

Life with Althaar

Episode 6: Blood is Thicker than Vacuum

Draft 3.0 (recording script), 8/1/19 - BAJ/IWH

*The Fairgrounds travel hub/customs area. Maybe a few **background discussions**, but not too busy--no large ships are in the process of arriving or departing at the moment.*

TRAVEL HUB ANNOUNCEMENT VOICE

NebulAir Passenger Flight 528 to the Horsehead Nebula, departing from Airlock Sowilo 3, is now boarding. Priority passengers for NebulAir 528, please proceed to Airlock Sowilo 3. Please make sure to check around your seating area before departure; the Fairgrounds assumes no responsibility for abandoned possessions, travel companions, or hopes and dreams.

Sounds continue in the background as the focus moves to a specific area.

COMMANDER

And these Human diplomats didn't say anything about why it is they're here?

FRALL

We should find out in a moment, sir. Their ship has just completed docking protocols.

COMMANDER

What do you mean, "we" should find out, Frall? You "project simultaneous extrusions of consciousness into all points of space and time." Don't you already know what they want?

FRALL

On one level, yes, but you know I do my best to avoid spoilers, Mindy.

COMMANDER

Ugh, fine. Well, it must be something big, to get a couple of high-ranking League diplomats all the way out here. Unless they're just passing through on their way to an alien posting.

FRALL

They did seem anxious to speak to you personally. Even without consulting my future iterations, I think we can assume this will be more than a simple meet-and-greet.

COMMANDER

It had better be. If they've dragged me down here just to waste my time...

ZNARIS

(approaching)

Ah, hello! Commander Torianna, I presume?

COMMANDER

Yes, and you are?

ZNARIS

Counselor William Znaris, of the League of Humans Diplomatic Corps.

COMMANDER

Welcome aboard. This is my second, Lieutenant Commander Frallen-Br'ar.

FRALL makes a shimmering noise.

ZNARIS

Yes yes. No time for chit-chat. Have the Xybidonts arrived yet?

COMMANDER

Xybidonts? We always have a few on board--Frall?

Another brief shimmer.

FRALL

There are a total of twenty-two Xybidonts on station at the moment.

ZNARIS

No, no! The official delegation from Xybidon! Are they here yet?

COMMANDER

(confused)

I don't believe we have any official delegation here. Unless they might be traveling incognito?

SUSAN

That would be unlikely, Commander. The Xybidont aristocracy aren't exactly known for their subtlety --they tend to go in for crowds of servants strewing flux-lily petals in their path, that kind of thing.

COMMANDER

Then I think we can safely say your delegation has yet to arrive, Ms.-- I'm sorry, I didn't get your name?

SUSAN

Susan T--

ZNARIS

Focus, please! At least we're not too late. But we can't have you spoiling things with some ignorant blunder--we'll need to brief you thoroughly before the Xybidonts arrive.

COMMANDER

(deciding to ignore the rudeness)

...And when will that be?

ZNARIS

Anytime between yesterday and a few days from now.

SUSAN

We can probably rule yesterday out.

ZNARIS

(increasingly annoyed)

YES, thank you. We don't know exactly when they're coming, but we know they *are* coming, and we've raced out here on the League's fastest transport to make sure they get what they want when they arrive. The continued stability of Human-Xybidont trade relations depends on them leaving the Fairgrounds satisfied with our handling of this situation!

COMMANDER

And just what is it that they want from the Fairgrounds? If this is about the peanut butter problem, we do get the occasional smuggler coming through, but nothing large-scale compared to--

ZNARIS

No no no no no! This is far more dire than a simple controlled substance issue! This is something that could conceivably upend the entire Xybidont Empire! And it's up to us to make sure it doesn't!

Music and sound transition to standard opening.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents

Life with Althaar!

Episode 6:

"Blood is Thicker than Vacuum..."

The Electric Egg on a relatively slow "afternoon".

XTOPPS

And the five of domes takes it to 53, another two points for me.

H.F.

Goddammit, Xtopps, I was sure you didn't have anything left lower than a 6. Ok, five of clubs, one point for last card, let's see your hands.

KWONTZ

(warbling (explanation of hand))

H.F.

Eight points, not too shabby, Kwontzy. How about you, Xtopps?

XTOPPS

Seventeen.

H.F.

Holy hopping hydrozine!

XTOPPS

Double run of four for ten, three fifteens for another six. And one for his nobs.

Toward the end of the preceding, an ominous clunk is heard in the background from the seltzer machine.

CHIP

(from the middle distance)

Hey H.F., I think the selzer machine might be doing the thing again, you mind taking a look at it?

H.F.

Is it making seltzer?

CHIP

Well, yeah...

H.F.

Then you're fine. Ok, 6 points for me, let's see what's in the crib... Three, four, seven, nine, ten, and the Monk of clubs. Bupkis. If you'd discarded that 8 of charms I'd have had a decent hand there.

XTOPPS

Yeah, that's why I didn't.

H.F.

You know, Xtopps, for a glitched-out peanut butter junkie, you are the cagiest 3-D cribbage player I have ever met.

KWONTZ

(warbling of agreement)

H.F.

And this kid's been around!

XTOPPS

Well, you know, H.F., it's all about grooving on the patterns. Music, cards, you go deep enough into it, it's all just numbers, mang.

An abrupt seltzer machine noise.

CHIP

H.F., it's getting louder!

H.F.

No sweat, Chip, I'll take a look at it later. Listen, Xtopps, are you sure that p.b. doesn't give you some kind of X-ray vision or mild precog abilities or something? Because this is shaping up to be the shortest game of 3D cribbage I've ever played, and no one's that lucky.

KWONTZ

(warbling)

H.F.

Yeah, especially on the Fairgrounds.

XTOPPS

Nah, mang, Xybidont photoreceptors glom the same vibes as Humans', and I go through time one second per second like most everybody else. The only difference between you and me is the chunk-style monkey on my thorax and a couple dozen limbs.

H.F.

All right, all right, deal.

Sound of twenty-four cards being dealt very rapidly by twelve arms.

XTOPPS

Not that the limbs don't come in handy.

KWONTZ

(brief warble ("I'll say!"))

The seltzer machine is getting louder and angrier.

CHIP

Can you hear that, H.F.?

H.F.

You still getting selzer?

CHIP

Yeaaaahhh...

H.F.

Ok then! Lemme concentrate. There's no way I can win this, but I can at least try not to get skunked.

KWONTZ

(warbling)

H.F.

And speaking of, when are you going to get that translator fixed?

KWONTZ

(long explanatory warbling)

XTOPPS

That's rough, buddy.

H.F.

I'd like to help you out, but you know how the Robot Union is about that kind of thing. You don't want to end up on the Do-Not-Service list.

KWONTZ

(fearful warbling)

H.F.

Exactly.

XTOPPS

It's your go, H.F.

H.F.

I'm going, I'm going! But I'm still not convinced you're not some kind of multi-system cribbage hustler. Hm... seven of hearts.

XTOPPS

What can I say, I've worked a lot of rooms, and I've pegged a lot of boards. Eight of charms makes fifteen, two points for me.

H.F.

Gah!

KWONTZ

(warbling (played a six, got 3 points))

H.F.

Hah! 5 of spades! A run of four! I feel a comeback coming on...

XTOPPS

Nine of domes, 5 points.

H.F.

By the Forsaken Friars of Fargol-10! How do you keep doing that?!

XTOPPS

Maybe I was just born with it.

H.F.

Oh yeah? Runs in your family, does it?

XTOPPS

Aw, mang. The less said about my family, the better.

KWONTZ

(warbling (“Are we here to talk or are we here to play cards? ”))

H.F.

Of course we’re here to play cards. *(plays a card)* So, Xtopps, you left behind a bad scene back home? That’s a pretty common story around here.

XTOPPS

Yeah, that place is fully voided. A serious vonch, you dig?

KWONTZ

(brief warble (“Go. ”))

XTOPPS

Two for pairs.

H.F.

Dammit! Go.

KWONTZ

(brief warble (“Go. ”))

XTOPPS

And one for go.

H.F.

Hey, no need to be embarrassed, Xtopps. We’ve all got a few skeletons in the family closet.

KWONTZ

(offended warbling)

H.F.

It’s just an expression, Kwontz.

KWONTZ

(offended warbling)

H.F.

No, I wasn’t trying to be endoskeletal-centric--would you just play a card?

KWONTZ

(brief truculent warble)

H.F.

Anyway, like I was saying, my family tree has more than a few rotten branches. Dad ran black-market hydyne to Mars, Mom spent her twenties smuggling phase rifles to Oberon, Grandma was wanted in three systems for insider trading, and my brother's an insurance executive.

KWONTZ

(warble)

H.F.

Yeah, it broke Dad's heart. *(plays a card)* Two for pairs. So no worries, Xtopps, whatever your people've got going on, it's no big thing to me.

Slow crescendo from the seltzer machine in the background during the following.

XTOPPS

Yeah, well, with some drifts, everything's a big thing. One for last card, count 'em up. When I said I didn't want to take over the family business, they flipped it like all seventeen moons of Piblorr just hit terminal orbit. Humans are way more my speed.

H.F.

Well, we're happy to have you, even if you are the system's biggest cribbage shark. Eight points.

KWONTZ

(warble)

XTOPPS

Twelve points for me, and another... fourteen for the crib. That's game, gentlefolk.

H.F.

Unbelievable! That's it, I'm outta here.

CHIP

Hey, H.F.! What about this seltzer machine?

H.F.

I keep telling you, Chip, it's not broken yet. Besides, I'm on my rest cycle--John'll be on duty, you can call him when it goes bad.

CHIP

Well how long do I have before that?

H.F.

Iunno, maybe half an hour--

Whooooooooooooo-gagungkaklunk!

H.F.

--maybe less. Later, Chip!

CHIP

Sopon, get me John B!

Music transition to a small conference room, to which the COMMANDER, FRALL and the Earth diplomats have retreated to talk in private. Fade in on Znaris holding forth.

