meat-Leary only made it to 11, but I've been as far as 23, with the help of randomized resistance modulators. And I imagine they just keep going.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I see. And is it possible for anyone to visit these... "Dimensions?"

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Oh, sure. But dimensions aren't physical locations, they're levels of consciousness. They all vibrate at a certain frequency. So when we vibrate at a higher rate, we move up, and in each higher dimension, there exists a clearer perception of reality. We understand more, we're free-er, we're more powerful, and manifestations become easier than pouring yourself a glass of water. If you're into liquids.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I see. Well that sounds... very plausible. And not at all like the ramblings of a robot in severe need of a core processor refurbishing.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Listen, Frondrinax, I know what you're thinking—your aura just went all Thulian there, and I think we all know what that means. But I'd like to invite you and all your Human listeners on the Fairgrounds to come check out Passageways Sausalito Zeta. Everyone's welcome, long as they want to get back in touch with their Source Energy. Once you plug back in, it's like being reborn—

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, this has been lovely, Mr. Leary-Bot, but I think we've taken enough of my listeners' time for today, don't you? Thank you so much for sharing your... provocative insights with us. But I would like to caution my Human listeners against engaging in any kind of pharmaceutical experimentation on the advice of a robot, who obviously has no personal experience of the practice to rely on, ha ha!

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Actually, it's easier than ever for me to fly out to the spirit world in this form. I just flip my "EGO Status" switch to an off setting—for all my robot friends out there, it needs to be all the way off, now, just setting it to passive won't do the job—and once that's done, I am right there linking my energy to everything in the history of everything. Is-ing really is underrated.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

...I'm more into photosynthesis myself.

[scene 4] Interstitial music. FRALL and TORIANNA in the latter's office.

TORIANNA

(exasperated)

Frall?

FRALL

Yes, Commander?

TORIANNA

Can I tell you something in confidence?

FRALL's cone-of-silence effect activates.

FRALL

You can now, sir. But I am uncertain as to why you would wish to do so. I am unaware of any events on your personal timeline in the recent past that would compel such secrecy. Or, indeed, in the near future.

TORIANNA

No, it's nothing like that, I just wanted a little soundproofing so I could have a proper rant. Nothing takes the wind out of your sails like knowing your entire Bridge crew can hear you throwing a big whiny cry-baby tantrum.

FRALL

Understood, sir. Our privacy has been ensured, you may stamp your little feet at your leisure.

TORIANNA

Thank you. *(beat)* Rrrrrrrraarrghhhh! I cannot believe, after years of trying to get the Fairgrounds under control— No, scratch that, I never had the slightest hope of keeping this fershlugginer place under control, after years of scrambling from one disaster to another, just barely hanging on by my fingernails, these stupid... *houseplants* take over, and now our Adverse Incident rate is down 83 percent! Have you looked around the station lately? I can barely recognize it, what with everything just... working like it's supposed to! Like it never did for me!

FRALL

I would try not to take it personally, Mindy. The Fugulnari do derive several advantages from the use of methods to which you would not stoop.

TORIANNA

You *think?! (sigh)* Sorry, Frall, I shouldn't take it out on you. Of course you're right. As usual. Of course putting all the Humans into lockdown and kicking most of the aliens out would have made my job easier. Fewer moving pieces equals fewer potential problems. And of course I would never have dreamed of doing such a thing. But, oh, did I dream of mornings like this! This cycle has been absolutely, utterly, distressingly... mellow, Frall. As far as I can tell, barely a single thing has gone wrong yet today. No catastrophic equipment failures, nary an outburst of sudden sectarian violence, barely even the tiniest explosion! We're just standing around on the bridge watching our step-counters not go up. And we're proud of ourselves, for Hazel's sake!

FRALL

There is something to be said for the comfort of knowing things could be worse.

TORIANNA

I suppose... And it's not like I exactly miss having one crisis after another flying at my head at high speeds. But on the other hand, we're not *not* in a crisis right now, it's just a... slow-motion crisis. Which is not the kind that I honed my instincts on. Maybe they're just having a rough time recalibrating. It's just... you know that feeling you get, when you book an outer-planet cruise, and you've been looking forward to it for forever, and then finally you get on board, and it takes you all of half an hour to realize that a couple weeks doing nothing but lying poolside chugging chartreuse tropical drinks sounds amazing right up to the point where you actually try it? And you get that cold sinking feeling that you've just locked yourself in an airtight metal pod with a bunch of humanoid bacteriophages, and no amount of sugar booze is going to let you ignore that. Have you ever had an experience like that, Frall?

FRALL

I have not. But if you'll give me a moment... *(a mid-length shimmer)* Mmmgh. Very unsettling indeed. You are to be congratulated on the precision of that particular scenario, Mindy.

TORIANNA

Thanks. I just wish I had something more productive to do right now than sit around constructing elaborate metaphors.

FRALL

Would it perhaps improve your state of mind to learn that the Fairgrounds is in fact a hotbed of largely unobserved activity at this particular moment? Activity to which the Fugulnari remain, for the most part, utterly oblivious?

TORIANNA

What? You've been holding out on me? Of course I want to know what's going on on my station! Especially if it's something the Foogs don't know about. Spill it!

FRALL

I should clarify, sir, that several of the current activities would more properly be classified as petty disobedience, rather than serious attempts at resistance. Which is why I had thus far neglected to mention them.

TORIANNA

Ah. Well, let's hear them anyway. "Petty" is a pretty good match with my mood right now.

FRALL

As you say, sir. Well, first of all, Chip Frinkel has figured out a way to sneak potatoes back onto his menu without inviting Fugulnari retaliation.

TORIANNA

Really? I thought no one had seen a potato on the Fairgrounds for months. That's pretty impressive.

FRALL

Oh, the Fugulnari never managed to cut off the supply completely—quite a few residents have their own home-gardening setups, for one thing, and for another, the Committee has had little more luck than we did in stamping out the more pernicious of the smuggling rings operating out of the shadier sectors.

TORIANNA

I see. So, are mama's potato skins back, or what?

FRALL

Unfortunately, sir, such an overt flouting of Fugulnari nutrition restrictions would not pass muster. Mr. Frinkel has instead concocted a surprisingly subtle, for him, method of tuber delivery.

TORIANNA

...Which is?

FRALL

Milkshakes, Mindy. And they're delicious.

TORIANNA

Huh. I don't know. Without fries to dip in them, I don't really see the point.

FRALL

Oh, and in other acts of gustatory rebellion—

TORIANNA

There's more? I had no idea that foodstuffs could play such a major role in civil disobedience.

FRALL

An army moves on its stomach, as one of your people once said.

TORIANNA

True. But I have no idea what the Foogs move on.

FRALL

Quite.

TORIANNA

No, I was actually being literal there. I've never figured out how they actually get around. Do you know?

FRALL

Of course, sir. (*not going there*) Anyway, as I was saying, there have been some interesting changes to the menu at Sammy's Wiches.

TORIANNA

(*actually concerned*)

They've still got the Whiz, right? Nothing's happened to Chee?

FRALL

Oh no, Commander. Chee continues to disgorge his much-loved excrescences at his customary rapid pace. These changes are confined to the menu itself. Specifically, the names of the foodstuffs thereon. Sammy, in keeping with ancient Earth tradition, has named many of his popular subs after galactic or local celebrities.

TORIANNA

Oh, right. I was glad he finally cycled out the "Spicy Torianna," I was never sure how to take that.

FRALL

You may have been pleased to see the last of that one, but its disappearance severely disappointed Sammy's Pliziod clientele. The braised Blorch po'boy marinated in vinegar and French Roast on an Amoroso roll had great appeal to the enormous, yet surprisingly discerning, Pliziod palate.

TORIANNA

Ugh.

FRALL

"Ugh," indeed, sir. Which brings me to Sammy's latest act of quiet rebellion: he has lately introduced a number of grinders named after noteworthy Fugulnari—the Frondrinax French Dip, the Oakensarx Open-face, the Pondilux Panini, and so forth.

TORIANNA

What's so rebellious about that? Getting a sandwich named after you is supposed to be an honor. Not the most impressive of honors, but still.

FRALL

The Fugulnari certainly see it that way. And yet, anyone who actually reads the listed ingredients cannot fail to notice that the hoagies in question are uniformly designed to be thoroughly unappealing to every species in the known galaxy. Nothing inedible, mind you. Just viscerally disgusting to any possible individual who might wander by in search of a classic wedge.

TORIANNA

Ha! Nice. That's the kind of petty I can get behind. It's just too bad the Foogs will never notice. I'd like to see them squirming for once.

FRALL

Then you may be pleased to learn, sir, that while no Fugulnari has tasted one of the spuckies in question, a few Boosters have tried to curry favor with their overlords by ordering one of these horrifying torpedoes in their honor. Their subsequent attempts to choke the thing down have provided great amusement to the rest of Sammy's clientele.

TORIANNA

Oh, I bet.

FRALL

So, petty while this rebellion may be, it does act as a relatively safe form of public, anti-Fugulnari bonding exercise.

TORIANNA

And that's not nothing. Remind me to drop in for a Chee's Combo Special sometime soon. All right, enough that's enough pettiness for now. What about the actual Resistance? How's the headband-forgery project going?

FRALL

It continues apace, sir. There may well be good news on that front later this afternoon. But I don't believe I should say more at this point.

TORIANNA

All right, I can wait. Is there anything else you *can* tell me?

FRALL

There is indeed, sir. The Resistance has seen splendid success recently in their partnership with a collective of conceptual landscape architects who had previously taken up residence in the In-Betweens. In fact, they've made some very exciting strides in the arena of weaponized mistletoe.

TORIANNA

Weaponized missile what?

FRALL

Mistletoe, sir.

TORIANNA

Mistletoe.

FRALL

Yes.

TORIANNA

Sort of... spriggy plants with little white berries? People hang them up at Christmas to trick other people into uncomfortable doorway smooching? That kind of mistletoe?

FRALL

Just so, sir. But more to the point, the kind of mistletoe that evolved as an obligate hemiparasite back on Earth.

TORIANNA

What's that?

FRALL

A parasitic plant, sir. They suck nutrients out of their vegetal hosts. Normally, of course, this is a very gradual process, and generally survivable for the host organism. But the Vegetal Art Ensemble have been consulting with several highly skilled members of the Pudendari commando squad that stayed behind to advise the Resistance. They're working on cultivating a fast-acting breed.

TORIANNA

Huh. So they're making... weapons? out of the stuff? I don't see the point. Couldn't a good old-fashioned flamethrower do just as much damage, without going to all the trouble of genetically engineering it first?

FRALL

Agreed, Commander, that would most likely prove impractical. But the current project is focused more on site-specific applications.

TORIANNA

Such as...?

FRALL

Traps, sir. The Resistance is well aware of the many vulnerabilities of their position in the In-Betweens, and has for some time been seeking a means of defense against incursion by Fugulnari forces. If the prototype they've installed behind the access panel at the back of Sanitation closet 37-epsilon-beta works out, they should have a form of passive defense they can install at all major entry points. One which will ignore all forms of non-plant life, but sink its haustoria with blinding speed into any intruding Fugulnari, draining said intruder of its vital nutrients with ruthless efficiency.

