

Life with Althaar

Episode 17: The Sweet Smell of the Fairgrounds

Version 2.2, 08/11/20 - Amanda & Phil (draft 2, BAJ)

[scene 1] The Travel Hub: Inbound Freight Processing. It's 1am. There is a line.

PACKAGE NON-RECIPIENT

I'm telling you, this is the slip they gave me!

WALKEN-BOT

And I'm telling you... this is blue... and you need... the pink one.

PACKAGE NON-RECIPIENT

Look, it says "Shipment Retrieval Authorization!" Right there at the top! So please just let me retrieve my shipment! Please!

WALKEN-BOT

You need... a "Missed Delivery... Retrieval Voucher"... which is blue... gesin.

PACKAGE NON-RECIPIENT

Rrgh, you are simply the worst! You get one teeny-tiny bit of authority and you use it to amuse yourself by giving the run-around to us hapless schmucks who have nowhere else to go if we want to get anything delivered out here! Because I guess that makes you feel like a big shot! Well, I got news for you, Mr. Saviour Machine... you are a packaging clerk! You are the robotic God king of the least efficient service on the Fairgrounds, and that is a title with some pretty stiff competition! Congratulations!

WALKEN-BOT

... And when you return with the proper slip... for pick up, you will... receive your package.

PACKAGE NON-RECIPIENT

The absolute worst!

They storm out.

WALKEN-BOT

Everybody... so excited... Ooh... so... worked up... all the time.

Commlink beeps.

WALKEN-BOT

Inbound Freight... Processing...

DOCKING CLERK

Yeah, hi, this is Docking Bay Ihwaz 3. You folks gonna be open for a bit?

WALKEN-BOT

We're open... until the end of... second cycle... every evening. Subject to the schedule of... the paintball league.

DOCKING CLERK

Copy that. We've just finished unloading on a, uh, sizable shipment over here, so I wanted to give you a heads up. Sending the manifest now.

Chime.

SMARMY COMPUTER VOICE

Incoming manifest!

Incoming manifest chime.

WALKEN-BOT

Yeah... I got it... Whoa... Hold on here... this is... quite a shipment. You've got... 75 ergonomic stand up... desks, 36 cushioned... 6 foot sleep... cubbies, 25 double... seat toilets, and 50... therapeutic VR... headsets with matching stress... balls, plus... 3 ping pong... tables?... For... Resh 37? That's mothballed! Please double check... the routing... slip.

Phone rings.

WALKEN-BOT

Inbound Freight... We are experiencing... a high volume... currently... you have what? You're making... delivery of... an ice machine... 4 industrial size juicers... and a panini press?... To where? Resh 37?... but there's nobody... down there. Who's going to... sign for... all this?... Well it's not... my problem... either. ...Ok. I guess... send them... on over.

Desk Bell rings.

DILURIAN 1

Hey bro... Wow, dig the hair. Yeah, I've got a package for pickup, I think about six boxes.

WALKEN-BOT

Do you have your pink... pickup slip?

DILURIAN 1

Nah, zood.

WALKEN-BOT

Blue... pickup slip?

DILURIAN 1

Nope.

WALKEN-BOT

Well then... I have to inform... you that... you'll need to fill out... a yellow slip-replacement... slip... And delivery... may be delayed... up to eleven... business cycles.

DILURIAN 1

Yeah, I just got off a long-jump, not really up on the local time... deal. How many days is that?

WALKEN-BOT

Three and two... thirds.

DILURIAN 1

Yeah, sorry bro, that's not gonna work out. So, hey! You see my six packages on the shelf there?

WALKEN-BOT

I don't know, they... could be your packages... Without... a blue or pink... slip... I couldn't... really say.

DILURIAN 1

No worries, True Bro-mance, I totally can. And you see the big UCSB Trade Commission priority stickers on those bad boys? That means expedited processing, bro. No questions asked, no answers given! So make with the merchandise, zood.

Commlink beeps.

DOCKING CLERK

Hey, Inbound, I double-checked the routing, and this shipment is definitely supposed to be headed to Resh 37. Maybe you can sort it out on your end? I gotta get it out of here, anyway, we've got two more arrivals scheduled and I can't have this shness blocking the whole intake corridor. Cargo is on its way to you now. Should be there shortly. Good luck!

WALKEN-BOT

Yeah sure... currently experiencing... high volume...

Desk bell rings twice.

DILURIAN 2

Hey, what's up there, Frankenstein? So, yeah bro, I'm here for 12 packages, should be marked for Resh 37? Steve-O! What's up my man?

DILURIAN 1

Zood. I am so amped for this. It is Go Time, clutcher!

DILURIAN 2

Can't wait, compadre!

WALKEN-BOT

Go Time? No... It's... no-go... time. It's... stop time.

Chime.

SMARMY COMPUTER VOICE

Incoming manifest!

Incoming manifest chime.

DILURIAN 1

Nah, bro, trust me, it's totally, ferociously go time. And we got places to be, zood. So, how about my six, and Steve-O's twelve cases?

WALKEN-BOT

You're picking up... twelve cases of... what?

Phone starts to ring, and continues under.

DILURIAN 2

Twelve cases of... beeswax. Straight from Nunya.

WALKEN-BOT

Beeswax? This is Inbound... Freight Processing... not some kind of... orbital apiary! And last I heard... Nunya... is still under... blockade...

Door buzzer squawks.

DELIVERY BOT

Hey, buddy, can you lend me a manipulator with this? I've got a bulk delivery outside. Says here... 4 Super nano 500G servers and 30 prefab work modules.

WALKEN-BOT

Experiencing... High Volume... too much... overloading

Chime.

SMARMY COMPUTER VOICE

Incoming manifest!

Incoming manifest chime.

DILURIAN 1

C'mon, bro, pass the parcels!

Chime.

SMARMY COMPUTER VOICE

Incoming manifest!

Incoming manifest chime.

DELIVERY BOT

You've still gotta sign for these, pal.

Desk bell rings continuously. Chime.

SMARMY COMPUTER VOICE

Incoming manifest!

Incoming manifest chime.

DILURIAN 2

C'mon, brah, I need those cases!

DILURIAN 1

While we're still on the 300 under 300, bro!

WALKEN-BOT

Overloading... too much... Can't handle... Gonna break... The ICE... is gonna break!

Breakdown noises as WALKEN-BOT shuts down. [scene 2] Theme music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...

Life With Althaar!

Episode 17:

The Sweet Smell of the Fairgrounds!

[scene 3] The bridge. The sound of FRALL materializing.

FRALL

Excuse me, Commander. *(a beat, no answer)* Commander...

Still nothing, FRALL clears their throat, then makes a sound we haven't heard before, as they enter the COMMANDER's brain and the background noises of the Bridge fade away. We hear their telepathic communication:

FRALL

Pardon me, Commander...

COMMANDER

(with a jolt)

AUGH JONES'S FUZZY BELLY, WHAT IS HAPP— Frall, are you inside my brain?

FRALL

Yes, Commander.

COMMANDER

This is a serious breach of protocol, Frall, a major overstep, and it's freaking me right the hell out!

FRALL

Apologies, Commander. I assure you that this occupation of your headspace was in no way intended to be invasive. It seemed the most efficient way of garnering your attention in your current unusually-unfocused state.

COMMANDER

Freaking the hell out here!

FRALL

Would you prefer if I resumed our usual mode of communication?

COMMANDER

YES! PLEASE!

Another sound cue indicates the "phasing" of FRALL back into their regularly occupied space as we return to the Bridge proper. The COMMANDER is shaken.

COMMANDER

Don't ever do that again, Frall! Sweet Hazel, that was discomfiting.

FRALL

I must apologize again for overstepping, sir. Perhaps it would be helpful if I were to erase the memory of this incident from your mind? Then we will be able to continue our amicable working relationship, without it getting weird.

COMMANDER

Erase my mem— what about the interaction we just had would make you think I'd be up for you scrambling my brains around?

FRALL

Very well, sir. If you have confidence that our future interactions will not be awkward, that's certainly good enough for me.

Beat.

COMMANDER

You know what? Go ahead. Zap it, Frall.

FRALL

As you wish, sir. I'll see you in a moment. (*a ZAPP!! or whatever sound memory-manipulation makes*) Ahem... Commander?

COMMANDER

What? Oh, yes Frall? I'm sorry, I'm a bit distracted today.

FRALL

I had observed as much, Commander.

COMMANDER

It's been two cycles, two whole interminable work cycles since I put in a repair order, and not a single bot has so much as scanned that busted milk frother. But Hazel help me if I ask the subcontractors to touch an "autonomous beverage system peripheral!"

FRALL

You have been commenting on this circumstance with some frequency, sir. Most recently 14 minutes and 27 seconds ago. And 31 minutes, 5 seconds before that. And twenty—

COMMANDER

Yes, thank you! My point is, I haven't had a macchiato in almost 19 hours, and I am tragically under-caffeinated. Without that precious alkaloid plugging up my adenosine receptors I'm about as sprightly as Rocky Marciano-bot running on a single triple-A battery in the 10th round. And I can't even get one from Tixondu's any more, because the whole bridge crew is banned until I can sweet-talk Delfinia into forgiving us for those Drop Time shenanigans.

FRALL

That shouldn't be too difficult, sir. No doubt she'll be needing a favor from us at some point.

COMMANDER

Do you know when?

FRALL

Yes.

Beat.

COMMANDER

So anyway, now I'm stuck here waiting for Systems Maintenance to get their asses in gear and fix our milk frother. And they just re-calibrated their asses last week!

FRALL

The Fairgrounds does host a great many other businesses that provide caffeinated beverages for purchase, sir.

COMMANDER

I know, but they never quite get my order the way I like. And Tixondu's draws those cute little monstrosities in the foam.

FRALL

Hmmm. It would be possible for me to provide your central nervous system with a caffeine-like stimulus, if I were to enter your brain and manipulate your adenosine receptors directly.

COMMANDER

I... appreciate the offer, Frall, but I'm not at all comfortable with the idea of you poking around inside my skull. Or anyone else's, for that matter, without my express permission. Understood?

FRALL

Thoroughly, Commander. It will never happen again.

COMMANDER

Good. Wait, what you mean ag— (*ZAPP!!*) I... appreciate the offer, Frall, but I'm not at all comfortable with the idea of you poking around inside my skull. Or anyone else's, for that matter, without my express permission. Understood?

FRALL

Thoroughly, Commander. That will never happen, in keeping with the tradition of it never having happened before.

Beat.

COMMANDER

Good. Anyway, I assume you had some reason for intruding on my *delirium caffeinum* in the first place. Something to report?

FRALL

Nothing at all, sir. But I felt it would be best if you were as alert as it is possible for you to be at the moment, given your current neuro-chemical constraints, due to the information you are about to receive.

COMMANDER

What informa—

AMBER

Commander?

COMMANDER

Yes, Amber?

AMBER

There's a sudden spike? In energy consumption? Coming from Resh 37?

COMMANDER

Resh 37? There's nothing up there, most of that sector is— Oh, wait. The Dilurians.

AMBER

The Dilurians?

COMMANDER

A group of them got permission to move in there, their lease took effect at midnight. I almost forgot. (*grumbles*) ...grrrr, caffeine...(*clearly*) Why would they need so much energy?

FRALL

I could perhaps go up there and extract the reason directly from one of their brains, sir.

COMMANDER

What? Ew. No. You can see into the future, why would you need to go... cranial spelunking?

FRALL

I would hesitate to attempt any explanation of my methods at the moment, Commander. You already have a headache.

COMMANDER

Good point. Hang on, this business of messing around someone's brain... is this is something you've done before?

FRALL

I'm not sure how to answer that, sir.

A beat.

COMMANDER

Fine. Amber, contact Maintenance and... those subcontractors with an office on Vav 41 whose name no one better be saying right now so help me. Tell them to each send someone to check out the Dilurian operation in Resh 37, and report back on any issues they might encounter. Oh, and have Security send someone to back them up, just in case.

AMBER

Why would we need... those subcontractors, sir?

COMMANDER

I have to cover all my bases, Amber. The last thing I need when I'm drowning in brain mud is for the Robot Union to call a general strike because some Dilurian suggested they have a quick look at a 12-speed juicer.

FRALL

You know, most Human-built robots have a memory configuration not unlike that of your own brains...

COMMANDER

FRALL. NO.

FRALL

Oh, pooh. You never let me have any fun.

*[scene 4] Transition to an empty, until-recently-abandoned corridor in Resh 37.
JOHN, FOREMAN-BOT, and CRVENO walk along.*

JOHN

These decommissioned sectors always freak me out. So quiet. Makes it a lot harder to ignore all the little things that could go wrong and suddenly leave me drifting helplessly through the pitiless void of open space.

FOREMAN-BOT

Mm. Interesting fact about Resh, this sector was the first to get mothballed when the Fairgrounds started downsizing, back in '89. 'Course, I wasn't in Systems Maintenance then, I was still in the Sports Pavilion waiting around for the Second Galactic Fair. Ha!

JOHN

Yeah, I could have guessed that. Tangerine carpets and avocado wallpaper? Super '80s.

FOREMAN-BOT

Hey, that was the style, man. You find me a sapient who *didn't* have avocado wallpaper in '89. Still, you're right about it being freaky. The cobwebs don't help.

CRVENO

Yes... Is very scary. I stay behind you.

JOHN

Uh, Crveno, was it? You're supposed to be our Security, right? Not the other way around?

CRVENO

Do not worry, if there is problem, I will protect from behind.

JOHN

Very reassuring. So, Foreman-Bot, you're still in Systems Maintenance, yeah? Why are they sending you rather than an electrician-bot? Aren't we investigating a power drain?

FOREMAN-BOT

We are not! According to Subsection 6733.8 of the Robot Union contract, Systems Maintenance has to be the first to sign off on any previously proscribed work areas. Once they get the ok from me, and you certify the water fountain functionality, *then* an electrician-bot can be authorized to file a ticket to initiate a preliminary investigation of the power drain.

JOHN

I don't suppose it would make any difference if we found the problem while we were here and just, like, fixed it ourselves?

FOREMAN-BOT

It'd make a difference in the length of your Robot Union disciplinary file.

JOHN

Right. Hey, speaking of the contract, how are you enjoying your Sundays off?

FOREMAN-BOT

Oh man, those days are the joy of my life. Just me and the little bits, playing Servo Says and Twelve Cube, teaching them all about the great big Galaxy, installing their little hardware upgrades. You got a family?

JOHN

No, not on the Fairgrounds... or well, anywhere, legally. But there is someone I've been seeing for a while.