ZNARIS

...should be addressed directly as “Your Grandiloquence,” or indirectly as “Your Fulmination,” but again, that’s only if they’re wearing a *turquoise* sash. If the sash is *aquamarine*, the proper indirect form of address is instead “Your Lustration,” while the direct of course remains unchanged. Now, if the sash is *cerulean*--

COMMANDER

Is this really the best use of our time, Znaris? I’d like to know--

ZNARIS

The Xybidont Empire takes its titles extremely seriously, Commander! The last thing we need in a delicate negotiation is some L.O.H. Enforcement buffoon throwing a wrench into the proceedings by using the wrong honorific! The repercussions could be--

COMMANDER

(testily)

Mr. Znaris, my crew is more than capable of following your lead when it comes to formal terms of address. I want to know exactly what it is we’re negotiating for, preferably sometime before the negotiations actually start!

SUSAN

Well, that’s part of the problem. We’re not really sure.

COMMANDER

What? You came in burning up the priority comms channel over some so-called emergency and you don’t even know what it *is*?

ZNARIS

You may not appreciate the efforts of the Diplomatic Corps, Commander, but I can assure you that when I say there’s a crisis brewing, that is nothing less than the truth! The information we’ve received may be... regrettably spotty, but we know that a delegation of Xybidonts from the Grand Duchy of Prang will be arriving on the Fairgrounds within the specified time frame, looking for... someone.

FRALL

A Xybidont someone?

SUSAN

As best we can tell, yes. They refused to respond to any further inquiries as to the identity of this person, or their reason for seeking them out. It seems likely that whatever this reason is, it's something that the Empire considers either dangerous or deeply embarrassing. We think they only resorted to soliciting our help because they believe their target won't leave the station willingly. And if *we* can't convince them to go with the delegation either...

ZNARIS

...then it may be up to you, Commander, to come up with an official pretext to force this individual to leave the Fairgrounds.

COMMANDER

I see. Well, thank you for that explanation, Ms...

SUSAN

Susan Torkan. Second Secretary in the League Diplomatic Corps.

COMMANDER

Torkan? I believe we have a resident here who used to share that surname. Any relation?

SUSAN

...No.

COMMANDER

Really? Because I seem to recall reading in his file--

SUSAN

I was under the impression that all the files connecting... that person to his former identity had been expunged. Given that he no longer has any legal claim to that identity. I'm quite surprised you managed to get ahold of them.

COMMANDER

I can still call in a few favors back on Earth from time to time, Ms. Torkan. I did a little research when I learned about John's... unusual situation.

SUSAN

I see.

A Fugulnar-esque rustling in the background during the preceding (as soon as JOHN's name is mentioned).

COMMANDER

And even if he's no longer legally your brother, I don't think it would be illegal to check in on him while you're here. If I recall correctly, the terms of the restraining order only--

ZNARIS

If you're quite done gossiping, Commander, could we *please* return to the matter at hand? We'll also need to arrange accommodations--I believe the Splendide is the closest thing you have to a luxury hotel on the Fairgrounds?

COMMANDER

...That's correct.

ZNARIS

Ugh. Well, it will have to do. Susan, book three, no four! of their finest suites for the delegation, and a reception room. And make sure their kitchens are equipped to handle Xybidont cuisine. Can I at least assume the facilities are peanut-butter free, or will we have a pack of hallucinating aristocrats on our hands?

FRALL

A certain amount of...suggestibility on their part might be quite helpful in the negotiations, actually.

ZNARIS

We will not be drugging an interstellar delegation, Lieutenant!

COMMANDER

The Splendide's kitchens are certainly up to code when it comes to cross-species contamination protocols, Mr. Znaris. I think the Lieutenant was merely trying to lighten the mood a bit.

ZNARIS

Please, Commander! This is no time for levity!

FRALL

I could float closer to the floor if you'd prefer.

SUSAN

I'll make the arrangements with the hotel immediately.

Door whoosh as she exits, accompanied by another faint rustle.

ZNARIS

Commander, your staff *must* be prepared to handle whatever the Xybidonts' requests may turn out to be, once they arrive.

FRALL

I can assemble a security team to remain on alert in case they're needed to apprehend a fugitive, but without more information, it will be difficult to prepare them adequately.

COMMANDER

Do that, Frall. As long as we're operating in the dark here, the best we can do is try to account for every possible contingency.

ZNARIS

Which is why it's vital that you learn the correct protocol for dealing with the Xybidont aristocracy! Moving on to the Under-Viscounts-- That's odd, I could have sworn there was a parlor palm sitting in that corner a moment ago.

COMMANDER

Oh, no.

FRALL

No, there definitely was not.

ZNARIS

...If you say so. Now then, if any of the delegation are wearing *vermillion* epaulettes, they would be Under-Viscounts of the Echelon Primus, who must always be addressed prior to any of the Echelons Secundus or Tertius, who you can of course recognize by their carmine and burgundy epaulettes respectively. Those of the Echelon Primus must be referred to as either "Your Delicacy," "Your Nicety," or "Your Punctility," depending on the current phases of the Seventeen Moons. So, if you'll turn your attention to the charts I've provided...

Fade out on the preceding to the rustling of Mrs. Frondrinax excitedly approaching John & Althaar's suite. She buzzes the doorbell.

ALTHAAR

(over the intercom)

Who is at the door of John and Althaar? Althaar will be most pleased to receive Human guests from behind his curtain of privacy!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

It's me, dears, Mrs. Frondrinax!

ALTHAAR

Ah! Be welcomed to the Suite of John and Althaar, dear Fugulnari friend!

Suite door whoosh as she enters.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Hello, Althaar sweetheart! Is John here?

ALTHAAR

No, FriendJohn has departed for his work duties. Once again all our lives are threatened by the seltzer machine at the Electric Egg! But Mrs. Frondrinax is welcome to await his return in comfort! May Althaar offer some distilled water or ammonium nitrate?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh no, dear, I'm too excited to eat right now! Althaar, you'll never guess who's just arrived at the Fairgrounds!

ALTHAAR

You are most likely correct, Mrs. Frondrinax! There are many many billions of beings in the galaxy and to guess one among all of them would no doubt take Althaar a very long time! It would be best to tell Althaar instead.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, of course, dear, you're such a sensible boy. Well. The Commander and Frall are down in one of the conference rooms with a couple of Earth diplomats, and one of them just happens to be... John's sister Susan!

ALTHAAR

(excited noise) This is a thing of great excitement! The first of FriendJohn's family to come to the Fairgrounds! FriendJohn will be so happy! And this joyous reunion will also be an occasion of much learning for Althaar! Human families present many strangenesses to Althaar's understanding.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You're sure John will be happy?

ALTHAAR

Oh yes! FriendJohn has many times compared Su-san to the Human leader Genghis Khan. So Althaar believes that she is a skilled administrator, and a great proponent of meritocracy and religious tolerance!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, she did seem to be on a pretty important mission from Earth Central, so I do hope she's not here to make trouble for him. You know, as the higher-status sibling, she has the right to challenge him to single combat and eat his heart to gain his strength.

ALTHAAR screams.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh no, what am I thinking, that's the Dilurians. No, that's right, Human siblings never fight! Ever, ever ever.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Then let us go to the Electric Egg and share this excellent news of Su-san with FriendJohn immediately!

Transition back to the travel hub. A big stupid fanfare.

FACTOTUM 1

Gird your unworthy selves for the imminent splendor of The Most Serene Amplified High Notability, J'Yallen Dwan B'techer Men'Walz, Daughter of J'Bellent, House Byllaburt, of the Grand Duchy of Prang!

ZNARIS

This is it, Commander! Remember, keep your eyes respectfully raised to the ceiling until addressed by the Amplisso Magnificat. Lieutenant, just... try to hover as obsequiously as you can.

*Another big stupid fanfare as the Xybidont delegation emerges from their docking bay. Perhaps some jingling of bells or tambourines as they approach. We can't hear the petals being strewn in their path, but strewing is definitely being committed. These folks are a parade. **Staff and travellers witnessing this make suitably impressed noises.***

Q'FULLIN

Who among you stands ready to bestow salutation upon Her Beneficent Splendor?

ZNARIS

It is I, William Znaris, Son of Janet, who rejoices in that honor, on behalf of the League of Humans Diplomatic Corps!

Q'FULLIN

And who are these who second you, William Son of Janet?

ZNARIS

They are Susan Torkan, Daughter of Mina, also of the League Diplomatic Corps:

SUSAN

Your Effulgence.

ZNARIS

Commander Mindy Torianna, Daughter of Catherine, who commands the station you grace with your coruscating presence:

COMMANDER

Your Effulgence.

ZNARIS

And Lieutenant Commander Frallen-Br'ar, Spawn of... Itself.

FRALL shimmers.

ZNARIS

It is an exquisite delight to welcome Her Beneficent Splendor and all of her factota to the Human Exchange Concourse! We are humbled and awed by the largesse of your glorious symmetry. Truly, the fruition of this meeting will be as opulent as the Uncountable Pearls of the Nazlatan!

J'YALLEN

Enough! We are here on a matter of the utmost delicacy, which we have no intention of discussing before this rabble!

Some "Awww"s from the rabble.

ZNARIS

Of course, Your Effulgence. We've arranged for the use of the Hotel Splendide's reception lounge for our discussions. If Your Beneficent Splendor would deign to follow me?

Extra-fancy door whoosh as they enter the Splendide lounge. Faint posh background music. Maybe a water feature.