TORIANNA

That is brilliant. And diabolical. I'd almost feel sorry for the Foogs, if it weren't for, you know, every single thing about them. Those Pudendari don't mess around.

FRALL

Indeed they do not. And trap-building is by no means the full extent of their activities. There is now a sizable contingent of Resistance members being trained in the Pudendari discipline of Yoyalabam—a form of unarmed combat invented by the celebrated Doamnalupta, in the time of their ill-fated struggle against the Apokeesti invasion.

TORIANNA

Hm. Well, Stella knows her stuff, but I think flamethrowers are probably going to be a lot more useful than punch-throwers when it gets down to it. On the other hand, improved physical fitness is never a bad thing if you're preparing for a fight, and if I can't get any of Caridada's "aid shipments" to the Resistance in time, I suppose punching is better than nothing at all. Except, most of the Fugulnari security forces are literal trees, Frall. I don't care how much training you have, punching a tree trunk isn't going to get you anything but some busted knuckles. If you're lucky.

FRALL

Indeed, sir. Which is why the First Principle in Yoyalabam is "Never strike the trunk of the noble tomatongo with closed fist."

TORIANNA

Oh. Ok. What are the others?

FRALL

There are Three Hundred and Fifty Three Principles in total, sir. While it has been a slow day, I think I can be justified in assuming it has not been slow enough that you would enjoy hearing me enumerate them all.

TORIANNA

Good call.

FRALL

But to summarize, the art of Yoyalabam is focused upon finding the weaknesses of the opponent, in order to strike most effectively. And it is uniquely suited to combat with the Fugulnari, honed as it was in the hallowed groves of Misofegga. Every tree, be they Fugulnari or sweetly-flowering tomango, engages in some movement, and of course the Fugulnari more so when they are actively engaged in combat. In the extension of their limbs, structural weaknesses are exposed, which can be used to great advantage by a canny opponent. With precision and timing, a strike can cause great damage.

TORIANNA

Huh. Well, more power to them, then. I'm still holding out for my flamethrower. So, is that it? I'm up to date on everything that's happening on the Fairgrounds?

FRALL

Oh, no, sir. Not in the slightest. But as you have chided me in the past for informing you of the activities of various sub-atomic particles, regardless of any intriguing qualities said particles may possess, I chose to omit those from my summation of current events.

TORIANNA

Thank you, Frall. And thank you for telling me about all that, even the petty parts. I am feeling a lot more optimistic now. *(a beat, then, into comms:)* Amber?

AMBER

(over comms)

Yes, sir?

TORIANNA

In lieu of a coffee run, I think I'd like to order milkshakes for the Bridge crew today.

AMBER

(comms)

Really?

TORIANNA

Yes, I think we all could use a morale-booster. Dairy-based treats for everyone, on me!

BRIDGE CREW

(comms)

Yeaaaahhh! Woohooo! Delicious!

STALIN-BOT

(comms)

Nyet for me! Stalin-Bot is liquid-intolerant!

[scene 5] Interstitial Music. A Pudendar, VOUSSH, disguised as a Fugulnari, is moving through an otherwise-deserted corridor—so at first, all we hear is a Foog-like rustling. Then, a BLEEP as she turns on a radio.

VOUSSH

Hello? Resident One?

H.F.

(over radio, for whole scene)

Here. That you, Mustelid Three?

VOUSSH

It is Voussh, yes.

H.F.

Copy. And Fearless Leader's here, too.

STELLA

(also over radio for whole scene)

Don't call me that. We read you loud and clear, Voussh. Where are you?

VOUSSH

In the corridor, making my way back from Foog laboratory. Estimated time of return, four minutes.

STELLA

What is it you need, Voussh?

VOUSSH

Nothing! The mission was a complete success!

H.F.

So you made it? You actually got into the pheromone printing lab?

VOUSSH

Voussh not only accessed the laboratory of the infamous Fugulnari, but is also bringing back a datastick of files from their pheromone printers, and two dozen unassigned Booster headbands!

STELLA

Amazing! I can't believe that disguise actually worked. I had my doubts about trying to pass you off as a Foog, but Udo and his bunch really do quality work.

H.F.

Mwangi's gonna be real happy, Stel. She's been wanting blank headbands to test for a while now.

VOUSSH

Yes! So Voussh wanted to share the good news!

STELLA

It *is* good news, but you could have waited to tell us until you were back in the In-Betweens. The last thing we need is you drawing attention to yourself.

VOUSSH

Voussh knows what she is doing! None can compare to the stealth of the Pudendari, honed against the prying eyes of the treacherous Apokeesti!

STELLA

Yes, I know how skilled your people are, Voussh, but I'd really prefer it if you erred on the side of caution, ok? Just get back here as fast as you can. I'll meet you at the storage closet. (*leaves*)

H.F.

You really got in and out without being noticed? None of the Foogs twigged—uh, so to speak—that you weren't one of them?

VOUSSH

No. Voussh's skills in physical deception were more than adequate to the task of compensating for this hastily-constructed disguise. It was a thing of great simplicity! Well, not *so* great. Imitating the plant ambulation is a task most formidable! But between that and the poor vision of the Fugulnari, I was assured of success!

MISS SOPHIE

(*also over radio, loud*)

Ruff! Yip yip! Ruff!

VOUSSH

Is that Voussh's little friend, the adorable Miss Sophie?

H.F.

Yes, it is, and you're getting her all excited. Calm down, Miss Sophie!

VOUSSH

Tell the strange but pleasant creature that her friend Voussh will be returning shortly.

MISS SOPHIE's barking fades away over the radio as she runs off.

H.F.

Well, you'll be seeing her even sooner, Voussh, 'cause I think that little troublemaker is on her way to meet up with you. She'll probably get there before Stella does. So make sure she doesn't get out, would'ya? She should know better, but when she's this het up—

VOUSSH

Do not worry, Resident One, I'll bring that darling little companion back to— Hold on, someone's coming. Voussh over and out.

VERT

(coming down the corridor, muttering)

I'm sure I heard a dog down here! It actually sounded like... But... that *couldn't* be...

(sees VOUSSH in Foog disguise)

Oh! Hey there, tall, green, and gruesome. By any chance, you seen a dog come this way? Coulda sworn I heard—

VOUSSH

(shaking branches, in character)

No, foolish little non-plant creature! No Fugulnari would permit such a horrible being in their presence!

VERT

Yeah, yeah, enough with the flailing, beanpole. I was probably just— Hey! As long as you're here? I want to file a complaint! About these step-counters! It's blatant discrimination!

VOUSSH

That's not my department! Please, begone! I have important plant business to be about.

VERT

Department or not, flytrap, I got something to say about it! (*VOUSSH sighs*) You built these stupid things for Humans! But then you made the rest of us start wearing them, and you didn't bother to recalibrate for different strides! I can barely get across one sector per cycle! How do you expect me to get to work?

VOUSSH

I have no time for this, get out of my way, bizarre little being—

VERT

Don't you turn your back on me! If that is your back. I'm not done with you!

FOOG GUARD 1

(coming up the corridor with another GUARD)

Greetings, comrade!

FOOG GUARD 2

Is there a problem here? Why are you allowing this perambulator to make his mouth-noises at you?

VOUSSH

Uh, yes! How do you do, fellow plants? Could you perhaps assist me by dealing with this bothersome, loud, and tiny citizen? I have some important data to transport to the Committee, and he won't leave me be.

VERT

Who you calling "citizen," knotweed?

FOOG GUARD 2

Of course, friend... Say, I don't think I've seen you around here before.

VOUSSH

No, I'm usually running errands—important errands—for the Committee, and they rarely take me into this distant sector.

FOOG GUARD 1

Funny accent you got there, too.

VERT

You all normally sound alike to me, but I gotta say I did think this one sounded weird.

FOOG GUARD 2

Quiet, meat-sack! We're talking to our colleague, here. Now, listen, friend, we just want to— Why are you carrying all those Booster headbands?

VOUSSH

As I said, the Committee needs me to—

FOOG GUARD 1

The Committee has never dirtied their leaves with the administration of Booster equipment. That's all taken care of by the Recruitment Centers!

VOUSSH

Well, yes, but as I was saying—

FOOG GUARD 2

And why are your own pheromones so weak? You're barely recognizable at all. Very strange.

VERT

Yeah, Mr. Hogweed! You're strange!

FOOG GUARD 1

Quiet, puny annoyance!

VOUSSH

Okay. Wait a moment. Yes, you have got me. I am a special agent of the Committee on a top secret mission. That's why you don't know anything about it, and why I've applied pheromone dampers. But if you come with me down this very hall, all the way to the end, there's something behind the door down there that will explain everything.

FOOG GUARD 1

What? The one that says Sanitation Closet 37-epsilon-beta?

VOUSSH

Yes, I can assure you that behind that door is something that will lay all your questions to rest. But I must warn you: once you see it, you'll be on a whole new level of security. Think you can handle it? You won't spill the, uh, fertilizer? You could get me in dry soil, you know.

FOOG GUARD 2

Oh, no! You let us in on this, we won't tell anyone else!

FOOG GUARD 1

Absolutely!

VOUSSH

Right this way, then.

VERT

I'm coming, too! Don't think I'm done complaining at you, buckthorns!

[scene 6] Transition to DEE's cell, where XTOPPS is visiting.

XTOPPS

So, yeah, the Tiny man asked me to send his most baritonal regards. And I'm sure that goes for Charles and Diego, too. So, that's the low-down from the get-down. What's the Xanthoni from the plasteel calaboose?

DEE

What do you think? My situation is static, mang. Wake up, wash up, choke down some nutrient paste, then I buckle down for a full day of sitting and staring. Talking to the wall, when I feel the urge. And hey, if I want a change of pace, there's always pacing!

XTOPPS

Sounds like nothing but a big ol' pile a clams, Delilah. Sorry. You know you got me holdin' down the sugar in your corner, sweets, but I wish I could pile it higher. Would be swingin' on the flippity-flop with you more often, but Mr. Green Jeans has severely limited trips down to Partchman.

DEE

No, it's ok, it's not your fault. I know you'd be here more if you could.

XTOPPS

If I could, *you'd* be here *less*, but maybe that's not a tune to lay down while there might be tape rolling, right? The walls have ears, you chom?

DEE

That they do.

XTOPPS

Yeah. But even if they're cutting wax on this right now, I got one track to lay on you. Streez, I'll even put it on long-play. Xtopps has come to believe that no matter how long you been relaxing on your scene, there's a time and a place to get uptight, and the time is high and the place is beneath us.

DEE

You're going to— Really? If I caught that right, that's a... major lifestyle change you're talking there, Xtopps. I mean, I was thinking you might want to cut down, sure, but... Cold turkey?

XTOPPS

Colder than Miles, palomino. The Fairgrounds needs a major key change, mang, and Xtopps can't do it alone. But there's no way I can be the Godfather if I'm still on the goeey. I need some seriously famous Flames behind me, like my whole sly Family, and that means, no stones.

DEE

Wow. That's... wow. Look, Xtopps, you know I've got your back no matter what, but... are you sure you want to do this? Absolutely sure?

XTOPPS

Sure, I'm sure. No sombrero, clutcher.