FOREMAN-BOT

Oh yeah? You got a gal pal? Is it that Rondakalki barfly who's always hanging around the Electric Egg?

JOHN

No. Why would you think that?

FOREMAN-BOT

Why not? Species isn't everything, it seems like you two've got a lot in common. You know, bad posture, constantly broke, that whole eye-bag situation...

JOHN

Thanks a lot. I'll have you know that my girlfriend happens to be the new head of the Sanitation Department. Since everyone with a higher rank got eaten back at Christmas.

FOREMAN-BOT

Whoa. Hitting way out of your weight class, there. Good for you!

JOHN

What? No! She's perfectly in my weight class.

CRVENO

Oh, please. She is strong, noble warrior goddess, and you are soft and weak like caterpillar.

JOHN

Well, okay, she's not *literally* in my weight class, she can bench press a power loader, but she's definitely in my league. Or at least like, the next league over. If you squint.

FOREMAN-BOT

If you say so. Congratulations, anyway.

JOHN

Thanks. It's been going really well, actually, and I'm... I don't want to jinx it, knowing my luck... but I'm happy. In fact, I've got the perfect date planned for us tonight.

FOREMAN-BOT

Ok, I'm gonna stop you right there. I have absolutely no interest in hearing about your sexcapades. Is interfacing all you Humans think about?

JOHN

I wasn't talking about that! I mean, hopefully it will get to that at some point, but I'm talking about an actual date. I was thinking we'd start off with a romantic dinner for two...

FOREMAN-BOT

Stop right now! I won't listen to your filthy plans, I won't lend you any motor oil, I don't want to hear about no slap and tickle, no tie me up tie me down, no pool boy comes in for lemonade shenanigans!

CRVENO

I would like to hear about these lemonade shenanigans.

JOHN

OH LOOK WE'RE HERE. Suite XXV:L (*said as letters*). Um... Foreman-Bot, did you happen to see any work orders for a giant, jewel-encrusted letter C installed on this door?

FOREMAN-BOT

Nope. Some scab must have done this. I better get started on an Unauthorized Structural Intervention report. (*bloop*) Well, go on, then. Ring the buzzer.

The buzzer is a wind-chimey musical refrain. This is the official jingle for Cadabra! The door whooshes open. It sounds like capital.

STEVIE

Hi, Welcome guys! We're so excited that you're here!

Beat.

JOHN

Ok, I guess I'll start. I'm John B from W.S.S., (*WSS jingle*) this is Foreman-Bot, he's a foreman-bot, and, uh, that's Officer Crveno back there, bravely performing a rear guard action. We're... excited to be here as well. Uh, what exactly is... here?

STEVIE

Thanks for asking! This is the new Fairgrounds HQ of Cadabra! (*windchime jingle*) I'm Stevie, head of PR. Can I offer you a cucumber water, or maybe you'd like a lavender rosemary macaron to snack on?

CRVENO

Yes. I am little hungry.

JOHN

Seriously?

STEVIE

Enjoy! Now, did he call you Officer?

CRVENO

Yes, Officer Crveno. *(swallowing a mouthful of macaron)* Mph. Security.

STEVIE

Wow, you look worn out! I bet they keep you on your toes, huh? Hey Stevers, why don't you take her along to the spa and get her a rubdown while we talk to John and his robotic friend?

STEVERS

No prob, Stevie! Come right this way, gesin. Boy, something tells me you could really use some relaxation.

CRVENO

Is true... I have incredibly stressful job.

CRVENO and STEVERS depart spa-ward.

STEVIE

Great. Now that that's taken care of we can talk about the exciting things that are happening at Cadabra! *(jingle)*

FOREMAN-BOT

I'm sorry, I've got to clear something up here before we continue.

STEVIE

No need to worry, friend bot! What's on your processor?

FOREMAN-BOT

Ok, I'm a Systems Maintenance bot, which is not what you'd call a public-facing occupation. So I don't have a lot of, uh, interaction with... the greater interstellar community? I've never met a Dilurian before, is what I'm saying.

STEVIE

Well, we certainly hope we'll be seeing more of you now!

FOREMAN-BOT

Uh huh, thanks. The thing is... You folks are... It's just that your... body composition is kind of...unique, and I'm not sure what to look at when I'm talking to you...?

STEVIE

Is it because of all the arms or all the butts?

FOREMAN-BOT

Both. But mainly the butts.

JOHN

Yeah, Dilurians definitely have a lot of... both.

STEVIE

No worries, my zoods! You can look at any arm or butt you want! Get an eyeful! Fill your graphic memory storage to the brim! You see, the unique evolution of Dilurian biology allows us to perceive the universe on a much higher frequency than Humans, or any other species of similarly limited capacity. Through the epidermis of our sensory appendages—what your people call “arms”—we experience sight, smell, taste, touch and sound in one big synesthetic, synergistic melange. This genetic gift is what gives us Dilurians the unique engineering aptitude that has created the kind of product exclusively available from us here at Cadabra! (*jingle*)

FOREMAN-BOT

And what do all the butts do?

STEVIE

I just know that you’re going to be super excited once you hear about all the amazing things that are happening at Cadabra! (*jingle*)

JOHN

And that’s going to happen every time you say Cadabra? (*jingle*) Oh. And me, too. That’s super fun.

STEVIE

I know, right? We paid Wixlarp Uno 3.72 trillion credits for that jingle, and it was worth every one, if you ask me!

STEVE-O

Hey, Stevie? If I could jump in for a sec. Hey zoods, I’m Steve-O, Senior Account Executive for the Big C. I just wanted to get any Union issues out of the way first thing. Here you are Mr. Foreman-bot. This writ certifies that we’ve secured permission from the Robot Union Central Board back on Earth, allowing us to employ an internal non-union workforce for our maintenance needs. It’s in order to the letter and if the Union has any grievances going forward, well, we can let the lawyers sort that out, can’t we?

FOREMAN-BOT

Hmm. It looks legit, but don’t think you can rewrite the Union’s network permissions just like that. We’ll be keeping a sensor on you folks.

JOHN

So, just to make sure I have this straight: we’re totally off the hook for maintenance in here?

STEVE-O

Well, let's not get ahead of our skis on this one, John. W.S.S.— (*W.S.S. jingle*) ...heh. That's your jingle? Very cute. Anyway, you would still have some responsibilities here at Cadabra HQ. (*Cadabra jingle, smug satisfaction at how much nicer it is:*) Ahhh. We will of course take care of all small-gauge wiring issues, no need to concern yourselves with that.

JOHN

Works for me. So, just the beverage machines...?

STEVE-O

Oh, no, not at all. In the very near future, we'll be installing a full service cafe on campus, with UCSB triple-certified baristas, juice-pressers from the Kompachian system, as well as grab-and-go food service handling over 4,000 species-specific dietary restrictions.

JOHN

Well, it sounds like you folks have got that covered. And I don't see any windows in here, so...

STEVE-O

Oh no, this is just Phase 1, John. You'll have plenty to do here once we're in full swing, believe me! But for now, what I am so grateful for is the opportunity to discuss our product with Mr. Foreman-Bot and yourself. If I could direct you to our state-of-the-art infomarium, where we've prepared a short pitch video for potential investors?

FOREMAN-BOT

Investors? Now, hold on! We're only here to—

STEVE-O

Right this way! Just have a seat on whatever structured foam feature appeals to your personal anatomical configuration, and enjoy!

JOHN

Wow. That is a 90-meter holo wall. I'm guessing we found the power drain.

FOREMAN-BOT

Not without a 387-FE Unauthorized Current Depletion Preliminary Investigation Form filed at Union headquarters, we didn't!

JOHN

Right, sorry.

The pitch video starts up.

PITCH VIDEO NARRATOR

Cadabra (*jingle*) welcomes you, George Foreman-Bot and John B!

JOHN

Uh, what?

PITCH VIDEO NARRATOR

What is Cadabra? (*jingle*) As you both know, the Fairgrounds is now home to hundreds of species from throughout the Galaxy. But they all have one thing in common. They all originated light years away. And even if they were born here, they can't help but miss miss the sights, sounds, and most importantly, the smells of their home planets. At Cadabra (*jingle*) your inner well-being is of paramount importance to us. And we want to supply you with the one thing you can't replace... the aroma of home. Cadabra! (*jingle*) Take a whiff!

JOHN

You sell... smells?

FOREMAN-BOT

When did you put our names in your little holo-pitch? How'd you find out we were coming?

STEVE-O

We've got one stellar marketing department, Champ! Or maybe it was just our heightened evolutionary senses, huh? Wink, wink!

JOHN

Please don't ever wink again. I'm begging you.

STEVE-O

You've got it, John B! Now, what I have here is a couple of personalized whiffs we've prepared just for the two of you.

JOHN

Sorry, Steve-O, I think your researchers might have fallen down on this one. You're not going to have much luck marketing these things to bots, they don't have a sense of smell.

STEVE-O

Not unless they've taken the trouble to get an upgrade installed, like our bro Foreman-bot here! Isn't that right?

FOREMAN-BOT

Sure as sugared pork chops!

JOHN

What? Why?

FOREMAN-BOT

Olfactory analysis is a vital component of the grillmaster's art, John.

STEVE-O

So go ahead! Just break this caplet right under your nose. Tell me what you think.

FOREMAN-BOT breaks a caplet.

FOREMAN-BOT

This is ludicrous, you gonna send me on some stench odyssey. I don't think so. My sensors are far too advanced to fall for any cheap— What is that? Cassava leaves, Tilapia, oh, roasted plantains, fufu... gasoline, sweat, and is that?... yeah, the tiniest soupçon of donkey shit. No way! This is Kinshasa! The Rumble in the Jungle! Best memory of my life. How'd you do that?

STEVE-O

Like I said, Champ, just good old fashioned market research.

JOHN

Didn't you lose the Rumble in the Jungle? If I remember, you dropped like an oak in the eighth round, when Ali rung your bell. And, hang on, that wasn't even you in the first place, that was the Human George Foreman! Have you even been to Zaire?

FOREMAN-BOT

Don't you rain on my parade, meat sack! Who's the toughest guy to ever take a swing at you?

JOHN

I see your point.

FOREMAN-BOT

Vert is 8 dekagrams soaking wet, and I bet he could knock you on your translucent ass!

STEVE-O

Haha, take it easy there, slugger! Now John! My zood! We've got a whiff for you, too. Breathe in deep, bro.

JOHN

Smell brokers. Unbelievable... *(breathes in)* Huh. Smells like the boardwalk, hot dogs, salt air, and... *(sniff)* Eurgh. Low tide, and... and... cotton candy vomit? Oh. It's... it's our last family vacation... back on... back on Earth... *(breaks down crying)*

FOREMAN-BOT

Aww man... It's ok, John, just let it out.

STEVE-O

Yikes, bro. Yeah, I'm thinking you're not our target audience. So, hey, Foreman-bot! I'm just gonna leave this investors' packet with you, and if you know anyone who doesn't turn into a sniveling mass of jelly after one whiff of *temps perdu*, please do pass that on. Ok, gotta jet! Busy, busy, busy! Keep it inertial, bros.

FOREMAN-BOT

You ok there, pal?

JOHN

Yeah, thanks. That just snuck up on me, I guess.

FOREMAN-BOT

Sure. Let's get out of here. Crveno, you ready to go? Crveno? Did you see where she went?

JOHN

No, sorry.

A beat.

FOREMAN-BOT

Eh, I'm sure she's fine.

[scene 5] Transition to Suite C, where ALTHAAR has been watching TV. Door whoosh as JOHN enters.

JOHN

Hey, Althaar! Watching TV again?

ALTHAAR

Indeed, FriendJohn! Althaar is again making the binge-watch! There is still much he is not "getting" in the Human sit-coms, but they have nonetheless been of great instruction! Althaar has been making investigation of the historic folkways of the famous Earth city of New York. It seems this was a most attractive location in the 20th century, as it was filled with exceedingly spacious and affordable dwellings! It must be that creative occupations were more generously compensated in that era. Although the depreciation of property value could perhaps also result from the numerous and distressing crimes that were busying the Special Victims Units.

JOHN

Or maybe it was just the smell. Speaking of which, I had a really weird call at work today.

ALTHAAR

Oh! FriendJohn has returned after a cycle of paid labors, and Althaar has failed to inquire about said cycle as is custom!

JOHN

No worries, I'd just as soon forget about it anyway. I'm more nervous about tonight.

ALTHAAR

But tonight FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes will be enacting the "date night!" Surely this is to be anticipated with joyment. What is causing anxiety to you, please?

JOHN

It's not that I don't have "joyment," Althaar. It's just... Stella and I have been together for a while now, but we've mostly been just... you know, hanging out.

ALTHAAR

And making sexual vibration!

JOHN

Right. Anyway, we've eaten a lot of dinners together, but we've never actually been on what you'd call a real, official date. You know, a *date-date*.

ALTHAAR

A date-date... (*bloop of the Data-Base*) Is FriendJohn perhaps referring to the Human custom of the "double date," in which one Human couple is making accompaniment with another, to be deputized should the primary couple be unable to fulfill their duties?

JOHN

No, that's— fulfill their duties? No. I didn't mean a double date, Althaar, I was just saying "date" twice for, like, emphasis.

ALTHAAR

Ah, constrastive focus reduplication! A delightful Human language phenomenon!

JOHN

Ok.

ALTHAAR

So the "date" FriendJohn is desiring is the truest form of date, and the ones he and Supervisor Reyes have been enjoying have been of inadequate authenticity!

JOHN

Not— no, that's not exactly what I meant either, it's— we've been having fun, I don't have any complaints, it's just that it's easy to get... complacent. When you've been with someone a while. So one way to keep the romance alive is to go on a really fancy date.

ALTHAAR

A fancycydate. Althaar was not aware that FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes' intimate gatherings were lacking in the way of fancy.

JOHN

I mean, you've been here for plenty of our "gatherings," most of the time we just come back here, order in dinner, and watch TV until, uh—

ALTHAAR

Until the adjournment to the bed-room?

JOHN

Exactly. See, Althaar, in most Human cultures, if you really like someone the way I like Stella, every now and then you should treat them to an expensive night out that will make them feel special. To let them know how special you think they are. Because if you don't, they might start to believe that you don't think they're special, and then they might start to wonder what are they even doing in this relationship, and soon they realize just how much better they could do with just about anyone else, and that's when they leave. They leave you to a sad, lonely life that you thought you had escaped forever and you almost did, you were so, so close, but you screwed it up, John! You screwed it up again, just like you screw up everything else, and all you had to do was pay for a couple of dinners with cloth napkins, and—

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn! Althaar must be interrupting, because he believes you are making again the spiral downward!