CUSTOMER RELATIONS ROBOT (Rosalind Franklin)

Welcome, gentlebeings, to the Hotel Splendide! I'm Rosalind Franklin-bot, and it will be my great pleasure to offer any assistance you may require while in residence at our Grand Monarch Xeno-Hospitality Suites! Our kitchens stand ready to prepare thousands of dishes from the cuisine of over two dozen worlds, delivered either to your rooms or buffet-style here in the reception hall during the course of your deliberations. We will of course be delighted to offer you a full line of credit at the Casino Splendide during your stay, as well as access to our Olympic swimming pool and exercise facilities complete with adjustable gravity settings. Our spa offers a variety of facials, wraps, depilatory treatments, repilatory treatments, and eighteen different forms of both traditional and telekinetic massage. Please let me know if there's any way I can enhance your enjoyment of your Hotel Splendide experience.

Q'FULLIN

We have all we require for the moment. Now begone, mechano-being, until you are summoned again! The Most Serene Amplified High Notability requires privacy. Begone!

CUSTOMER RELATIONS ROBOT

Of course, sir.

Discreet service door whoosh as she exits.

ZNARIS

The League of Humans understands the need for discretion, Your Effulgence, and we are prepared to offer all assistance possible, in the interest of interstellar amity and the long-standing relationship between our peoples. May we, your humble servants, be informed as to the exact nature of your mission here?

J'YALLEN

We appreciate your directness, Znaris of Earth, and will delay no further. We have come to retrieve a relation of ours: my quarter-cousin, the Marquess of Brellipheen, a young Xybidont who has been traveling in Human space for some years. His mother the Grand Duchess has thus far allowed him to... indulge himself in this fashion, but as his uncle the Baronet of Kandephaa'a has been stricken with J'Filgyn's Blight and is not expected to recover, it is time for the Marquess to give up his childish antics, return to Xybidon and take up his uncle's title.

ZNARIS

And would Your Scintillence condescend to tell us the name of this person?

J'YALLEN

The Well Learned Illustrious Lordship, Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, Marquess Runroar, Son of J'Bollont, House Byllaburt, of the Barony of Brellipheen-Hwyine.

Subtle booping as Susan looks this up on her PDA, as well as a shimmer from FRALL.

ZNARIS

I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the name... Susan?

SUSAN

No record of such a person exists in our databases, Your Effulgence.

FRALL

And no one by that name has passed through Fairgrounds Customs.

J'YALLEN

He has of course been travelling under an alias, in order that he not bring disgrace to the family--a condition his mother set forth when she allowed him the latitude to occupy himself as he sees fit. Thus our insistence on secrecy--it is imperative that the name of the future Baronet of Kandephaa'a not be linked to any... indiscretions he may have committed while in Human territory.

COMMANDER

And do you know this alias?

J'YALLEN

My wayward cousin did not see fit to inform us of his plans in that regard, no. But we come bearing a hologram of his likeness, as he was before he left us. This should allow your people to seek him out. Q'Fullin?

Q'FULLIN

Behold, gentlebeings, the resplendent visage of His Lordship, Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, House Byllaburt, Marquess of Brellipheen-Hwyine, Baronet-Apparent of Kandephaa'a!

*The holo is opened with its own stupid little electronic fanfare. The **COMMANDER** and **FRALL** react.*

COMMANDER

Is that...?

FRALL

I believe so, Commander.

J'YALLEN

You know the Marquess? He is here after all?

COMMANDER

Yes, Your Effulgence, he is. We've had... a few dealings with him.

FRALL

Yes, we've had to throw him in the Peanut Butter Jar more than once.

J'YALLEN

The... *peanut butter*... jar?

Perturbed Xybidont murmuring from the assembled factota.

ZNARIS

Explain yourself at once, Commander!

COMMANDER

I must apologize for the expression, Your Effulgence. We have a few cells in the brig that are optimized for the comfort of the most common non-Human species, and, as peanut butter intoxication is unfortunately the most frequent cause of imprisonment for your people here, the crew has taken to referring to the Xybidont facilities as the "Peanut Butter Jar". No disrespect is intended, I assure you.

SUSAN

No doubt Your Effulgence will recall that the assignation of informal nicknames is a considered a friendly gesture among Humans, and take this one in the spirit in which it was meant.

J'YALLEN

It is not your silly names that concern me, but the fact of the Marquess's imprisonment! What crimes against Human law did he commit to require that such measures be taken against him? Use of inappropriate flatware? The wearing of white after the Day of Labor? Or perhaps--I know your people frown on duelling, but you must understand that there are times when a Xybidont must defend his honor. These youthful peccadilloes could have been overlooked, surely!

COMMANDER

I'm afraid it wasn't any of those, Your Effulgence...

FRALL

We call it the "Peanut Butter Jar" for a reason.

Shock! and Horror! from the delegation.

ZNARIS

Lieutenant!

COMMANDER

Lieutenant, in the interest of interstellar amity, I think it would be best if you returned to the bridge. And let the security detail know they can stand down, this doesn't look to be a fugitive situation.

FRALL

Understood, Commander.

Shimmer as FRALL phases out.

J'YALLEN

Am I given to understand, Commander, that His Lordship the Marquess of Brellipheen-Hwyine, the future Baronet of Kandephaa'a is... a *peanut butter junkie!*?

Shock! Horror!

COMMANDER

I'm afraid so, Your Effulgence. Not a particularly disruptive one, I should add--we've only had to detain him a couple of times when he was... vacationing a little too far from reality.

J'YALLEN

Commander, the Xybidont Empire is prepared to overlook these acts of lèse-majesté, on the condition that they are never linked publicly to the Baronet-Apparent.

COMMANDER

Understood, Your Effulgence.

J'YALLEN

But it is clear that young Q'Mellix must be judiciously whisked onto our brigantine and removed from this corrupting environment without a moment's delay!

ZNARIS

Commander, how long will it take your staff to search the station for him?

COMMANDER

I don't think that will be necessary, Mr. Znaris. At this hour, he's most likely at work.

ALL THE XYBIDONTS

WORK!?!?!

SHOCK! HORROR! *The sound of an extremely rich and well-bred Xybidont passing out and falling to a finely-carpeted floor. General hubbub--fussing from her attendants, consternation from ZNARIS, attempted soothing from SUSAN. Transition to another form of audio chaos at the Electric Egg, as the seltzer machine is doing its ramping-up-to-doomsday bit.*

JOHN

Ok Sopon, just hold it there for a second, and... done!

The malfunctioning tube is sucked back into place, the klaxons and warning messages cut off abruptly, and the seltzer machine once again hums in a fully functional and non-lethal fashion. JOHN closes the machine.

JOHN

Seltzer's fixed!

A few cheers & a smattering of applause from the patrons.

CHIP

Ah, great! Perfect timing, John--Dee and Xtopps are going to start their set in a minute, and those alarms don't really do a lot for the ambience. Hey, any chance you could disable those before you head out?

JOHN

No one makes any changes without approval from the Committee back on Earth. You know that, Chip.

CHIP

Sure sure, but you know, accidents happen, if you maybe were to jostle a wire or something while you're poking around in there...

JOHN

Not if it's bigger than 16-gauge. Plus the compressor shares coolant with the life support system, so if you like breathing...

CHIP

Big fan.

JOHN

Then I wouldn't mess around with the alarms.

CHIP

Gotcha. Well, thanks anyway.

Official bells & tambourines jangle and are quickly muffled with a "Shhh!"

CHIP

What the--?

FACTOTUM 1

(from the doorway)

Prepare your wretched spirits for the impending magnificence of... *(oh shit we're incognito)* a completely inconspicuous individual! Marvel not at their splendor, plebeians, for their business is none of your own!

The Xybidont party enters as inconspicuously as they can (not very) and takes in the unbearable squalor of their surroundings with as much discretion as they can manage (not much).

ZNARIS

Well, Commander? You seemed certain the Marquess would be here. If you've led these *(slightly raised voice for the benefit of bystanders)* Perfectly Ordinary Xybidonts *(back to normal)* on a wild goose chase through the... seedy underbelly of this miserable garbage scow, you'll answer to Earth Central for it!

COMMANDER

Mr. Znaris, this is hardly the seedy underbelly of this miserable garbage scow; it's barely even the seedy armpit. Frinkel! Do you have a moment?

CHIP

Anything for you, Commander! Say, if this is about the Gendaran busboys sleeping under the bandstand, that's all taken care of, I set them up with some hammocks in the storage room.

COMMANDER

The bandstand wasn't the issue, Chip, it's the sleeping that's against regs. You're not zoned for residential, how many times-- You know what, we'll deal with that later. Right now I need to talk to another one of your employees.

The Xybidonts are still assing about in the background.

CHIP

Ahh, ok... I think I can guess which one.

COMMANDER

Is he working tonight?

CHIP

Sure, they'll be starting in a minute. What's up?

COMMANDER

Nothing I can talk about. Is there somewhere more private we could sit down with him? I've got something of a, uh...

Xtopps has already started vamping on stage.

DEE

(from the stage)

Welcome, gentlebeings, to the Electric Egg, (**COMMANDER: “Oh, no.”**) your home on the Fairgrounds for the finest in intoxicants, entertainment, and galactic fusion cuisine! I’m Delilah Mallory, and joining me as always on keys, drums, guitar, bass, viola, and fleezborp is the incomparable “Xtopps!”

A flourish from all the aforementioned instruments.

DEE

Xtopps, you’re not too busy over there with all that equipment to sing a little something with me, are you?

XTOPPS

Never too busy for you, Dee.

DEE

Isn’t he a peach? Now, folks, out here in the vast empty expanse of space, (*fleezborp “space” noise*) sometimes things like romance can get a little difficult.

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell ‘em, sister!

Rimshot.

DEE

She knows what I’m talking about. So now, Xtopps and I would like to sing you a little number about two sentients trying to chase away loneliness, while maintaining their oxygen supply. We call this one, “Baby, It’s a Vacuum Outside.”

SUSAN

William! Is that...

ZNARIS

Good lord! The Marquess!

COMMANDER

Shh! Let’s see if we can keep the delegation distracted until he gets offstage. It’s our only chance to get through this without making a scene.

ZNARIS

Oh, this is infamous!

DEE

(singing)

It's time I should leave...

XTOPPS

(ditto)

But it's a vacuum out there...