DEE

Okay, but no. Seriously. I did some reading up on PB withdrawal a while back, ok? I got curious after your cousin showed up and tried to flatten you out. And... I know you've got balloon lungs, but the air is real thin where you're planning to go, Xtopps. I mean, it's... bad. Really, really bad. Have you ever tried kicking before?

XTOPPS

Negatory, but I have never had a most pertinacious and immediatoid rationale for as such. Namely, being, ee-gee-aye-ee, stoppin' these green meanies from shipping you off-station to Maggie's Farm.

DEE

Uh uh. No. Xtopps, if you're going to do this, you can't do it for me. You have to do it for you. Otherwise it'll never take. Seriously, the average PBJ relapse rate looks like the chemtrail of a cockathreec with an RP1-liquid oxygen booster. There's only one way for this to work. You're going to have to really, really want it.

XTOPPS

I believe that I did most say that I did, did I not or didn't I?

DEE

Yeah, but are you still going to want it six to eight hours after your last dose, when the intense muscle cramps start to set in? Every one of your limbs will feel like they're on fire, Xtopps, all 28 of them. And that's just for starters. The next six hours after that? The pain isn't going to go anywhere, but some of its friends will start showing up: acute anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, and uncontrollable shaking. Oh, not to mention our good pal explosive diarrhea. A few more hours after that, the party will be in full swing, and not the Benny Goodman kind. Abdominal cramping, sweating, shivers, nausea, vomiting, and intense hallucinations, all of which can last for days. And even if you make it through all that without knuckling under, there's still the potential long-term after-effects: anxiety, depression, fatigue, insomnia and irritability. You could be fighting those every day for years. Knowing the whole time that you could make it all go away with just one little dollop of salty goodness.

XTOPPS

Streez, Dee! When you wanna make a point you sure as schness know how to puncture a zood's zeppelin!

DEE

I'm not saying don't do it. I'm just saying you have to want it.

XTOPPS

I want it, Dee.

DEE

Okay. Then... good luck. I wish I could be there to help, but, you know. I'll be with you in spirit, though. Just try to remember that, ok? When it starts to get ugly.

XTOPPS

I can hold that, Dee, and I'll be holdin' it close. That's all I'll need when the screaming meemies come blowing their horns.

DEE

Thanks, Xtopps. But, uh, on a practical level? You're going to want some support of the non-moral variety. Ideally someone with a level head, steady hands, and a very strong stomach.

[scene 7] Interstitial music takes us inside the "storage closet" that conceals a secret entrance to the In-Betweens. Door opens, VOUSSH, VERT, and the two FOOG GUARDS enter, and the door closes behind them.

FOOG GUARD 1

What is this place?

VERT

Pretty cramped, even for me.

FOOG GUARD 2

Looks like an ordinary storage closet.

VOUSSH

Yes, very observant, this *is* just a storage closet. But behind it? A secret Committee Command Center! Right... through... here!

Improvised sliding panel opens and closes as they enter the In-Betweens. It is a bit dank, and if somehow possible, sounds like plantlife as well.

FOOG GUARD 2

I didn't know we had an ivy nursery on the Fairgrounds!

VERT

Ooooh, it all looks so festive!

FOOG GUARD 1

Gotta say, that Committee sure knows how to treat themselves to some nice surroundings.

MISS SOPHIE

(running up from a corridor)

Yip! Yip!

VERT

Wait a second—

FOOG GUARD 1

Hey! What's a Fidorian doing in a secret Fugulnari command center?

VOUSSH

Um—

MISS SOPHIE

(seeing a bunch of Foogs; not happy) Grrrrr! Ruff! Ruff!

FOOG GUARD 2

Do Fidorians make sounds like that?

VERT

That's no Fidorian! That's Miss Sophie! What are you doing with my dog friend, you big green bullies?

FOOG GUARD 1

A dog! An Earth dog?

VOUSSH

Well, yes you see, we've been working to—

FOOG GUARD 2

What's wrong with you? Get that dog out of here before it lifts its leg all over this noble ivy!

FOOG GUARD 1

Hang on, I don't think this is ivy, it's some other eudicot. Maybe a... santalum...? Oh, frost me!
RUN!

Sounds of a struggle, muted cries from the FOOGS, and then two sets of five distinct thumps followed by the sound of an explosion of treebark.

VERT

(spitting out wood chips)

AHHH! WHAT THE CRAP? What is going on?! I'm covered in splinters!

A very loud/large zipper as VOUSSH steps out of her Foog disguise.

VERT

Augh! And now that Foog just vomited up a lady! No, no, no! You're eating people whole now? You ghouls!

VOUSSH

Calm down! No one is eaten! It is only I, Special Agent Voussh! Master of disguise!

MISS SOPHIE

Yip! Yip!

VERT

No! No! None of this makes any sense! Secret closets? Ralping Foogs? Exploding mistletoe? This is all wrong! Miss Sophie! Get away from that crazy-talking pile of Foog vomit! Come here, girl!

VOUSSH

No, I will explain!

VERT

Stay away from me, you inexplicable animated upchuck! Come on, Miss Sophie! Let's get you somewhere safe before this puke-pile turns us into splinters, too!

VERT scrambles away through the In-Betweens, carrying a madly yipping MISS SOPHIE, chased by an audibly angry VOUSSH.

[scene 8] Interstitial music. Drums under as XTOPPS gets his act together.

XTOPPS

Ok, Your Radiance, let's run the list. What is required for passage back to the Jonathan Richman zone?

One crib, from which you will not effoe.

Calming, vibey, foobed-out sounds on random circularity— Dan Hicks... Michael Nesmith... the Bastard Mojave acoustic sessions... should do it.

Wind up Mickey Mouse alarm clock, one.

Molasses from the disused reservoir on Kaf 12, three jars of.

Pret-a-manger Mebsutan Lava soup, six tins of.

Gelato, aw mang, (*disappointed*) Cherry, one large cask of.

Magnesia, milk of, one bottle.

Acetaminophen, the Classic Coke of Painkillers.

Strong mint-flavored halitosis rinse.

Twelve bottles of H₂O for fluid maintenance.

Three amphorae Coconut Oil—just because, baby.

Memory disks of my first Fyrexian luau.

One floppy, bouncy and absotively poofy duvet.

One bucket for goop, one bucket for soup, one bucket for poop.

And the entire third season of *House, MD*.

The drums progressively slow.

(cont.)

One crib, from which you will not effoe. So...yeah.

The drums stop.

Ok, Xtopps... You can do it. Just have to want it. Feet on the air, head on the ground. Try this trick and spin it. Yeah...

But y'know what I'm missing right now, is my special cerulean satchel. Sky-blue buddy, where has you gone? Xtopps wears that to every major gig. And this here might just be the greatest in the history of great gigosities in the sky... Ah! Here we go. *(slips on sash)* Yeah... Totally patric... Ready to bouge. *(beat)* Oh, what's this? A tiny little vial ensconced in this silky ceruleanity? Hey, would ya look at that. Looks like... *(uncorks it, takes a big whiff)* Ahhhhhhhh! Pure, uncut peanut oil! Now, how do you suppose I might have slipped that piece of temptation off of the front of the back of my mind? Well, waste not, want not. Operation Coyote Keys has been... ahhhh, postponed, my upright tadpoles.

[scene 9] Interstitial music. JOHN and ALTHAAR's apartment. The TV is on.

TV ANNOUNCER

We'll be back with more Dave and Zwizz'linarp after this brief message.

"Dave and Zwizz'linarp" sting. Then harps and new age sounds.

PASSAGEWAYS VOICEOVER

Are you suffering from the ravages of substance abuse? Have you tried all the popular 14-step programs, to no avail? Well, if that's the case, Passageways Sausalito Zeta may just be the place for you. Here at PSZ we are proud to announce a 100% recovery rate from all addictions, fixations, and intractable hang-ups.

JOHN

Pfft, right.

ALTHAAR

Why is FriendJohn making the noise of sarcasm, please?

JOHN

C'mon, Passageways Sausalito Zeta? It's a scam. They're just taking rich addicts for a ride. There's no way they've actually got a 100% success rate.

ALTHAAR

Yes, that would seem to make violation of Bisplum's Law of Inevitable Imperfection.

PASSAGEWAYS VOICEOVER

When Dr. Timothy Leary-Bot joined our research and development team just one year ago, he brought with him his top secret 90 minute Bufo Alvarius treatment program, which has made us the premier substance abuse center on the Fairgrounds. But don't take it from me—just listen to some of our satisfied patients.

DEBORAH

Hi I'm Deborah, and as you can see, I'm a Dilurian. But what you can't see is that I spent twenty miserable years as an Ataraxium addict, before discovering Passageways Sausalito Zeta. Take it from me, this place really works!

JOHN

Ugh. That's it, I'm muting this shness.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is not objecting! (*bleep*) But it is a sad thing that the people in the advertisement are not offering truthfulness, as there are many who they could be helping if this were so.

JOHN

Well, they're definitely not offering truthfulness. All they're offering is to empty out some desperate suckers' bank accounts.

ALTHAAR

Has— Has FriendJohn had experiencing of this?

JOHN

No, not personally, but I watched a couple friends go in and out of these places back on Earth, and as far as I can tell, it's the same everywhere—the more they promise, the less they actually help. I mean, anyone who knows what they're doing isn't going to be on tv offering quick and easy solutions to complicated problems, right?

ALTHAAR

Yes, this is a most reasonable assuming. (*beat*) Althaar is hoping that the efforts of the friends of FriendJohn were success? To make escape on the chemical dependings?

JOHN

One did get sober eventually, yeah. She's doing ok. Married a nice couple, moved out to Titania to start a lichen farm. The other one... no idea where they are now. But I doubt it's anywhere good.

ALTHAAR

Consoling to you from Althaar.

JOHN

Thanks. *(beat)* It's funny, I hadn't thought about them for years, but seeing that ad brought it all right back. That helpless feeling, watching them struggle, and not knowing what to do about it. But knowing for sure that all those con artists and their promises were just making it worse. How infuriating it all was. *(beat)* I guess I'll always wonder if I could have done more, or better, if it would have made a difference if I'd reached out when they started drifting away, but... I don't know, at that point I was just exhausted, and nothing I'd tried seemed to be any help. So I just... let them go.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is certain that FriendJohn was doing all that was capability. As you are out-pointing, these are the problems most complex, and you are not having expertise in the solutions of psychology.

JOHN

No, I know that. But it's hard not to wonder, you know?

ALTHAAR

Mm. Perhaps FriendJohn could make view of this sad experience as one of learning? And take consolation from the thought that, if FriendJohn is in future knowing one who has suffering of addiction, he will be knowing better what is to be done? Or at leastment, what is not to be done?

JOHN

That's one way of looking at it, I guess. But I doubt it'll come up. I mean, I only know one addict on the Fairgrounds, and he sure as shness wouldn't ask for my help. If he even wanted to get clean, which—I can't even begin to picture that, can you? Xtopps, sober?

ALTHAAR

No, FriendJohn! It is a thing altogether outside of imagining!

[scene 10] Interstitial music. We are in XTOPPS's apartment. Bleep and door whoosh as CHIP enters.