JOHN

Whuh—? Oh, yeah, sorry, I really went off there for a second.

ALTHAAR

Indeed! FriendJohn was going off almost into the next star system! Althaar is deducing that FriendJohn has previously experienced great suffering from the neglect of the fancydate.

JOHN

You've got that right.

ALTHAAR

Then fancydate must be success, so that FriendJohn is not once again subjected to the sad-loneliness! But Althaar is certain that FriendJohn has made excellent planning of fancy-ness. What are the components of fancydate, please?

JOHN

Oh, I've got it all worked out: first a seven course meal at Chez Pazzo, and then we're going to take in that new musical at Wondering Comet Rep.

ALTHAAR

Oh, delightment! Althaar was intrigued and captivated by their staging of *Cherry Orchard II: Zombie Orchard Massacre* in the last seasoning!

JOHN

And after that, we'll head over to the hydropark in Dalet 5 to look at the stars. Which in itself is not really special because that's literally all there is outside, but that park is really nicely lit during third cycle, it kind of gives the ambience of a balmy summer night. And, well, then...

ALTHAAR

Yes, FriendJohn?

JOHN

If the time feels right...I'm going to say it.

ALTHAAR

...Just the word "it," FriendJohn? This seems to Althaar to be of the anti-climax.

JOHN

No, Althaar. I'm going to say... you know, the "L" word.

ALTHAAR

...Luncheon?

JOHN

No.

ALTHAAR

Lycanthrope?

JOHN

Wrong.

ALTHAAR

Lapland!

JOHN

Nope.

ALTHAAR

Luminous?

JOHN

Incorrect.

ALTHAAR

Mmm... Lycanthrope?

JOHN

You said that already.

ALTHAAR

Then Althaar is giving up.

JOHN

Love, Althaar! I want to tell Stella that I love her. That's why this date is so important. I want it to be absolutely perfect.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Then Althaar is certain that FriendJohn will be as clever and diligent in the execution of the fancydate as he is in his work duties!

JOHN

Hopefully a little more than that. Fortunately, I have plenty of time to get ready. I only had one call this morning, and all I had to do there was listen to a bunch of Dilurians going on about their latest innovation in the field of things nobody could possibly want or need. Which is stressful in its own way, but at least I won't need to spend the afternoon scrubbing a bunch of crawlspace gunge out of my hair.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn, please forgive the digressment, but Althaar must request clarification. How was the on-going of the Dilurians related to your work duties?

JOHN

Oh, a whole bunch of them have set up this...compound? Corporate headquarters? I'm not sure what to call it. But it's in Resh 37, which was a de-commissioned area before, so I had to sign off on it being inhabitable before the Robot Union would go in there. And then it turned out that the Union won't be going in there anyway because the Dilurians got this fancy-pants exemption, so the whole trip was pretty pointless.

ALTHAAR

Is FriendJohn intending to wear these fancy pants on his date-date?

JOHN

Ha, no. Fancy-pants aren't real pants, and even if they were, a Human trying to fit into a Dilurian's pants would have quite a challenge on his hands. Or butt.

ALTHAAR

Indeed, FriendJohn!

JOHN

So, yeah. A pretty slow day at the office.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is most relieved! The Dilurian culture is typically causing... difficulty in their dealings with other peoples.

JOHN

Even the Iltorians?

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, FriendJohn! Iltor is enjoying pleasant relations with all beings! With one exception, but Althaar has great expectation that he and FriendJohn will be solving that one day!

JOHN

Here's hoping.

ALTHAAR

But the Dilurians are making many... challenges of diplomacy, as they are not often taking consideration of the needs of others. In truth, they are frequently causing great offense with their rudenesses, and then believe this to be the problem of those they have offended!

JOHN

Yeah, I know what you mean. They're definitely the most obnoxious players in our billiards league.

ALTHAAR

This is of no surprise! There is much of Dilurian ingenuity to be learned from, FriendJohn, but their dis-courtesies are often a great block of stumbling. Their innovatory and technological prowesses are rightly praised, but their relentless acquirement of capital and aggressive self-perpetuations are less so. It seems they are constantly searching for the loop-holes in the ICSB charter, merely in order to increase their profitings! The Dilurian set-of-mind has created the need of many interventions from Iltor.

JOHN

Huh. Well, I don't think this group will be here long. Their business plan seemed... pretty silly.

ALTHAAR

Althaar hopes you are correct. But the Dilurian marketing research is of great renown. ...It is a worryment to Althaar that these newly-arrived Dilurians are making the long-term residence. He would not wish to see them ride over the Fairgrounds with rough shoes.

JOHN

I'm sure it'll be fine. These folks were less insufferable than most Dilurians I've met, actually. Well, at least they were, while they thought I might be a potential investor. Not so much after that.

ALTHAAR

Mm. This is indeed a typical experience. *(gross worried noises)*

JOHN

Are you ok, Althaar? You seem a little freaked out.

ALTHAAR

Yes, FriendJohn! Althaar is out-freaking considerably! Althaar fears that he has made little preparation for this circumstance! If he had known of this Dilurian in-moving sooner, he would have sought the wisdom of his dear friend Rilfeer Semburi Dilurbash Tandarapåsprutefjell, who has a most profound understanding of Dilurian society. But Althaar has not done so, and now Althaar is flying sightlessly!

JOHN

Whoa, hey, calm down, buddy. Listen, you may not be a Dilurian expert, but you're still a trained, uh, whatever you are, right? Come on, I've seen you— well, *heard* you dealing with all kinds of species here. You get along with everybody. If the Dilurians start making trouble, I'm sure you can figure out a way to solve it.

ALTHAAR

The confidence of FriendJohn is most heartening. Althaar is thanking you. ...Althaar believes he will now prepare some frighten-tea, and attempt to put this Dilurian encroachment out of his thinking.

Tea-preparation noises commence from the kitchen area.

JOHN

You know, Althaar, when I can't stop myself from worrying about a possible future problem, I find the best thing to do is face it head-on. Then sometimes it turns out I had nothing to worry about after all. And, sometimes it turns the future problem into a present problem, but then I'm too busy flailing and screaming to do any worrying, so either way my worries are over.

Clonk of ALTHAAR setting the kettle down.

ALTHAAR

This is most wise, FriendJohn! ...Although the head-on-facing can not be accomplished literally with the Dilurian anatomy!

JOHN

Heh, right.

ALTHAAR

How are you believing that Althaar should proceed?

JOHN

Well... maybe just go on up there and introduce yourself? Like I said, they were pretty friendly at first, and you're much more plausible investor material than me or George Foreman-bot. You can, you know, establish a relationship, so if there's trouble later on, you've already sort of... preemptively extended an olive branch.

ALTHAAR

Yes! Althaar will do so this very cycle! And Althaar can be stopping by the interstellar post on his way, to dispatch a request for advising to Rilfeer Semburi Dilurbash Tandarapåspruteffjell!

JOHN

There you go! See, you've got this!

ALTHAAR

Althaar is thanking you for your encouragements! But Althaar is having one more question.

JOHN

What is it, buddy?

ALTHAAR

If Althaar can not obtain a branch of olives, would the branch of any fruit-bearing tree be sufficient?

*[6] Transition to the Electric Egg. DEE, XTOPPS, & SOPON and CHIP & JEAN-CLAUDE are different spots at the bar. During first part with J-C and CHIP, we can hear **DEE enjoying a whiff**.*

CHIP

That's a real voider, pal. But hey, look at it this way: you had a great run. Twenty years owning the only Parfumerie at the Fairgrounds. You should be proud.

JEAN-CLAUDE

Proud. Pffft. What do you know, Cheep? Ze art of creating scents and aromas takes time and requires true ability. It has subtle and nuanced qualities zat create dreams, arouse amour, calm the nerves... Zese "wheefs" are an aberration. Instant gratification in some kind of aroma popper. I simply cannot compete. I am closing ze shop. I am leaving ze Fairgrounds.

CHIP

I'm really sorry to hear that Jean-Claude. I will definitely miss our monthly petanque matches. Listen, I gotta run, but have another one on me. Sopon, another Pernod for Jean-Claude here.

JEAN-CLAUDE

Merci, Cheep.

CHIP

Excuse me JC... *(walks over to the others)*... Hey Dee. Dee, c'mon. Do you have to do those whiffs in here? Jean-Claude is right over there. Have a heart.

DEE

I know I'm not hearing Chip Frinkel talking to me about compassion. I know that Chip flotting Frinkel is not standing there trying to give me lessons in basic Human decency. I am absolutely certain that that is not happening right now.

CHIP

Streez, Dee, I said I was sorry. It was a craggy prank, I get that now. And c'mon, you got a huge raise out of it. How much longer do I have to apologize?

DEE

I don't know, until you figure out that "Streez, I said I was sorry," isn't an actual apology?

SOPON

First rule of holes, boss.

CHIP

Yeah, yeah, ok.

CHIP sulks back toward his office.

XTOPPS

Another wheeze, zood?

DEE

Sure, thanks. *(pops another capsule and sniffs)* ...Whoa. This shness is amazing. I can literally smell my childhood! The sorghum fields at sunset after a summer rain... My mom cooking that Samsday night Turducken... the onions, the carrots... Oh! Now I'm catching the scent of my brother's socks from that laundry basket he always left open. So vivid!

SOPON

Yeah, I was skeptical at first, but these Cadabra Whiffs are the real shness. I closed my eyes and it felt like I was by the sulphur geyser in my old back yard on Parpatafoon. The sweet aroma of home. How's yours, Xtopps?

XTOPPS

Soporific. I am digging these C whiffs. I am riding a cumulo-nutmeat of the sweet stuff. There's smooth, but there's also chunky, you chom me?

DEE

And how exactly does something smell "chunky"?

XTOPPS

You know, it's like... it's like I'm wearing a smoking jacket made of all of GWC's experiments in one big salty ball. Smells like satori!

During the previous line, NESS and DORMER have entered the Egg.

NESS

I say it smells like justice! Hands up, gesin!

SOPON

Hey, hey, hey, how many times do we have to kick you goons out of here? Sovereign Xybidont territory, read the scroll!

DORMER

That was before we got a snootful of probable cause!

NESS

Correct! We made, uh, olfactory detection of probable contraband from the corridor!

XTOPPS

Listen up, Clouseau, apparently you aren't hip to the new jam here at the Fairgrounds. You caught the parfum of the 'gume. But that's all it is... the floating essence of PB. You could frisk me, if you're down for a little lèse-majesté, but you'd come up conkers.

NESS

...What?

DEE

Haven't you heard? There's a new product on the market. And you can't confiscate a smell, so you're going to have to come up with a new excuse to barge in here, 'cause that one's kaput.

DORMER

Well, how are we supposed to tell real peanut butter smell from this simulated shness?

XTOPPS

I guess your job just got a few frills craggier. Now make it vague, Wojo.

NESS

Oh yeah? Well... we'll be watching you, gesin.

SOPON

From the corridor?

DORMER

You think you're so smart. You'll jeck up one of these days and we'll be on you like... like...

XTOPPS

Peanut butter on the roof of my mouth? Too late. Nothing illegal about smells, mang. So I advise you to get residual.

NESS & DORMER grumble their way back out.

DEE

For real, though, Xtopps. You sure you haven't touched any of the creamy dreamy? These whiffs are nice, sure, but is just the smell enough to smooth you out?

XTOPPS

Aw, frid no, Dee. I am totally randomized, about six tweaks to Sunday from my own personal stash of Mr. Eliot's finest reserve. But as far as anyone can see, I'm just getting inertial with a little aromatic action.

CHIP has emerged from the office during the preceding, and on his way by:

CHIP

Hey Sopes, I have to run to make the drop. Frill me, this place is dead. I gotta come up with another drink special or something. This new craze isn't exactly doing the Egg any favors.

SOPON

Have you tried one?

CHIP

Yeah. it was amazing, loved it.

SOPON

So what's your happy smell?

CHIP

East Village Dive Bar. Ok, back in a few, keep it glossy for me.

STEVE

Hey there, Steve from Cadabra! I see you've been enjoying some whiffs! The tang of home is a powerful blast of nostalgia, no?

STEVEN

You totally said Tang, bro. Heh heh.

STEVE

Heh. So, folks, what's the narrative here? You loving our new product?

XTOPPS

I have to say, clutcher, these nosegays are my new number 2 recreational indulgence.

DEE

Yeah, I'm really impressed. These things are amazing.

STEVE

Hard agree. So how 'bout putting your creds where your mouth is? We're always looking for forward-thinking investors interested in joining the Cadabra family!

DEE

Ooh, I don't think so, sorry. I don't have that kind of brioche to throw around.

SOPON

What about your Chip-is-a-smarkhead bonus?

DEE

Oh, no. That bouncing baby bonus is getting invested in something with a reliable rate of return, so it's got a shot at growing up into a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed Chip-is-my-EX-boss fund.

STEVE

If solid ROI is what you're looking for, then Cadabra's looking for you, bro!

DEE

Cadabra's looking for investors in a bar, on the Fairgrounds, at 13:30 in the morning. I think that says all there is to say about you zoods. Hard pass.

STEVE

Ha ha, ouch! How about you, buddy? We're offering an exciting ground floor investment opportunity! Don't say no yet, why don't we hop on over to Resh and I can show you around Cadabra HQ, introduce you to some of the team, how's that sound?

XTOPPS

You zoods got a chocolate fountain?

STEVEN

Two!

XTOPPS

Sounds infra-patic. Let's bouge!

DEE

Uh, Xtopps? That might not be the best idea. You probably shouldn't be taking any business meetings in your condition.

XTOPPS

Foob out, Dee, I see what condition my condition is in. You can come and keep a peeler on me, if you're so yonked about it. Lead on, my first edition!

STEVE

Sweet!

DEE

Oh, this is happening, isn't it? Fine, let's go. Just, Xtopps? Promise me you won't sign anything until you've read all the fine print? From one who knows?

[scene 7] Transition to the Customs area. KAISER WILHELM-BOT is at his station.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

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

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

What's up there, Generalissi-bro?

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

No bags today, gesin?

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

Nope. Traveling light, bro. Everything I need is already here.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Very well. Name?

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

Steve!

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

...Surname?

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

Just Steve. Mang, you sure are nosy.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

I am performing my duties as a customs-bot, Sin... Steve. Port of Origin?

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

Diluria III, duh.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Purpose of visit?