DEE

Getting harder to breathe--

XTOPPS

But it's a vacuum out there!

DEE

The orbital win-

XTOPPS

When will I see you again?

DEE

-dow's closing soon.

XTOPPS

Or you could slingshot 'round that moon...

J'YALLEN

(shouting)

By the seventeen moons of Piblorr! Cease this unseemly display!

Music stops.

DEE

My oxygen's getting low, sir-- *(stops singing)* Hey, uh, Xtopps?

CHIP

Hey now, folks, no need to get excited, why don't you all have a seat and--

J'YALLEN

Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, put down that fleezborp at once!

XTOPPS

Aw, nertz.

DEE

Xtopps? What's going on?

XTOPPS

Sorry, Dee, looks like you'll have to fire up the Karaoke-O-Matic. I've got family in town.

Boos and disappointment from the audience.

DRUNK ALIEN

Aw, I wanted to hear "Beyond Uranus" with a fleezborp sola!

CHIP

(taking the mic)

Ok folks, let's settle down now, we've still got plenty of entertainment for you this evening. We'll just take a second to set up our backup backup music, and for the next hour, we'll be having a buy-one-get-one-uh... half-off special on Ganymede Gimlets! And remember, later on, MC Magnetopause will be spinning all those retro 24th century hits, so kick back, relax, and let's all ignore the messy Xybidont family drama going down over by the bar.

DEE

Well... guess it's time for a medley of all your public-domain favorites! So, to get us started, how about a classic little oldie from back on Earth, something we like to call, "Sumer Is Icum In!"

DEE begins some public domain song stylings. Meanwhile:

XTOPPS

Hey, Auntie Len. You could have waited until the end of my set.

J'YALLEN

I care not for your "set"!

Q'FULLIN

And you will address the Amplified respectfully, as befits a scion of Xybidon!

XTOPPS

Nah, jeck that. I effoed the Empire for a reason, ok? I appreciate the visit, but, you know, I've got to get back to work.

Brief Xybidont consternation at the mention of work.

Q'FULLIN

Impudence! You dare defy the Amplified, and through her, your mother, the Grand Duchess?

XTOPPS

I mean, yeah?

J'YALLEN

I'm afraid you have no choice in this matter, young Marquess. The Baronet of Kandephaa's is... unwell, and thus, we come bearing the Scepters of J'Threnn, that you may assume your uncle's position without delay, before returning to Xybidon to take the Oath of Blessed Imperium.

XTOPPS

Uncle Demps?

J'YALLEN

Yes. I'm afraid he's expected to depart the material plane shortly.

XTOPPS

Whoa, that's... a real drag, Auntie, but... I'm still not gonna go. Tell Mother I said hi, ok?

Q'FULLIN

I can scarcely bring myself to believe this effrontery! My suzerain, it would be a gross transgression for one as lowly as myself to upbraid the Marquess, but, were I to commit such an impertinence, I would no doubt say: *(getting increasingly worked up & shouty)* Most Honored! Have you no respect for your quarter-cousin? Have you no respect for the Grand Duchess your mother? Have you no respect for the Fifty-Three Principles of Zorfont!?

XTOPPS

No.

SUSAN

Gentlebeings, may I take the liberty of reminding you of the need for discretion in this matter? If all parties are amenable, perhaps we might adjourn to the Hotel Splendide? We can all take a few moments to settle ourselves, the Marquess can change out of his stage costume,

XTOPPS

Costume?

SUSAN

and we can resume this discussion in relative comfort and privacy.

J'YALLEN

...Very well. We will re-convene in one half-hour. Znaris, you will ensure that the obdurate Marquess is in attendance.

ZNARIS

Your wisdom dazzles as it enlightens, Your Effulgence.

Departing jingles and cries of "Make way!" as J'Yallen and entourage swoop out.

COMMANDER

Well played, Susan.

JOHN

SUSAN!? What are you doing here?

SUSAN

Working.

JOHN

Oh, of course. Why would I think you were here to visit me? It's not like anyone else has.

SUSAN

Listen...

JOHN

No, it's fine. I'm sure you have lots of super important diplomatic work to do.

SUSAN

I do, actually.

JOHN

Yeah, those fancy canapés don't eat themselves.

ALTHAAR

(from outside)

ALTHAAR WISHES TO ENTER THE ELECTRIC EGG!

SUSAN

Ugh! Typical! Just because you can't be bothered to--

DEE

(on the mic)

Human patrons! There is an Iltorian entering the Electric Egg! Repeat, an Iltorian is about to enter the Egg! Please avert your eyes, or if you prefer, you can raise your hand and the waitstaff will be bringing around blindfolds.

Background patron "I can take it!"

SUSAN

So this would be your roommate? Only you could end up rooming with an Iltorian, I swear.

JOHN

Hey, Althaar actually *likes* me. It's a nice change from back home. Good luck with your canapés, I'm out.

DEE

(on the mic)

Eyes down, folks! Here he comes!

ALTHAAR and Mrs. F enter. Vomiting and hubris in the background.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn! Althaar and Mrs. Frondrinax have the most wonderful news! Su-san, the sister of FriendJohn, is here on the Fairgrounds! For the visiting!

JOHN

Not for the visiting, Althaar. Look, I have to go. I'll see you at home, ok?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh dear, something must have him awfully upset. He lit out of here like something was nibbling at his shoots! (*seeing Susan*) Oh! Hello miss! We haven't been officially introduced, I'm Mrs. Frondrinax, I'm your brother's neighbor up on Alef 1, and of course this is his roommate Althaar, now don't look at him dear, you'll put yourself in a terrible state, but we came rushing down here just as soon as we heard that John had some family on the station, because we're all so excited to meet you, and I'm sure John will be thrilled to show you around the place once he's done with whatever it was that took him out of here in such a hurry, won't he Althaar, he's such a helpful young man, always rushing this way and that with his tools and such and fixing all the malfunctions we get around here, well not all the malfunctions of course, the Robot Union wouldn't stand for that! but still he's very handy and you should be terribly proud.

ALTHAAR

Welcoming to Su-san, sister to FriendJohn! This meeting is of great pleasure to Althaar!

SUSAN

(dealing with her discomfort at Althaar's presence relatively well)

Uh, thank you, Althaar, Mrs. Frondrinax. I'm a bit busy at the moment, so I'm afraid I don't have time to chat.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Then Althaar will not delay Su-san further! But perhaps later when the busy-ness has diminished, Su-san may enjoy a pleasant meal at the home of Althaar and FriendJohn?

SUSAN

I'm sorry, Althaar, but I don't think either John or I would enjoy that.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar has installed a privacy curtain for Human comfort! John and Su-san will not expel fluids at the sight of Althaar! It is a promise!

SUSAN

That's... very considerate, Althaar, but you're actually not the main problem. John and I haven't had a pleasant meal together since we were on solid foods.

ZNARIS

(approaching as SUSAN and COMMANDER try to warn him)

Susan, if you please! These constant distractions of yours are--*(screams, vomits)*

SUSAN

Oh, wonderful. William? William? Remember the briefing--eyes down, hands in blinder positions, wait for it to pass, and *don't think about him*.

COMMANDER

Deep breaths, Mr. Znaris. Try to imagine the smell of fresh-baked bread, that seems to help.

ALTHAAR

Althaar apologizes for the causing of distress! Althaar will obscure himself behind this decorative trellis! Althaar is becoming as small as possible! Please fear not, gentle Humans!

ZNARIS coughs & groans. Rustle of Althaar stashing himself.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

It's all right, dearies, you can uncover your eyes, the dear boy's completely hidden behind this *(getting distracted & a bit turned on)* rather dashing Algerian Ivy feature. Hello there, handsome...

COMMANDER

(calling across the bar to whoever's cleaning up)

You're going to want to bring that mop bucket over here when you get a minute.

SUSAN

(to ZNARIS)

Feeling better?

ZNARIS

(getting even more freaked out)

Never mind that now, we have barely half an hour to get the Marquess to agree to this meeting! This is a crisis! A disaster! A calamity!

XTOPPS

Hey, I'll come to the meeting, just be cool, ok?

SUSAN

What? Just like that?

XTOPPS

Sure. There's going to be a spread, right? I heard something about canapés?

COMMANDER

All you can eat.

XTOPPS

Ok, flush. See you there.

SUSAN

I can't believe that worked.

COMMANDER

Never underestimate the appeal of free food to a musician. Just keep breathing, Mr. Znaris, picture yourself in your favorite bakery...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

...and what strong tendrils you have! You know, I'm not normally this forward with a plant I've just met, but--

ALTHAAR

Mrs. Frondrinax?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh my blades and petioles! I forgot you were hiding back there! I just get a little lonely sometimes, you know how it is, and there aren't many of my kind here to talk to...

ALTHAAR

Commiseration to you from Althaar! But apologies--there is some urgency! Althaar fears he has committed a misunderstanding. It seems the presence of Su-san brings no joy to FriendJohn? How is this possible?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I'm as confused as you are, dear. Let's see if we can't figure this out. Now, Susan can't help us while she's preoccupied with this Xybidont business, so it's up to us to shake Johnny out of this wilt he's in... Oh! I know just the thing! If there's one thing all Humans like, it's surprises!

ALTHAAR

Althaar has been instructed most forcefully never to surprise a Human, Mrs. Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, that's because of their silly thing where they spread fertilizer every time they catch a glimpse of you, but no no, ordinarily Humans love to be surprised. Especially by visits from relatives! If we can just get them away from all this fuss and bother, and then arrange a little surprise meeting between the two of them, then this whole tangle will take care of itself, just you wait and see!

*At some point during the preceding, DEE has turned over the stage to MC
Magnetopause:*

MC MAGNETOPAUSE

READY! I SAY ARE YOU READY! MC Magnetopause is here to lay down the righteous three-four all night long, so put down your glasses and get off your asses! I wanna see all your appendages on the floor and MOVIN'! We got the mighty mighty sound of the 24th-Century comin' back at ya! THIS... IS... DUBWALTZ!