CHIP

Xtopps? Xtopps? Xtopps?! Are you home? I just wanted to check in, see how it's going. Listen, if you need an extra day off, I can switch to trivia night while you recover, ok? No sombrero! ...Xtopps? *(passes through a beaded curtain, sees him)* Oh, there you are. Are you... ok?

XTOPPS

Aaaay...Chorp! Xtopps is not solely ok, Xtopps is... bountifully soul-ful! Hey, what time is it? Am I on already?

CHIP

(sigh) No, Xtopps, you're not on. I think it's safe to say you're... off. Way off. What's going on here? I thought you had a plan, zood. I'm not saying it was a good plan, but you seemed pretty serious about it a couple hours ago. What happened?

XTOPPS

Best laid cans of rice and pens, Chorp, best laid plans. Xtopps is triple-tiled!

CHIP

Yeah, I can tell. So, what, you changed your mind? You're done trying to go clear?

XTOPPS

I did not do the change, the changes were played for me. I found some of the pure taste in my secret sash, I couldn't just send it down the drain.

CHIP

Well, what's going down the drain right now is my patience. No more jacking around, Xtopps. If you're not going through with this, then I want you on stage for your shift tonight, comprende? Excrete or get off the pot!

XTOPPS

Narg, Chorp, what is this tough love shness?

CHIP

Look. I was skeptical when you said you were going to kick, but I was willing to be supportive. But what I am not willing to do is this dance where you say, "No shness, Chorp, for realsies this time," and then two minutes later, you're back on the protein punch. If you fall off the wagon every time you get your xtopps on the sticky, then this is never going to stick. You've got that stuff stashed all over the Fairgrounds! So either you figure out some way of dealing with temptation, or I'm out. I'm your boss, not your chaperone.

XTOPPS

I can't do it, mang. I love the crunchy nutty ooey gooey icky sticky too much, too much...

CHIP

Okay! Then don't do it! I don't know why you wanted to in the first place, your habit never seemed to cause any problems for you before. For other people, absolutely, but you seemed perfectly happy stuck down and vacuum-packed.

XTOPPS

That's not the botheration of the situation, Chorp. This isn't about my haver, this is about House Byllaburt, its ancient charges and committals!

CHIP

Seriously? You're doing this because of your folks? I don't get it, Xtopps. You've never given a pasteurized jeck what they think. Why start now?

XTOPPS

Because I needs them to *penser* on what I parlay, cause these Foogs are out to seriously waterloo you Humans, and the right word from the right Baronet to my dimly-beloved mother might make its way to the ossicles of the Empress, that she might stomp her deeply unhip but highly potent heel on these floral fascists. But while I am *under* the influence, I *have* none, so if I wanna help Dee, and you, and all my Human clutchers here, Chorp, I have got to get vertical, or at least, de-angled enough for the Imperium to take me at my verbiage.

CHIP

...Wow. That's... Holy cats. That's, um... Thank you, Xtopps.

XTOPPS

Hey, mang, don't be thanking me just yet. Not exactly off to a great hey-ho-let's-go here.

CHIP

Yeah. But you're going to do it, and I'm going to help. You're not alone, Xtopps. Ok? You've got friends, and we're all going to pitch in, and we're going to get you through this. Somehow.

XTOPPS

Means the galaxy to me, bossman.

CHIP

All right. So. Step one. Change of venue. There's no way we can get your pad 100-percent enticement-free. I'm pretty sure you've got stashes in every nook and cranny of this place, possibly spackled into the acoustic tile. So for take two, we're going to relocate this whole set up to my office. Start packing. (*activating phone as he gathers buckets and whatnot*) Phone! Call Bubbles!

Brief dial-y noise on speakerphone.

BUBBLES

(over the phone)

What's up, boss? How's the dry-out goin'?

CHIP

It's distinctly sub-aquatic right now, Bubbles. So we're on to Plan B. I'm gonna need you to send Grem over to Xtopps' place with the hover-sledge, and then I want you to head into my office and use your compositional spectroscope to make sure every single peanut and peanut derivative has been thoroughly scrubbed from the premises before we get back. Sopon can show you how to get into the "special drawer." Oh, and make sure we're stocked up on cleaning supplies while you're at it, I have the feeling the mop bucket's going to get a serious workout over the next couple days.

BUBBLES

Copy that!

Bleep as she hangs up.

CHIP

All right. Listen Xtopps, I don't know if I'm the best choice for a... sponsor, but I'm here, ok? And you've got other friends, too. Friends who want to help. Like... Oh. Huh. Thrab it. Okay, I'm regretting this already, but if there's one zood on station who knows how to make anyone feel better... And if you're brave enough to spend the next couple cycles puking your guts out, I guess I can risk joining you. Phone! Call Althaar!

[scene 11] Interstitial music. The In-Betweens. MISS SOPHIE's barking can be heard from the other side of a metal hatch, where VERT is holding her hostage.

H.F.

Miss Sophie! Just hold on, girl! Papa's coming for you!

VERT

(muffled)

Don't come any closer! I swear I'll do it! I'll blow both of us out into the cold vacuum of space!

H.F.

Don't do it, Vert!

STELLA

He's not going to, H.F., relax.

VOUSSH

I don't know, he does seem somewhat unhinged. Perhaps we should take the risk, I think I can grab our canine friend before the airlock activation sequence is complete. Then it will just be Vert getting blasted into the cold vacuum of space.

STELLA

No one's getting blasted into the cold vacuum of space!

H.F.

That's right! You hear that, baby? Tante Stella's going to do whatever it takes to keep you safe!

Yipping from beyond the hatch.

STELLA

Sure, I will, but that's not really an issue right now, H.F. Because they didn't bother to build airlocks in the In-Betweens. No one's supposed to be back here, remember?

H.F.

...Oh. Right. Sorry.

VERT

This isn't an airlock? Then where am I?

VOUSSH

There's a label by this valve, here, but it is old and worn, hard to read. Looks like... "Ascorbic Aerator Reservoir 375-B." Does that mean anything to you?

H.F.

Oh, yeah, it's an old pineapple juice tank. ...Vert! Don't put Miss Sophie down in there, I don't want her paws getting all sticky!

VERT

Oh yeah? Well, well... Maybe I will! If you don't explain what's going on around here!

H.F.

Don't you do it, Vert!

VERT

I'm gonna do it! I swear I will! She's gonna track this stuff all over!

H.F.

You bastard!

STELLA

Everyone calm down! Vert, we will be happy to explain the whole situation, once you come out of there and let Miss Sophie go. Ok?

VERT

How... How can I trust you? I don't understand what's happening! I followed these Fugulnari into a storage closet, but then it wasn't a storage closet, and then Miss Sophie was here? And there were these whippy, zippy tendril things, and two of the Foogs exploded! And then the third one... unzipped itself somehow, and turned into some kind scary purple lady-person!

VOUSSH

That was merely I, Voussh, of the Pudendari!

VERT

I don't know who that is!

H.F.

But you know who I am, Vert, right? It's me, H.F. Miss Sophie's papa! You know me.

VERT

I don't know what I know anymore! We thought you were dead! No one's seen you in months! Or Miss Sophie! And now you're here? I have no idea what's going on! How do I know *you* won't unzip yourself?

H.F.

I promise, Vert, it's really me. It's H.F. There won't be any more unzipping. Why don't you and Miss Sophie come on out of there, and then we can have a nice, calm discussion while we find something to clean off your shoes. How does that sound?

VERT

I don't know...

STELLA

Listen, Vert, you might as well trust us, because you're stuck in a pineapple juice tank, and we're outside the only exit.

VOUSSH

(sotto voce)

Is it the only exit?

STELLA

(ditto)

Probably? *(calling through the door again)* Just come on out, Vert. Everything will be fine. I promise.

VERT

Um... ok! Ok, we're coming out! But... don't you unzip me!

STELLA

Wouldn't dream of it.

Clonk-fsssh of a pressure-sealed hatch opening. Excited barking as MISS SOPHIE runs to H.F.

H.F.

Awwww, there you are, baby! There's my good girl! You had a little adventure today, didn't you? Yes! Yes you did!

VERT

(emerging from the hatchway)

Oh, wow, it really is you! I'm sorry about the dog-napping, everybody. I was just so confused! What with the exploding Foogs, and the inside-out lady, and now we're... inside the walls somehow? And then I saw Miss Sophie, and I just wanted to keep her safe from whatever was going on! But now I can see that I had absolutely nothing to worry about— *(BONK! as STELLA whacks him on the head)* —owwww...

VERT falls unconscious to the floor.

H.F.

What the frid, Stella?

STELLA

Operational security, H.F. If you don't want to get your own hands dirty, I'll understand, but there's no way we can let Vert go after what he's seen today. Voussh?

VOUSSH

(hoisting VERT over her shoulder)

On it! Time for this one to find out what the inside of an airlock really looks like.

H.F.

Whoa, whoa whoa whoa whoa! Hold on there! Let's just think this through for a second, ok? Can't we just... drop him off somewhere, back in the world? Just because he's seen this place once doesn't mean he'd be able to find it again after he wakes up, even if he tried. I mean, come on. This is Vert we're talking about!

STELLA

Right. This is Vert we're talking about. A guy who always says the worst possible thing at the worst possible time. He is literally the last person on the Fairgrounds I'd trust with a secret. I'm sorry, H.F., but we can't take the risk of sending him back out there.

H.F.

Ok. All right. Then... Let's not send him back out there. Let's keep him in here.

STELLA

Keep him—? Oh, I don't know. I mean, obviously I'd rather not resort to violence...

VOUSSH

I am fine with it.

STELLA

Be honest with me, H.F. Do you sincerely believe that Vert can be trusted? With all your heart? Because if not, I'm going to ask you to walk away right now, and let us do what we need to do.

H.F.

I think... I think he can, yeah. I mean, not to keep his mouth shut, you're right about that. But I know he hates the Foogs as much as we do.

STELLA

Really?

H.F.

Absolutely. They had him locked up for a couple of months after the New Years' riot. In fact... *(bleepity bleep)* Here, check it out. His arrest record.

A beat as STELLA and VOUSSH read.

STELLA

(impressed despite herself)

Huh. He really—? ...Wow, six of them at once? ...With a hand juicer?!

VOUSSH

This tiny *polpinta* did all that? Voussh is impressed!

H.F.

So, what do we think? Has the Resistance just scored its newest recruit?

[scene 12] Transition to CHIP's office. A clock ticks. The ticks echo more and more.

XTOPPS

Aww, mang... What am I doing, hanging me out on this limb? I must have flipped my gizz...

CHIP

Just focus, Xtopps. Eyes on the prize, you can do this!

BUBBLES

(sotto voce)

You really think so, boss? He's looking kind of pink around the thorax already.

CHIP

(ditto)

What did I just tell you?

BUBBLES

Uh... "We are going in there, and we are going to be supportive, no matter how bad we think he's going to crash and burn."

CHIP

That's right! So zip it! *(out loud)* We're all here for you, Xtopps, ok? And backup is on the way. So you just let us know what you need. Anything you want, you name it.

XTOPPS

Xtopps needs a spreadable hit, mang...

CHIP

Anything but that! Come on, Xtopps. You have to keep it together. Are you with me?