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

Yeah, this bites. I'm out. *(dials phone)* Yeah, hey Steve, it's Steve from Operations. This zood with a pointy hat and a funny mustache will not foob it with the questions, and I've been on this line for like five minutes already. There's two or three other teams on this flight with me, this is gonna be a serious snag. Yeah. Yeah. Oh, nice, thanks bro.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Purpose. Of. Visit.

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

Yeah, just cool your jets there, Wolfgang Schmuck, we're gonna get this sorted out in two short squirmies.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

I am not equipped with jets, gesin. You are perhaps confusing me with a hull-repair bot. This is Customs. Purpose of visit?

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

Wait for it... Oh, sweet, here he is now. Thanks for coming, Steve.

STEVE IN LEGAL

No problemo, Steve. What's the rumpus?

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

Just waiting on you, bro.

STEVE IN LEGAL

Wow, you were right. That is one hilarious ‘stache. Ok, achtung baby, here’s what we are gonna do. Cadabra has secured authorization to create a priority entry lane to free up this seriously scraggy bottleneck you’ve got going.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Bottleneck? This line is operated with the utmost robotic efficiency.

STEVE IN LEGAL

The line is glacial. We gotta roll, Helmet Kohl.

STEVE IN OPERATIONS

Heh. Good one, bro.

STEVE IN LEGAL

Thanks, bro. Now, I’ve brought along Steve here from Cadabra admin, she’s going to be staffing our priority check-through station. Go get ‘em, Steve.

STEVE FROM ADMIN

You got it chief. Next!

STEVE FROM OPERATIONS

That’s me. Later, Rolfie.

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Name?

STEVE FROM OPERATIONS

Steve. Cadabra Operations.

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Welcome to the Fairgrounds! Next!

Ding!

STEVE FROM BIZLAUNCH

That’s me, bro!

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Name?

STEVE FROM BIZLAUNCH

Steve, Cadabra Biz launch.

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Welcome to the Fairgrounds! Next!

Ding!

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Stop this at once! This is an outrage! A scandal! It is the responsibility of Customs to protect the H.E.C. from unauthorized entry! I cannot allow this to continue!

STEVE IN LEGAL

Nothing unauthorized about it, bro. This is 100% cubic, check your inbox for the certs. Oh, and here's the dead-tree version, I know you zoods are big on that around here. *(drops a sizable sheaf of documents onto the customs desk)* We good?

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

This... this seems to be in order... but—

STEVE IN LEGAL

Great! Keep 'em coming, Steve!

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Will do, bro! Name?

STEVE FROM INTEGRATION

Steve, Cadabra Integration.

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Welcome to the Fairgrounds! Next!

Ding!

STEVE IN LEGAL

Hey there, Sauerbraten, I don't want to tell you your business, but shouldn't you be laying some of that robotic efficiency on those suckers in the Loser Line?

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

(disgruntled Teutonic muttering) ...NEXT!

TOURIST

Loser Line? I didn't sign up for the Loser Line!

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Is this all your luggage, gesin?

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Name?

STEVE FROM HR

Steve, Cadabra HR

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Welcome to the Fairgrounds! Next!

Ding!

TOURIST

Uh, yeah. Just one bag. Can I, uh... can I get in the not-loser line?

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

I don't know, gesin. How many butts do you have?

TOURIST

Uh, zero.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Then I suppose not. Name?

TOURIST

Zyloxides fru Peplin. Boy, you sure get a lot of Dilurians here, huh?

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Apparently so.

TOURIST

Oof, that's a lot of butts.

Meanwhile, during the preceding:

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Name?

STEVE FROM TECH SUPPORT

Steve, Cadabra Tech Support

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Welcome to the Fairgrounds! Next!

Ding!

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Welcome to the Fairgrounds. Next!

Ding!

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Welcome to the Fairgrounds. Next!

Ding!

STEVE FROM ADMIN

Welcome to the Fairgrounds. Next!

Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!... [scene 8] Transition to the Bridge.

STALIN-BOT

Inside Voice? What is Inside Voice?

COMMANDER

It's what I am gonna need from you right freaking now, Comrade Shouty-pants! *(sigh)* Listen to me very carefully, please. I have a screaming caffeine headache, and you are way too loud for me to function. Inside voice, for the love of Jones.

STALIN-BOT

This is space station, Commander. Everywhere is inside. This is my voice.

COMMANDER

Please... just... shush.

STALIN-BOT

(not quietly)

Shushing, Commander!

COMMANDER

SH! *(beat)* Ok. Thank you.

*A long beat of nothing but distant background Bridge business, just long enough for the sound of an incoming commlink call to make **both the COMMANDER and STALIN-BOT audibly jump.***

COMMANDER

Aagh!

STALIN-BOT

Incoming call, Commander!

COMMANDER

You think?! Ugh... Bridge, Torianna here. Barely.

H.F.

Hey Mindy, listen, sorry to bother you, but those Dilurians up in Resh? Yeah, they just sent me an updated maintenance remit, and I gotta tell you, we are not prepared to deal with this kind of volume. It's just me and the kid here, you know, and there's only 28 hours in a day. We'd basically have to live up there full-time to take care of all this.

COMMANDER

Hang on, I thought their contract specified that they were responsible for their own maintenance. That's half the reason I didn't kick up a fuss when Earth Central approved their lease. That doesn't apply to you?

H.F.

Yes and no. We're off the hook for the drinks machines and the tiny wires, but the windows are still on us.

COMMANDER

Oh. Still, it's only Resh 37. How many windows could they possibly have?

H.F.

According to this maintenance order, about twenty-seven hundred.

COMMANDER

What?

H.F.

Yep. Two thousand six hundred and forty six to be exact. Not to mention the, ah, "vitreous architectural specialty elements," which are nothing to sneeze at. Especially if you're the one who has to wipe them down.

COMMANDER

What in Koko's name is a "vitreous architectural specialty element?"

H.F.

Ok, well, I'm looking at a schematic for a snow globe that's, uh... yeah, looks to be at least 20 meters tall, and then in the waterslide park...

COMMANDER

Waterslide park?! How is it that I am just now hearing about this from you?

H.F.

Good question. It says “Proprietary Information” in big black letters at the top of the document, that might explain it. Want me to shoot you a copy? They also sent us a Non-Disclosure Agreement, but there’s no way I’m signing that.

COMMANDER

Absolutely, thank you. I’ll let you know as soon as I get this sorted. Torianna out. ... What by Hooker’s deflected ear is going on down there? They just moved in this morning, and now they’re installing waterslides and gargantuan snowglobes?

FRALL phases in.

COMMANDER

Oh, good. Frall, what can you tell me about this... why are you shimmering like that?

FRALL

(chuckling) Oh, don’t mind me, Commander.

COMMANDER

I do mind, though, Frall. I mind a lot. I mind everything, in fact, because my head is killing me, and now apparently the simple, uncomplicated additional revenue stream I was promised by Earth Central is turning into a ridiculous and stupidly complicated hassle. Do you know what these Dilurians are up to?

FRALL

I believe they’re up to Qof 36 by now.

COMMANDER

What?

An alert klaxon goes off, and continues under the following.

COMMANDER

Aagh! What now?

NESS

Unauthorized entity approaching the Bridge, Commander!

COMMANDER

Species?

DORMER

Scan unclear! No organic material indicated, sir!

COMMANDER

Frall! Is it hostile?

FRALL

That would honestly depend on how you look at it, Mindy.

COMMANDER

What!?! Are you telling me we might actually be under attack? Dormer! Ness! Set neuro-dampers to Full and stand by to fire at whatever comes through that door! I don't care who they are, they picked the wrong day to jeck with me! Bridge Control, open main doors on my mark! In three...two...one... Now!

The klaxon stops as the door whooshes open and a drone hums through it, saying:

PROMO DRONE VOICE

Commander Mindy Torianna!

COMMANDER

Fire!

*Profligate laser zapping followed by a large crash as a drone hits the floor.
Sparks. A beat.*

DORMER

What is that thing?

COMMANDER

It looks like a drone of some sort.

NESS

It's opening up! Permission to fire wantonly in its general direction, sir!

COMMANDER

Permission denied, Ness. But stand ready.

PROMO DRONE VOICE

Greetings Commander Mindy Torianna! Great news! Cadabra is now offering so much more than Aromas! Please enjoy this De Longhi 500G Magnifica espresso machine with fully integrated milk frother, with our compliments. *(slowing)* More fantastic news! Cadabra is now offering a wide spectrum of gifts for all your shopping needs. Check out the new interface. Cadabra! The perfect gift lives here. *(slowing deeper)* You loved the whiffs, now get the gifts! Free delivery! Open all Days...y. Daisy. Give me...your...answer...Do. *(dies)*

NESS

Whoa. That was heavy.

DORMER

You killed it, sir. Poor thing was just trying to deliver a coffee machine.

COMMANDER

Don't be melodramatic, Dormer, it's just a drone, it's not sapient. *(clunk as a piece of the drone falls off, beat)* ...Although I suppose I may have overreacted a bit.

FRALL

Maybe just a bit.

Foom! as the drone catches on fire just a bit.

COMMANDER

Someone get a cleaning-crew to take care of that, please! And— *(5 rapid-fire bleepities of message alerts coming in)* Oh, what now!? *(bloop as she opens her messages)* Spam for Cadabra gift services, wonderful. *(bleep as she deletes it)* ...Spam for Cadabra food delivery, now available to all sectors... *(bleep)* Notice of occupancy for Resh levels 36 and 38? *(bleep)* Notice of occupancy for Shin 36 through 38? *(bleep)* Notice of occupancy for Qof 36 through 38? All pre-approved by Earth Central? And we have no say in the matter. Well, that's just perfect! What am I going to do about these Dilurians, Frall?

FRALL

Perhaps a macchiato would help you concentrate, sir.

COMMANDER

Of course it would. But using their espresso machine feels like giving aid and comfort to the enemy, somehow.

FRALL

More taking aid and comfort from the enemy, really.

COMMANDER

Yes, but still. Anyway, how did they know I needed one in the first place? It's creepy.

DORMER

Maybe they used an algorithm, sir!

COMMANDER

Do you even know what an algorithm is, Dormer?

DORMER

Uh, a thing that... figures out... things?

FRALL

Congratulations, Corporal, that is... technically correct.

COMMANDER

In the most useless way possible. All right, screw it. I'm going to be completely unfit to grapple with the ethical ramifications of drinking their coffee until I've actually had some coffee. You two, unpack that thing and get it up and brewing. I want a latte, very frothy, with a triple shot of my personal roast.

NESS

Yessir!

DORMER

Right away, sir!

COMMANDER

Frall, level with me. Should I be concerned about this Dilurian expansion?

FRALL

Without a doubt, Mindy. But what I'd really worry about is Shin sector. Cadabra is getting awfully close to the... well, never mind.

FRALL discorporates. Milk begins steaming.

COMMANDER

Never mind?! Oh, for— no. No, I'm not even thinking about any of this until that latte is in my hand. *(bleepity of another incoming message)* Oh, and now Cadabra has sent me an invoice for the drone. Incredible. The mollifying promise of imminent caffeination is the only thing keeping me from heading up to Resh right now to straighten them out.

NESS

Resh and Qof and Shin, sir.

COMMANDER

Right. Well, wherever they are, they better not think they can put one over on Mindy Torianna.

DORMER

Your latte, Commander.

COMMANDER

(slurps) Ahhhhh... Rogar's toes, that's perfect.

[scene 9] Transition to Suite C. JOHN splashes on aftershave and winces.

JOHN

They can break the light barrier, but they can't make an aftershave that doesn't sting like the surface of Mebsuta?

A buzz from the intercom.

ALTHAAR

(over intercom)

Althaar is returned, FriendJohn! Please be making shieldment of your vision, please!

JOHN

I'm in the bathroom, Althaar, you're good.

ALTHAAR

Then Althaar is performing entrance!

We hear the distant whoosh of the front door, then the sound of a grumpy Iltorian stomping through the living room and into his own room, where the door whooshes shut behind him, as:

JOHN

(muttering to himself)

Should I have gone with the bowtie? No, stop overthinking, John. This is good.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn may be entering the room of living in comfort, as Althaar is in his own room, where Althaar should perhaps remain eternally for all that Althaar is good for!

JOHN

Are you okay there, buddy? You sound a little... grumpy.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn is correct. Althaar is indeed most saturated with grump. Oh! But he would never wish to perpetuate these grumps upon his dear friend and room-mate! Althaar must beg your forgiveness, FriendJohn. Perhaps it is best if he is not speaking further.

JOHN

Oh, no, you've probably talked me out of a few thousand bad moods at this point, it's about time I returned the favor.

ALTHAAR's door whooshes back open.

ALTHAAR

FriendJohn is very wise! It is a truth that reciprocity is the pneumatic motor of friendship!

JOHN

O-kay...

ALTHAAR

...Now that Althaar is thinking of it, that expression is perhaps losing something in translation from the Iltorian.

JOHN

I think I get the gist. So, what's up? Did you have a rough day?

ALTHAAR

Indeed! Althaar's day was of a roughness to parallel that of the infamous Pumice-Bogs of Abrasia!

JOHN

Things didn't go well with the Dilurians, I take it.

ALTHAAR

Do not take "it," FriendJohn! Althaar would not wish "it" upon Althaar's own worst enemy, if he had one, which of course it is most fortunate he does not, because that is perhaps the only thing that could cause him even greater distressment than this great failure of Dilurian branch-proffering.

JOHN

Sorry, buddy. Want to tell me what happened? Maybe you'll feel better if you talk about it.

ALTHAAR

It was as Althaar had feared, FriendJohn. His inexperience with the Dilurian people prevented utterly the attainment of friendly understanding. Althaar had hardly finished his introductorys, when he was besieged by the pitches of sales. Such were the sales pitched at Althaar, that he was feeling like the target of a Dunk The Driffer attraction at a Xanthoni Harvest Festival!

JOHN

Yeah, I remember them being pretty aggressive with the investing talk.

ALTHAAR

Yes! They are as relentless as the... Althaar can not think of a simile, FriendJohn, but they are very relentless! Althaar could not get a word in on any edge! And there are only so many insincere pleasantries and packaged speeches of "synergy" and "capitalization of the market" and "optimal demographic orthants" that Althaar can endure! Althaar made hasty departure, with no achievement of inter-species understanding. Shame and lamentation!

JOHN

Aw, don't be too hard on yourself, I'm sure you did the best you could. And hey, at least you didn't burn any bridges, right? So you can always try again.