DEE

Hey, Xtopps? Can I, uh, talk to you in the green room? I think you have some explaining to do.

XTOPPS

Yeah, ok Dee. Chip? You want to come along? This is kind of a long story, and I don't want to have to tell it twice. Frid, I didn't want to tell it once, but here we are.

CHIP

Sure thing, Xtopps. So pon! I'll be in the back.

ZNARIS

We will expect you at the Hotel Splendide in twenty-six minutes, Marquess!

XTOPPS

I said I'd be there, yeesh.

SUSAN

Well, at least he's been dealt with for the moment. Now, if you'll excuse me, Commander, dub-waltz gives me a headache. Is there somewhere less... cacophonous I could go to prepare?

COMMANDER

There's always the hydroponic gardens--there's one on Gimel 8, not too far from the Splendide.

SUSAN

Perfect, thanks. I'll see you in half an hour.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, I can show you where that is, dear, I was just heading that way myself! (*rustling whisper*) Here's our chance, Althaar darling, go find John and get him over to the gardens! (*back to Susan, fading away as they exit*) It's a pity you don't have more time, dear, or I could take you up to my favorite spot! They've got a titan arum up in Tav 48, and of course it's not due to bloom for a few years yet, but when it does, that's the place to be! All those noisy Humans clear right out! But Gimel 8's very nice, don't get me wrong, they've got some lovely birthworts...

COMMANDER

Why don't you take the chance to relax, too, Mr. Znaris?

ZNARIS

Relax? RELAX?! Are you mad, Commander?

COMMANDER

Look, I get that you've been sent out here to keep the Xybidonts happy, but in the grand scheme of things, will it really be so terrible if Xtopps renounces his title?

ZNARIS

I couldn't care less about one goobered-up aristocrat! But the Xybidont Empire does, and their helium import contract with the Kakisto Trade Consortium comes up for renewal in three months. If we resolve this to their satisfaction, the Empire has assured us they will look *very* favorably on our bid to replace the Consortium as exclusive suppliers of helium and helium derivatives to all of their considerable holdings. If we fail, we won't get another opportunity like this one for another six decades! Billions of credits are riding on this negotiation! So, yes, it is "that big of a deal!"

COMMANDER

Well, that does put a different spin on the situation. But I still think you should try to calm down. You're not going to be much use as a mediator if you burst a blood vessel before we even get in the room.

MC MAGNETOPAUSE

All right, my sliders and hoppers, you all remember this one from the Straussian Distribution, so I don't want to see any hesitation out there, it's time to get your fleckerl on!

Fade out on the above as we move to the green room backstage. Muffled dub-waltz coming through the wall.

XTOPPS

So, yeah, that happened.

DEE

Uh, yeah it did. What the meckel was all that about? Are you seriously royalty?

XTOPPS

Yeahhh, my mom's the Grand Duchess of Prang. Twenty-third of her name, Suzerain of All Gwanteria, Protectress of the Outer Quantities, all that smark. But I vagued out about a dozen years back. Haven't squeaked anyone from the Empire since.

DEE

But they called you "Marquess". Have you been, like, ruling people this whole time?

XTOPPS

Nah, the place runs fine without me. The stewards are the zoods who keep it together. All my folks do is yell at the skulls and throw fancy parties. And insult each other at the parties. And fight duels over the insults. Then throw more fancy parties to celebrate whoever won the duels.

DEE

Ok, I get it. How come you never told us any of this?

XTOPPS

Because I left that life behind, mang. I never thought they'd come looking for me. Not this soon, anyway. Aw, frid... Uncle Demps was a pretty slick profotrix...

DEE

So the whole time we've been working together, you've been lying to me. Pretending to be just some wandering gig-hopper.

XTOPPS

Aw, Dee, don't be like that. I'm Xtopps. None of that other shness is the real me. I don't want to be the Marquess of Brellipheen-Hwyine, it's a real voider.

CHIP

Yeah, but think of the publicity angle! A genuine Xybidont prince, right here on the stage of the Electric Egg!

XTOPPS

Aw, come on, Chorp, it's embarrassing. I mean, Brian May didn't go waving his astrophysics degree around, you dig?

CHIP

Who?

XTOPPS

Human musician, few hundred years back. *(no response)* Wrote "Fat Bottomed Girls?" *(no response)* You two a pair of nulls? He was in Queen!

DEE

Wait, he was royalty too?

XTOPPS

Shoulda been.

CHIP

So that's why you insisted on a per diem, huh? You didn't want to put your real name on a contract and blow your cover!

XTOPPS

Yeah, that, plus I've been around, mang. Cash up front's the only way to go, if you don't want to get frilled over by some chucko-runno club owner. No offense.

CHIP

None taken!

DEE

I don't get it. You left behind a life of luxury to play in bar bands? Like on purpose? You didn't get kicked out over the peanut butter thing?

XTOPPS

Nah, I didn't get into the goober 'til after I hit Human space. I came out here for the music, Dee. First time a classical ensemble did a concert of 20th Century work at the palace--some of the standards, you know, King Crimson, Throwing Muses, Blue Cheer, Charles Mingus, The Carpenters--it changed my life. I was hooked. Hurfed that zombie birdhouse and hitched a ride to Earth first chance I got.

CHIP

Look, Xtopps, on behalf of Humanity I'm flattered, but I gotta be honest, I've never heard of any of those people.

XTOPPS

Ignorance of your culture is not considered cool, Chorp.

DEE

Ok ok, so your family found you--what do they want?

XTOPPS

I guess my Uncle Demps is sick, and he's the last of my mom's brothers, so... his title goes to me.

DEE

So what does that mean? They seemed really worked up about it.

XTOPPS

Yeah, but they're like that all the time. Uptight in triplicate.

DEE

Oh, ok. So they just stopped by to tell you you're the new-- what was it?

XTOPPS

Baronet of Kandephaa'a.

CHIP

That'd look great on a marquee, I'm just saying.

DEE

And now that they've told you, they're heading back to Xybidon?

XTOPPS

Well, yeah, but they want me to come with them.

DEE

So just tell them no.

CHIP

Yeah, you gotta maintain your boundaries, kid.

XTOPPS

Right, right, I did that, but now they've got this meeting thing with the Commander, and those Human diplomats. I'm nerved-out, palominos. I think they're like, scheming. What if they got the Humans to mulch me out?

CHIP

Well, what's the worst that could happen? You pack up a few "snacks" for the road, head back to Xybidon, sign the Baron papers or whatever, say hi to your mom, and you can hop the next transport and be back here in a couple weeks. We can put together a band to sit in for you till then.

DEE

Uh, remember the last time we tried that? Better stick with the Karaoke-O-Matic.

XTOPPS

It's no good, zoods. My folks let me do my own thing for a while, but that was before they found out what my thing was. I don't know if they're more zarked about the p.b. or seeing me work a steady gig, but I am defini-tatively out of slack. If I set one pod in the Empire now, they'll make sure I'm stuck there for good.

DEE

...Can they do that?

XTOPPS

They can do whatever they want, mang, it's Xybidon. So I gotta keep off that brigantine, or I'm frilled. I don't know what they're going to try, but can you be like, my backup at this meeting, because I am tripping lobes right now and this might get hairy.

DEE

Yeah, of course. We've got your back, Xtopps.

CHIP

Don't worry, buddy. You're one of us now. They can't mess with the Electric Egg!

*The hydroponics park. Fade in on another of Mrs. F's monologues, with **SUSAN** occasionally trying to get a word in edgewise.*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

...oh, it's so complicated all the time, protocol this and propriety that, I'm sure you understand, you being a diplomat and all, all these people with all their problems, making their lives so difficult in so many languages, but the one thing that calms everyone right down is to sit with a bunch of friendly plants! So pleasant to just sit and process some good gases with good friends around and what else do you really need? Come down here almost any cycle and you'll find a few sentients just enjoying how silent and peaceful we plantfolk are!

SUSAN

Yes! It's really relaxing, really, um, quiet.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh yes, dear, this is the perfect place for that! Nothing but peace and quiet, 28 hours a day! You won't find anything to wither your petals here!

ALTHAAR

(in the distance)

ALTHAAR IS ENTERING THE HYDROPONIC GARDENS!

SUSAN

Oh Jesus Hoverboarding Christ.

ALTHAAR

(as he approaches, to JOHN)

Yes, this is the perfect place for recovery from the Bad Moods. Many beautiful Earth plants for viewing, and smelling, and the trickling of water from the broken valves of irrigation provides a soothing noise also! And now FriendJohn must look at the sur-prise that has been arranged by Mrs. Frondrinax and Althaar! *(happy noise)*

JOHN

Agh, what? Oh. It's you. Didn't you have some urgent diplomacy to do? What are you, forging an alliance between the flowerbeds?

SUSAN

I was *trying* to relax and go over my notes before my meeting in 20 minutes. A meeting that has billions of credits riding on it, so I want to be at the top of my game. Because I actually care about my responsibilities, unlike *some people*.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is observing the body language of Human tense-ness! Do not worry, good Humans! Althaar will listen from behind the shrubbery, so as not to interfere with this family reunion of great happiness!

JOHN

No, you can stay right here, Althaar. I think my sister should meet my friends. That's something Human sisters do, right Susan?

ALTHAAR

Oh, elation and gratitude! Thank you, FriendJohn and Su-san! It is a great privilege to Althaar to observe the typical Human siblings and their pleasant relation! Commence with the cherishment and affection, as though Althaar were not here, please, dear Human friends!

JOHN

Well, that's... that's sometimes what happens between Human siblings, Althaar, but it doesn't always work out like that. Sometimes siblings can really push each other's buttons.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Is it permitted to see these buttons, please?

JOHN

Just an expression, Althaar. It means, uh... to irritate someone in like, a really efficient way. So for example, there are some Human siblings who really like to nit-pick and harp on people's mistakes.

