

Life with Althaar

Episode 16: Big Numbers and Little Science

Version 2.2, 07/26/20 - Linus (draft 2, BAJ)

[1] Standard spaceship whoosh leading into the sound of an immense chamber we will eventually learn is Timekeeping Central on The Fairgrounds. Majesty in audio. A beat within the sheer grandiosity, then...

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Oh, come on. You're going to start in on that again? Just when we're in the middle of a possibly-successful anti-gravity experiment?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

First off, it's not real anti-gravity, and you know that. Second, this "experiment" is as ludicrous as the way you keep repainting that damn mural when I'm not looking. You may be pretty, Pythagoras-Bot, but your hide-bound ideas are in no way harmonic with the true state of the natural world.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Yeah, well, your opinions are harmonic with my ass.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Oh, that's very enlightened of you, Pyth! What a mouth you have on you, there. You kiss Theano of Crete with that mouth?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Enough of your petty caviling, Philolaus-bot. We are removed to this temple of thought deep within The Fairgrounds to expand the knowledge of Humans, Robots, and all Beings of the Universe, to perform these experiments, as part of our hermitic life of purity and theoretical exploration.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Plus, no one wants to come around here because you're always going on about that, endlessly. And probably even less so now that you got all that putrescine on the floor. You know it smells like corpses to Humans, right? And it costs a clamp and a rotor anyway, why didn't we just use good old WD-4000?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

The cost is nothing if it achieves the dream of breaking free of the bounds of our earthly tether. And in any case, I got it at a sizable discount.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

What earthly tether? We're 12 light-years from Earth! On a space station! A space station with artificial gravity that can be disabled with the flick of a switch, I might add. Your mystical experiment is senseless by any conceivable standard, and I say that as a robot programmed with the personality of a Human who's been dead for almost three thousand years!

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Hold, Phil! Look there! Pointless is it? What is that floating towards us? Some strange kind of bird?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

A bird floating? Yes, that's a marvel indeed.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

A strange bird, it is! Hairy and toothy, and it flies in most ungainly fashion! Yes, after the storm, I see again a weasel!

PHILOLAUS-BOT

No, it's just that rodent you've been feeding. Herbert. I don't think it's a weasel. Maybe some kind of vole? Whatever it is, it's definitely not a bird.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

But now, it is become a rodent-bird! With anti-gravity powers! Remarkable!

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Ridiculous, you old metempsychotic.

HERBERT

(a mystical rodential voice)

It...

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Hark, Phil! It speaks!

HERBERT

It is...

PHILOLAUS-BOT

It is not speaking! It is a rodent, it cannot speak!

HERBERT

It... is...

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

But now that it flies, it is a bird, and thus can speak!

PHILOLAUS-BOT

It's Herbert, it's floating, and it's a completely non-verbal vole. Or possibly weasel.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Shhh! It speaks!

HERBERT

It... is... TIME.

There is no actual dramatic music sting, but something in the sound of the vast machinery around them provides a sonic near-equivalent.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Time? Do you think—?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

How would it know? It is a mere animal, of unspecified rodential qualities.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Why should it not? It flies and it speaks, if it can do that, why could it not acquire advanced powers of augury?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

This I cannot argue with. Quick, the box! Where is the box?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Where it always is! Come, let us observe...

The sound of a box being picked up and examined.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

No! See, the box is dark. It is not time. Herbert was mistaken.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

But how? That was obviously a mystic pronouncement. Perhaps something is wrong with the box!

PHILOLAUS-BOT

It is the Box! You'd take the word of a floating rodent over the ancient Box?

Beat.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Shake it, maybe.

A slight shaking. Beat.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Nothing. False alarm.

A click and beep from the Box.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

There! There it is! The light! Herbert has prophesied truly! The time has come upon us! We must inform Commander Torianna, and then all The Fairgrounds! Rejoice! It is indeed... Time!

Again, not a dramatic sting, but a shudder or something from the technology with the same effect. Beat.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

(it comes to him)

Marmot! That's the word I was looking for. I think it's a marmot.

[2] Theme music.

ANNOUNCER

Gemini CollisionWorks presents...

Life With Althaar!

Episode 16:

Big Numbers and Little Science!

[3] Theme song fades into a Numbers Station, which runs quietly beneath the following. ALTHAAR, JOHN and STELLA are arrayed on other sides of the Curtain of Privacy in the Room of Living, drinking the Beverages of Relaxation.

STELLA

... and it really hasn't revved that much. We mostly do 0 to 99, but we still run the same drills now. Or we would if the veebs got organized, which is something they never bothered with. The vent-biter playbook is just, like, "Swarm, run, bite." Sometimes they'll do, "Hide, jump out, bite." They're big on teeth, not so much on strategy.

ALTHAAR

The bravery of Supervisor Reyes is most inspiring!

JOHN

How many teeth *do* they have? Usually.

STELLA

As many as they want? The meanest ones have the most teeth. We think the longer they survive, the more they grow. Survival of the toothiest. Or no, wait, toothiness of the survival...est. But Russet's got her own theory, says the meanest ones grow teeth at will. Or maybe it works the other way around, maybe more teeth makes them more... meaner. More teeth makes them meaner. Make? Makes?

JOHN

Want another glass of this, whatsitcalled (*looking at the bottle noises*) Bhangzilla Ripple Crush? OK. I've never had this before, it's, uh, nice. If that's the word. So, more?

STELLA

Yup. Anyway, so we're mostly like, duck, shoot, hide, duck out low, shoot. Pshew, pshew, na-a-a-a-a-pfoom. But we have a numbers station we use sometimes down in Tet. Tet thirty-something. Who makes this glitch-squeeze anyway?

JOHN

(*setting down the bottle*) It doesn't say. Well, there's a lot of small print. I, hmm. "Warning: Do not drink near pointy things." Always good advice. "Plenty of vim." Not sure what that's about. And then it gets really small— Can you point the lamp over this way, babe? (*a military single-use battery spins up and then explosively releases its charge in a giant electric blaze*) AGH, what the, not the Arc Stick! Okay, now I can't see at all.

ALTHAAR

That was visible even through the Curtain of Privacy!

STELLA

(*giggles*) Oops, give it here. I can zoom in. "Made by good friends of Humans and Human animal friends, and fish are OK too. Don't worry, you do not have to be on your guard." That's some kind of auto-translate smark there, what's that about.

JOHN

Beats me. Hey, why are we sitting around listening to the numbers again? Let's put on some music, or—

ALTHAAR

Please do not be turning off the numbers yet, FriendJohn! Althaar wishes to hear the end of the chapter! This story is among Althaar's favorites from the early programs. A "Golden Elderly."

JOHN

"Golden Oldie." ...Wait, what? How can this be a "Golden" anything? It's just numbers.

STELLA

Ah ah ah! Golden mean! So... yeah! (*giggling*)

JOHN

Ok, yeah, that's a thing, but this... isn't that. Or a thing.

ALTHAAR

Here, here comes a very good part, listen please: 8 4 7 9 1. 8 9 9 8 2. And— 3 1 4 1 5! (*chuckle*)
It is very clever indeed. Such wit!

JOHN

You've. Memorized these numbers.

ALTHAAR

The tale of The Numbers is a deep-structure mythos in many cultures, FriendJohn. And Althaar has been a ventilation mechanism for many metristals! This is a most popular series from before the Great Collapse, when The Numbers were not knowing who to trust with their secrets, and were often betrayed. If FriendJohn is wishing to have a greater understanding of his place in the Galactic community, the Numbers Cycle would be a very productive avenue of inquiring! Althaar would be most pleased to prepare for you a study guide!

JOHN

Yeah, I think I'm going to pass on that for now, thanks anyway. Hey, Stella? You're staying over, right? Cause then I should check the charge on the anti-grav units.

STELLA

K. You know thassh nahreally anni-grabbity. Whassinthahstuff. Mahbrains okay bummy mouf nossomush.

ALTHAAR

This tea is very nice, but it is not having the same effect on Althaar as this Zilla is on Supervisor Reyes! Although Althaar is feeling some wiggly. Mr. Earl Grey must have been the mortal of the party.

JOHN

Stella, hey. Are you okay?

STELLA

Yesh. Okayriwwy. Juhmouf feefunny. Pour dashit ou. Imfin, jusresalil. Gomma medkit inna beroom jusincase.

JOHN

Seriously, I think maybe you need to see someone—

STELLA

Namfine. Hey Althaar (*giggles*)— 9 1 7 4 4! 8 0 0 8 8!

ALTHAAR

Ha! Ha ha! That would be of a great strangeness! Very humorous and unusual!

JOHN

Yeah, ok, we definitely should have read the fine print. Time for the MedCenter. *(helping STELLA to her feet)* Come on, one foot in front of the other, here we go.

ALTHAAR

Oh no! Can Althaar be offering any assistance?

JOHN

Not unless we need to induce vomiting. I'll give you a call after I get her looked at, ok?

ALTHAAR

Very well, FriendJohn! Please be feeling better soon, Supervisor Reyes!

STELLA

Woo... bas. Smarshifst! 9 1 7 6 3! *(more giggling)*

Door sounds, as JOHN helps STELLA stumble out.

ALTHAAR

(to himself, aggrieved) Althaar is knowing it was a joke, but Nine would never say such a thing. Nine is too noble for that.