XTOPPS

I'm here... but it's coming, Chorp. The check is in the mail and it is coming express!

BUBBLES

You can do it, Xtopps! Just, uh... breathe? I guess? I don't really have a lot of experience with biological-type coping mechanisms, sorry.

CHIP

No, that's good. Breathing is good. Keep breathing, Xtopps!

Thumping house music builds throughout scene.

XTOPPS

I'm scared, Chorp!

DEE

(echoey)

Sweating...shivers...

XTOPPS

I'm cold, Chorp, crazy moist! What have I done?

DEE

(echoey)

Abdominal cramping...

XTOPPS

Aaagh...My abdomen!

Crowd noise.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

Good evening, gentlebeings! This is your Howard Cosell-Bot and I am here for the main event, coming to you exclusively from the notorious back office of Chip Frinkel's Electric Egg! The No Holds Barred Steel Cage Match between His Radiance Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, Marquess Runroar of Brellipheen-Hwyine, Baronet of Kandephaa'a, facing off against his Peanut Butter Addiction. And here's Michael Buffer-Bot to get us started—

MICHAEL BUFFER-BOT

LETS GET READY TO KICK SOME NUUUUUUUUTS!

Crowd cheering.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

With me as always is the best partner a bot could have, the Markiza of Muay Thai, the Suzerain of the Sprawl-and-Brawlers, an uncanny facsimile of our favorite five-time Ultimate Fighting champion of Earth, Joanna Jedrzejczyk-Bot! Welcome, champ!

JOANNA JEDRZEJCZYK-BOT

The pleasure is all mine, Howard.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

It looks like we're going to be seeing an epic battle tonight. Thoughts?

JOANNA JEDRZEJCZYK-BOT

Well, Howard, if you know the size of the monkey on this Xybidont's thorax, then it will be no surprise to you that this is expected to be one of the greatest fights of all time.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

And here we go! The abdominal cramping has already set in, as well as the twitching muscles. Ooh, that looks painful! I almost can't believe my visual receptors, but the hapless High Lord of Menchitan appears to be break dancing.

JOANNA JEDRZEJCZYK-BOT

I'm not so sure about that, Howard. I would say, rather, he appears to be Krumping. Or at the very least Bone Breaking. But I don't see him spinning on his head.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

Not yet, Joanna, not yet, but the night is young.

Crowd swells with cheers.

CHIP

Hey Xtopps, how's it going there, sport?

XTOPPS

Chorp! This schness is getting way too real! I think today is gonna be the day I get my Golden Carapace, chom?

CHIP

Uh, no. What does that mean?

XTOPPS

No more Xtopps, mang! I'm coming apart! My legs are gonna slide off, zood! They're sliding clean off! I can see them, Chorp!

CHIP

No they're not, Xtopps! Legs don't do that, ok? Or... maybe yours do, I don't know, but they're definitely not doing it now! Look, this is just withdrawal, all right? No matter how bad it is, it'll pass.

XTOPPS

I'm seeing things... hearing things... I'm so cold... I'm scared, Chorp!

CHIP

You got this, Xtopps! Just remember, that scary stuff is in all your head. It doesn't mean anything. You are in control!

Pounding music fades in.

XTOPPS

Aagh! I'm not in control! I am not in control!

Crowd noise.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

Wow! The Xybidont has taken on a color that I've not seen since my visit to the opalescent honeycombs of D'Vorax 7!

JOANNA JEDRZEJCZYK-BOT

Yes, Howard, it looks like all those withdrawal symptoms are working the thorax hard. They're hitting him one after another.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

Agreed. He's stopped the top rocking, but now he seems to be focusing on floor work... Or maybe he's just convulsing, it's hard to say.

JOANNA JEDRZEJCZYK-BOT

I would say that this is just the beginning of the craggiest part of the ride for our unfortunate Baronet.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

I haven't seen moves like that since Breaking 2482: Electric Ragout!

Crowd noise swells.

DEE

(echoey)

Nausea, vomiting and intense hallucinations.

XTOPPS

Aw, mang, I think my reticulum's goin' in reverse! I haven't spewed since my first taste of brittle...

XTOPPS dry-heaving. Visitation theremin.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You want me to hold your antennae back, honey? It's the least a shrub can do.

XTOPPS

Aaagh! Frondrinax? What are you doing here?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I thought I should let you know that you're just not up to this, sweetie. All your ambitions are no more than tomorrow's mulch. I honestly don't see why you're putting yourself through this agony.

XTOPPS

You don't care about me, Heartattack and Vine! You threw my chanteuse in the hoosegow!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, you're doing this for the songbird? Well, I hate to put the vonch on your little plans, but Dee joined us this morning, right after her NutraZoom shake! She's a loyal Booster now! Just like your good buddy John B! Ha ha ha ha ha! *(echo effect on her diabolical laughter)*

XTOPPS

No... No! That's not true! That's impossible!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(echoey)

Search your feelings, sweetie! It's true, you know!

XTOPPS

NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

House music, crowd noise swell.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

I've gotta say, Joanna, this Xyb has really battled, but it looks like we are moving into the last stage of this fight. While his breakdancing was masterful, I now see no signs of movement whatsoever. It looks like Xtopps may be all tapped out.

House beat slows to stopping through this part.

JOANNA JEDRZEJCZYK-BOT

It sure does, Howard. This is what we call the Point of No Return. He'll lie there in a catatonic state until his body makes the choice to either pass through it, or pass on over, if you know what I mean.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

I do indeed, champ! If only we could see what he is seeing right now...

Visitation theremin.

SCHLOOMA

Hey, Xtopps! How's my literal Monster of Rock?

XTOPPS

(scared)

Schlooma? Where'd you come from, zood? I thought they hurfed you out, mang...

SCHLOOMA

Oh, yeah, they did do that thing, clutcher. This is by way of a non-literal visitation. Just thought I'd slide into your DTs to check out the sitch. I gotta say, you don't look so hot.

XTOPPS

Yeah, my zood, I am in rough shape.

SCHLOOMA

You're downright craggy, baby. So, hey, just so you know, if you want to come back to the fluffernutter fold, we are ready and waiting. You can make all this schness effoe immediamente.

XTOPPS

Nah, mang, I gotta get linear... I gotta do it for Dee!

SCHLOOMA

But Dee knew you couldn't do it, mang. Remember?

DEE

(echoey)

...you could make it all go away with just one little dollop of salty goodness...

SHLOOMA

She's right, Xtopps. You can make all this pain go away. Oh, and hey! I've brought an old friend along! He wants to say hello.

XTOPPS

(shaky, frightened)

Oh yeah?... Who's that, Schlooma?

Jaunty music and the clicks of tap-dancing.

MR. PEANUT

Greetings, Q'Mellix! We have been friends for a very long time, yes? You've walked by my side for many years, yes! I must say, old man, I was terribly disappointed to hear that you wish to spurn all the protein-packed goodness I am only too happy to provide.

SCHLOOMA

Recognize our old friend, Xtopps?

XTOPPS

Top Hat... monocle... cane...

MR. PEANUT

It's a walking stick, you smarkhead.

XTOPPS

MR!... PEANUT!

MR. PEANUT

The very same! And as I said, I'm terribly disappointed, yes? But not terribly worried. You see, there is one little thing you seem to have forgotten: you are mine, old man! *(big and scary all of a sudden)* YOU ARE MINE!

XTOPPS

No, please! Let me go!

MR. PEANUT

MINE! MINE! MINE!!!! *(ghoulish Vincent Price Style laugh)*

Trumpets blare the regal Xybidont alarum.

XTOPPS

I need out! I'm flippin my gizz!

BITCHASS XYBIDONT GRANDEE

Greetings, Your Radiance!

XTOPPS

Oh nertz, it's Q'Voglint. I hate this zood.

BITCHASS XYBIDONT GRANDEE

It is my duty to inform you, Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, that there is no possibility of Her Incalculable Inscrutability giving credence to the ravings of a, what is the term? Ah, yes, PBJ, that's it. Even if your mother were to intervene further on your behalf, I can assure you that we all know just who you are and what you are, and if you think the Imperium would put its proverbial eggs in the basket of a devotee of, how do you say?...the icky, sticky...?

XTOPPS

Creamy...dreamy...

BITCHASS XYBIDONT GRANDEE

Oooey...gooey...Yes. Well, it is deeply apparent that your particular basket is thoroughly unsound. Rest assured, "Xtopps," you are, and will always be, nothing but an embarrassment to the Xybidont Empire, not to mention the Grand Duchess your mother.

XTOPPS

You're wrong. I can do this!

BITCHASS XYBIDONT GRANDEE

Don't tell me. I can't be convinced. And neither can...

Royal Alarum.

BITCHASS XYBIDONT GRANDEE

The Suzerain of All Gwanteria, Protectress of the Outer Quantities, Patron Notary of Biliabafoon Fields, Eminence of the Wellendong Orbital Rhombus, the High Doyenne of House Byllaburt, J'Bollont, Lady of the Suspended Yark, the Most Exalted Grand Duchess of Prang, twenty-third of her name!

Trumpets.

XTOPPS

Mom? Aw, mang. Mr. Peanut, I can tailgate, but that's dirty pool.

THE GRAND DUCHESS

Q'Mellix!

XTOPPS

Hello, Mother.

THE GRAND DUCHESS

Is this how you receive your mother? Prostrate on the floor of some malodorous saloon? Have you truly abandoned all propriety, Q'Mellix?

XTOPPS

The corpus is all out of comportment, Mom, sorry. Prostrate is all I got left. Stick around, you may catch a clonic twitch or two.

THE GRAND DUCHESS

Appalling. And now this latest tomfoolery. Am I given to understand that, having senselessly rejected all the multifarious bounties of the Imperium for the sordid delusions of the legume, you now seek to reverse your course? Not to regain the stature befitting your lineage, but in order that you might more readily petition me to intervene with Her Incalculable Inscrutability the Empress, on the behalf of those same wretched bipeds who first led you down the path of dissolution?

XTOPPS

Nobody led me, Ma, I just kinda... slipped.

THE GRAND DUCHESS

You have slipped indeed, if you believe you have the slightest chance of achieving your ill-conceived aims!

XTOPPS

Yeah, thanks for the encouragement. 'Preciate you stopping by.

THE GRAND DUCHESS

Well, what kind of mother would I be, if I allowed you to persist in such delusions?

XTOPPS

Awwww, mannnng... Hold up, you're not any kind of mother! You're just a vision! A spectral appari-ti-on! I don't have to écoute any of your shness!

THE GRAND DUCHESS

Oh, yes you do! I'm not going anywhere! None of us are! Not until you face the truth! You can't do it!

BITCHASS XYBIDONT GRANDEE

You will always be an embarrassment to the Imperium!

THE GRAND DUCHESS

So just give up!

SCHLOOMA

You can make all this pain go away... with just one dab...

THE GRAND DUCHESS

Give up, Q'Mellix!

MR. PEANUT

YOU ARE MINE!

THE GRAND DUCHESS

Give up!

DEE

...it'll never take.

MR. PEANUT

YOU ARE MINE!

XTOPPS

Please... Make it stop!