SUSAN

You know, that's true, John. And sometimes there are siblings who are completely unsupportive, and never appreciate their older siblings' hard work or accomplishments. That frequently causes problems.

JOHN

Right, and then sometimes, an older sibling will put their baby brother in a basket and leave him in the front yard, with a note that says "Free to a Good Home." That can cause a certain coolness.

SUSAN

And you know, sometimes you'll get a bratty little brother who'll take his big sister's dolls and stuffed animals, and stitch them all together so he can play "Island of Dr. Moreau." That can have some repercussions on the family intimacy front.

JOHN

Not to mention, some sisters will tell their little brother's date to the junior prom about how their Meemaw used to call him "Nibblebiscuit," and that little brother will end up being called "Nibbly" for his entire senior year. That can interfere quite a bit with the warm and supportive family environment!

SUSAN

And then some brothers will decide that sleeping in after a night of beers and laser skeeball is more important than showing up for their sister's induction ceremony into the Diplomatic Corps! That can really put a damper on family cohesion!

JOHN

And some sisters won't even write their brother a single letter after he's been replaced by a duplicate and kicked out of the Solar system! Because they're assholes!

JOHN and SUSAN huff off in opposite directions.

ALTHAAR

Thank you, Human friends, for these very specific examples! They will be most helpful to Althaar's-- where are you going? Oh sadness! Mrs. Frondrinax, Althaar fears this sur-prise visit has gone very very badly!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

It just doesn't make any sense, dearie. What could have put them in such a state?

ALTHAAR

Is Mrs. Frondrinax certain that Su-san does not intend to devour FriendJohn's heart? She seems very capable.

Music transition to the Hotel Spendide reception room. A gong sounds.

Q'FULLIN

Znaris of Earth! The hour of re-convening is at hand! You were charged with ensuring the presence of the Marquess at these proceedings, and yet he is nowhere to be seen!

ZNARIS

We implore your indulgence, Your Bountiful Factotery. He gave us his word he would appear at the appointed time. Commander, perhaps your second could--

The fancy door whooshes open. Sound of a saucepan being banged on with a wooden spoon on the other side.

DEE

(shouting from outside the door)

Prepare, o worthies, for the incipience of The Well Learned Illustrious Lordship, uh... Q'Mellix Lobiche...*(quieter)* what does that say?

CHIP

(also outside)

Ofpeels?

DEE

(back to shouting, attempting to pronounce all this with middling success)

Ofpeels, Marquess Runroar, Son of J'Bollont, House Byllaburt, of the Barony of Brellipheen-Hwyine!

More banging on the saucepan as they enter the room.

J'YALLEN

At last! Have you forgotten the Fifth Principle of Zorfont, young quarter-cousin? To be early is to be on time, to be on time is to be late, and to be late is unacceptable!

XTOPPS

C'mon, spare me the Fifty-Three Principles, Auntie Len. I know I'm shaming my ancestors and the Glorious Path of Incorruption, ok? I don't need to hear about it again. I'm just here for the canapés. Ooh, and you got a chocolate fountain, patie!

XTOPPS fills a plate with hors d'œuvres and can be heard enjoying them while:

J'YALLEN

Then perhaps your seconds have some fraction of the decorum you are lacking? Who are you that stand with the Marquess Runroar before this august company?

DEE

I am Delilah Mallory, Daughter of Eleanor!

CHIP

And I am Chip Frinkel, Son of Megan!

DEE

(aside)

Chip, you're supposed to use your real name.

CHIP

(likewise)

That is my real name.

DEE

Seriously? Megan has a lot to answer for. *(back to declaiming)* We second His Erudition, and dedicate ourselves to the defense of his honor!

Q'FULLIN

His honor. Hah! How can you defend that which he has profligately abandoned?

J'YALLEN

Silence, Q'Fullin! The forms have been observed.

Q'FULLIN

My most abject apologies, Your Effulgence.

J'YALLEN

Now then. There is no time to waste. Most Honored, if you have luxuriated sufficiently in the chocolate font, it is incumbent upon you to answer the question we bear from Her Grandosity your mother: Will you take up the Scepters of Grand Matriarch J'Threnn, return to Ancient Hwytine, and take the Oath of the Blessed Imperium in your new seat of governance?

XTOPPS

Nah, mang. I'm here to stay. We got cousins coming out of our ossicles, get one of them to do it.

Some consternation from the factota, but not too much--they know where this is going.

J'YALLEN

Your answer is unacceptable, Marquess.

Q'FULLIN

Clearly you are too addled by the Demon Legume to conduct yourself with the solemnity appropriate to your station, not to mention to pay the Amplisso Magnificat the obsequance she is due.

XTOPPS

Right, mang, I'm addled. You don't want to give Kandephaa'a to a p.b. junkie. You know who'd be good? Cousin Q'Pannet. That zood loves fancy parties.

J'YALLEN

We are pleased that you agree. And thus, as your thinking is clearly impaired, we will invoke the Right of Regency to appoint ourselves your guardian until such time as your addlement has ceased, if such a thing should ever occur.

XTOPPS

Whoa, that was not what I meant, ok? Uh, seconds? Help me out?

CHIP

Does that mean what I think it does? Can they just section you like that?

XTOPPS

If she invokes the Right of Regency, that's it, mang. Good night J' Ayreen.

DEE

Shit. Can we stall them?

J'YALLEN

Guards! Prepare to apprehend the Marquess. I hereby invoke--

XTOPPS

Whoa, whoa! I may be stoned off my tarsal pads, but even I know you can't use the Right of Regency unless you can prove I'm out of it permanently! They tried it on Ostaphon the Drunk and she had the entire Resplendent Assembly shot!

Q'FULLIN

Nertz!

J'YALLEN

I am gratified to observe that you yet retain some measure of your vaunted scholarship, Most Honored. You do indeed have the right to a six-hour grace period to attempt a state of sobriety. But you know as well as I that such an attempt will fail, and thus I can only assume that your intention is to distract us, that you might evade our supervision. Commander?

COMMANDER

Yes, Your Effulgence?

J'YALLEN

We are compelled to allow the young Marquess his six hours, but we are also certain that he intends to use his no doubt numerous unsavory connections here to flee our lawful claims upon his person at the soonest opportunity. We must insist, therefore, that he be confined for the duration in your... your... Peanut. Butter. Jar.

Gasps.

COMMANDER

Xtopps?

XTOPPS

All right, I'll go. Streez, you're really twisting my trochanters, Auntie.

J'YALLEN

Your six hours begins... now.

Gong. Door whoosh as XTOPPS is escorted out by the COMMANDER.

ZNARIS

The League of Humans admires and exalts your forbearance, Your Effulgence. We hope that this delay will not inconvenience Your Scintillence unduly.

J'YALLEN

All is well, Znaris of Earth. We have been in pursuit of the Marquess for many long months, but the conclusion of these trials is at last before us. Soon we will return him to the loving embrace of Her Grandiosity his mother, and all will be as it should. Rest assured, your part in the satisfactory culmination of this sordid affair will not be forgotten in three months' time. Come, Q'Fullin! We shall adjourn to the Casino Splendide. I wish to observe these "loose slots" of which the Comte de Subondinat speaks so highly.

They whoosh out, with jingling.

ZNARIS

Finally! Progress at last! I can practically smell the fresh-mined helium in the air!

SUSAN

Helium's inert, William.

ZNARIS

Don't ruin this for me!

They whoosh out.

DEE

Shit.

CHIP

Yeah.

DEE

Do you think he's got, like, a secret plan or something?

CHIP

Here's hoping.

DEE

But what if he doesn't? I've never even seen him sober, have you? Can he do it in six hours?

CHIP

I don't think we want him to. Have you ever seen a p.b. junkie in withdrawal?

DEE

No. It's bad?

CHIP

If he doesn't get a fix, in six hours he's going to be climbing the walls. And with twenty-eight limbs to work with, that can get pretty intense.

DEE

Shit.

CHIP

Yeah.

DEE

So what do we do?

CHIP

You got any experience with jailbreaks?

DEE

No.

CHIP

Yeah, me neither. I hope that whacked-out Xyb's got a plan, but if not--we need to get back to the Egg and start setting up auditions for your new backing band.

DEE
Shit.

CHIP
Yeah.

Music transition to the Egg. CHIP and DEE are trying to set up auditions in the background while JOHN and SUSAN have an awkward dinner.

SOPON
Ok, that's an Arrakeen Sunset for you, a Midori Scutoid for the gentleman, and one Celestine Extravagance with strontium garnish. *(calling across the bar)* Hey Chip! We're running low on sand-squid gizzards!

CHIP
(yelling back)
Yeah, thanks, I'll add 'em to the next shipment! *(normal voice)* Ok Dee, what've we got?

DEE
I think Booboo DeBates is still around.

CHIP
From your smark band?

DEE
I mean, he was the least smarky?

CHIP
That's not saying a whole hell of a lot.

DEE
Yeah. Let's keep looking.

CHIP
Do you want me to put a listing on HECNET?

DEE
Not yet. That makes it too real, you know? We're not replacing Xtopps yet, we're just... researching our options, yeah?

CHIP
Fair enough.

Later:

CHIP

I got another dozen messages from Vert, we could always bring him in. *(they both laugh)* You know, I've never actually heard him play, for all I know he could be amazing.

DEE

I guess? But I mean... he's *Vert*.

CHIP

Yeah, I can't picture it either. But anything's possible, right?

Later:

DEE

Hang on, we've got Roegian Montage coming through next week. You think we could convince them to stick around?

CHIP

How?

DEE

With money, Chip.

CHIP

With too much money!

DEE

Listen, you're not going to find another band who plays six instruments for the price of one. No matter what, if we lose Xtopps, your bottom line is going to take a hit.

CHIP

Arrrrrrgh I hate everything. Hey, I don't suppose you'd be willing take a pay cut? Help the old Chipper out?

DEE

You're hilarious.

CHIP

Just a thought. Let's put Roegian Montage down as a "maybe."