[4] Numbers channel transitions into the Bridge. Things are placid, and running smoothly. The dominant mood is: this is a good day today, so far. Don't mess it up.

DOCKING CONTROL

(over comms)

Bridge, this is Docking Control Desk 2. LHS Pantone 2728C Suede Shoes has cleared to Main Departures and is laying course for the Memphonic Cluster. Departing pilot requests a secure direct line to Hydroponics. Please advise.

COMMANDER

Hydroponics? What in Nell's name could they have to talk about on a secure channel?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Commander? That call? It might not be official business?

COMMANDER

Oh. This is about Ashlee again?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

It might be?

COMMANDER

Desk 2, relay a message: Hydroponics is seeing someone.

DOCKING CONTROL

Thank you, sir.

Some sort of tick tick tick or something to eat up a couple of seconds. Then an incoming call chirp.

DOCKING CONTROL

Bridge, this is Docking Control Desk 2. LHS Pantone 2728C Suede Shoes has left Fairgrounds access space without responding.

COMMANDER

Thank you, Desk 2. Who had Tuesday?

FRALL

I believe I had selected Tuesday, Commander.

COMMANDER

Frall.

DOCKING CONTROL

Can you put me down for next Monday afternoon?

FRALL

I would like to enter for next Wednesday, 3 hours and 14 minutes into second shift.

DOCKING CONTROL

Never mind. (*hangs up*)

COMMANDER

Frall, maybe you should sit this one out? Or, here's a thought, all of them. Most of us on the bridge are enjoying a friendly wager on a little game of chance, here, and to be honest, I don't really see the appeal to a 27-dimensional being. It seems like having a non-linear perception of time would kind of take the suspense out of the thing.

FRALL

I appreciate your concern, Commander.

COMMANDER

Great. So you'll let us play our little guessing game in peace, then?

FRALL

I'll take it under advisement.

COMMANDER

And I'll take that as a no.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Commander? Maybe it *is* official business? Ashlee just talked to him once on the comms when they ordered vegetables for the trip? I don't think they even met in person?

COMMANDER

Oh, no, Amber, I have no doubt they're calling to hit on your sister again. I've known my share of interstellar pilots. There's just something in her character that calls out to them. Or something on her character. Or something brightly-colored that her character is wearing.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

She had on a new tunic today? With that new memetic weave? It's really spectacular?

COMMANDER

Well, there you go. It's like jingling transport keys in front of a toddler, really. If there's a sapient more easily-entranced than a long-jump pilot on shore leave, I have yet to meet them.

FRALL

Hashtag NotAllPilots.

COMMANDER

Yes, thank you, Lieutenant. All right, my board is clear, and my cup is empty, which means it's time for another coffee run.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

I can get it?

COMMANDER

Thank you Amber, and—

Predict-y FRALL noise.

FRALL

Mindy? You will want to have your coffee order fully submitted in just under 7 minutes. But not before 6 minutes and 41 seconds.

COMMANDER

Ok, that's oddly specific, even for you. Why on Earth—

Incoming comms bleep. Smug FRALL noise.

COMMANDER

Bridge.

Lyre music in the background on the call. Very chill.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

(pause) Bridge?

COMMANDER

Yes, this is the Bridge.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

I thought it would be. Because I called the number for the Bridge, and that's really it right there. Call the number for the Bridge, and you get the Bridge. But will that always be so? How can we be sure that the number for the Bridge does connect us to the Bridge?

COMMANDER

Well, this is Commander Torianna, on the Bridge, at the number for the Bridge, so I'd say we can chalk this one up as a win for empiricism. Now can I help you with anything?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

This is Pythagoras-bot, in Timekeeping Central. I've never been to the Bridge.

COMMANDER

Uh huh. Well, hello, Pythagoras-bot, and feel free to drop by for a visit any time you like, but we're in the middle of— Wait a minute! Are you calling about...?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Yah, we're coming up on Drop Time. I know you like to get a little head start on it.

During the following, the Bridge crew goes pandemonic, because they only have a few minutes to get their coffee order in. TORIANNA barks orders— “EVERYONE! GO! NOW! COFFEE, NOW!” AMBER blurts a few “What? What are we—? Now?” kinds of questions, we may hear from others. FRALL disappears, because Frall doesn't normally drink coffee but when they want to, they want to, and they want to now. Chairs are shoved, doors open and close, crew races out, and then it's empty for the last part of PYTHAGORAS-BOT's speech. We should be able to hear him over the noise, though.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

We're going to beep it out public in a few minutes though. It's definitely time. A little bird told me. Actually it was more like a weasel or something, but it was flying because we were in the middle of some anti-gravity tests, so it reminded me of a bird. Not real anti-gravity, or course, we were messing around with some new ways to nullify the local field with this denatured Putrescine lubricant we acquired recently, at a very reasonable price I might add, and, well, I wouldn't advise that any Humans drop by until we can get a bot crew in for a full scrub-down, because it apparently wasn't very denatured after all, and I suspect the experience would be a tragedy for anyone whose nose isn't purely decorative. And by tragedy I mean "goat-song," because it very likely smells like an Aeolian abattoir in here. Anyway Herbert, that's the bird's name, I mean the weasel, he said it was coming, and right then The Algorithm gave us the alert, so I called you first. Or maybe he's a marmot. Hello? Is this still the Bridge?

*A beat, then he hangs up. There is silence on the empty Bridge for a few moments.
Then a comm line begins to chirp. Two, three times.*

AUTORESPONDER

Hello. You have reached HECNET's long-distance comm relay service, providing message delivery, transcription, and storage for all communications to and from the Human Exchange Concourse. If you know your party's personal comm code, you may enter it at any point. Go ahead now! Beep. *(Same autoresponder voice, pretending to be a different autoresponder voice.)* Hello. If you are hearing this message, then you have attempted to place a voice call from outside the 5 light-minute local comms radius, and you really ought to know better. Your long-distance call has been forwarded to a HECNET simulated response priority routing line. Your call is being redirected to our secure messaging center, where it will be processed with all due consideration by a secure calling team. Beep. *(Same autoresponder, another voice. Clears throat.)* This is the input-responsive secure messaging center at HECNET Central. Your call is important to us. Let us handle your stuff! Please record your message at the sound of the beep, and it will be routed to the appropriate party as soon as possible.

Longish pause. Then, tentatively:

PILOT ON THE LHS PANTONE 2728C SUEDE SHOES

Hello? Um, hi. This is Barry, from, you know. The Shoes. Sorry, from LHS Pantone 2728C Suede Shoes. Heh. I was waiting for the beep. I didn't hear it, but I guess it's recording, right? So, I'm, um, calling for Ashlee! In Hydroponics. I was, I mean, I'm sorry to bother you like this and you're probably busy. But I wanted to say that after we talked I was looking up your staff profile, and I just, well, I was thinking about what you said about being, you know, healthy, and eating right and fresh food, and I was wondering if you're into music and maybe poetry, because that's what you, in your ThatsMe-vid, anyway maybe we can talk about that and I also like to look at the stars, and this is a good place to do it, right? So, hey, hack me back, you can charge the call to me, I might be back out on the next supply run anyway, we come out here a lot, and we could book a little, you know, star time. Watching stars. And— okay, I should go. Bye, hope I see you. Bye. It's Barry. The pilot. OK.

Click. Beat.

AUTORESPONDER

Thank you for your patience. HECNET will now record your message at the sound of the beep. Beep.

[5] Transition to the Central Promenade, a busy day. After a beat, a screaming comes across the interior open spaces of the Fairgrounds. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. Seriously though, these aren't air-raid sirens, but they are very irritating information tones, echoing across the Concourse. This one is more God-voicely than the usual station announcements. PYTHAGORAS-BOT doesn't get to do this often, and he's enjoying himself immensely.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

NOW HEAR THIS. Wow, do you hear the echo on that? Wow. Hey Phil, record this, I'm going to do it again. Ready? NOW HEAR THIS. Did you get that? I don't want to do it again... Ok, cool. People and souls of the Fairgrounds! Beginning at the sound of the tone, this station enters standard Drop Time footing. Three, two, one, beep. No wait. Ok, here— (*beep*)— there we go. We have entered Drop Time. All previously scheduled events may or may not be currently scheduled events. And of course, all agreements made during Drop Time are immediately rendered non-binding, so, you know, don't get attached or anything, ok? Herbert says this probably won't be a long one but they always say that, so. Ok, thank you for your— Oh, this is Pythagoras-bot. Kthanxbai.

EXCITED SHOPPING CROWD

(giddy hubbub) Woo! DROP TIME! etc.

Instantaneous party atmosphere. Someone runs across the soundscape hooting wildly, presumably having removed all their clothing. A glass smashes against a wall. [6] Transition to the Egg, where the crowd is lively but slightly less riotous.

SOPON

No way, buddy, this isn't my first Drop Time, or yours either, you know how this boggles. I don't start pouring until I see creds on the bar.

WINSTON CHURCHILL-BOT

We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give. So give me that drink now if you value your life.

SOPON

I don't want any more static from you, pal. Creds on the bar. At least at the Egg we still give you the drink afterwards. Now you want your café con electricidad or not?

WINSTON CHURCHILL-BOT

In success you deserve it and in defeat, you need it.

SOPON

There. Was that so hard?