ALTHAAR

It is true that Althaar was not burning the bridge. Althaar was attempting to make compliment of it, in fact, as it is a most pleasing aesthetic addition to the park of water-sliding. But of course he was inundated with discourings upon the "core competencies" before he could finish! (*gross sigh*) Althaar appreciates FriendJohn's attempt at consolation, but Althaar is thinking he must make processing of this disappointment before solace is to be enjoyed.

JOHN

You take all the time you need, guy. I'm heading out in a couple minutes anyway, so you'll have the place to yourself. You can spread out in the living room and do your gyro-yoga if you want.

ALTHAAR

Oh! The fancydate of FriendJohn had slipped entirely from the mind of Althaar! Althaar hopes his interruption has not made delay in the preparations!

JOHN

No, I think I'm good to go. Reservations are all made, I've got the theater tickets in my pocket, I smell as good as I've ever smelled... Is there anything I'm forgetting?

Front doorbell rings.

ALTHAAR

Ah! Supervisor Reyes is arrived! Fancydate is go! Do not worry about Althaar, FriendJohn, he will be growing mums! There will be no interference to fancydate!

JOHN

I don't think that's Stella, actually, I'm supposed to meet her on the Central Promenade.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Then who can be making request of entry?

JOHN

Good question. If it was Mrs. F she'd be in here already. (*hits intercom*) Hello?

VOICE OVER INTERCOM

Great news, John B! Cadabra is now offering so much more than Aromas! Please enjoy this corsage of lush European orchids with our compliments. (*under the following lines*) More fantastic news! Cadabra is now offering a wide spectrum of gifts for all your shopping needs. Check out the new interface. The perfect gift lives here. You loved the whiffs, now get the gifts! Free delivery! Open all Days...

JOHN

Oh, hey! I was thinking about picking up some flowers on the way over. This is perfect.

ALTHAAR

It is as if the Cadabra is knowing all your needs before they are happening!

JOHN

It really is. But...how?

[scene 10] Transition to Cadabra HQ.

STEVE-A-RINO

...and towards Qof is where we hope to expand the main campus, and we're thinking Shin 37 is looking pretty good for packaging and distribution.

AWESOME STEVE

Awesome, Steve-a-rino, I'm loving it! Any news on HQ2? What's the sitch on the Upper Concourse?

STEVE-A-RINO

We've got Outreach scouting Kaf and Yod 20 through 40 as we speak, should settle a deal within the hour.

AWESOME STEVE

That is some awesome news, my compadre!

STEVE-A-RINO

If you think that's awesome, wait til you see the first day viewing numbers on the new streaming service. We'll be wiping all our butts with platinum-threaded handkerchiefs when the bonuses come out!

AWESOME STEVE

Awesome! Hey, how about we get in some rounds of vibro-squash before we kick some more ass!

STEVE-A-RINO

As long as that ass isn't one of ours!

They both laugh douchey tech-bro laughs.

STEVE-A-RINO

Hey, who put this fern here next to the fiber-lizer?

AWESOME STEVE

I dunno, maybe Steve thought we could use an awesome blast of O² while we get our snack on?

STEVE-A-RINO

Don't get me wrong, I dig the innovation of bringing some green to the nutrition prep zone, it's a real paradigm-chuck. But I planned this layout with maximal efficiency in mind, you know? And this weed is frilling up my feng shui, big-time.

AWESOME STEVE

Well, that is decidedly not awesome, bro. Why don't you head on out to the courts while I find a place for this leafy little accent item that doesn't harsh your chi.

STEVE-A-RINO

That would be awesome of you, bro.

AWESOME STEVE

Hey, bro, "Awesome" is my middle name!

STEVE-A-RINO

I thought it was Steve!

Douchey laughter; STEVE-A-RINO heads off.

AWESOME STEVE

All right, Miracle-Bro. Let's find a spot for you in the most awesome of optimal conditions.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Put me down, you ungainly land-urchin!

AWESOME STEVE is startled, nearly dropping MRS. FRONDRINAX

AWESOME STEVE

Whoa! Oh wow, talking topiary, awesome! Did Steve in Genetics set this up? Steve, you maniac!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Of all the—I was not "set up" by anyone, and certainly not by any Steves of your no doubt tragically-limited acquaintance! I happen to be a perfectly normal Fugulnari, thank you very much! Why don't you grow a head so you can finally pull it out of... whichever ass is closest, and learn a little something about the rest of the Galaxy, for once?

AWESOME STEVE

Ha! I'm getting roasted by a plant! Awesome! What brings you to Cadabra HQ on this fine cycle, my greenie meanie?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

The name is Mrs. Frondrinax, you nightmare paramecium. And I'm here to investigate your intentions. I got here long before you people, and I've come to think of the Fairgrounds as, well, as my own little garden. I've got big plans for this place! And the last thing I need is some misbegotten gluteo-brachoids chucking their recyclables onto my compost heap. If you know what I mean.

AWESOME STEVE

No idea, bro, but it sounds super-exciting!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, it will be. But not if you cabbage-worms plow me under before I can get started! So I think I have a right to know just what kind of fuss you're planning to kick up here. The cut-rate fertilizer you've been spreading around doesn't fool me! I want to see what you've got hidden in the potting shed! So as the Humans say: take me to your leader!

AWESOME STEVE

Oh, sorry, no can do, bro. Big Steve's scheduled down to the yotta-second. Launch day operations, you know. But hey, if you have any questions about our corporate philosophy, core mission statement, or operational parameters, I'm the Steve to water your roots. Hit me!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh. Well, it's not exactly the tête-à-tête I was hoping for, but then I suppose neither of us are technically equipped for that in the first place, are we? Why don't you tell me as much as you know about this little operation, and then maybe this won't be a complete waste of my time.

AWESOME STEVE

Awesome!

[scene 11] Transition to a commercial/nightlife area on the Central Promenade.

STELLA

John! John! Over here!

JOHN

Hey, Stella! Wow. You look amazing!

STELLA

Thanks, so do you.

JOHN

Thanks! You ready?

STELLA

Yeah. So where are we headed? You've been so cryptic.

JOHN

One thing at a time. First of all, these are for you.

STELLA

Ooh, European orchids, pretty!

JOHN

...And so is this.

STELLA

What's in here?

JOHN

Open it and find out.

Rip rip rip.

STELLA

Oh, wow... Cool Cherry Cream, Montelimat, ooh, Coconut Fudge, my favorite. Did you get these from Jacques'?

JOHN

Jacques Torrent Stream Chocolates, yep. But you you might want to take your time finishing them off, because the guy there told me they're closing for good.

STELLA

What? They're closing?

JOHN

Yeah, apparently there's a new online sweetshop from these Cadabra people, and he said they lost almost all their accounts in one day. It's pretty sad. Mom-and-pop style stores just can't compete, I guess.

STELLA

Oh, mang... I loved that place. One of my go-to after work indulgences. That's too bad. ... Alright, enough of that. What's the plan for tonight?

JOHN

Right this way, Supervisor Reyes.

They head down a quieter corridor.

STELLA

C'mon, the anticipation is killing me. Where are we going?

JOHN

A little place called Chez Pazzo.

STELLA

Oh, wow! I've been dying to check them out, but they were booked solid every time I tried to get a table!

JOHN

I noticed. That's why I got on their waiting list a couple of weeks ago. And this is just the first stop, Stella. I promise, this is gonna be a night to remember. Here we are, after you. *(rattle of a locked analog restaurant door being tugged on fruitlessly)* Rgh. Uh... what's going on? Why is the door locked?

STELLA

It looks... not open.

JOHN

This can't be. They confirmed my reservation this morning!

STELLA

I walked by two days ago and the place was jammin'. What could have happened?

JOHN

Hang on, there's a touchscreen next to the door, looks new...*(reads)* Button, button, yo push my button... Oh-kay. *(bleep as he pushes the button)*

PROMO VOICE

Yo, zoods! Amazing news! Chez Pazzo is now a part of the growing Cadabra family. While in house dining is no longer available (Sorry, bro!), the menu has been converted to our brand new Con'Soom digestible expedition app! Free delivery to your domicile within minutes! Cadabra Con'Soom... You'll eat it up!

STELLA

Looks like no one's getting a table.

JOHN

Ugh. Cadabra again... This morning they were selling smell pellets, and now they're into chocolates and food delivery?

STELLA

Those Dilurians move fast, huh? Which is pretty impressive for a species that's all arms and butts.

JOHN

Yeah... I'm sorry, Stella. I was really trying to make this a special night out. We'll get Chez Pazzo next time we're ordering in, ok?

STELLA

Hey, the night is young, don't worry about it. Where to now?

JOHN

Ummm. Ok. Well, I guess we can pick somewhere else to have dinner on the way to... the next place we're going.

STELLA

Which is?

JOHN

Not far. So, if you'll accompany me down the deosil corridor...?

STELLA

Oh, come on, I hate suspense. I got enough of that on vent-biter duty. Give me a little clue, at least.

JOHN

Well, I will say that I think it's something that my personal warrior princess is really gonna love.

STELLA

You didn't! Are you kidding? *Xena...The Musical*? I have been dying to see that! Wow, you've done your homework! Color me impressed.

JOHN

I think they've got a little cantina inside that we can grab a bite at before the show, how's that sound?

STELLA

Sounds perfect. Nice save, Mr. B.

JOHN

I think this is gonna work out just fine, Ms. Reyes. C'mon. I can almost smell the blue corn enchiladas... What the—? No! What is going on?!

STELLA

Blacked out windows, Lucy and Desi sani cubes, Craft service table—this looks like a film set.

JOHN

That makes no sense. Uh, hey, excuse me? Can I ask you a question? What is... all this? Isn't there a show at 7:40?

FILM P.A.

That's a negative, bro. They're closed for the next three days. We're shooting inside.

STELLA

Shooting? Shooting what?

FILM P.A.

Uh, I really can't say... Hey Steve, can you handle this?

STEVE FROM SHOWCAINE

Hi folks! I'm Steve, Cadabra Pictures. As you can see, the theater's going to be occupied for the next few days. You should contact the box office for rescheduling or refunds. Now if you could move along, we have to keep this area clear, thanks so much.

JOHN

Wait, who are you, again?

STEVE FROM SHOWCAINE

Steve, Cadabra Pictures. Hi.

STELLA

So you're making a film of the show?

STEVE FROM SHOWCAINE

Ah, nah bro. We've offered the cast roles in a new series based on the play, and they were more than happy to jump right into shooting.

STELLA

You're making a TV show based on a musical based on a TV show?

STEVE FROM SHOWCAINE

It's not a TV show, bro. It's a brand new audiovisual content pellet for Cadabra's brand new video streaming service, Showcaine.

JOHN

Showcaine.

STEVE FROM SHOWCAINE

Showcaine! If you like to binge, there's nothing like a Showcaine binge. Now, I gotta get back to it, bros. But be sure to sign up in the next 2.3 hours for a 40% discount on your first entertainment module! Showcaine! (*moving off*) Hey, Steve! Did you backdate the start time like I told you? I don't want to go into meal penalties!

JOHN

I can't believe this! Is screwing me over somehow part of Cadabra's mission statement?!

STELLA

John, sweetie, it's fine. Really. Just relax.

PROMO DRONE

Hi folks! It looks like you're experiencing a catastrophic dating failure. And crushed expectations lead to messy breakups! There's a high probability that you two won't last long at the rate you're going. These things happen. But not to worry! Cadabra's got your back or equivalent anatomical region, with our new dating app, Mingle Tingle! You'll know it's time to mingle when you feel the tingle! Terrible dates like this one will be a thing of the past.

JOHN

This wouldn't have been a terrible date if Cadabra hadn't smart bombed it at every turn! And we're not having a messy breakup! This woman is perfect! She's my ideal! And she actually likes me! So step off, you stupid drone!

PROMO DRONE

Whoa, my biometric sensors are detecting a spike in adrenalin and cortisol, accelerated heart rate, and a serious lack of inside voice! According to my data-base, this display of temper will bring your long-term compatibility potential down to .08%. Why not download Mingle Tingle right now to get a head start on your post-breakup recovery process? We're here for you!

JOHN

Just shut up and leave us alone, you... you... Rgh! (*clank*) Ow! My hand!

PROMO DRONE

Violent outbursts targeting inanimate objects! Wow, that's serious red flag territory, bro. But Mingle Tingle can connect you with thousands of singles in your area desperate enough to overlook it! Download today!

STELLA

Never try to box a drone, John. Here, I've got this. Stand back.

JOHN

You've got what? What is that?

STELLA
Stand back!

BEEP BEEP BEEP BOOM!!!

JOHN
Holy crap. I didn't realize you could fit a photon grenade in a clutch.

STELLA
A girl can never be too prepared.

JOHN
Stella, I love... that you're such a badass.

STELLA
Aw, thanks Johnny. If it keeps you from bruising your knuckles on passing spam-cans, then I'm happy to pitch a pineapple or two. Hey, listen, I know you put a lot of work into planning this date, but think it's time to pull the plug. Why don't we just head back to your crib for some takeout and some...vibrations.

JOHN
Yeah... Let's do that.

[scene 12] Transition to the Cadabra Main Campus, which TOUR GUIDE STEVE is showing to DEE and XTOPPS.

TOUR GUIDE STEVE
And this is the quad, where we like to chill, relax our arms, butts *and* brains, and notion up new ways to bring Cadabra to the *next* next level.

XTOPPS
Wooful, mang. Et in Arcadia sum-thing else!

DEE
Yeah, this makes your typical Fairgrounds hydroponic park look like a compost heap.

TOUR GUIDE STEVE
That's right, bros! Our backers' support has given us the opportunity to expand in ways we could only spitball back when Cadabra was just a handful of up-and-comers with some gumption and a dream.

DEE
You mean like, ten hours ago?

TOUR GUIDE STEVE

You know what they say about idle hands, Ms. Mallory? Well, we've got so many hands, we just gotta keep 'em busy building value for our cherished investors. That's why we want to let His Splendor the Baronet here in on this amazing opportunity. Isn't that right, Your Radiance?

XTOPPS

(distracted)

How d'you zoods get the dirt so clean, mang?

TOUR GUIDE STEVE

Hahaha, you said it! Well, moving right along, I want to make sure you get to check out the infinity pools. Now, that's not just a clever name: dip a toe into one of those babies and you can see clear to the edge of time itself!

DEE

Oh, that sounds... the exact opposite of relaxing?

TOUR GUIDE STEVE

Depends on your sensory setup, bro. For us it's kind of a detox. Like a shot of wheatgrass juice for the nervous system. Gotta keep the machine oiled, ya get me?