Meanwhile:

JOHN

So, I got your message.

SUSAN

And you actually showed up.

JOHN

Well, I'm not going to turn down a free meal on Earth Central's dime.

SUSAN

Are you that broke? I thought you found another corporate job.

JOHN

I did, but a Probationary Mechanic's Under-Assistant isn't exactly raking in the credits. Plus the rents out here are ridiculous. If it wasn't for Althaar I'd probably be sleeping upside down in a garbage chute somewhere.

SUSAN

Wow.

JOHN

Although I'm sure you think that's where I belong, anyway. You were perfectly happy to let me get thrown out with the trash. Did you even miss me at all?

SUSAN

Well not really, because you're still there. I mean, the... other you is.

JOHN

Right. And it's not like you needed two of me. You barely had any use for one of me.

SUSAN

What did you want us to do? You were supposed to have been disintegrated the second you stepped in that teleporter. Legally, my only brother's back on Earth right now. I'm not sure it's even a good idea for me to be seen talking to you.

JOHN

The restraining order says *I* can't contact *you*. Nothing about the other way around.

SUSAN

Ok, I know that, but I didn't want to make things awkward with J-- the new guy. Or... more awkward.

JOHN

Oh, so now you care about *his* feelings?

WAITRON

...and here we are, one Fytithian phoobsteak for you, and for you sir, one order of meatloaf with cream of mushroom sauce. Can I get you folks anything else?

JOHN

(tense)

No, thanks.

SUSAN

(ditto, at the same time)

No, thank you.

WAITRON

O-kay then! Enjoy!

SUSAN

When I saw that on the menu, I went ahead and ordered for you. Still your favorite?

JOHN

Uh, yeah.

SUSAN

You can get something else, if you'd rather take full advantage of my expense budget.

JOHN

No, this is... this is good. *(a beat while they start their dinners)* So... what's the new guy been up to? Back at the Plexworks, before the accident, I'd been hoping to get promoted to Specialist C-Class by now.

SUSAN

Oh, yeah, he got that a couple months ago. He, uh... he used some of the bonus to buy an engagement ring...

JOHN

Ah. Yeah, that was the plan.

SUSAN

Sorry.

JOHN

You know what, I'm actually ok with it. So have they set a date yet?

SUSAN

I don't know. We don't really talk that much. Less than we used to, even.

JOHN

What, are you the only one who doesn't like the replacement better than the original?

SUSAN

Ok, that's not fair. Mom and Dad were really upset, it's just... hard to mourn somebody who's still standing in front of you. And he's their son, too, I mean, you're completely identical copies. Or at least you were when you first stepped out of those teleport pods.

JOHN

But he's changed since then?

SUSAN

A little, yeah. His luck's definitely better than yours was.

JOHN

Funny story about that...

SUSAN

But no, I meant that you've changed. I don't know what it is, but you seem more... hm... relaxed here? That isn't it either, it's just... I don't know, you never seemed to quite fit in back home. Like no matter where you were, there was somewhere else you were supposed to be. But here, you actually seem like you belong, somehow. It's new. Makes you much less annoying.

JOHN

Wow, thanks.

SUSAN

Oh, don't be a turdworm, just take the compliment.

JOHN

Shut up and eat your phoob.

They eat in silence for a moment.

JOHN

I think I know what you mean, though. I never would have chosen this life--like, *never* in a trillion years--but the Fairgrounds does kind of grow on you. Literally, if you're not careful. And people here rely on me, which is nice. Nothing I did back on Earth made much of a difference to anybody, but out here--like, I stopped that seltzer machine over there from killing everyone on the station a few hours ago.

SUSAN

Wow. Are we, uh... safe here?

JOHN

As safe as you are anywhere on the Fairgrounds.

SUSAN

So... not at all?

JOHN

Bingo. It helps if you think of it as another part of the place's rustic charm.

XTOPPS

(from outside the doorway, sounding Very Different)

Commander, as I am unaccompanied by factota at the present moment, perhaps you would grant me the boon of announcing my arrival? The simplified form of my title will suffice.

COMMANDER

Of course, Your Sublimity. *(raised voice)* The Marquess of Brellipheen-Hwyine!

CHIP

What? Oh, crap, where's the thing?

Brief scuffle as CHIP rushes to grab his pot & spoon and belatedly bangs them.

XTOPPS

You have our thanks, Commander, and you as well, loyal Chip. If we may request another small consideration, we wish the use of your stage for a few moments, that we may address all parties concerned in our succession.

CHIP

Sure thing, Your, uh, Sublimity.

DEE

Hey, Xtopps, what's going on? Did you really kick in six hours? What's the play here?

XTOPPS

All will be revealed shortly, steadfast Delilah. Do not concern yourself unduly.

ZNARIS

Susan! Thank Heyerdahl you're already here. I've been trying to call you for the past ten minutes!

SUSAN

I had my phone off, I was taking some personal time. What's going on, William? I thought we had until 25:30 before the Marquess got out of the brig.

ZNARIS

Well apparently he had other plans!

The other Xybidonts arrive with much bustling and consternation.

J'YALLEN

Marquess! Why have you emerged before the conclusion of your allotted grace period? This is most irregular. We are certain our "system" for playing the slots was just about to bear fruit.

Q'FULLIN

And why, Most Honored, have you demanded the return of Her Beneficent Splendor to these squalid and degenerate environs?

CHIP

Hey!

XTOPPS

The Amplisso Magnificat has constrained me to prove my fitness, and behold! I stand before you of sound mind and body, prepared to take up the Scepters of J'Threnn and assume the title of Baronet of Kandephaa'a, Potentate of the Fyrexian Isles, High Lord of Menchitan, and Master of Her Grandiosity's War Snails, in the sight of all those here assembled.

DEE

WHAT?!

XTOPPS

It is my duty and my destiny. Protest not, Delilah, Daughter of Eleanor.

DEE

Unbelievable.

J'YALLEN

We have walked a long road through the spaceways to find you, Marquess, and though our trials have been many, we are most content to find that you have at last remembered yourself. Factota! Strike the tambors! Jangle the gallaticons! Bring forth the Scepters of Grand Matriarch J'Threnn! Let the Ceremony of Bestowal commence forthwith!

Celebratory cacophony (CHIP joins in with his saucepan) as the Scepters are brought out. Some appreciation of the spectacle from the patrons of the Egg.

DEE

Chip! Knock it off! (*he does*) Xtopps, I can not believe you! Are you seriously going to frill me over like this? I thought you hated all this royalty crap!

XTOPPS

There are ceremonies that must be observed, Delilah of Tammuz Beta. There is no other course that can be taken. I must assume my duties and rights as Baronet of Kandephaa'a. *All of them.*

DEE

What the frid are you--oh! Oh. Oh...kay then. Good... luck?

J'YALLEN

Are you prepared to receive the Scepters, Most Honored?

XTOPPS

I am, Your Effulgence.

J'YALLEN

Then let the Ensceptering begin!

Gonnnng. (The gong is struck again after each Scepter is announced.)

Q'FULLIN

The Scepter of Sagacity, forged from the swords of the Generals Three at the dawn of the Tripartite Alliance!

The Scepter of Honor, retrieved by J'Drett from the barbarous nomads of the Shrilling Wastes!

The Scepter of Agility, which is very nice!

Ooohs and aahs from the crowd.

JOHN

So is there a scepter for each hand? Or limb? Because I've got to be back at work in a few hours.

SUSAN

I think just the first six pairs?

Q'FULLIN

The Scepter of Zeal, commissioned by Q'Radrigan the Indolent!

The Scepter of Acumen, encrusted with the Shrieking Emeralds of Byroxideen!

Teeny little shrieks as the scepter is handed over.

And The Scepter of Mental Fitness, emblazoned with the sigils of all forty-three Houses of the Resplendent Assembly!

Gonnnnnng.

J'YALLEN

It is completed.

Q'FULLIN

All hail His Well Learned Radiant Splendor, Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, House Byllaburt, Marquess of Brellipheen-Hwyine, Baronet of Kandephaa'a, Potentate of the Fyrexian Isles, of the Grand Duchy of Prang!

More celebratory jangling. Applause, cheers, etc. from the delegation and bar patrons.

J'YALLEN

And now, Most Splendid, we will board the *IXS Opaline* and return to Hwyine, ancient seat of the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a, that you may begin your rule!

XTOPPS

But my rule has already begun, Most Amplified! For I have taken up the Six Scepters, and thus, ascended the Throne of Menchitan!

J'YALLEN

(testily)

Your Radiance is of course technically correct, but as the throne *itself* remains in Ancient Hwytine, we request that you assemble whatever baggage you wish to retain from your recent... adventures, that we may begin our journey there post-haste. Your exalted mother awaits you, Most Splendid, and we ourselves are anxious to shake the dust of this place from our slippers.

XTOPPS

And you may do so presently, Most Amplified. But first! I wish to take my first official action as Baronet of Kandephaa'a: A declaration, before all those here assembled, loyal progeny of the Xybidont Empire and citizens of the greater Interstellar Cooperative of Sentient Beings! One of the many rights pertaining to the Baronet, first bestowed upon Q'Sadrin by Her Most Iridescent Superiority J'Threnn (as a reward for his service in the Battle of Daxriganth) is the right to name his seat of government. And thus, I declare that too long has Kandephaa'a been ruled from Ancient Hwytine! From this day forth, the official seat of the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a shall be... The Electric Egg!

SHOCK! and HORROR! from the Xybidonts (and ZNARIS). Confusion and perhaps enthusiasm from the other species in the bar, depending on personal inclination and how closely they've been listening. DEE and CHIP are thrilled. (perhaps more saucepan banging)

J'YALLEN

You... You can't!

XTOPPS

Ah, but I can. Whosoever holds the Scepters of J'Threnn may speak for all Kandephaa'a!

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'em, sister!

J'YALLEN

Znaris of Earth! Put a stop to this foolishness at once!