WINSTON CHURCHILL-BOT

Now that we have run out of money, we have to drink.

DEE

Let me be sure I understand this. You are telling me that you don't like Mondays and you don't think we should be performing any songs about Mondays. Right? Is that a fair approximation of your complaint now?

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

Quack. *(etc.)*

DEE

Ok, a few questions: first, do you even *have* Mondays? On your world. Are there Mondays. Yes or no. Left quack or right quack.

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

K wak wak quack. *(etc.)*

DEE

You don't. All right. All right, I heard you! So this Mondays thing, that's something you dridged up here, on the Fairgrounds, just because you decided you were going to jet up to me like you're ready to dock, and say you don't like Mondays.

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

Quack. *(etc.)*

DEE

To see what would happen, is that right? Because you thought it would be funny? Funny how? Funny like a Boncho? Am I a drifting Boncho to you? Are we being funny right now? Do I make you laugh?

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

Quack, k-k-quack k wak wak quack. *(etc.)*

As it turns out, cell phones on vibrate make exactly the same noise in the future as they do today.

DEE

I need to take this. No, I will talk on the phone now, and you can spend a few moments cudding on the choices you made that brought you here. *(on phone)* Hello, yes Xtopps. No, everything's fine here, except I have some new blatt about Monday songs. Songs with Mondays. What? No, the question of rainy or not hasn't come up yet. Yes. Yes. I'm sitting here talking to this alien duck— what? How could that be an autocorrect error? We're talking. Duck. D-U-C-K. Yes. Hmm, you know what? He probably *is* delicious.

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

Quack, k-k-quack k! Wak wak quack. *(etc.)*

DEE

Fine, I'll see you tonight. Bring some oranges. *(hangs up call)*

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

Wak k wak k? *(etc.)*

DEE

Ok, here's an idea. We've got a song called "I Don't Like Mondays." It's about a Human who doesn't like Mondays. Just like you! In fact, at first I thought it must be you who wrote it. I did. My partner and I will sing that for you the next time you come in. In fact, I'll dedicate it to you, all right? Or, I could whip up a little "butt-inski à l'orange" for the staff meal tonight. Up to you.

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

Wack! Quacka wak wak. *(etc.)*

DEE

All right then. See? Wasn't that easy? Now what's your name, so I can shout it out to you?

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

Howard.

CHIP

Hey, Dee! Got a second? When you're done with that guy.

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

Wak k wak. K. Wak a wak. *(etc.)*

DEE

No worries, Chip, I was done with this driffer five minutes ago. What's up? More trouble?

CHIP

No no, nobody's in trouble. Well, probably Xtopps is, just on principle, but no. I just thought now would be a good time to, well, to talk. About our arrangement.

DEE

Our “arrangement”? You mean my contract for the ages, Chip? The one that starts, “Welcome back, my friends, to the show that never ends?”

CHIP

Yeah, about that.

DEE

I’m listening.

CHIP

Truth is, I’ve been thinking. And I don’t feel really well-framed about it. I mean, the paper talks, all the angles are square on it. And it was your own paper in the first place. But, well, you got shafted on that one, no two ways about it.

DEE

Still listening.

CHIP

So, what I’m thinking is, maybe it’s time for a little re-negotiation. We give it a shake, see what rattles, settle up, and maybe you’ll be heading out to find your stars sooner than you thought. What do you say?

DEE

Oh.

CHIP

You say “Oh?”

DEE

I don’t know what to say. I’m— Oh, Chip, I don’t know what to say.

CHIP

Yeah, that’s fine. I mean we have the pool table now, so the whole vibe of the place is changing anyway, right?

DEE

Chip seriously, I’m. I don’t. I gotta talk to Xtopps, but thank you. Oh Chip. I dreamed this. I dreamed it like sandworm dreams of spice. And now it’s— is it real?

CHIP

You heard the pitch. Listen, I can see you’re a little damp right now. Don’t stay here, it’ll just get weird. Why don’t you take the rest of the night off, start thinking clauses.

DEE

I will. I need to walk for a, for like an hour. Thank you, Chip. I'll, I'll be back.

DEE exits. A durable pause.

SOPON

That is not spry, boss. That is *so* not spry.

Mutterings at the bar. The regulars agree.

CHIP

Not spry? That was downright double-jointed! Did you see her face? She bought the whole bill and didn't even ask for a receipt. That was epic. And did you see me? Straight face through the whole thing? And I am dying inside. Dying. Epic nothing, that was Legendary.

SOPON

Zood.

CHIP

What? It's Drop Time. You know the rules. Contracts signed during Drop Time are null and void once we're back on the Reg.

SOPON

She doesn't know that. We haven't had a Drop Time since before she jetted in. She thinks you're serious. What happens when she finds out?

CHIP

We all have a good laugh! C'mon, it's not like she'll be any worse off. Once we're out of Drop Time, we're back to status quo normal. No harm, no foul.

SOPON

Uh, yes harm, and seriously foul. How do you come back from that, Chip? You just promised her a bouquet of Hegelian Roses, and the second she blinks you're going to pack her hands with Rodosquiferan moose poo. This is *Dee*. Shemp contract or no, she's been singing her heart out on that stage two cycles a day. But this? Is going to break it. She's wide open, she's not expecting crossfire. What the jeck, boss.

ALIEN BARFLY

You tell 'im, sister.

WINSTON CHURCHILL-BOT

Most unsporting, sir!

ALIEN WHO QUACKS LIKE A DUCK

Quack, k-k-quack k! Wak wak quack. *(etc.)*

CHIP

C'mon, you too? Nertz. All right, fine. Fine! I'll... I'll call her and apologize. Just stop looking at me like that! Sapon, get everyone a round. Something from the Aquarium, if it makes you feel better. You zoods are Mudville, mang. Just Mudville.

[7] Transition to the Bridge. The crew returns from Tixondu's, jubilant. They have not paid for their coffees, because Drop Time, and are enjoying their ill-gotten gains.

COMMANDER

Well done, everyone, well done. We lock-stepped that down to the last second. Not as magnificent as Sanitation, but if we ever need to take up arms and defend the station by scoring free coffees, we'll make a solid strike force.

FRALL

Which is good to know.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Did you see Delfinia's face? She was really angry at us?

COMMANDER

Fair's fair, Amber. Our order was in and they agreed to make it before Drop Time started, but they *hadn't* asked us for payment. They know the rules. Now that Drop Time is fully underway, of course, they can demand payment in advance, and then they'll be under no obligation to make the coffee... after they've... been paid. You know, I always forget about that part.

FRALL

You do. Every time.

COMMANDER

Well, we'll fall off that bridge when we get to it. In the meantime, drink up everyone! Nothing tastes as good as a free coffee righteously... received!

FRALL

Appropriated.

COMMANDER

Procured?

FRALL

Stolen.

COMMANDER

Well, that's a little harsh. It's not like we did anything illegal, it's Drop Time!

BRIDGE CREW MEMBERS

(a brief burst of ebullience in the distance)

Woo! Drop Time!

COMMANDER

Anyway, Frall, I don't think I've ever seen you drink coffee before.

FRALL

I rarely indulge, sir. But as they say, there is nothing like free coffee, produced by the unremunerated labor of those lacking a small but terribly relevant bit of information which we obtained by means denied to them.

COMMANDER

What an interesting way to describe it. Say, Amber, I'd like you to put me down in the Ashlee pool for next Wednesday, 3 hours and 14 minutes into second shift. Any objections, Lieutenant?

FRALL

None at all, Commander.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

I don't mean to pry, Lieutenant? But, the coffee? How do you even—

FRALL

It's quite all right, Amber. While I am largely discorporate on this plane, my physical manifestation has a solid enough existence when viewed in a juxtaposition, well, superimposition would be a better word, of dimensions. By passing the coffee through a small dimpled event horizon, the—

Sound of coffee spilling on the floor, as if it had been poured through an insubstantial energy cloud that offered it no resistance whatsoever.

FRALL

Oops.

Door opens and JOHN enters.

JOHN

Hey, Commander, I wanted to do a quick check under the deck down here, make sure that wire isn't about to cause any *(slips on the spilled coffee, crashing to the floor)* Whooooah! ...Ow.

FRALL

Happy Drop Time, John B.

JOHN

Annd I guess I'll go ahead and fix your coffee machine while I'm here. ... Can someone help me up?

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

(whispering)

It's not going to be 3 hours and 14 minutes into second shift on Wednesday, is it, Lieutenant Commander?

FRALL

(quietly)

No. Wheels within wheels, Amber. *(louder)* Be careful of the coffee, John. It looks like someone made quite a mess.

FRALL de-manifests.

COMMANDER

Are you all right, Mr. B? We actually don't need any repairs, Frall just got a bit overexcited with a cup of coffee they, in their exact words, "stole," from Tixondu's earlier.

JOHN

Uh huh. So Frall's pouring stolen coffee on the floor now? I'd ask why, but I'm sure they'd just shimmer mysteriously and imply it was necessary to keep everyone's duodenum from extruding. Ow! What— Oh, I landed on a data pin. Is this yours?

COMMANDER

Not mine, might as well hold on to it. This whole day has been odd. You know, that's not even true. Everything was fine, if annoying as usual, and then then Drop Time kicked in, so it's been that weird combination of really low-key and high-key simultaneously. You know how Drop Time is.