XTOPPS

Awwww, the sun is so bright down here! How'd you freaky little jelly spiders get sunlight into a place with no windows? Wait... I'm not the only one seeing the sunlight... am I?

TOUR GUIDE STEVE

Hahaha, good one, Your Radiance! I can introduce you to Steve in Environmental Engineering later on if you want to talk lighting schematics, no sombrero. Oh, hey, Steve!

AWESOME STEVE

Hey, what's up, Steve?

TOUR GUIDE STEVE

Steve, I'd like you to meet the Baronet of Kandephaa'a!

XTOPPS

Hey, call me Xtopps.

AWESOME STEVE

Awesome to meet you, gesin! I hear you're our next big fish!

XTOPPS

Nah, you've got it densified, mang. I'm a Xybidont, just count the arms.

TOUR GUIDE STEVE

Hey, Steve, buddy, I don't mean to stick any of my butts in your business, but did I see you talking to a plant just now?

AWESOME STEVE

Your powers of observation are as awesome as always! I was just spit-balling some ideas for our botanical division. Gotta think out of the box, am I right?

TOUR GUIDE STEVE

As if we ever set butt *in* the box, bro!

They laugh enthusiastically. DEE and XTOPPS laugh politely.

TOUR GUIDE STEVE

Well, I'll let you get back to your research. Don't work too hard! Just kidding!

AWESOME STEVE

You know it, bro! It's always crunch time at Cadabra! Have an awesome cycle, zoods!

TOUR GUIDE STEVE leads DEE and XTOPPS away, pointing out other things of interest.

AWESOME STEVE

That was close. If word got to my super that I was engaging in unauthorized leisure strategies, I'd be frilled. And that would not be awesome.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, I certainly don't want to get you frilled, but, frankly I'm a little perplexed that those two didn't recognize me. I suppose Xtopps can barely recognize himself most days, but I thought Dee was a little more on the root bulb!

AWESOME STEVE

Maybe she was distracted. She probably has to concentrate super hard to get oxygen into those little face holes of hers.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I know, right? How do Humans get ANYTHING done breathing like that?

AWESOME STEVE

Their sad, inefficient respiratory system could be a value-add though, bro. Might be the only thing that stops them doing their weird mating rituals 28 hours a day.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! You may be right!

They laugh.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Steve! You know, I have to admit... I had some preconceived notions about your people, but I have not had such a pleasant conversation in ages! It's so nice to talk to someone who really *gets* me.

AWESOME STEVE

And I have to say, Mrs. Frondrinax, hanging with you is pretty awesome, and that's not a word I throw around lightly. Say, Mrs. Frondrinax?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes, Steve?

AWESOME STEVE

Is there a, uh...*Mister* Frondrinax?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! No one has ever actually asked me that before. The fact is, I started introducing myself as "Mrs." Frondrinax in order to, let's say, blend in with the Humans. But no, we Fugulnari are far too advanced for such an outdated institution as matrimony. *(beat)* Why do you ask?

AWESOME STEVE

Oh, uh, no real reason, I was just—

Suddenly:

CADABRA DRONE

Hi there! I noticed you two are falling in love! We at Cadabra aim to optimize every one of life's special moments. Allow me to provide you with some upgrades to help this milestone reach its maximum romantic potential...

Sounds of metal tearing and drone dying.

AWESOME STEVE

Whoa! I never saw anyone scrap a drone with their bare... fronds before. That was awesome!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, please. I've tussled with tougher hunks of junk than this metallic gadfly. And we couldn't have it reporting you to your superiors just for having a nice little chat, could we? Although I think it was malfunctioning anyway. I mean... it thought we were falling in love! Ha! Can you believe that?

They both laugh awkwardly.

AWESOME STEVE

Wait, were we not falling in love, bro?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No. No, of course not. Why would we? Anyway, it's impossible.

AWESOME STEVE

What's impossible about it, Mrs. F? Do you not want to fall in love with me?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No. I mean, yes. I mean, oh, what is happening to me? I feel all flustered. This is all wrong...

AWESOME STEVE

It doesn't feel wrong to me, Mrs. F. It feels awesome.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

This is all happening so fast... What about my mission? What about The Harvest?

AWESOME STEVE

I can help you with that! I can get you anything you need, as long as it means I get to be with you.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, Steve.

AWESOME STEVE

Mrs. Frondrinax...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Steve...

AWESOME STEVE

Mrs. Frondrinax...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Steve, I... I'd like to kiss you, but I'm not sure how.

AWESOME STEVE

Because of all the arms or all the butts?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Both. Also, neither of us has what you'd call a mouth in the first place, but oh, Steve! Somehow, I want to try!

AWESOME STEVE

Let's just rub against each other and see if we can work something out.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I'd like that, Steve. I'd like that very much.

AWESOME STEVE

Awesome...

The sounds of... whatever they work out taking place as we transition to a very empty X.Z. Drachir and Offspring [scene 13]:

OFFSPRING

Don't be so down on yourself, Mum. You did a really great job on those commercials. C'mon, give us a bit!

X.Z.

Oh, I don't know...

OFFSPRING

Maybe it'll cheer you up! "Come on down..." Eh? Eh?

X.Z.

Oh, all right. "Come on down to X.Z. Drachir and Offspring, where you have our pledge that if you can find a better price, we will give you your money back. Mixolydian's honor!"

OFFSPRING

(applauding)

Fantastic! What a voice...

X.Z.

Thanks, darls. But yeah, not the most sustainable policy, in retrospect.

OFFSPRING

Right, we're in a bit of a pickle. Refund requests have been coming in all day. These Cadabra figjams are putting us right out of business.

X.Z.

Well, it's better than a kick up the backside. Even from folks who are nothing but backside.

OFFSPRING

Good one, Mum. But what are we going to do? the Fairgrounds has turned into a hostile market overnight. They started with the Whiffs, no problem there, we don't sell perfume—

X.Z.

Your cousin does, remember? Jakkso's Scents, Vents and Tents on Samech 15. Well, at least he's still got the Vents and the Tents.

OFFSPRING

Maybe just the Vents at this point. I just saw another Cadabra ad for a new glamping service. CD Bivvie and Beauty.

X.Z.

Oooh... That's gotta hurt his bottom line.

OFFSPRING

Same as ours. As soon as Cadabra moved into gifts and appliances, foot traffic went way down in the showroom. And now, when we do get a potential customer in, all they have to do is to ask me if they can get it cheaper from Cadabra, and, well. Everyone knows you'll never hear a lie from a Mixolydian.

X.Z.

Well, that tears it. If we don't do something, we'll never see a customer again. X.Z. Drachir and Offspring will be belly up in no time.

OFFSPRING

So what are we going to do?

X.Z.

Well, I say the first thing we do is mobilize the Mixolydian community. We're all getting sat on by the butts of this Dilurian menace, and we need to get organized if we want any of our businesses to survive! We'll lodge a formal protest with Fairgrounds Command.

OFFSPRING

Good thinking, Mum! I'll make a post to the Mix-It-Up message board right away.

X.Z.

Thanks, love. And set up a Come-Pay-Me fund while you're at it.

OFFSPRING

What for?

X.Z.

I'm thinking there's got to be some pretty substantial ICSB regulations these Cadabra drifters are violating to keep their prices this low. We've just got to figure out what those are, and then, we convince the Humans to kick those clacker-posies out! But that means we'll need a lawyer, which is the one profession our species has never successfully produced.

OFFSPRING

Got it!

*[scene 14] Transition to a crowded conference room, full of irate Fairgrounds residents **muttering complaints**. Door whoosh followed by **general clamor** as the **COMMANDER** enters and they all try to get her attention.*

COMMANDER

All right, settle down, people. I'm here to listen to your concerns, but I'm going to need everyone to be calm and speak one at a time, all right?

A mumble of agreement.

COMMANDER

Now, I've called this public meeting because Fairgrounds Command has been receiving some complaints about Cadabra.

The crowd noise picks up again.

OFFSPRING

They're a menace!

WILHELM-BOT

We demand satisfaction, Commander!

COMMANDER

Please, everyone! One at a time! You'll all get your chance to be heard! You, gesin, why don't you start?

OFFSPRING

Commander, speaking for the Mixolydian community, Cadabra is threatening all of our livelihoods. They're undercutting all of our prices, and business is slower than the clerks at Inbound Freight Processing. (**WALKEN-BOT: ...Hey.**) These Dilurians are free-marketing all of us out of our respective livings! If things don't turn around for me and the parent, it's a one-way ticket to the liquid ingestibles kitchens of St. Sassafras!

H.F.

Seriously, Commander, they're nothing but trouble for everybody. My pager's been going off practically non-stop with portal ablation tickets for Cadabra HQ. *(WSS pager goes off)* As you can see. Basically, we can handle the Fairgrounds, or we can handle Cadabra, but there's no way me and the kid will be enough to do both.

COMMANDER

Isn't that a problem for your bosses back on Earth? It's their responsibility to make sure the local franchise staff is adequate to your workload. Just send them a request for more personnel.

H.F.

Yeah, great. And what do we do about the backlog while we're waiting for corporate to send someone all the way out here, *if* I can convince them to shell out for backup in the first place? Cadabra just moved in this morning, and we're already in the weeds! It's unsustainable!

OFFSPRING

It's unfair!

WILHELM-BOT

It's unsafe! These Dilurians are recklessly violating Customs protocol! And they made fun of my mustache!

JEAN-CLAUDE

I would like to point out that you are all hypocrites! No one cared when Cadabra's whiffs destroyed my parfumerie. But now that it is your derrières on the line, oh, the tables! How they turn!

Indignant responses from the others which descend into general arguing.

COMMANDER

People! People, please! I know the recent changes have been stressful for all of you, but let's not turn on each other. I'm sure we'll be able to come to some kind of mutually-agreeable conclusion. Walken-bot, you were about to say something?

WALKEN-BOT

Commander...Inbound Freight Processing...is a friggin'...mess... All those...deliveries...for Cadabra...are straining...our staff...especially, me. I was not...constructed...for such...a high volume...of deliveries...and furthermore...

COMMANDER

(finally getting a word in edgewise after trying to speed Walken-bot along through his speech)
Yes, ok! Duly noted, Walken-bot! We at Fairgrounds Command hear your complaints, and we take them all very seriously.

AYN RAND-BOT

Pardon me, Commander, I have something to say concerning Cadabra.

COMMANDER

Well, everyone here does, obviously. We'll get to you all, if you can just please be patient—

AYN RAND-BOT

Commander, my fellow so-called sapients have allowed their rational minds to be dulled by compulsive, panicked thinking. If we were to look at the success of the Dilurians objectively, we could see how Cadabra is a shining example of the kind of success only availed through a truly free market.

COMMANDER

All right then, Ayn Rand-bot, thanks for your input. Moving on—

AYN RAND-BOT

Commander, these fools are all so blinded by their lack of reason that they cannot see how the technological innovations exhibited by Cadabra go on to create the conditions of economic freedom.

COMMANDER

Ok, I think we all grasp your position now, so if we could—

AYN RAND-BOT

(continuing uninterrupted over the COMMANDER's line) Cadabra profits and becomes wealthy only by satisfying the voluntary choices of us, the market participants, and in direct proportion to the value those participants find in transactions with that producer, namely, Cadabra. Therefore—

COMMANDER

Oh, for— Security!

NESS and DORMER strongarm AYN RAND-BOT out of the room as her rant continues, and is eventually cut off by the door whooshing shut.

AYN RAND-BOT

(as she is shuffled away) Stop! This is a violation of my individual freedom! Weak-minded fools! How happy you all are in slavery! Reason is the only absolute! Productive achievement is the noblest of activities! Is a sapient not entitled to the sweat of their brow or brow-like structure? 'No!' says the sapient from the ISCB, 'It belongs to the poor.' 'No!' says the sapient at Vatican Station Beta, 'It belongs to whatever deity we've co-opted for your convenience...'

COMMANDER

(to herself) ...Every time I call a public meeting. When will I learn? *(to the crowd)* All right. I understand you're all upset right now, but I'm afraid the Cadabra situation is out of my hands. They went over my head to negotiate their lease with Earth Central, and their business practices, while unquestionably predatory, are not technically in violation of League of Humans or ICSB regulations, as far as I know.

The crowd angrily picks up the noise again. Suddenly:

A VOICE FROM THE CROWD

SIIIIIIEEEENNNCE!!!

The crowd falls silent.

A VOICE FROM THE CROWD

I would like to express my sentiments toward the Dilurians. If I may.

COMMANDER

Who—? Oh! Of course, your majesty.

Murmurs from the crowd. "Who is she?" "What's going on?" "Could that be...?" "I thought they were only rumors."

A VOICE FROM THE CROWD

Commander, with your leave, may I address the gathered throng?

COMMANDER

You have the floor, your majesty.

AN ATTENDANT

Fathom the words of Westellernta, Queen of the Pudendar!

A VOICE FROM THE CROWD (WESTELLERNTA)

Citizens of the Fairgrounds, long have my people lived quietly in our refuge within the confines of Shin 37, since our home planet Misofegga was plundered by invading Apokeesti forces. Many lives were lost in the battle for our home, and when we arrived at this station, broken in almost every way, all we wished was to exist in peaceful solitude, free to create the magna opera that are the pride of every Pudendar.

H.F.

Hey, that's right! I read something on HECNET once about the Pudendar! refugee enclave. It said the creative genius of the great artists' colonies of Misofegga was unmatched throughout the known galaxy.

AN ATTENDANT

We know our own history, Human!

H.F.

Of course you do. Sorry.

WESTELLERNTA

For years the Fairgrounds has provided us with the sanctuary we craved, granting us a security we had feared we would never enjoy again... until today, when a Dilurian representative dared to breach our encampment with what he termed “an exciting growth opportunity.” As the one called Steve explained, the Dilurians wish to erect a “distribution center” upon our hallowed grounds. This Steve called our beloved refuge a... I cannot bear to repeat it.

AN ATTENDANT

“Very hip, up and coming, prime gentrification opportunity.”

WESTELLERNTA

Ugh. He also bare-facedly claimed, without benefit of a face no less, that Cadabra’s presence would not intrude on our artistic endeavors, but would prove in time to... what was it?

AN ATTENDANT

Increase the market value, my lady.

WESTELLERNTA

Ah, yes. “Increase the market value” of our settlement. As if this “market” is of any value to one whose soul is dedicated to quest for sublime artistic transcendence! As if such mercenary scrabblings could provoke in us anything but contempt! As if the Apokeesti did not make to us the same empty promises! We showed this Steve what we thought of his “exciting growth opportunity.”