BITCHASS XYBIDONT GRANDEE

An embarrassment!

THE GRAND DUCHESS

GIVE UP!

MR. PEANUT

MINE!

Voices repeating, echoey. Crowd swells.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT

And the Xybidont is on the ropes, champ! He is really taking a pounding!

JOANNA JEDRZEJCZYK-BOT

He sure is, Howard! Things do not look good for the Electric Egg's resident musical genius...

BITCHASS XYBIDONT GRANDEE

EMBARRASSMENT!

SCHLOOMA
PAIN!

THE GRAND DUCHESS
GIVE UP!

MR. PEANUT
MINE!

MRS. FRONDRINAX
(echoey)
SEARCH YOUR FEELINGS, SWEETIE!

MR. PEANUT
MINE! *(scary laugh)*

Echoey voices build to a cacophony.

XTOPPS
Aaaah! You all need to effoe! There's too many of you. There's too many of me! Golden Carapace! This is the big one! Too much, too much, too much! Get out of my head! Make it stop! Please! And who gave that baby on the ceiling a monocle? That's a choking hazard, mang! That just ain't right! Aaagh!

HOWARD COSELL-BOT
...And Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels is down for the count!

JOANNA JEDRZEJCZYK-BOT
He fought a brave fight, Howard.

HOWARD COSELL-BOT
That he did, Joanna, that he did.

Funeral bells repeat through end of scene.

XTOPPS
Just ain't right... Just...ain't...right. *(passes out)*

[scene 13] Transition to the In-Betweens. H.F. and VOUSSH are watching over the passed-out VERT.

VOUSSH
How long can the small green one sleep? Voussh is tired of waiting.

H.F.

He should be coming out of it soon, I think. He's moving around a little.

VOUSSH

Can we not speed up the process? I have a shock prod.

H.F.

No, thank you! We will not be instigating another dog-napping today, if that's quite all right with you!

VOUSSH

Have it your way...

VERT groans.

H.F.

Hey, Vert? You back with us? How's your head?

VERT

Buh... wha...? Wh— what happened? Where am I?

H.F.

Welcome to the Resistance, Vert. We call this place the In-Betweens.

VERT

I don't know where that is.

H.F.

No one does. That's the whole point. We're completely off the grid, here. None of this place shows up on the official Fairgrounds schematics, which is how we've managed to hide from the Foogs for so long.

VERT

Wow, that's smart!

H.F.

Heh, thanks. But we can't get too comfortable, even back here. We have to keep on the move. And that includes you, so, up and at 'em, kid! I'll give you the grand tour, ok?

VERT

Okay! Is the barf-lady coming, too?

VOUSSH

I am no barf-lady! I am Voussh! A Pudendar of the Boyovachata! And I am keeping my eyes on you, Vert-person!

VERT

Hi! Oh, wow, I like your halberd! Do I get a halberd?

H.F.

Eh, let's take this one step at a time, huh kid? Come on, we're close to one of the mobile canteens, we can start there.

They enter an improvised cafeteria-like space. Silverware, chitchat, etc.

VERT

Wow, that's quite a spread! It smells great!

H.F.

Doesn't it? We eat pretty well these days, actually. Maybe better than those folks out there in the world. No Committee back here to tell us what we can and can't put on the menu.

VOUSSH

And our techniques for liberating confiscated food shipments are undefeated!

H.F.

So far, anyway. Doesn't pay to get cocky. You want a piña colada while we're here? It's the official drink of the Resistance.

VOUSSH

Virgin, of course, because we must maintain battle-readiness at all times. Inebriated high jinks can wait until all are free of the Fugulnari scourge! But then, oh, the feasting!

H.F.

You said it. Here you go, Vert!

VERT

Cheers! (*clink, sluuuurp*) Yummm!

They move on out of the canteen.

H.F.

All right, where to next... Oh! Voussh, I think Vert would be very interested in seeing one of the training sessions you Pudendari have been running for the front-line volunteers. You think they'd still be going at this hour?

VOUSSH

Yes, the training will still be in progress! Each session is several grueling hours long! Hours of blood, pain, and mind-numbing repetition! Follow me!

VERT

Okay!

H.F.

(to himself)

Way to sell it, Voussh...

*They approach an area where soldiers are drilling punches and kicks kung-fu style—
Hiyyaa! YAAA!*

VERT

Oh! What are they doing?

VOUSSH

This is the Hartsuik, Vert, where the fighters of the Resistance train in Yoyalabam, to prepare with combat with the Fugulnari.

H.F.

Some of the recruits call it “the Lumber Mill.”

Hiya!

VERT

Wow! Very sweaty!

PUDENDARI DRILL SERGEANT

You must do better than that! Do you think the Fugulnari have any care for the delicate skin covering your sad, frangible bones? On your knuckles! Now!

(the trainees drop into push up position on their knuckles)

Give me 30—all the way down—fast!

VERT

She doesn't seem very nice.

H.F.

Yeah, well, the Foogs aren't very nice either. And we need to be ready for them.

VOUSSH

Hutavarova leaves a bittersweet taste, but she is the best. Her hands move like lightning.

PUDENDARI DRILL SERGEANT

Up, you weaklings! Open up your saw-horse stance. Back to punching! Bat!

SOLDIERS

(after every count)

Hah!

PUDENDARI DRILL SERGEANT

Bi!

(hah!)

Hiru!

(hah!)

Lau!

(hah!)

That was better! All right, partner up and grab some wood. Don't be shy, stack them up!

PUDENDARI DRILL SERGEANT

Ok— line 1, then 2... on my count.... BAT!

(Hiiya!!! CRUNCH of boards shattering)

BEEEE!

(Huuuuuh! SPLAAAANK!)

Hiruuuu!

(Huuuuuh! BANG!)

LAU!

Ayyyyyyyyaa! Bang! fades into the background but continues under.

VERT

Wow, they're scary! Those planks of wood don't stand a chance.

H.F.

Yeah, we go through a lot of boards. It's lucky we stumbled on that abandoned chair factory a couple months back.

VOUSSH

Ah, watch now! This technique is called Ukulul Fat, or Fist of the Exploding Tree.

PUDENDARI DRILL SERGEANT

La-QAAAAT!

Yaaaah! Kerblaaaaam!

VERT

Just watching them makes me tired.

VOUSSH

It is not for the weak, but we must be prepared, for when it is time to strike. That is why I will take on your training personally, until you are ready to join the others.

VERT

Wha—? Oh, gosh! I mean, I appreciate the offer and everything, but I really don't think I have that kind of time to devote to training. I mean, I've gotta be at work in a couple hours!

H.F.

You're not going to work, kid.

VERT

But... I have to! I'll get fired! And then I'll be broke! And have nowhere to live!

H.F.

Sorry, Vert, but... you live here now. We can't let you go back out there and risk you telling anyone what you've seen today.

VERT

But... but... my audition!

VOUSSH

This is how it must be, Vert. You are one of us now.

H.F.

I know this wasn't exactly your choice, and I apologize. But, hey, life in the Resistance isn't so bad. And you'll have a chance to really help some people. Make a difference, you know?

VERT

I guess...

VOUSSH

Yes, you will see. With training, you could become a hero of the Human liberation!

VERT

Me?! No way! I'm no fighter! I'm just a simple troubadour!

H.F.

Well, you don't have to if you really don't want to. There are plenty of other jobs back here that need doing. But, listen, Vert: I've seen you at the pool table, and I know you've got a fighting spirit. The rest is just a matter of practice.

VOUSSH

And I have seen the reports of how you carried yourself in the Battle of the Electric Egg. You have potential, small green one! Voussh will turn you into a little buzzsaw of fury.

VERT

Gosh! If you really think I can do it, then... I guess... Okay! When do we start?

VOUSSH

Drop and give me 50!

VERT

You got it, boss!

*VERT starts counting out pushups as
[scene 14] we transition to the Electric Egg.*

ALTHAAR

(in the doorway)

Althaar is entering the Electric Egg! Please do not make peering behind this hover-sledge of medicaments and tubs of electrolyte-infused liquid, Human friends! For behind it, Althaar is proceeding!

CHIP

(calling out)

Hey, Althaar! Bring that stuff over here, ok? We can put it in the office.

ALTHAAR

(approaching)

Very well, Mr. Frinkel! Althaar will make parking of his hover-sledge just behind you, so do not be around-turning, please! Is it in your office that Sin Xtopps is performing recuperation? You did not make precise naming of his ailment, so Althaar has brought every possible home remedy he is knowing of, and also the chicken sooo-up, which Althaar has found in the person to be very very disgusting, but your own people are consuming this in the case of illness, yes? So perhaps Sin Xtopps will make appreciation of it also. Do you believe this will be sufficiency?

CHIP

(quieter, now that Althaar has closed the distance)

Yeah, thanks, that's all... more than sufficient, but do you think you could keep your voice down? I don't want the Foogs finding out why Xtopps is... indisposed.

ALTHAAR

(quiet...ish)

Oh! Apology to you from Althaar! He was not comprehending the need for secrecy! ...Is it permitted for Althaar to have knowledge of the malady of Xtopps?

CHIP

Yeah, but this is just between us, ok?

ALTHAAR

Of course, if that is what you are wishing!

CHIP

Okay. He's... in peanut butter withdrawal.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar was not purchasing any of this substance! He had assumption that Sin Xtopps would already be most thoroughly supplied! But it is the work of the moment to make out-popping to a grocery!

CHIP

No, no, he didn't run out. This is on purpose. He's trying to get off the stuff for good. It's... not going great. He was thrashing around like a Persephonian spindizzy for what seemed like forever, yelling all kinds of incomprehensible shness—well, that part's nothing new. But anyway, he finally passed out a couple hours ago. I've got Bubbles in there now keeping a scanner on him.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar is wishing he had made more haste in arrival! It is seeming his remedies are now past useful-ness.

CHIP

Oh, I'm sure he'll get some use out of them when he wakes up. He's going to be feeling like refried Pliziod fewmets for at least a couple days, according to HECNET-MD. I'm gonna take their word for it, I don't exactly have a lot of personal experience with PB withdrawal.

ALTHAAR

Hmm. Althaar is knowing one who has made observation of the Human addictions, but... he is not of the expert. And perhaps you would not wish to make discussion of these secrets with FriendJohn?

CHIP

You're damn right I would not wish! The whole point of all this is— Hang on, we shouldn't talk out here. Let's duck into the office.

ALTHAAR

But will our discussings not make disturbment of Sin Xtopps?

CHIP

Xtopps was out colder than a Velbopp's frozen quiescence when I stepped out. I doubt anything could disturb him more than whatever his neurotransmitters are doing to him right now, soo— (*analog door as they enter the office, which is a severe biohazard zone*)—oooh my GOD! Xtopps! What the hell did you do to my office!?

ALTHAAR

Althaar should perhaps have included more supplies of cleaning in his preparations...

CHIP

What the frid, Bubbles? You were supposed to be keeping a scanner on him!

BUBBLES

Sorry, boss. I tried to keep it to the buckets as much as I could, but, you know. I'm built to dispense liquids, not collect 'em.

CHIP

Aaugh. What is that smell?