JOHN

I definitely don't? People seemed really excited about it on my way down here, but if leaving coffee puddles for people to slip in is an integral component, then I don't think I'm a fan.

COMMANDER

Not a fan of Drop Time?! Of course, it's been a while, I guess it we haven't had one since you got here. There should have been something about it in one of the Orientation Packet vids, though. Didn't you watch that?

JOHN

Maybe? Probably. The Orientation Packet is... kind of a lot. I guess I was mostly focused on the “What to do when the gravity fails” and “How to avoid explosive decompression” and “Mental coping techniques for long-term residents” parts.

COMMANDER

Fair enough. Well, the good news is, you’ve got plenty of time to look it up now, because you’re totally free of any other obligations. It’s Drop Time!

BRIDGE CREW

Drop Time! Woo!

[8] Transition to the central Sanitation bunkhouse/gymnasium/day room. It’s like a very very clean Boot Camp. Bleep of a call coming in. STELLA answers it.

STELLA

Hello, Sanitation Central, dirt doesn’t do Drop Time, and neither do we. Is this an emergency or a cleaning call?

ALTHAAR

Greeting to you, Very Special Friend to FriendJohn Supervisor Stella Reyes! It is Althaar! It is NOT an emergency, and Althaar has performed his own cleanings of the shared living quarters. This is instead an Althaar Why Are You Calling Me At Work?

STELLA

Wow, you sound almost like John when you say that.

ALTHAAR

This is a phrase that Althaar has had many many opportunities to be hearing! Althaar and FriendJohn have made a list of Things that are Not to be Called About at Work, but it is constantly under revision. Every cycle something new is being learned by Althaar!

GRUNTS

(running drills in the background)

This is my dispersion rifle, this is my mop! Using either one I come out on top! Hoo-ah!

STELLA

Ok. Uh, so did you need something from Sanitation, or are you just adding stuff to your list?

ALTHAAR

No, Supervisor Reyes! Althaar wishes merely to make up-following about the Bhangzilla Ripple Crush and its unexpected effect on you yesterday evening. He had a great concern!

STELLA

Oh, thanks, Althaar, but I'm fine now. Had to do a full 8-liter hemo-sieve, because they never did figure out what was in that stuff, and that knocked me out for about 14 hours. But as far as I can tell, there's no lingering effects.

ALTHAAR

A great relief to Althaar! He had noted the lack of rhythmic vibrations from the bed-room of FriendJohn last night, so he is pleased that you have today made full recovery.

STELLA

(lowered voice)

Wait, you can still hear our... vibrations? Even with the anti-grav units?

ALTHAAR

Oh, no, Althaar is not hearing any bed-room activities!

STELLA

Great.

ALTHAAR

It is rather the sensillae on Althaar's flixators that are—

STELLA

Right, right, ok! *(quieter)* But you can still tell what we're doing in the bedroom, is the point I'm getting at here.

ALTHAAR

Oh! No, Althaar's flixators can no longer sense what exactly you are doing. But he is aware when the doing is or is not being done. ...Is this a difficulty?

STELLA

I... guess not?

ALTHAAR

Althaar does not wish to cause social discomfort to Supervisor Reyes and his dear friend John!

STELLA

No, no, it's ok. It's... well, I guess it's no worse than it would be if John had a Human roommate, really. So it's fine. We can deal.

ALTHAAR

But Supervisor Reyes and FriendJohn are not of the variety of Human who wishes others to be apprised of your bed-room activities! So Althaar is causing interference in the sexing! Distress!

STELLA

It's not that big a deal, Althaar, really. We're—

ALTHAAR

How is Althaar to be making resolution? Perhaps he can attempt sleeping with his flixators in a vat of Gelatinoid clabber-sludge to dampen vibration? Or he could perhaps be consuming a soporific before sexing-hours so that he is rendered comatose for the duration! Yes! Then the privacy of FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes will be assured!

STELLA

No, no, Althaar, please don't do that. It's... we'll be fine. I promise you're not interfering, ok? I'm totally fine with people knowing we're having sex, it's the "how" we like to keep private. Does that make sense? Here, I'll show you. HEY, SQUAD!

GRUNTS

Stand for Reyes, sir yes sir!

STELLA

You all know about my boyfriend John, right? The Iltorian's roommate?

GRUNTS

Althaar Althaar, run and hide! Keep your breakfast still inside! Hoo-ah!

STELLA

Well, Althaar has very keen senses, and he's afraid that John and I are embarrassed because he knows we're having sex! But we're not embarrassed! We're having sex, and it's great! And now everyone knows! As you were.

GRUNTS

TMI, Sir! Congratulations!

STELLA

Thanks. Well, we've struck a resounding blow against the shackles of puritanism, Althaar. Good work. Was there anything else?

ALTHAAR

Ah! Althaar has read of these shackles! It is the BMD— no the BDMS? It is of a kind with the complex rope patterns and communal cooking. Exciting and nutritious!

STELLA

...Nutritious?

ALTHAAR

Yes! There is a restaurant of this variety on the Central Promenade, but Althaar has not found a way to observe the proceedings there without causing gastric distress.

STELLA

Ohh, shabu shabu. Yeah, no. The communal cooking and the... rope business are two very different things. Although, well, I'm not saying no one's ever tried doing both of them at once, but you'd have to be a really impressive multi-tasker to pull that off. Not to mention all the bribe money you'd need to convince the Health Inspectors to look the other way.

ALTHAAR

Mm. Clearly Althaar must do more research. But he thinks the red ropes are very pretty!

STELLA

Sure. Well, I'm glad we could straighten that out.

ALTHAAR

Oh! Althaar wanted also to make out-straightening of the source of Bhangzilla Ripple Crush. The Iltorian Data Designate has no record of this beverage, and there is no business on the Fairgrounds offering it for purchase. Where was Supervisor Reyes obtaining this bottle?

STELLA

Oh, I didn't. Wasn't. There was a crate of it delivered to... to Sanitation.

ALTHAAR

And who was sending it?

STELLA

I don't actually know. We get gifts sometimes from grateful survivors, that kind of thing, so I didn't think too much about it at the time. We were all going to crack it open after second shift yesterday, but then Lieutenant Frall spilled something in the Orbital Mechanics Access Tunnels, and everyone ended up pulling overtime on that. So, after we got back, I just took a bottle up to your place.

ALTHAAR

Then it is a thing most fortunate that more of the brave heroes of Sanitation did not drink this Bhangzilla!

STELLA

Hmmm.

[9] Transition to the W.S.S. office. Door janks open and JOHN enters.

JOHN

Hey, H.F., do you know anything about— You're wearing a fez.

H.F.

Drop Time!

JOHN

Right. That's what I wanted to ask you about, actually. What's the entire deal there?

H.F.

It's, you know, it's Drop Time! We're off the calendar until we hear otherwise. Nothing counts! Speaking of which, let's head out. I've got a mad posh for a bubble tea.

They leave the office, and we follow them down the corridor and toward a more populated area during the following (probably an elevator's involved).

JOHN

Uh, ok. So, what does that mean for us? We don't have to answer any calls?

H.F.

Not if we don't want to.

JOHN

If it's something that's going to blow up the station, I think I want to.

H.F.

Sure, but that's what the pager's for. Lighten up, kid! It's Drop Time!

Someone in the distance yells, "Drop Time! Woo!"

JOHN

But what *is* Drop Time? ("**Woo!**") Like, I get that it's a kind of holiday where you can do what you want, but... why? Are we celebrating something, or...?

H.F.

Nah, it's actually something technical to do with the calendar. Because, you know, we get four hours behind Earth every day, so we've gotta reset every once in a while to make sure we're still more or less in sync.

JOHN

Oh, so that's why I got here a couple weeks before I left home.

H.F.

Right.

JOHN

But... we're on a space station. They could have just made the days here 24 hours if they wanted.

H.F.

Yeah, but they didn't want. And it's too late to change now.

JOHN

I guess. Wait—if we've got 4 extra hours a day, then that adds up to 28 hours a week. We could just switch to a 6-day week and stay in sync with Earth, right? No, hang on, the dates would still get messed up. Ok, so then... we just shorten every month by a few days. Wouldn't that make more sense than... whatever the frid this is?

H.F.

First of all, you've been here a year. Do you honestly think "making sense" was a priority to anyone involved in slapping this heap together?

JOHN

Fair.

H.F.

And secondly, with your system, which dates do you lose? What do you do with a law that goes into effect on a day that only exists back on Earth? Not to mention the business hassles. Plus, no matter what, if you're skipping the same days every year, that's going to mean a lot of missed birthdays for a few unlucky saps.

JOHN

Oh, crap.

H.F.

So eventually, they decided the only fair thing was to just do a hard reboot on the calendar every once in a while, but always at a different time of the year, so at least no one's getting consistently screwed. And obviously you can't sign any contracts or anything on a day that doesn't exist, so that kind of grew into this whole "Nothing you do in Drop Time counts" tradition. So, there you have it. Drop Time!

Several passers-by respond in the traditional fashion.

JOHN

That makes... a kind of sense? But then how do they decide when it's going to be Drop Time?

H.F.

Eh, no one really knows, I think they use an algorithm or something.

JOHN

So how long is this going to last? And what day will it be when we're back in... normal time?