ZNARIS

I... is the Baronet correct, Your Effulgence? Does he have this right under your laws?

J'YALLEN

He... may, but... surely the League of Humans will not allow its territory to be annexed in this fashion?

SUSAN

I'm afraid we'll have to, Your Effulgence. Under the terms of the Interstellar Reciprocity Act, Earth is required to accept any legal territorial claim from a fellow ICSB member. We retain the right to charge rent, of course.

J'YALLEN

Bah! This is unconscionable! Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, just you wait until your mother hears of this! Your Radiance can expect no more allowances to be forthcoming from the Ducal Treasury! And as for you, Znaris of Earth, we will most *assuredly* remember this insult in three months' time! Q'Fullin! Let us effoe at once to inform the Grand Duchess of this travesty!

They exit as noisily as they came.

DEE

Xtopps! You did it! I knew you had a plan!

CHIP

Right! We were never worried for a second!

VERT

(in the background)

Hey, uh, I'm here for the audition?

CHIP

Buzz off, Vert!

VERT

Aw.

XTOPPS

Thanks for the backup, zoods.

DEE

I don't think we really did that much, but you're welcome.

XTOPPS

Nah, you were my seconds, mang. That's a lot. You boffers really came through for me--you're twice-tiled in my book.

DEE

Well, thanks, we're just-- Hey! You sound like... you. What happened to all that royal jabber? Did you get sober or not?

XTOPPS

Aw, frid nah, I'm seeing like five of you right now.

CHIP

So you never had the p.b. d.t.'s! But-- how'd you sneak the sticky stuff into the brig?

XTOPPS

Xybidonts got a lot more places to hide a stash than Humans know to look for. Nah, I've been higher than all seventeen moons this whole time.

DEE

But then how'd you keep up the aristocrat thing through that whole ceremony?

XTOPPS

You kidding? Xtopps knows how to maintain.

DEE

Well, congratulations. Glad you're still with us.

CHIP

Yeah, congrats!

XTOPPS

Right, everything's patric, except Auntie Len cut me off! No more allowance--I'm frilled.

CHIP

Hey, I'm still paying you. Can't you get by on that?

XTOPPS

You're paying me peanuts, and that don't buy too many peanuts. I got an expensive habit to support.

COMMANDER

Hang on, let me get this straight. You're officially registering the Electric Egg as Xybidont territory.

XTOPPS

It's the official seat of the Greater Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a, yeah.

COMMANDER

And does that mean the Xybidont Empire will be paying the rent now?

CHIP

Hey, yeah!

SUSAN

Yes, it does.

CHIP

This is amazing. Does that mean I can let anyone sleep here I want?

COMMANDER

No!

SUSAN

I don't think it's up to you, Commander. Since the Egg is now officially Xybidont territory, it's their laws that apply here. The Baronet would have final say on questions of residency.

COMMANDER

Xtopps?

XTOPPS

It's all flush with me, Chorp.

CHIP

Sweet!

COMMANDER

Ugh. Fine.

DEE

So, Chip, now that your expenses have gone way down thanks to Xtopps, not to mention he's solved your busboy problem, you could take what you were paying in rent and kick it back to him.

CHIP

What? No!

DEE

Or we could go ahead with the auditions. I think you can catch Vert if you hurry...

CHIP

(long groan)

XTOPPS

Without that allowance, I gotta split for somewhere I can live in style, mang.

CHIP

Ah, hell with it. I guess I'm no worse off than I was before. I'll draw up some papers for a... Baronet's stipend.

DEE

Yes!

XTOPPS

Spry!

COMMANDER

Well, it seems like this will work out nicely for everyone concerned. Even the busboys.

ZNARIS

NO IT WON'T! *We'll* have to go back to Earth and tell them these shenanigans just cost the League billions of credits in helium exports!

SUSAN

It was always a long shot, William.

ZNARIS

This failure is unconscionable! Catastrophic! The repercussions will be appalling! Have you no concern for your future in the Corps, Susan?! And Commander! Believe you me, when Earth Central hears of your role in this--

XTOPPS

Hey, Bill, foob out for a minute. You know where most of the helium refineries in the empire are? Little place called Kandephaa'a. Can't do shness with that helium without somewhere to work it. So anyone who's in good with the new Baronet will have a pretty good shot in those contract re-negotiations, you smell me?

ZNARIS

...Understood, Your Splendorousness.

XTOPPS

Hey, call me Xtopps.

Music & sound transition to the travel hub.

TRAVEL HUB ANNOUNCEMENT VOICE

Attention travellers. If you are the owner of a blue lamasheen suitcase, please retrieve it from the baggage claim area immediately, as it has begun reciting unspeakable prophecies, and is thus in violation of Universal Robot Health and Safety Code 134-alpha. Thank you.

SUSAN

So...

JOHN

So.

SUSAN

Thanks for coming out to see me off.

JOHN

Well, the least I could do. Sorry for losing my temper. I wasn't acting too brotherly for a while there. I mean, I know, technically, I'm *not* your brother any more, but...

SUSAN

Look. Whatever it says on paper, whatever you've had to become, you're still the kid I grew up with. And I'm sorry I didn't get in touch sooner. We may not have had the world's greatest sibling relationship, but you'll always be my baby brother, even if I can't legally call you that anymore. I haven't forgotten about you. And even if they already have another "you" around, I know Mom and Dad are thinking of you, too.

JOHN

That... that makes me feel a lot better, Susan. Give them my love, okay?

SUSAN

Will do. And, uh, could you apologize to your roommate for me? He wanted me to come over for dinner, but... you know.

JOHN

No problem. Believe me, he's used to Humans avoiding him, he doesn't take it personally.

SUSAN

An Iltorian... I don't know how you can stand it, but it seems like you have a really good friend there. And if you can keep that going, you might end up embarrassing all of us in the Diplomatic Corps.

JOHN

I'll do my best. Sorry you got stuck with a mission to the Fairgrounds, but it was... good to catch up, so I guess it was a lucky coincidence.

SUSAN

Coincidence? Oh yes. I definitely came out here on a mission I could have easily pulled rank to avoid, just so I could feast my eyes on a decommissioned tourist trap. That's *exactly* why I'm here.

JOHN

(moved)

Susan... I...

JOHN's pager plays the WSS theme.

H.F.

(over link)

John! You still on the Central Promenade? They need you over in the food court. Something hinky with an Untalian pop dispenser, and it sounds like it's about to go nuclear.

JOHN

I'll be right there.

Bloop.

SUSAN

Go nuclear? That's a metaphor, right?

JOHN

With a Untalian pop dispenser? I'm afraid not.

SUSAN

O-kay, I think that's about all the rustic charm I can take. I'm going to head out.

Sound of a muffled explosion that shakes the floor.

JOHN

Yeah, I should probably get on that. *(as he rushes away)* Have a good flight! See you next time!

SUSAN

Next time...

Theme music up and leading into credits.

ANNOUNCER

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

This episode was written by Berit Johnson and Ian W. Hill
featuring

John Amir as John B

Berit Johnson as Althaar

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Eli Gantias as Hardyfox Fornes

Christopher Lee as Chip Frinkel

Zuri Washington as Dee

Derrick Peterson as Xtopps

Philip Cruise as William Znaris

Jessica Stoya as Susan Torkan

Lex Friedman as The Most Serene Amplified High Notability, J'Yallen Dwan B'techer Men'Walz,
Daughter of J'Bellent, House Byllaburt, of the Grand Duchy of Prang

David Arthur Bachrach as His Bountiful Factotery Q'Fullin

{etc. with other parts}

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

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

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

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

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

This has been an audio production from Gemini CollisionWorks.

Tune in again in two weeks for our next episode, but until then, let's check in on the new seat of government of the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a, otherwise known as the Electric Egg...

Music comes up as DEE and XTOPPS are finishing their interrupted number, while JOHN and ALTHAAR are chatting (from either side of the dashing Algerian Ivy feature).

ALTHAAR

So the visiting of Su-san was brought to a happy conclusion?

JOHN

“Happy” might be pushing it, but... it worked out ok. Eventually.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is most pleased to hear this! FriendJohn, Althaar would like to apologize for causing troubles between John and Su-san. Althaar wishes very much to learn of the Human family relation, but Althaar should not allow his desire for knowledge to overcome his manners! Althaar is very very sorry!

JOHN

Thanks, Althaar, but don't feel bad. Things between me and Susan have always been... difficult. I don't think it would have gone any smoother even if you had stayed out of it.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn is very gracious. ...Althaar does not wish to make prying, but would FriendJohn help Althaar in understanding this difficulty with Su-san?

JOHN

I don't know if I can, Althaar, it's just one of those things. Like-- well, your family are the people who've known you your whole life, you know? And that can be good or bad. Or both. I don't know. Don't you have anyone in your family you don't get along with?

ALTHAAR

The “family” is not a thing of Iltor, FriendJohn. This is why Althaar has such problems in the understanding! And the Human family is of even more confusion than any other Althaar has studied. It seems to be the cause of much trouble, but contentment also? Can FriendJohn explain to Althaar?

JOHN

I can try. Give me some time think about it, ok?

ALTHAAR

Yes! Althaar is most grateful for the assistance of FriendJohn!

Under the preceding:

{pretty sure we'll need more lyrics}

DEE

Just open those pod...

XTOPPS

Your astrogation could be flawed.

DEE

...bay doors for me.

XTOPPS

We're almost at our syzygy.

DEE

And oh how the commlinks are burning

XTOPPS

A lesson we'd surely be learning

DEE

It's getting me quite a bit stressed

XTOPPS

If you explosively decompressed

DEE

It's time I should leave

XTOPPS

Just put that suit back,

XTOPPS & DEE

Cause/But it's a vac-uum... out there!

Song ends.

DEE

Thank you, thank you from all of us here at the Electric Egg! You've been a great crowd!

XTOPPS

And the next round is on the Xybidont Empire!

*Fade out on the sound of **cheering** and the popping of bottles.*