BUBBLES

(scanner sound)

According to my vapor analyzer, that is a nitrogen rich mixture of peanut oil-infused perspiration, molasses, cherry gelato-flavored vomit, and coconut oil.

CHIP

Well, can you at least deodorize it or something? It's climbing right up my sinuses and straight into my brain.

BUBBLES

I can give the whole room a quick vodka mist?

CHIP

Do it.

BUBBLES

Copy. *(mist spray)* But why coconut oil?

CHIP

Just because?

XTOPPS groans, weakly.

ALTHAAR

Sin Xtopps...? Are you requiring any medicaments or electrolyte-infused liquids? Or the chicken soo-up? It is only to be requesting them of Althaar!

CHIP

Xtopps? Xtopps! Can you hear me? C'mon, sport. Talk to me.

XTOPPS

(weak)

Hey, Chorp.

CHIP

Hey, there you are, big guy! Looks like you really went through it, huh?

XTOPPS

Am I through it? Are they gone? 'Cause if that Mr. Peanut's still around, I'm noping right back out. That jecker is terrifying.

CHIP

No, he's gone, Xtopps. Mr. Peanut is gone. But I brought a friend to see you.

XTOPPS

No way! No more visits! No smilin' faces, smilin' faces tell lies!

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar can make departure, if this is preferment!

XTOPPS

Althaar? Are you for real, or just a passin' headlight? You're not going to turn into Mike Love, or my prosody tutor, or Great-Great-Grandmama J'Wyandotte?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is promising he will not become any of those persons, Sin Xtopps! He is here to be offering the moral support! Although it is seeming to Althaar that the de-toxification is already accomplished, in explosive fashioning!

CHIP

Yeah, all over my office...

BUBBLES

But the important thing is, you did it, Xtopps! You kicked the ick.

XTOPPS

(disappointed)

Yeah...

CHIP

C'mon, Xtopps! This is what you wanted, right? To get clean, so the folks back home will take you seriously. So they'll take the Foogs seriously. That's what'll make all this worth it. Right?

XTOPPS

Yeah...

ALTHAAR

Is this the purpose of the cold-turkeying of Xtopps? To make reconciliation with his relations in the Xybidont Imperium? So that they may be assisting the Human people?

XTOPPS

Yeah...

ALTHAAR

Ohh! This is an act of great courage and generosity, Sin Xtopps! It is very movement to Althaar, that you are willing to make such sacrifice of your comfort, in aid of the Humans!

CHIP

Right. My office carpet is... a small price to pay, for the future of Humanity. And now that you're clean, Xtopps, we've actually got a chance at getting these Foogs off of— Why are you crying? You did it! You beat the odds!

XTOPPS

You got it all wrong, the odds are gonna beat me! I ain't ever going through that again. But I know, Chorp. Deep down, I know. I'm on the right road, but I'm gonna take a wrong turn. It just ain't gonna take.

ALTHAAR

But you have already demonstrated the great will-power and resourceful-ness, Sin Xtopps! Now it is only to continue what you have already been accomplishing! Surely this will be of greater easiness!

CHIP

Right! Easy does it! One day at a time, yeah?

XTOPPS

That's a load of schness and you know it! I'm a lifer! I can't get linear. I'm sorry, mang. The center will not hold.

CHIP

No way! We're not giving up on you! *(beat)* All right, time for Plan flotting Z! Xtopps! Can you walk?

XTOPPS

Who knows, I'm a mysterious zood.

CHIP

Fine. Althaar, I'm commandeering this sledge, ok?

ALTHAAR

It is the pleasure to Althaar to be offering it!

Crashing as CHIP sweeps the contents of the sledge onto the floor.

ALTHAAR

Oh, no! The soo-up has made spilling onto your carpet!

CHIP

The carpet's a lost cause, Althaar, but Xtopps won't be. Not if I have anything to say about it. Okay, onto the sledge, Xtopps. Bubbles, help him out.

BUBBLES

C'mon, honey. Uppy uppy.

CHIP

All right. Let's go.

ALTHAAR

Where are we going, please, Mr. Frinkel?

CHIP

To the last people on the Fairgrounds I'd ask for help with something like this. But what the frid, we've tried everything else. And if we don't find some way to keep Xtopps off the nut, we're all mulched.

[scene 15] Transition to MRS. FRONDRINAX's office. Doorbell.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, it never fails. Just when I'm about to sit down with a nice Haber-Bosch root pack...

Insistent doorbell.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, yes, I'm coming, just settle your flavedo...

Door whoosh.

OAKENSARX

Afternoon, Frondrinax. I hope I'm not interrupting anything important—there's a recent development I wanted to bring to your attention.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, you did catch me in the middle of a root rejuvenation session...

OAKENSARX

I see.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, but you know me! I'm always prepared to set personal matters aside for the vital work of the Committee!

OAKENSARX

I should hope so.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ah hah hah, yes! So, to what do I owe the honor of this surprise visit?

OAKENSARX

We've just received a docking request from the *IXS Bombast*.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

A Xybidont ship? What are they doing here?

OAKENSARX

According to them, they're just stopping by to refuel on their way home from a diplomatic mission to Mebsuta. But Xybidont protocol demands that they, how did they put it, "Pay due obeisance to His Radiant Splendor the Baronet of Kandephaa'a, as they traverse the purlieu of his demesne." It sounds like a mere formality, but I wanted to hear your thoughts before allowing them on station.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hm. I'd say we should go ahead and grant permission—you know how the Xybidonts are about their precious protocols, and we certainly don't want to give the Imperium any sort of grievance against us. Although of course we should keep these visitors under close observation as long as they're here.

OAKENSARX

That goes without saying. So, you're confident that this isn't some ploy on the part of the Baronet? You've mentioned in your reports that you've seen a large increase in correspondence with his home planet.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, yes, but that's nothing we need concern ourselves with. Just pathetic pleas for pocket money from his mother, or his aunts, or his cousins. Nothing subversive in it at all.

OAKENSARX

You're certain? You've read these letters yourself?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I *did*, at first. But, as I said, they really are very monotonous. So I delegated them to Rooty a while back. (*calling*) Rooty! Get in here!

ROOTY

(*from the next room*)

Coming, Mama!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Ugh.

ROOTY

(*arriving*)

Oh! Hi Mr. Oakensarx!

OAKENSARX

Why, hello there, Rooty! I hope your work is going well!

ROOTY

Yes! I've been updating the spreadsheet of Pernicious Counter-Productives!

OAKENSARX

Excellent. Rooty, you've been inspecting the correspondence of the Baronet of Kandephaa'a, is that right?

ROOTY

Ummmm...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Xtopps, Rooty. You've been reading Xtopps's mail.

ROOTY

Oh! Yes! He's funny! He's all "Ohhhhh, I'm saaaaad, because I don't have any creds!" And then his aunties and his cousins all say, "Good! We're glad you're sad! Because you made your Mama sad! Because you like peanut butter, so we don't like you! So nyeah!"

OAKENSARX

I see.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

So, there you have it. Nothing to get your stems twisted about! I think we can safely say that a visit from this Xybidont dignitary can only be to our advantage, once they see Xtopps in all his goobered-up glory.

OAKENSARX

Really. So it doesn't cause you any concern that the Baronet was recently observed being hover-sledged through the doors of a substance abuse treatment center?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

What?! You might have led with that, for Vim's sake!

OAKENSARX

I had assumed you would have taken it upon yourself to keep abreast of current events, Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

When was this?

OAKENSARX

He passed through the doors of Passageways Sausalito Zeta not ten minutes ago.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Passage— Oh! *(laughing a bit)* You had me going there for a moment, Oakensarx!

OAKENSARX

Beg pardon?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Didn't you catch my interview segment this morning? I can promise you, if Xtopps is looking to Timothy Leary-Bot for help, we have absolutely nothing to worry about. He's going to stumble out of that so-called "treatment center" more thoroughly scrambled than he went in!

ROOTY

Yay!

[scene 16] Transition to the Passageways Sausalito Zeta rehab center.

CHIP

So, you're the zood from those commercials, yeah?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

That's right. Hey, take off your shoes and join me in the conversation divot.

CHIP

No thanks. I'm going to be honest with you here, Leary-Bot. I'm pretty skeptical about this "treatment" of yours. Xtopps is trying to kick a pretty hefty chunk-style fixation.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Oh, that's no problem.

CHIP

A three-tub-a-day habit is no problem?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

No no no noooo, I meant your skepticism is no problem. Unsupportive friends fortunately have no bearing upon an individual's ability to see addiction for what it really is.

CHIP

Unsupportive? I've done everything I can think of to help the poor guy out. We only came here in the first place because I'd already tried everything else.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

The Universe works in the strange ways, my friends. Ways that your average meatsack generally finds... counterintuitive, yeah? But it still brought you here. Because here is where your pal Xtopps needs to be, right now.

CHIP

Sure it is.

ALTHAAR

It is a truth that your claim of 100% percent success is of much suspicion, Sin Leary-Bot. If you are so certain of your methods, why is it that you will not be permitting Mr. Frinkel into the chamber, to make observation of them?

CHIP

Yeah!

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

The ego is hard enough to disassemble without personal attachments complicating things, getting all clammy and mucilaginous. Xtopps needs total isolation, in order to dissolve the illusion of self and reconnect with the source energy which is all of us.

CHIP

See, that's exactly the kind of creepy shness I'm talking about. Source energy? Dissolve the illusion of self? I knew this was a bad idea. I've been getting serious cult-y vibes off this place since we first walked in the door.

ALTHAAR

Mr. Frinkel, do you believe it is to make rescuing of Sin Xtopps from the Chamber of Isolation? Althaar is not certain he can be over-riding the door controls, but perhaps the hover-sledge can have repurposment as the battering ram?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Whoa, hey, let's not flip our wigs, here! Violence is a real bringdown. At least give the treatment a chance to work before you climb in a judgmental bag, ok?

CHIP

Fine. But I still don't see how all this woo-woo is going to make the slightest dent in Xtopps' problem.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

There's nothing more powerful than realizing who you really are, Mister Chip Frinkel.

CHIP

Oh yeah? And just who am I?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

You are stardust, Chip.

CHIP

Oh, yeah, wow, Tim. That's some real profound philosophy, there. They used to carry novelty mugs that said that in the gift shop.

ALTHAAR

Yes, Althaar was purchasing many of these for his friends across the galaxy!

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Just because it's on a mug doesn't mean it isn't true, zoods. Every atom of your being, every boson, every quark, every single scrap of matter that you think of as "you" was at one time condensed in an area so small you can't fathom it.

CHIP

Hey, I can fathom plenty, pal.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Can you fathom that all of me was in there too? And the meatsack version of me, and Earth's sun, and literally everything else ever? And you, Chip, are just a continuation of that energy.

CHIP

So, what, you're going to convince Xtopps he's... abusing his personal portion of the Big Bang? Going against the divine nature of the universe?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

But Chip, he's not. He *is* the divine nature of the universe.

CHIP

Uh huh. And this is going to stop him relapsing?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Isn't it beautiful?

CHIP

How much are you charging me for this nonsense?

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

There is no charge. Suggested donations only.

CHIP

Smart. Probably helps with dodging lawsuits.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

You can't charge folks for remembering who they are.