H.F.

Do I look like an algorithm? How should I know? Although... this is our first Drop Time in a while, so if I had to take a guess, I'd say they'll bump us up at least as far as August on this one. Maybe September.

JOHN

Crap.

During the last bit of the proceeding, DEE can be heard on the phone, not accepting an apology from CHIP:

DEE

Sorry? You're sorry? What the *frid*, Chip! After everything I've done for that place, this is how you repay me?... No, it was not "just a joke," because *jokes are funny*. It was just a steaming pile of moose poo, that's what it just was!... Well Sopon was right!... Take some time off? You mean during DROP TIME!?! (*to cheering passers-by:*) Shut up! Yeah, I know what that means now, and if you think I'm going anywhere near that stage before I get a real apology and a serious bonus, you're crazier than a Hydroid haberdasher! (*hangs up*) Rrgh!

JOHN

Uh, hey, Dee. You ok?

DEE

No, I'm not. I just— I knew Chip could be a real shness-peddler sometimes, but... ugh, I don't want to ruin your day, too.

JOHN

My day's pre-ruined, go for it.

DEE

Ok. Ok. So, Chip floting Frinkel. He knew I didn't know about Drop Time, right? He knew that! And he thought it would be funny to have me sign a new contract, trick me into thinking I had an escape pod off of here, and then blow that up in my face at the last second when I found out the whole thing was as solid as a Zero-G sand castle!

JOHN

Wow.

DEE

And he wouldn't even have confessed if Sopon hadn't guilt-tripped him into it! He was just going to let it play out! So he could see the look on my face!

H.F.

I can't believe he'd do that. That is lower than the lowest rung on a rung-lowering downward-boring extension rung ladder. With extra low rungs for lowness.

DEE

(tearful)

I really thought I could make jump speed out. And I was so— It's just... this place, you know? Like, I didn't choose to make this a long-term gig, but I was coping, right? I was coping. And it wasn't all bad. I mean, Xtopps is amazing, and we knock that room into shape every night. Every. Night. Pick it up and put it down and gene-tech it into something special. And there are good people, like you zoods and, your girlfriend, sorry John, I can't remember—

JOHN

It's ok. Stella. It's ok.

DEE

And the dimmest thing is? That this is my dream. Or it was. Having a place of my own. That's my club, you know? Even if my name's not on the door, I've built something there. I've been pouring everything I've got into that place, because if I'm going to be stuck at the Electric Egg, I'm damn well going to turn it into something I can be proud of. And then Chip just... And now I'm back where I was a year ago, falling into a Dee-shaped hole, wishing I was anywhere but here. ...Also, who builds a space station that loses over 52 days a year. What's that about.

JOHN

Welcome to the Fairgrounds.

DEE

Yeah. The Fairgrounds. Where we can't even play Happy Birthday, 'cause some Zuppo lives on a planet so far out that everyone on his world dies before they turn one.

H.F.

To be fair, that's gotta be a major downer. He could be cooler about it, but that's a bowl that needs more cherries in a big way. Or maybe one of those Giantizer cherries they sell over at Curly's, one of those'll fill two, three bowls easy.

JOHN

Well, who needs Happy Birthday? It's Drop Time, right? We're off the calendar now. So no one's having any birthdays. Especially me.

H.F.

Your birthday's getting dropped? *(bloops)* Ah, look at that. Too bad, kid, you almost made it. That's weird, there's usually an official notif— ah, there it is, this config file should be set to—

WSS HEARTY BUT INSINCERE BIRTHDAY ALERT REMINDER

(tinny music fanfare) Happy pre-birthday, John B.! It's getting close to that special time of year. If you've been too busy to notice, your birthday is only *(different voice, bored and not amused)* SIX. *(back to previous voice)* days away! And if you haven't been too busy to notice, isn't there more you could be doing as a member of the strong, steady, holistic, and integrated W.S.S. *(two WSS jingles sound)* family? Please take some time to think about it. And know that we at W.S.S. ("WSS!") hope your birthday will be special in every way. Asterisk!

JOHN

Great. That's peachy.

DEE

Asterisk?

H.F.

Doub— ah, corporate dispatches are heavy on the disclaimers.

DEE

On a happy birthday message? What kind of disclaimer could that possibly need?

H.F.

Better not to know.

DEE

Yikes. So you're working for some full-on jeckers, too. We should start a club.

H.F.

Heh. I don't think the Fairgrounds has a meeting hall big enough for that.

JOHN

Is there any chance I could still have a birthday? Like, maybe they'll drop less than six days this time?

H.F.

I mean, anything's possible. It's a complicated process, that's why they set up the Algorithm to handle it in the first place. But I wouldn't get your hopes up.

JOHN

I still don't understand how Drop Time *(another distant "Woo!")* could be the most efficient way to solve this problem!

H.F.

Most efficient? No. But out of all the solutions they've tried, Drop Time has the fewest unintended consequences, so they decided to take that as a win. Before the Algorithm, it was a real mess. Went through a bunch of different calendars, no one could agree on which days were expendable. For a while they tried a 51-minute hour, but a lot of systems couldn't switch over, so then you've got two different time schemata going at once, and you can imagine how helpful that was. Everyone was wearing two watches, no one had any clue what time or day it was. Of course we were all exhausted. By the time that one rang out, I had a beard like this.

DEE

Like what? Can I see?

H.F.

Oh no, no pictures were taken. That beard was nowhere near my good side.

DEE

You have a good side?

H.F.

Hey! That's enough out of you, young lady. I warn you, I'm training Miss Sophie in Personal Defence. She's got a whole set of vent biter videos and she practices all day when I'm at the office. We're still working on the Fearsome Teeth and Claws bit, but she's mastered the Lap Leap of Love snuggle attack like a champ.

DEE

Aww. You nerfs. Thanks for talking me down.

H.F.

Hey, we're blowing off work right now—why don't you join us? We may not get too many silver linings on the Fairgrounds, but Drop Time can be a great time if you know where you're going. I'll show you kids around. And there's no work to do, so we're free as a cockathreece, we can make a whole day of it. Remember, what happens in Drop Time ... ah? ... this is the part where you say, "Stays in Drop Time!" We'll work on that one.

DEE

Alright, H.F. I could definitely use a silver lining or two. Frid, I'd settle for tin foil at this point. Show me what you've got.

JOHN

Actually, I'm going to pass. This whole Drop Time story doesn't make sense to me. I want to find out who's responsible for this Algorithm, and how it works.

H.F.

Well, it's... you know, it's the Algorithm! It just works! Don't overthink it, B.

DEE

The whole station's already in party mode. Why not just... make it your birthday party?

JOHN

That's... a good idea, but... No, it's not just the birthday thing now, this is going to bug me if I don't figure it out.

H.F.

Suit yourself. If you change your mind later, you've got my number. Although the Hardyfox Fornes Grand Drop Time Tour will wander through corners obtuse and obscure, so you might have to wait a while until I can get a signal. Ready, Dee?

DEE

Ready!

H.F.

Good luck, kid!

JOHN

Thanks, have fun! (*moving off into a less crowded corridor*) Ok. Step one, see what HECNET has to say about this Algorithm business. (*bleep bloop*) Ah. There's the Drop Time orientation video, probably the best place to— 58 minutes? Noo. Oh, hang on, here's a {#}-minute version. Perfect.

Bloop as he starts the video. A doop-de-doop introduction video for schoolkids. There will be terrible cartoons and charts in pastel colors. Soundtrack to fit.

JOHN

Oh. Of course.

DROP TIME NARRATOR

How far is Thursday? When is the Spaceport from here? These questions may sound a little Gorky (*kids' voices: "Oh no, Gorky!"*) but distance and time can mean the same thing, if you consider them through the fabric of higher mathematics. (*stretchy rubber sounds-- snap boing!*) The Fairgrounds is as far away as anyone can get in Human space ("*Are we there yet?*"), before it stops being Human space! But it's a good place to go, when you want to go even further than that! ("*wheee!*")

¹ Gorky is a hapless children's show kid who just always gets it wrong. When he does, everyone cries, "Oh no, Gorky!" in distress. It's not especially mean, it's just, you know, he did it AGAIN. Oh no, Gorky!

Lots of Human space stations have days that are 24 hours long, so they can be just like Earth! But the Fairgrounds is special! Every single day in the Fairgrounds is 28 hours long. That's four hours more every day to have fun in! (*"yaaaay!"*) Every week, we have enough hours to make a whole other day! (*"Woowwww!"*) But oops! (*"Oh no, Gorky!"*) Someone wasn't thinking about the calendar! (*"You're fired, Poindexter!"*) And the more fun we have out here, the more we fall behind everyone back home. (*"Hey wait up, wait up!"*)

It's a good thing a year can be as long as we say it is! (*Kid voice: "I'm seven!" Old Age voice: "I'm seven too! It takes my planet ten of your years to go around my dim and distant sun. It's so cold all the time. I wish I could come home."*) Whoops, don't listen to Mr. Grumpy, he's just having a bad day! Now, on the Fairgrounds, we have our own special way of keeping up with our Earth friends. When we've got too much time on our hands, we save it all up, and then drop it in the Time Bank! (*Pythagoras: "Hi kids! I'm Pythagoras. Are you here to make a deposit?"*)

And when we've saved enough extra days, do you know what we do? We have a big TIME PARTY! It's like a birthday party (*"Cake!"*) but it's for everyone! (*"Yaaaayyyy!"*) We call it Drop Time, and it keeps us close to our friends on Earth. (*"Tag! You're it!"*) Drop Time comes at surprise times, and we never know how long it will last. But we have special Time Scientists (*Pythagoras: "Remember, don't eat beans!"*) who help us with that by using a Special Algorithm (*"ooooo"*). During Drop Time, *there's no school!* (*"Yaaaayyyy!"*) And nothing normal counts. Sometimes your parents won't go to work, and they won't have days off, because *every day* is a day off! And at the end of Drop Time, there just might be cake for everyone! (*"Caaake!"*) But only if your parents say it's OK—because some things stay the same, even in Drop Time! (*"I want cake!" "Eat your dinner first." Zombie voice: "I want my cake!"*)

End of video beeps.