A meaty thump. Gasps from the assembled crowd.

KAISER WILHELM-BOT

Mein Gott! They cut off his head!

JEAN-CLAUDE

What head? I think zat is an arm.

OFFSPRING

No, mate. I’m pretty sure that’s a butt.

COMMANDER

It doesn't matter if it's an arm, a butt, or an elaborate skin tag. Queen Westellernta, you must know that this incident will seriously endanger your people's ICSB refugee status. Especially if whatever it is you've got there turns out to be something a Dilurian can't live without.

WESTELLERNTA

But it is our autonomy and creative freedom that no Pudendar cannot live without! Commander, we are forever grateful for your hospitality... but should these Dilurians, or any other sentient, dare breach our encampment from this moment forth, the repercussions will be terrible. The Fairgrounds will run red, blue, neon-green, prismatic, acidic, gasoline-like and chunky with the vital fluids of every sentient who dares trammel us! Heed my words, Commander!

AN ATTENDANT

(as they storm out)

Thus endeth the speaking of Westellernta, Queen of the Pudendari!

COMMANDER

Okay. Great. Today's really turning into one for the books, even by Fairgrounds standards. All right, folks, as you just heard, something a little more urgent than a dispute over questionable business methods just got dropped in my lap, so I'm going to have to ask you to table your own objections to Cadabra until I can make sure we're not all about to be slaughtered. Sound fair?

H.F.

I think everyone here can agree that protecting their revenue streams just took a back seat to protecting their blood- or lubricant-streams, Mindy.

General nervous agreement.

COMMANDER

Thank you. I hope I'll have some better news for you shortly.

Door whoosh and subdued muttering as they clear out. FRALL materializes.

FRALL

If I might offer a suggestion, Commander.

COMMANDER

Yes, please? Anything that could spare us a literal class war would be great.

FRALL

A Cadabra drone should reach you in 4 minutes and 53 seconds, bearing your invitation to a "Phase 3 launch party" at Cadabra HQ this evening. I suggest you take them up on it. This could be your only opportunity to discuss the situation with the Dilurians' leader and CEO without waiting several weeks for an appointment.

COMMANDER

Good thinking, Frall.

FRALL

And you'll want the full dress uniform for this one, Commander.

COMMANDER

Dress to impress, eh?

FRALL

Quite, sir. But more to the point, I believe you'll have reason to appreciate that uniform's stain-resistant properties before the night is done.

[scene 15] Transition to JOHN and ALTHAAR's apartment, which is filled with the sound of seamlessly bingeable streaming content available through Ob'SERV.

MURDER STANDUP

“What no one realized is that the zero gravity karaoke emporium would be the last place anyone would ever see Ramona Borealis alive... kind of like my sex life after I got married!” (*audience laughter and applause*) “Anyone else here married?” (*shouts and “Woos!”*) “Then I don't have to explain the word ‘premeditated’ to you folks!” (*thunderous laughter*)

Bloop of the show being noped out of.

STELLA

You know, I understand the appeal of true crime docu-series and stand-up specials. It's combining the two that I don't get.

JOHN

Yeah. We could check out Showcaine's new series, I guess. It's premiering in about 8 minutes.

STELLA

What's that one?

JOHN

“Spooning Death: The Fornaxa Williamson Story, Live at The Roxy!”

STELLA

Ecch. I'd rather wait for “Durmius ‘Dumbass’ Reticulux Presents: The Sextantis Bay Massacre, A Hilarious Nightmare”

A beat.

JOHN

Sure, that sounds like it'll be worth the 13 minute wait. So...enjoying those assorted crustacean puffs?

STELLA

Huh? Oh, yeah. I mean. They're a little cold.

JOHN

Right, I imagine the optimal time to eat a puff-pastry-wrapped shellfish is less than two hours after it leaves the kitchen.

STELLA

They're dealing with a brand new ordering app, it's no surprise things are a little buggy. You can't blame the restaurant.

JOHN

I wasn't complaining about the restaurant.

STELLA

It sounded like you were complaining.

JOHN

Well, I wasn't.

STELLA

Well, good.

JOHN

Great...*(a beat)*... this date sucks.

STELLA

Oh, John, no...

JOHN

No, it sucks. I wanted tonight to be special, but you know me: I managed to jeck it up, like I always do.

STELLA

What are you talking about? There's no way you could have known that the Fairgrounds was about to turn into some laissez-faire spook-a-rama overnight.

JOHN

No, but I should have guessed that something would go catastrophically wrong. I'm the unluckiest chump in the Galaxy. Like, quantifiably. All the work I put into planning this probably just guaranteed it would be a disaster.

ALTHAAR's door whooshes open on the other side of the privacy curtain.

ALTHAAR

Please excuse the interrupting, FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes. But... fancydate is not success, is this correct?

JOHN

No, Althaar, fancydate is fail. Literally everywhere we were going to go has been shut down, bought out, or co-opted by Cadabra. You were right about those Dilurians being trouble. Fancydate has been free-marketed to death.

ALTHAAR

Commiseration to you from Althaar. Oh! But he has perhaps the solution! Althaar has received invitation to the Cadabra Party of Launch that is happening at this moment! He had not thought to make use of it, but perhaps FriendJohn could do so, with Supervisor Reyes enacting the "plus one"! Would this make appropriate location for fancydate? A vast array of comestibles and entertainments are promised! And surely the Dilurians can not be making interference in a party that they themselves are hosting!

JOHN

That's true. What do you think, Stel?

STELLA

Sure, let's check it out. If Dilurians are as intense about party planning as they are about achieving market saturation, this thing is probably going to be nuts. And they kind of owe us a nice dinner, anyway. Althaar, you're sure you don't want to go yourself?

ALTHAAR

Althaar is most certain, Supervisor Reyes! Please be enjoying the revised fancydate with his compliments!

STELLA

Will do, thanks! All right, Johnny, what do you say? You ready to party down with the Steves?

JOHN

Anything is better than hilarious murder programming. Let's do this. Later, Althaar!

ALTHAAR

A very good evening to you, dear friends!

Front door whoosh as they exit.

ALTHAAR

Ah! And now that the room of living is once again open to Althaar, perhaps he will complete his routine of the gyro-yoga!

ALTHAAR's comms unit rings with an incoming call.

ALTHAAR

Or perhaps Althaar should simply accept that that will not be occurring this cycle. *(bleep of answering it)* Greeting to you on Althaar's communication device!

H.F.

Hey, Althaar? H.F. here. I was, uh, wondering if you might be able to help me out with something. It's... kind of important.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar would be most willing to make assistance, Mr. Fornes! What is needed, please?

H.F.

Well, first things first: how much do you know about the Pudendari?

[scene 16] Transition to Cadabra HQ: Sounds of an absolute rager of a party. 26th Century techno dance music pulses in the background. Clinking glass, mingling chatter, cheers, etc.

BIG STEVE

And the dessert bar goes live at 10:40?

PARTY STEVE

10-4, Big Steve!

BIG STEVE

Excellent work as always, Party Steve! Now get those appetizers moving, bro! I want to get up on that dais and look out over a seething ocean of hors d'oeuvre trays.

PARTY STEVE

Roger that, big guy!

COMMANDER

Excuse me! Pardon m— watch where you point that butt, please, I am an officer! Hello there, um, Steve, was it? I just wanted to take a moment to introduce myself.

BIG STEVE

(good-naturedly)

Please, only my fellow quadrillionaires call me “Steve.” You can call me “Big Steve.”

COMMANDER

Uh huh. Well, Big Steve, I’m Commander Mindy Torianna. I was happy to receive your invitation earlier today, and I was hoping we could find of couple of moments to discuss a few concerns about Cadabra that have been brought to my attention.

BIG STEVE

Happy to oblige, Mimi! There’s nothing I care about more than the goodwill of our customer base!

PARTY STEVE

Hey Big Steve! The Venusian Aphrodisiac Concentrate Shots have just congealed!

BIG STEVE

Oh frid yeah, bro! Aim those love cubes my way and fire when ready! Sorry, Mimi, but I’m gonna hit this while I can. Gotta keep that relaxation quotient in the green, burnout’s a major bear for the bleeding-edge entrepreneur on the go. But hey, make sure to check out the buffet, I think the carving station just opened up. Our catering squad scored us some absolutely dynamite Kalybrion flank. Those delicious bastards were just discovered on Elysion Beta a week ago. They have no natural predators, they’re tender as hell, and our crew just landed ‘em on the critically endangered list. Survival of the fittest, am I right, bro? Ha! *(walking away)* Stop right there with that shooters tray! Big Steve is here and he wants to get weird!

COMMANDER

By Moni’s motley muzzle, this is going to be a long night...

Elsewhere at the party, in a fancy sky box:

XTOPPS

C’mon, Dee, what would I want with any of that investment portfolio smark? I’m just a simple club-hopper.

DEE

That Dilurian was bending your ocelli for like, two hours and you kept nodding and saying “Yeah, mang.”

XTOPPS

You know how it is, Dee. I try not to hassle it.

DEE

Well, it was definitely un-hassled. But I'm pretty sure you've gotten yourself entangled in like, twelve different divisions of this shness somehow.

XTOPPS

No way, zood. You said no signage, and Xtopps kept his tarsals tight!

DEE

Ok, but then why are you the guest of honor at this stupid Cadabra Victory Dance? Why did we get whisked up to this VIP skybox? I mean, look at the invitation!

XTOPPS

Ooh, digging the Hyper-Lenticulon finish! Straight wooful, mang.

DEE

No, look at what it says! "Ultra-Seraphim Palladium Level Investor Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels." They must have sleeted you somehow, I just can't figure out how they did it.

XTOPPS

(distracted, still vibing on the finish)

Keep it prone, Dee. It's all dipitous.

DEE

Well, if your gizz isn't flipped over this, I guess there's no point flipping it for you. ...The party does look intense from up here. And that buffet looks absolutely obscene. Is that a Baked Europa?

Elevator door whooshes open.

PHARMA STEVE

Hey bro, are you the Baronet?

XTOPPS

Was Fats on Imperial?

PHARMA STEVE

No idea, bro! So hey, I just wanted to pop in and introduce myself.

DEE

Let me guess...Steve?

PHARMA STEVE

Wow, yeah! Good guess, bro!

DEE

Thanks. Hey, Steve, quick question for you. Xtopps here is responsible for a lot of this, right? With his seed money?

PHARMA STEVE

Absolutely, bro, that's why we're so happy to have him here partying with all of us in the Cadabra family!

DEE

Ok. So, who exactly authorized this? Because this is the first he's heard of it.

PHARMA STEVE

You'd have to talk to Steve in Accounts about that. I'm just a simple pharma executive. But I'm sure it's all cubic.

DEE

Uh huh. Well, here's the thing. I was with Xtopps the whole time he was talking to your boy Steve this afternoon? And I never saw him sign document one. Oh, and sidebar—do you zoods have any idea who his mom is? Because gifting a Baronet of the Xybidont Imperium is not what I call a sound business strategy.

PHARMA STEVE

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Increase the chill factor, zood! Don't blame me for your sad Human perceptory wheeze. Of course you didn't see any scribbling, Cadabra's not on any paper chase.

DEE

So how do you sign your contracts?

PHARMA STEVE

Pheromone stamps, bro. I promise, we've got the Baronet's chem-trail registered, triple-filed, and verified with the ICSB trade commission. It's all good!

DEE

Oh, frill me.

PHARMA STEVE

Hey, I appreciate you looking out for your bro, bro. But you've got nothing to get craggy about. His shares have dodeca-tupled in value in the past ten hours!

DEE

Sure. Well, that definitely sounds like a very stable investment that's absolutely not about to tank violently at any second. All right, Xtopps, I'm going to dig into that Baked Europa while the digging's good. Try not to sweat your signature onto anything else while I'm gone, ok?

XTOPPS

Xtopps never sweats it, Dee!

Elevator whoosh as DEE heads down to the main party.

PHARMA STEVE

Anyway, like I said, I'm Steve from Pharma, and I am super jazzed to meet you, Your Radiance. So listen, here's the wheeze: we in Pharma have a new product in the pipeline that would make an ideal investment opportunity for someone with your... recreational interests.

XTOPPS

Oh, patic, mang. But I don't want to spread myself too thin, you chom me?

PHARMA STEVE

Funny you should say spread.

XTOPPS

Ha ha ha! Wait, what? What are we squeaking, here?

PHARMA STEVE

We've developed a synthetic spreadable that bears a remarkable similarity to a certain leguminous Earth concoction. But about a thousand times more potent. And I just happen to have brought along a few "promotional samples" straight from the lab. Want to get sticky?

XTOPPS

Vigorous assent!

PHARMA STEVE

Let's head to the head, Broheem...

Elsewhere...

STELLA

Oh, wow. Look at all this!

JOHN

This is a lot more elaborate than what they had set up this morning. I don't remember that statue before. Or that other statue.

STELLA

You know, when they're that big and carved from marble, all those butts actually look... kind of majestic.

JOHN

Are you kidding?

STELLA

Of course I'm kidding. That's still a ridiculous butt-to-overall-mass ratio. All right, let's get to it. I'd say our first order of business is to plunder that buffet.

JOHN

Absolutely.

At another part of the party...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, hello dearie!

DEE

Oh, hey Mrs. F! Didn't expect to see you here.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Dee, the most wonderful thing has happened!

DEE

You're telling me. This Baked Europa is incredible!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh never mind the dessert cart, Dee! I'm in love!

DEE

You're what?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

In love, Dee! In blooming love!

DEE

Oh, wow! I didn't even know you were seeing anybody.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Well, it all happened so fast! Just this afternoon, in fact. You know, I never believed in this love nonsense before. Truth be told, I always thought it was a myth you meaty types made up so you could clamber into each other's pots. But wouldn't you know it? It's a real thing! And I'm in it, Dee! I'm up to my terminal buds in love!

DEE

Well, I'm really happy for you. Congratulations. I'm sure your new sweetie is a really great—guy?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

He is a guy! Or, well, I think he's a guy, the topic of gender hasn't really come up yet, but that doesn't matter to me and my Steve.

DEE

...Steve? You're dating a Dilurian?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Yes I am! Do you have a problem with that?

DEE

Oh, no. Not at all. I'm sorry, I just... never considered a Dilurian romantically, is all.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Is it because of the all the arms or all the butts?

DEE

Both. Mostly the butts.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

I have to admit, the overwhelming quantity of posteriors was a lot to take in at first, but underneath all those butts is a warm, wonderful sapient whose life goals are compatible with mine! Oh, it's bliss!