CHIP

Which is... stardust. Right. And the universe is held together by rainbows and chocolate.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

It's held together by love, Mister Frinkel.

ALTHAAR

Oh! A sentiment shared by those of Iltor! It is love that is accumulating all peoples!

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

See, now you're starting to get it!

CHIP

This was a mistake! *(starts banging on the door)* Xtopps! You all right in there, buddy?! I'm sorry!
This was a horrible idea!

CHIP's banging gets more insistent. Louder, then more rhythmic, then crossfades into drums... the sounds of a stream... rushing wind... epic guitar riffs... a shaman's rattle...

XTOPPS

THIRSTY— I'M THIRSTY! My throat... dry....

BYROXIDANA

Then drink!

Crashing waves.

XTOPPS

(trippy reverb effect)

Oooohhhh shnesss! I don't wanna die I don't wanna die I don't wanna dieeeeeeeeeee *(echo)* die... die... die ... die... Die...

XTOPPS

I'm afraid! I'm afraid my body can't handle this! HELLLLP! MAKE IT STOP!

BYROXIDANA

Your body loves the medicine, Xtopps. That's just your ego fighting to stay in control.

XTOPPS

I'm afraid! I might stop breathing!

BYROXIDANA

Surrender!

XTOPPS

I'm... fighting.... to stay...

BYROXIDANA

You're afraid Xtopps. Just let go. Surrender... reeeeeemember!

A locomotive blows through, then a HUGE CRASH! Beat.

XTOPPS

That never gets easier does it?

BYROXIDANA

Welcome back.

XTOPPS

I wish I could just stay here. Don't make me go back. Everything's fracked to helios in the real world.

BYROXIDANA

Xtopps, you *can* stay here.

XTOPPS

I can?!

BYROXIDANA

Remember? I am you. We are we. Everything in all existence... is you. (*eagle cries*)

XTOPPS

Is us! I do remember! (*wind chimes*) That Big Bang was a doozy!

BYROXIDANA

We're still exploding, Xtopps. All of the life in the universe, all of everything. Like the ceremonial fireworks during the Invocation of Euphonic Malaise. There's the boom and the bright flashes of color! And then the greater bursts fade, to reveal those... little sparkly bits, that fizzle to life while they slowly fall from the sky...

Life, Xtopps... is just like those fizzy sparkly bits. Effervescing throughout all of creation, illuminating the nooks and crannies of the universe, just long enough for us all to catch a glimpse at the beauty of what *is*.

XTOPPS

But, why all the strife? Why all the pain, the wars and the conquests? Why all the selfishness?

BYROXIDANA

Because... of fear, Xtopps. Fear blinds us to the love all around us. But love holds everything together, Xtopps. Love is the living thread that knits together the Universe. Remember?

Waves crashing.

XTOPPS

I remember...

Wind/rain/thunder/shaman's rattle.

XTOPPS

But... How do I climb out of that fear-hole? How do I stay in the Kingdom of Izness?

BYROXIDANA

Xtopps...

Train flies through at 200 mph; an eagle cries.

BYROXIDANA

There is no fleeing from fear. You have to see it, embrace it, know it. And then you will know it cannot harm you. Make yourself a home in that fear-hole, Xtopps! Fill it with the soft cushions of purpose! Line it with the fuzzy blankets of love!

XTOPPS

Love...

BYROXIDANA

And when you have sat with your fear, invited it to live within you and pass through you, then, you will be—

XTOPPS and BYROXIDANA

Complete.

Hammer on anvil!

BYROXIDANA

Everything is held together with perfect design.

XTOPPS

Everybody's got their own angle, I guess.

BYROXIDANA

Your purpose is remarkable and your story will be legend, Xtopps. You will get there. But right now, you're here. And here is a beautiful place to be.

XTOPPS

I am complete.

BYROXIDANA

Go effervesce, and show me the beautiful things we've made.

XTOPPS

I love you.

BYROXIDANA

Then come back and see me. Anytime you want. Literally. Don't be a stranger.

Drums crossfade back to Chip banging on the outside of the door.

CHIP

All right, that's enough! I am getting this door open one way or another! I don't care if you're all made of molybdenum! I have got an industrial-grade neodymium magnet right here and I swear to Jones I'll use it if you don't OPEN! THIS! DOOR! RIGHT! NOW!

Whoosh of the isolation chamber door.

XTOPPS

Please, do not disturb yourself unduly, loyal Chip. I have remained in the isolation chamber entirely of my own free will, and I now depart it gladly.

CHIP

...Xtopps? Are you... ok?

XTOPPS

I am beyond sophonsified, my noble benefactor. The pangs of craving remain within me, but I will allow them to pass through me and beyond me, and thus, all will be well.

CHIP

You mean—?

XTOPPS

Yes, Chip. I feel I can say with some confidence that the demon legume no longer clutches me in its fearful grasp.

ALTHAAR

Congratulation to you from Althaar!

XTOPPS

Thank you, my friend.

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

Wait, it worked?! The isolation chamber bit actually worked? Holy crap, you've gotta be pulling my footcuff! This is amazing! Listen, Xtopps, baby, don't go anywhere, all right? I just wanna record a couple quick testimonials before you take off. Oh, mang, an endorsement from a real live Xybidont Baronet! Talk about a publicity goldmine! This is going to be—

CLONG! CHIP applies the industrial-grade neodymium magnet to LEARY-BOT's skull plating, who starts singing at a gradually diminishing tempo, à la HAL 9000's "Bicycle Built for Two":

TIMOTHY LEARY-BOT

—ee i ee i ooooo...

Thud.

ALTHAAR

Mr. Frinkel!

CHIP

What? I told you we needed to keep this a secret!

ALTHAAR

But to assault Timothy Leary-Bot with the industrial-grade neodymium magnet! It is a violence most distressing!

CHIP

I know, I know, but we have to make absolutely sure the Foogs don't hear about this. And I'm sure this isn't the first time Leary-Bot has had his memory scrambled.

ALTHAAR

Not every problem can be solved by the involuntary memory-scramblings, Mr. Frinkel!

XTOPPS

I'm afraid such extreme measures are sadly necessary in this case, gentle Althaar. If the Fugulnari were to glean the slightest inkling that I am not as I was, they would move to eliminate me from the pegboard before I could apprise the the Grand Duchess my mother of my freshly-restored faculties, and enlist her to beseech intervention of Her Incalculable Inscrutability, on behalf of our Human protégés.

CHIP

Yeah, about that. Are you going to be able to, like, re-Xtopps-ify yourself when you're in public? Because if you can't, the Foogs are going to twig that something's up before we make it halfway back to the Egg.

XTOPPS

Is the difference in my demeanor so readily apparent, friend Chip?

CHIP

Uh, yeah. You've said my name right three times now, for starters. Not gonna lie, it's kind of giving me the habdabs.

XTOPPS

Then needs must I endeavor to replicate my previous inebriosity, my good sirs. I mean, my good... zoods.

[scene 17] Closing credits music.

ANNOUNCER

You've been listening to *Life With Althaar*, episode 31!

This episode was written by Philip Cruise and Christopher Lee for Gemini CollisionWorks and starred

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Zuri Washington as Dee

Berit Johnson as Althaar

John Amir as John B

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant Frall

Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

Eli Gantias as H.F.

and Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel

and also featured

David Arthur Bachrach, Ian W. Hill, Jessica Stoya, Linus Gelber, Olivia Baseman, Holly Pocket McCaffrey, Anna Stefanic, Leila Okafor, Lex Friedman, Fred Backus, Clara Francesca, Leila Okafor, Dean Haspiel, Rolls Andre, and Philip Cruise

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

Berit is the supervising producer, showrunner, and script supervisor

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

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

Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanic

Life With Althaar logo and illustration created by Dean Haspiel

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We'll be back in two weeks with another "Tale from the Fairgrounds," but first, who is this sumptuously-adorned Xybidont making his ill-humored way toward the Electric Egg...?

[scene 18] The Electric Egg.

SOPON

Hi there, what can I getcha?

Q'PUTROUS

You can "get" me His Radiance the Baronet of Kandephaa'a, if you please. I believe he is expecting me. Lord Q'Putrous of House Mistetvotten.

CHIP

I got this, Sopes. Salutations, Your Beneficence! Welcome to the Electric Egg, official governmental seat of Kandephaa'a. His Radiance is indeed expecting you.

A crash from the back.

XTOPPS

Chorp! I got four of my feet stuck in the mop bucket again!

Q'PUTROUS

Is *that* His Radiant Splendor?

CHIP

Yeah, ah, he's a little under the weather today. Something he ate.

Q'PUTROUS

I am well aware of the Baronet's... proclivities, factotum. There is no need to conceal his debaucheries from me. But I must nonetheless perform the obsequies due his position, no matter the desultory fashion in which he chooses to occupy it.

CHIP

Suit yourself. He's just through here.

Analog office door.

CHIP

Hey, Xtopps? You decent? I got a Lord Q'Putrous here to see you.

XTOPPS

Oh hey, mang... You from Piblorr? I haven't seen the seventeen moons since I was a pupa. All those prayers, and lunar offerings. A stone voider, yeah? Inutterably tiresome.

CHIP clears his throat meaningfully.

XTOPPS

Oh, ah, yeah! That is to say, bouge on in, zood. Let us have a squeak.

Q'PUTROUS

Ugh. If I must. ...What is that dreadful odor?

XTOPPS

Eau de recycled cherry gelato, mostly.

Q'PUTROUS

Repugnant.

CHIP

All righty, then! I'll leave you to it.

XTOPPS

Hey, ah, Chorp? A scintilla of sequestration would not be amiss, mang.

CHIP

Gotcha. Hwæt, NERCA! Run silent, run deep!

*Boop of office privacy system activating, followed by the office door closing behind
CHIP.*

Q'PUTROUS

I am here merely to enact the formal greetings owed to your station, Most Splendid. Such elaborate precautions seem somewhat surplus to requirements. Why should we require privacy? It defies belief that there should remain any tarnishment your reputation has yet to accrue.

XTOPPS

On the contrary, Your Flourishing Bounty. Privacy is of the utmost exigency, if you are to depart this station unmolested by those who would constrain me from colloquy with Her Grandiosity my mother.

Q'PUTROUS

...Your Radiance? Am I to take it from your abandonment of the wretched patois that was your wont in metristals past, that you are... not high?

XTOPPS

Oh, I'm high, all right. I'm the High Lord of Menchitan! And I am once again in the full flower of my faculties!

Q'PUTROUS

Her Grandiosity will be beside herself with joy! Her eldest, no longer in thrall to the scourge of the Fabaceae? I can scarcely credit it!

XTOPPS

But credit it you must, Q'Putrous! For I urgently require your fealty and furtherance, in order that we might combat a scourge that threatens the Imperium itself! Make it known to all Houses of the Resplendent Assembly, that Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, son of J'Bollont, House Byllaburt, Marquess Runroar of Brellipheen-Hwyine, Baronet of Kandephaa'a, Potentate of the Fyrexian Isles, High Lord of Menchitan, Master of Her Grandiosity's War Snails, and Human Exchange Concourse Staring Contest Champion, of the Grand Duchy of Prang, is restored! And he calls for aid!