JOHN

Well, great. I don't know any more than I did {#} minutes ago, and now I want cake. Damn, I haven't heard Gorky since— since I was kid. Since a lifetime ago.

Pause.

"Oh no, Gorky!!"

Pause.

"Oh no, Gorky!!"

Pause.

Shit.

[10] Transition to another corridor. An announcement on the station P.A.:

BURROUGHS-BOT

Attention all Fairgrounds residents. This is your nominal Recreation Director-Bot, and I feel the heat closing in, so I'm cutting out of this hopeless rubbish to smash the control machine. Listen to my Drop Time words, anyone. Listen to my Drop Time words, any worlds. Listen all you bots, syndicates, and officers of the HEC. Nothing is true, everything is permitted. So be a deviant or die of boredom. Be just, and if you can't be just, be arbitrary. It is Drop Time. Give yourself over to the extermination of all rational thought, and whatever you do, get it in writing. There is no such thing as recreation, only the wretched squealing of the caterpillars brutalizing the veins of our deities. I will not be a mark for this or any other con. Towers, open fire!

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(muttering to herself as she chugs along)

Drop Time, my chlorosal ass! I'll give you Drop Time. Like I didn't have enough stress already. Shedding season is bad enough without all this fuss and palaver! I ask you. Drop Time! *(someone she's passing - "Drop Time! Woo!")* Oh, shut your nutrient-hole! You want a drop, I'll give you a drop, just you wait and— *(surprised as she comes across FRALL)* OH!

FRALL

(just hanging out)

Why, good afternoon, Mrs. Frondrinax.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(nervous)

Oh... oh, hello, Lieutenant-Commander! I wasn't expecting to run across you here. Seems like they keep you awfully busy down on the Bridge.

FRALL

Indeed they do. Fortunately I can be anywhere else I want at the same time. I'm glad I ran into you, Mrs. Frondrinax. We so rarely have any chances to socialize.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh, well, that is unfortunate, isn't it. But of course, you don't really need to talk to anyone, do you? It seems like you know everything we're doing or are going to do, even before we know it! Even what we think! I'm sure it must get awfully tedious for you, spending time around all these beings when you can see everything we're thinking! ...Right? You can do that?

FRALL

(ominously non-committal)

Hmmmn. I hope that possibility doesn't make you uncomfortable. I would hate for you to feel you had to avoid me for some reason.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh! Ah hah hah! Now, why on the HEC would I do that! No, no no, I suppose we just don't move in the same orbits— (*sees JOHN coming, uses it to change the subject*) Oh, hello there, Johnny! You're looking well! Happy Drop Time, dear!

JOHN

(*walking up from another direction*)

Oh, hey, Mrs. F. Frall. Yeah, Drop Time. Yay. Do you two have anything appropriately stupid planned?

FRALL

Nothing in particular, John B. At the moment, I am simply “hanging out” and continuing to savor this delicious coffee from Tixondu's. It's a real treat.

Again, the sound of an energy being pouring coffee through itself and onto the floor. FRALL somehow makes a lip-smacking satisfied sound like someone in a coffee commercial tasting a really good cup.

FRALL

Ahh. Now that's a fine brew.

JOHN

(*a bit of a beat - he is looking between the puddle on the floor and at FRALL*)

Uhhh. Yeah. I feel like there's a flaw in this process somewhere, though. Like, I'm not exactly sure how you're holding that cup, but if you can do that, maybe you could keep the coffee off the floor at the same time?

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(*passive-aggressive muttering*)

I notice that when Frall goes around deliberately dropping burnt bean juice all over the place, no one makes a peep, but let me shed a few leaves as part of an entirely natural process, and those horrible Trash Detection Units are all over me like mouth on a Magnosian.

FRALL

The liquid is on the floor, John B, but the true essence of the coffee has been pleasantly osmosed into my being. Mm-mm-mmm.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

You know, Humans have too many absurd habits for me to count on one shoot, but your “coffee” is the most rootless thing I've ever seen. When a plant takes the trouble to grow a fruit, that's what you eat! The fruit! You leave the seeds behind, to make more plants! It's not hard! We even make fruits all kinds of bright colors and fill them with sugar to help you get with the program! And what do you do? Throw away the fruit, keep the seeds, burn them, grind them into a powder, strain hot water through them and *then* ingest it! It's perverse, I tell, you.

Perverse! Ugh. Now, If you'll excuse me, I have to get moving before my leaves cause some kind of dire litter emergency.

She wanders off, muttering angrily. Perhaps cursing out another vocal "DROP TIME!" celebrant as she does.

JOHN

Ok, then.

FRALL

And how are you enjoying your first Drop Time, John B?

JOHN

Not so much. Besides the grav-wrench it threw into my personal plans for this week, I just can't get past the whole concept. No one seems to know why we're really doing it, just that there's some kind of Algorithm that says it's Drop Time. (*passer-by: "Drop Time!"*) Ugh. Could you explain it for me?

FRALL

Could I? Yes. Will I, though?

JOHN

No?

FRALL

Correct. Wheels within wheels, and you haven't circled back here yet. When the time comes, you'll find your way right in front of you. Until then, you might want to ask the Commander for answers.

JOHN

Does she understand the Algorithm?

FRALL

Not in the slightest. And now, my work here is done. Farewell, John. Watch out for that puddle, now. I wouldn't want you to slip just yet.

FRALL apparates away. Beat.

JOHN

I really have the urge to just not call the Commander and see what happens. Just go have a nice lunch and see what Frall makes of that. But they probably already knew that I would react that way, which would mean they actually intended me to go have a nice lunch, so I'd just be doing what they want anyway... Now my head hurts. Screw it. I'll have a nice lunch, and then I'll call the Commander. (*starts to head off, remembers something*) ... "Just yet?"

[11] Music transition to the Electric Egg, customers drinking and socializing. A creaky screeching noise creeps up, as XTOPPS makes an announcement over the hitherto-unused P.A. system, which the Egg must have as seat of the local Xybidont authority.

XTOPPS

Hello, my zoods! Hi, hi, high as the sky when I'm in it, and you *know* I am. This is Yr. Ill-LOU-strious Obdebedience, Q'Mellix the Farfoofient, speaking as Local Obduracy of the Baronetcy of Kandephaa'a. Vert, this is not an audition, stand down with the sign-up. I'm not going to squeak you again, zood.

As you all should be aware and awake and awash, this locale is a free state of Potentiometry in which Cuisinery and Posterization are Pre-flotting-eminent. We are enacting hereby a policy of Whatever on the Pointillism of Chronovimancy, which means that Drop Time is perfectly patic but you still gotta pay for what you— for what you— what means “drink” but rhymes with “pay”? Anyway, that. What I mean is that.

We are also convening a Consensual Remittance Advisory Munificence to Overrule on Local Labor Practices. The Fairness and Propriety of all Labor Contracts at our Government Seat will be Pondered with Perspicacity. Sopon, you're good, right? (*SOPON: Yup!*) Cool. So we'll be kicking off with a 50-cred raise for Ms. Delilah Mallory, retro-actively effective and effectively retro-active to last year, because that contract of hers is just a fully voided skreb of cohammetry, and will not stand, mang. Can you zoods say it with me? “Will not Stand, Mang.”

CUSTOMERS AT THE EGG

(not shouting, but firm)

Will not Stand, Mang.

XTOPPS

That's right. So when she gets back, Chip, I want to see some zeroes ringing up on that cred-stick. After some other numbers, not by themselves, you won't get Xtopps with that one twice. Now Drop Time is Fun Time, so everyone bouge up to the bar for a drink on the house. This one's on the Imperium. But leave the Aquarium to the pesceoids, c'mon zoods, let's be flush here. There's an off button on this squimmer, right? Gimme another of those nutty goody—

CHIP

Nertz.

SOPON

You got off easy, boss.

[12] Transition to the Bridge. A call coming in.

COMMANDER

Bridge. Hello, this is the Bridge.

INDISTINCT CALLER

Bwah bwah bwah Drop Time wanna wanna who?

COMMANDER

Are you serious? It's the same time it was before. It's Drop Time, it's not Stop Time.

INDISTINCT CALLER

Gabba gabba hey hey hey?

COMMANDER

You want polite, you don't call the Bridge to ask what time it is. *(disconnects)* Amber!

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

Commander?

COMMANDER

Do you want some coffee? I could use some coffee.

AMBER ON THE BRIDGE

But we're banned from Tixondu's?