DEE

Well, if he makes you feel happy, Mrs. F., then I'm happy for you.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

"Happy" doesn't begin to describe it, Dee. He makes me feel...awesome!

BIG STEVE hits a glass for everyone's attention.

JOHN

Oh, hey, looks like the biggest collection of butts is about to make a speech.

STELLA

Yeah. What say we find someplace without a direct line of sight before we start eating?

JOHN

You read my mind.

The party starts settling down at BIG STEVE's urging.

BIG STEVE

Yo! Quiet down, bros! Hey, can I have everyone's attention? Hey! I'll be remembering this at bonus time! Just kidding, heh. All right. So, you all know who I am...

"Woo! Big Steve! Yeah!" etc. from the Dilurians.

BIG STEVE

...and I just want to welcome all of you to the Cadabra 3.0 Launch! We did it, bros! You zoods have made me so proud. Cadabra hit the ground running, grabbed that low hanging fruit, and took a deep dive into the moving parts of this untapped market. By drilling down to the essentials and still giving the consumer more bread for their cred, we were able to bring to the table a laser focused, customer-centric model with exponential growth potential. *(applause)* But there's even more to come, bros, and each and every one of you is responsible for this game changer in thought leadership! 240 subsidiaries of the Cadabra Brand and counting! Stellar work, all of you! *(applause)* So enjoy, you've earned it! Have a glass of champagne, make a splash in the chocolate fountains, and mingle with the stars Seamus McGinnity and Inez Cordoba of the Showcaine original drama Blue Tuesdays. *(applause)* But first, I want to open the kimono on something: Our awesome sales team hit a one-shot SuperNova today, when they landed Sin Q'Mellix Lobiche Ofpheels, who is not only the coolest Xybidont I've ever met, he's also a Baronet of the Xybidont Imperium! *(applause)* So I'd like to invite our newest, most next-level investor up here to say a few words. Gentlebeings, please give it up for His Splendor the Baronet of Kandephaa'a! Let's get him up here, where is he?

XTOPPS runs through the party wearing even fewer clothes than usual.

XTOPPS

Mustard gas and curly fries! Take a feather and fly it from a roof! I won't let them stretch their necks!

DEE

Xtopps! No one's stretching their necks, you're just glitched!

PHARMA STEVE

Xtopps, come back! Remember to breathe! You're going to be ok!

XTOPPS

I can't do it, Steve! My skin is rolling! Rolling!

DEE

You don't even have skin! Listen, you're going to be fine, just try to maintain and we'll help you get back into your kicks, ok?

XTOPPS

Get it off me! Get it off! Seal it in a cage! Aaaaugh! (*trailing off as he runs down a back hallway*)

COMMANDER

Somebody stop him! He's headed straight for the— oh, no.

JOHN

Straight for the what? What's down that passageway?

COMMANDER

I think you're all about to find out. You might want to stick close to Stella, John. And good luck.

JOHN

Why? What's that sound? Are those...horses?!

XTOPPS

Aaaghh! It's happening again! I had too much to dream last night!

Whooping and screaming, the PUDENDARI gallop into the party.

WESTELLERNTA

You will pay for your insolence, Dilurian scum! We'll make kinky scarves of your arms and throw pillows of your butts! PUDENDARI! ANNIHILATE THEM!

War cry of the PUDENDARI; chaos, screams, hoofs, shattered glass and plates.

BIG STEVE

No, no! What's happening? You can't be here! This is a private event!

COMMANDER

Big Steve!

BIG STEVE

Mimi! You've got to help me leverage this downturn! I don't want to die, that'll really put the brakes on the Phase 3 roll-out!

COMMANDER

This was what I came here to warn you about! Now, come with me if you want to live.

BIG STEVE

Oh, this is going to do a serious vonch on the PR team.

COMMANDER

Here, into this reclaimed barnwood conceptualization nook!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Steve? Steve??

DILURIAN 1

Yes?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Not you, idiot! Steve! Where are you?

DILURIAN 2

I'm right here!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Get out of my way! Steve! STEEEVE!!!

DEE

Mrs. F! Quick! Under this table!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Let me go, Dee! I have to find him! I have to find my Steve!

JOHN

STELLA! ON YOUR SIX!

STELLA clotheslines a Pudendari warrior off of her horse.

JOHN

Oh, nice one! You, uh... need any help down there or...?

STELLA

(amidst fighting)

I got this, Johnny! You stay on top of the statue where it's safe!

JOHN

Okay! But I'm only covering up here because you asked me to.

STELLA

I know, hon! And you're doing great!

The COMMANDER and BIG STEVE have concealed themselves in the reclaimed barnwood conceptualization nook.

COMMANDER

So, Steve, what's Cadabra's contingency plan for bloody cavalry-based annihilation?

BIG STEVE

Same as with any adverse growth event, bro: bunker down in the panic room until the screaming's over, then cash in our golden re-entry capsule and vectorize outward to the next untapped market fortuity. You think this is the only consumer resource pool that's dried up on us? Pssh. No Dilurian is gonna let a minor snag like a massacre put the vonch on his portfolio. Time to get out of pocket!

COMMANDER

I see. And just where is this panic room of yours?

BIG STEVE

Well, it's, uh... it's on the other side of that, uh, seething mob of bloodthirsty sword-wielding Pudendari berserkers. Uh, ok, so...

COMMANDER

So you're going to give these Pudendari whatever they want before they destroy my station! Let's go.

BIG STEVE

Hey, whoa, what? *(as she drags him out into the open)* No! You can't do this to me! I'm a job creator! I— ugh. *(sniffs)*... What is that? Do you smell that?

COMMANDER

Stop trying to weasel out if this, I don't smell any— *(sniffs)* Oh my Tucker, what is that? That *(sniff)* isn't like anything I've ever smelled before. And... it seems like it's having some sort of effect on the Pudendari?

PUDENDAR ATTENDENT

Your majesty, can you smell that?

WESTELLERNTA

I can! I would recognize that aroma anywhere. But how can it be?

PUDENDAR ATTENDENT

What shall we do, your majesty? *(a beat)* Your majesty?

Another beat.

WESTELLERNTA

Stand down, Pudendari! Stand down!

PUDENDAR ATTENDANT

Your majesty?!

JOHN

Stella, look! They've stopped attacking!

STELLA

(grunting with each rhythmic punch)

That's. great. news. John.

JOHN

Um. So you can probably stop punching that one. In the interest of interstellar peace.

STELLA

(does not stop punching)

I'm. just. finishing. what. she. started.

BIG STEVE

What's going on? It looked like we were experiencing a complete synergy reversion event.

WESTELLERNTA

(shouting)

I do not know what manner of nasal trickery is at play, but whoever is responsible for what I am smelling... If you reveal yourself, you will be granted mercy.

ALTHAAR

It is Althaar that was releasing the odor! And he will be making emergence into the ballroom now, so he is advising all Humans within to be covering their eyes, please!

Shuffling and muttering from the Humans in attendance.

BIG STEVE

Isn't that the zood who tried to sell us flowers or something this morning? What does he want now?

WESTELLERNTA

Noble Iltorian, tell me I am not mad. Is this not the scent of Misofegga's sacred tomango groves that I inhale?

ALTHAAR

Your majesty is most correct.

WESTELLERNTA

But how? Every grove in existence was razed by the foul Apokeesti hordes!

ALTHAAR

Althaar could not make explanation to you of the chemical process that was re-creating the aroma of your beloved orchards, but the sentients who were building of it are among those that Your Majesty's forces have been castigating.

WESTELLERNTA

The Dilurians made this? I don't believe my ears.

ALTHAAR

Then your Majesty may make belief with your nose! It is as Althaar has spoken.

WESTELLERNTA

If these Dilurians are capable of creating such a potent reminder of our former home... perhaps... perhaps all is not yet lost. Good Iltorian, my thanks and the thanks of all Pudendari are owed to you.

ALTHAAR

It is the great pleasure of Althaar that he has been able to prevent greater blood-shedding on this day! He is asking only that you are permitting him to find a way to make peaceful resolution among you.

WESTELLERNTA

I will honor your request, noble Althaar. And now, I must think further on this. PUDENDARI! LET US DEPART!

Sounds of retreating PUDENDARI forces.

BIG STEVE

Hey, Althaar, bro! I knew you were prime Cadabra material the minute I met you! Listen, I'm considering a few growth opportunities in the construction and medical sectors that I think you might be really interested in. How about we—

ALTHAAR

Do not be sugaring the coat of Althaar with flattery, Big Steve! The Cadabra has already been causing much distress to all of Althaar's friends on the Fairgrounds, and now you have made provocation of a violence! So Althaar will be insisting that you are making fair negotiation with the Pudendari, when talking is commenced! Or, or... or Rilfeer Semburi Dilurbash Tandarapåsprutefjell will be most disappointed in you!

A lot of the DILURIANS react to the name. It would be a real voider to bum out Rilfeer.

BIG STEVE

Oh, hey, you know Rilfeer? Say no more, bro! I mean, hey, we're Dilurians, not monsters!

COMMANDER

A fine distinction if ever I heard one.

BIG STEVE

Seriously, though, this is the first time one of my startups has made it all the way through launch with a team member mortality rate below 80%. So whatever you want to pitch me, I'm totally on board to cascade relevant information and take it to the next level. Let's shift this paradigm, bro!

ALTHAAR

Yes! There will be a very great shifting indeed! Big Steve, let us take the meeting!

Elsewhere, MRS. FRONDRINAX looks for her STEVE, turning over cadavers and turning over furniture.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Steve...? Steve, it's all over now! Where are you? Steve, please answer me!

AWESOME STEVE

(weakly)

Mrs...F...?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

STEVE! Oh, my darling! It's all right now! I'm here! You're going to be all right!

AWESOME STEVE

(even weaker)

Oh, Mrs. Frondrinax... I've only ever been all right...but when I met you...for the first time...I know what it was like...to be...awesome...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Don't talk like that, Steve. You're going to make it. We'll get you to a MedCenter, and you'll be good as groundwater, you'll see!

AWESOME STEVE

(dying)

I'm sorry...that I...won't get to see... the Harvest...

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(tearfully)

Steve...

AWESOME STEVE

(even more dying)

I know...you will make it...awes...uh! *(dies)*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(quietly)

No... no...

DEE

(climbing over the debris)

Mrs. F? *(sees everything)* Oh, Mrs. F...I'm so sorry.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

No...no...*(shriek of despair fading into the next scene)* NOOOOO!!!!...

*[scene 17] Transition to JOHN and ALTHAAR'S apartment, some time later.
Takeout and TV. {maybe more true crime standup?}*

STELLA

So, do you think Althaar's peace agreement is going to hold?

JOHN

Well, right now both sides have agreed to it on a trial basis. But they're both getting something they want out of it, so yeah, I think so.

STELLA

Wow. Even for an Iltorian, that's impressive work. How'd he manage it?

JOHN

Turns out Cadabra had a weapons division that was set to launch in Phase 3, so the survivors have agreed to outfit the Pudendari with enough heavy metal to take back Misofegga, in exchange for the Pudendari not, you know, slaughtering them all for insulting their artistic dignity.

STELLA

Wait, so now the Fairgrounds is hosting a bunch of Dilurian war profiteers? That's... slightly less impressive work.

JOHN

Not exactly, Althaar worked it out with the Big Steve. They rebranded themselves as Caridada, and now they're a strictly philanthropical operation. Filed for 501(c)(3.1415) status with the ICSB this morning. First order of business: the restoration of the endangered Misofegga tomango groves.

STELLA

Oh. Well, that's... probably a happy ending? I'm not sure how well philanthropy is going to mesh with the Dilurian ethos.

JOHN

Eh, I'm sure they'll figure it out eventually. And at least it means they won't be taking over or forcing out any more of the local businesses, which means the Fairgrounds can get back to normal. Ish.

STELLA

Do you think Pazzo's is going to start doing dine in again?

JOHN

Oh, hey, yeah! Maybe we could actually have a date night that wasn't a total disaster!

STELLA

What are you talking about? I got the chance to scuffle with a genuine army of noble warriors. That was the best date night ever!

JOHN

Really?

STELLA

Yeah! Besides, I don't need a fancydate. I like hanging out with you, no matter where that is.

JOHN

Stella, I love... hanging out with you, too.

STELLA

(warmly)

I know, John.

[scene 18] Closing credits music.

ANNOUNCER

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

This episode was written by Amanda LaPergola and Philip Cruise for Gemini CollisionWorks and starred

Berit Johnson as Althaar

John Amir as John B

Ivanna Cullinan as Commander Torianna

Alyssa Simon as Lieutenant-Commander Frall

Eli Gantias as H.F.

Amanda La Pergola as Mrs. Frondrinax

Chris Lee as Chip Frinkel
Zuri Washington as Dee
and Derrick Peterson as Xtopps
and also featured
{additional credits}.

Life with Althaar was created by Berit Johnson and Ian W. Hill
Berit is the supervising producer, showrunner, and script supervisor.
Ian is the audio producer, sound designer, and technical supervisor.
The writers' room consists of Berit, Ian, John, Amanda, Chris, Philip, Lex, and Linus.
Theme and Interstitial Music composed and performed by Anna Stefanie
Life With Althaar logo and illustration by Dean Haspiel
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We'll be back in two weeks with our next bingeable content pellet, but first, let's see if things
are back to normal over at Inbound Freight Processing...

[scene 19] The Inbound Freight office. There is a line.

WALKEN-BOT

So, let me get this straight... you want... to pick up your... package... now?

CUSTOMER

I just told you that. You have the slip, and I can see my package right there.

WALKEN-BOT

Wait up... just a second, let me... read here.

CUSTOMER

You do understand that most people here have other things to do, right? Things they'd rather be doing than waiting for a package? You grasp the concept that some people are busy?

WALKEN-BOT

Reminds me... of those... Dilurians... always busy, busy... busy. You heard about Cadabra? Cadabra went... Kaput... Shame.

CUSTOMER

Everybody's heard about Cadabra. People tend to notice when a company takes over every business in town and then ups stumps overnight. Can I have my package, please? I've gotta run.

WALKEN-BOT

Run... I bet... some of those Dilurians... were looking for a place... to run to.

CUSTOMER

Can you just help me please?!

WALKEN-BOT

Oh... no. This is blue... and you need... the pink one.

CUSTOMER

What? Why didn't you just say that?

WALKEN-BOT

I just.....did.

CUSTOMER

Impossible. I'll be back. Thanks for nothing.

WALKEN-BOT

Wow... people get... so excited... It's a real shame. (*long beat*) ...Next.