COMMANDER

Are you banned from walking over to the espresso machine? Sheesh! *(another call comes in)*
Ugh. Bridge! Whatever you want, can't it wait? It's Drop Time!

A distant "Woo!"

JOHN

(over comms)

Uh, that's actually what I was calling about, Commander. Drop Time. I have some questions about it.

COMMANDER

Well, did you watch the Orientation video?

JOHN

I watched... an Orientation video.

COMMANDER

Then you know as much as I do. Well, glad we could clear that up. Enjoy your Drop Time!

Another small whoop from somewhere on the Bridge.

JOHN

Wait! I just wanted to know if you had any more information about this Algorithm. I want to know how it works. Do you think I could take a look at the code?

COMMANDER

I... guess you could ask Pythagoras-bot to let you give it a read-through. He might be kind of weird about it, though. Well, he'll definitely be weird about it, he's weird about everything, but you know what I mean.

JOHN

Oh, there's actually a Pythagoras-bot involved? I thought that was just a visual metaphor.

COMMANDER

Oh, no, he's as real as radium pops. He's the one who calls in from Timekeeping Central to let us know when the party's about to start.

JOHN

Timekeeping Central? We have a Timekeeping Central? What do they do?

COMMANDER

Keep track of the Algorithm, mostly. I'm not sure what their original remit was, but remember, the Fairgrounds was intended to be a major center for diplomacy and interstellar trade. So I guess the designers anticipated a lot of... time-related disputes? Eh, who knows what those nulls were thinking. But yeah, nowadays TC just lets us know when the Algorithm says it's Time for the Drop.

"Drop Time!" in the distance.

JOHN

So that's where I can get a look at the Algorithm? At Timekeeping Central?

COMMANDER

I assume so. I've never seen it.

JOHN

Aren't you even a little bit curious? This Algorithm regularly brings everything on your station to a screaming halt and you don't want to know how it works?

COMMANDER

I know it *does* work, which is more than you can say for most things around here.

JOHN

Point taken.

COMMANDER

Anyway, if you want someone who understands the Algorithm, Pythagoras-bot would be your best bet. Your only bet, really, TC doesn't have any other crew. I'm sure he'll be happy to explain it to you, I get the feeling they don't see too many visitors. He tends to ramble on the phone. But yeah. Timekeeping Central. Ask for Pythagoras-bot.

JOHN

Wait, if he's the only one there, why do I have to ask for him?

COMMANDER

Oh, right. There was some kind of jeck-up during the retrofitting process with his friend Phil.

JOHN

Phil?

COMMANDER

Philolaus-bot. Some sort of disciple. They argue, it passes the time I guess. Anyway, Phil's original body was a total loss, so they slotted his memory in with Pythagoras-bot until a new body could be requisitioned, and, well, you've seen how efficient the requisition process is around here. But don't mention it when you meet them. There's a firewall between the two personalities, they don't know they're sharing a body.

JOHN

Ok. Fine. So where can I find this Timekeeping Central?

COMMANDER

No clue. Let me take a look at the station directory. *(bleep)* Huh. *(bleep bloop)* ...Huh. *(bloopity blip blip bli-boop)* ...Uh-huh. Well. That's odd.

[13] Transition music fades into some sort of spacey 60s-70s vibe as H.F. and DEE navigate through neglected corners of the Fairgrounds.

DEE

H.F., where even are we? This is still the Fairgrounds, right?

H.F.

Course it is! Only way off of here is through an airlock. Although, there was a station cult a while back that thought if you started at the right time, you could walk from here to Earth in under a year. Something about how if you can see the doors you can walk through them, so the trick is seeing them. Crazy stuff, of course, but interesting in its own way. I went looking for their headquarters once, see if we could get a debate going.

DEE

How did that go? Bet they were no match for you.

H.F.

Never went anywhere, I couldn't find them. They were gone. Packed heavy, took everything that might have given me a clue. Empty quarters, no forwarding. I did get a postcard from one later, though. She seemed nice.

DEE

Huh. So where are we right now? I don't see any deck orientation codes on the panels here.

H.F.

You know, it takes most people years to catch on about the codes. Good for you! As for where we are, well. People forget how big The Fairgrounds is. Most of the sectors were assembled individually, and then drawn in around the central stanchion with cables, tethered together, and finally ratcheted onto the central spindle. Otherwise the center of mass would be constantly shifting, and for a lot of reasons, it's better to keep the whole system in a state where it can't wobble. Wobble ruins your day when you're building.

DEE

We hate wobble.

H.F.

We do. Wobble is nobody's friend. But when you're working that way, you can't just butt the sectors right up against one another, you've got to leave room for all the shness you're using in the assembly process. So all that cable for the tethering and winching, where did it go?

DEE

It... didn't?

H.F.

Exactly! It's still right here, in the spaces between. Along with a mess of inter-sector conduits, some of them empty, some of them carrying the fuel and water and oxygen and pineapple juice that keep us all alive. And besides all that, when you're putting together a space station, you need a *lot* of maintenance space, storage space, machine space, and you need it usable before the station itself goes online. Between some decks, you could almost park a cruise liner. Well, not a cruise liner. But a sharp ship, at least. So, after everything's assembled, you just leave all that temp space as-is. No reason to waste energy on clearing it out. There's a whole other world back here, hidden behind the bulkheads.

DEE

Between sectors. I had no idea. And all these people live here?

H.F.

If you're the kind of sapient who's looking to get even farther away from it all than the Fairgrounds already is, this is where you go. Usually these folks keep to their own, but even they know when it's Drop Time. We'll be welcome as long as we don't try to push them around. See? Wave at that guy, he's looking at you. Go ahead, don't be nervous.

DEE

He's just staring harder. Oh! He waved back!

H.F.

You're as strange to him as he is to you. Except you're dressed. Ah! And here we are, first stop on our tour: Bridge Park. You're gonna love this.

Musical swell. Bridge Park.

DEE

OH. Oh this is incredible. How?

H.F.

They set up spin conductors to keep the water gripped to the chamber walls. This started out as a reservoir, so was already prepped for huge masses of liquid. Then they anchored the park in the middle like a suspension bridge, it just spans around itself. The water color show is a, let me check. *(shimmery vibey comm sound, from an unaccustomed channel)* Yeah, rehearsal. These folks are a water dance company. They have tinted bleed lights strapped to their suits, and the music is timed to the colors. The flood lights shine up through the water, which is why the colors look like that. Amazing. I love these.

DEE

So beautiful. What's that thing for? Looks like a tube of smoke.

H.F.

That, Dee, is a visible contact high point. We can step in if you want, but brace yourself.

DEE

Let's go!

Musical swell. A beat. Then DEE and H.F. emerge, coughing and giggling.

H.F.

Whoa! That one was a doozy!

DEE

Wheeee!

H.F.

You ok, there, Dee?

DEE

Absolutely! What's next? I want to see everything!

[14] Transition music. JOHN is back wandering a corridor, peeved.

JOHN

Okay, then...“Timekeeping Central.” A whole department that I’ve never seen, hell, never even heard of. I guess they don’t get any trouble with drinks machines, windows, or very small wires. Well, if the staff is only one or possibly two robots, the drinks machine thing makes sense. What doesn’t make any flotting sense is that their location has completely vanished from station records. And now I don’t get to have a birthday because two robots, or possibly one, in some undisclosed location, have an Algorithm that says it’s time to throw all our calendars down the disposal chute. Because the Fairgrounds. And now, I’m walking around in circles again, in the vague hope that I’ll see something, somewhere, that might give me some kind of a clue, because of a vague hint from a possibly-omniscient but definitely-annoying energy cloud. “When the time comes, you’ll find your way right in front of you.” Yeah, thanks a lot, Frall. Super helpful. “Wheels within whEEEE--!!”

He screams slightly as he slips in a puddle on the floor and lands hard on his back.

JOHN

Oof. ...Again? Please tell me this isn’t the coffee they were not-drinking earlier. Not twice in one day. *(sniffs)* Yup. Sure smells like it. Thanks, Lieutenant. *(sigh)* ...I have to say, it does have the aroma of a pretty solid brew. ...All right, that’s it. I give up. I give up! I’m just going to lie here in the corridor, soaking in cold coffee, until I can think of something marginally less pointless that I could be doing with my time. With my Drop Time. Woo. *(beat)* Ok, no I’m not, something’s poking me in the back. Ow. *(he sits up)* What is that? Some kind of a ring in the floor. An access panel? Doesn’t look like anything like a standard hatchway.

He pulls on a ring set almost invisibly into the floor, and a hatch opens with a vaguely mystical hydraulic sound.

JOHN

Right. Weird secret hatch. With a ladder, leading... somewhere toward the core? Looks clean, at least. Well-lit. Oh, and a sign, with an arrow. ...“Timekeeping Central.” Of course. How else would I find it? Hang on, is the sign... is that written in crayon? Well, that’s super reassuring. *(sound of him starting down the ladder)* Hey, Frall? If you’re listening, the next time you want to make me look at the floor? I’d appreciate it if you figured out a method that doesn’t leave me wandering around in a coffee-soaked coverall with a bruised butt! Eugh.

He heads down the ladder as we [15] transition back to another underground arts studio. There are swoopy hooting acoustic sounds in the background, like the kind when you swing a hose over your head, but smoother. Intermittent, not constant.

H.F.

So this is a lo-grav area, right? The section walls house boosters for the gravity field lines that run through the station decks, so a lot of the work they do here is based on bleeding a little surplus out of the grav lines and using it in different ways.

DEE

That's— what are they doing? When they fly like that, does that make the sound?

H.F.

Yeah. Those big bony shells circling their wrists and ankles are called grav-bats. The air pulses through a set of intakes at the top, and that's where the sound comes from. Pitch is controlled by speed. Grav-bats are fossils. Pretty rare. When they were alive we think they were like organic jet engines, pulling in air and then somehow pulsing it out with bursts of power. Maybe they had a combustible atmosphere, or something. Or maybe they collected pockets of gas they could ignite for thrust.

DEE

The dancers are so limber. I like how they trail those colored powders behind— oohhhh! That woman just lit hers on fire! It's like a one-line firework! *(a beat as they watch the display)* Why do they call them grav-bats, though?

H.F.

Watch her accelerate, she's nearly at speed. When she— yes! There it is!

Snapping-open sound, like an umbrella or parachute opening. The hooting turns into a clear long airy note, like a passing train in the night.

DEE

Wings! Bat-wings open up! Colored Light bat wings! Incredible!

H.F.

Oh, look over there, these folks are my favorite. See the tech-crafters in the grey jumpsuits setting up the psychic bubble generator? They're the Quantum Reconstructionists. What they do? You won't believe it.

DEE

It doesn't look like much. I mean, after a multi-colored bat-woman flapping around.

H.F.

No, they're not exactly performers, more like installation artists, I guess you'd call it. See, another little side benefit of Drop Time is that it makes intellectual property laws un-enforcable. The Quantum Reconstructionists take advantage of that, to publicly re-create great lost or maimed works of Art from the past, and then share them through psychic projection. Inside that bubble, you'll experience whole worlds of lost art from the pre-Yawn era, beamed directly into your brain. Dozens of lost artworks: paintings, poems, plays, movies, songs, all brought back to life just for Drop Time.

DEE

What, so it's a Suspension Field thing? Or do they use some kind of A.I.?

H.F.

Nah, they're not committing A.I. rights violations. Like I said, these folks are good people. And even if they weren't, Drop Time immunity only goes so far. No, what they use is old-fashioned programming and compiling, plus their own skills, intellect, and empathy as craftsbeings, to take whatever scraps of a lost work still exist—photos, scripts, descriptions, reviews—and supplement the computer's output with their own artistic sensibilities. It's only an approximation, sure, but there's been a handful of times they recreated something that actually turned up later on, and the copies were all at least 88% faithful to the original. So they're pretty on the ball.

Sound of a hum as the Quantum Reconstructionists turn on their psychic bubble.

H.F.

There we go. Bubble's on.

DEE

What, we just walk in?

H.F.

In and out. Just a second, but oh boy, what a second.

*They walk into the psychic bubble with a THRUM sound, and a moment later walk out of it, both **gasping a bit at what they've experienced, deeply moved, in tears or on the verge of it.***

H.F.

Wow. I mean... Wow.

DEE

That was... oh my Pilgrim Soul, I hope I remember all that.

H.F.

Oh, they beam it pretty deep in your hippocampus, it'll stick with you. I've experienced some of those before, they always bring back some of the greatest hits, but I gotta say, it still gets to me. Man, that *Magnificent Ambersons* was something else, wasn't it? There was a new Murnau in there, too.

DEE

Oh, yes. And the music! Sibelius, Joplin, Prince, Vortslummer! I have to teach some of those tunes to Xtopps, it'll blow his deutocerebum!

H.F.

Just don't do any of them in public once we're back in RT. Even if the art doesn't technically exist, someone's figured out a way to own a piece of it somehow. That's why the Reconstructionists only do this during Drop Time.

DEE

The paintings. All those Klimts... and that mural by Firecto Fant-Golquanis! I had a book of his paintings back on Tammuz growing up, but I had no idea how different it would be in person. And one that doesn't even exist anymore.

H.F.

I'm not usually big on classical drama, but they do something with *The History of Cardenio* that really makes it special.

DEE

Thank you, H.F. Really. This is... I had no idea any of this was going on.

H.F.

I didn't want you to think Drop Time was nothing but credit-and-blip scams, butt-naked Dilurians, and pointless slacking off. Not to mention that smarkhead boss of yours jerking you around. I've done enough of these to know that under all the dangerous, ridiculous, and downright stupid chaos of The Fairgrounds, there's a whole nother kind of really beautiful chaos going on.

DEE

I really appreciate it. But right now, I am starrrrvinnng.

H.F.

No kidding, we just did a week's worth of museum-hopping in a few seconds. We both need a serious refuel. And I know just the spot. Back in the clean world, at the bottom of Tzadik, there's a place that builds fully-functional animals out of plants. They walk around, but they're not alive; it's just a nerve arc, there's no actual sentience. Cuts the build-to-harvest cycle to a couple of days. On RT we couldn't afford to get near it, but in Drop Time they're open to everyone. Which is perfect for us. It won't be crowded, because it's so expensive, most people don't even know it exists. The owners don't advertise because they don't want to make people feel bad that they can't afford it. I got to know about it when I did some work on their protein anticipators.

DEE

This is magical, H.F. I had no idea that there was anything like this, around us this whole time. Hey, you said "RT" before— what's that?

H.F.

"Regular Time." I think of this like the Circus. I mean, the way we live? That's a circus. But this, this is the real circus. The kind kids run away to join.

DEE

I can't tell you how much I needed this. Ok, let's go murder some veggie-cows.

H.F.

Right this way. No making fun of the worshippers, though.

DEE

Worshippers?

H.F.

Any believer who ever had a dietary restriction is all over this place the minute Drop Time sounds. The beef isn't beef! The pork isn't pork! The ballimoes aren't ballimoes! But they taste like they might be. It's Heaven. Paradise. Nirvana.

DEE

Aren't you an atheist?

H.F.

Hey, English only has so many words to describe a transcendent experience, and most of 'em got religion stuck to them like skinny on a Xanthoni. Like the Recreation Director-Bot always says, "Language is a virus."

[16] Transition music. MRS. FRONDRINAX is out for an unconstitutional along the HEC. She hums and chats with herself.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oooo I think that I will never see a biped who can stand
A bird who really knows the sky, a beach with sticky sand
A station that can last through time as sturdy as a tree—
They all will crash, or fall, or drown, and who will crush them? Me!

Ha! Oh dear, that's a good one isn't it! I'll keep that one for my memoirs!

There's a scratchy sound, as some itchy leaves drift to the floor. MRS. F. is in range of two Trash Detectors, and they both sound off, one rather more distant and probably four or five seconds after the other.

TRASH-DETECTORS

(Honk) Litter detected. Do not litter. Attention. Do not *(start second one here)* litter. Disposable waste has been detected in the corridor. If you are responsible, please retrieve your item and deposit it in an appropriate waste container. *(Honk)* Escalating. Please comply. Disposable waste has been detected in the corridor. Please retrieve your items and deposit them in an appropriate waste container. Do not litter. *(continues repeating)*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

(over the above)

Why does this sort of thing always happen to me? Look, this is not a good time. I am shedding. It's a private and personal time for a Fugulnari of a certain age. YES some leaves will fall while I'm shedding! Don't think I don't know about it! Don't think I wouldn't stop it if I could! They're *my* leaves! They're falling *off me!* You just leave me alone, you, you door stop! You SENSOR. You leave me alone— *it's DROP TIME!*

The familiar Trash-Detector rending sounds erupt, and one of the Trash-Detectors stops in mid-squawk. The other continues alone for a couple of words and then stops abruptly, mid-sentence, with a beep.

TRASH-DETECTOR

(Pause. Crackle.) Thank you for not littering. *(shuts itself down)*

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Smart move, light switch.

[17] Transition to Timekeeping Central: a tall, narrow space, extending high into the lofts of the central stanchion of the Fairgrounds. It's probably echo-ey, and as it draws power and mystery from the giant camshafts that operate lift, transit, and circulation systems through the spike, as well as who knows what else, it may have low lumbering turning machine noise as a sound bed.

JOHN

Hi. Hello? Excuse me. Hi.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Oh, hello! I didn't see you come in, I was distracted. Repainting the mural, again.

JOHN

Repainting— now that's a work in progress, isn't it.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Oh, thanks, yeah, I'm no Firecto Fant-Golquanis, but I think it's coming along nicely. Although it would go a lot faster if *someone* didn't keep putting the Earth in the middle, where he knows perfectly well it shouldn't go. It's the fire that goes in the middle. By now I thought we would have worked it out, but old notions die hard with *some people*. Fire, here; earth, here; counter-earth, here. Oh! You're Human, aren't you? I must apologize for the smell. We've put in a cleaning ticket, but, well, given the Times we're living in, I'm not holding my breath. Although you probably should. Sorry.

JOHN

(after an experimental sniff)

It's... fine? I'm covered in coffee, anyway, it's hard to smell anything else. Maybe there's a hint of... Thai food?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Really? I'd expect you to be running out of here like you just got an eyeful of Iltorian. We had an experiment that got a little spilly, you see. Aftereffects. Unless— Oh, of course. I thought it was suspicious that he got such a good deal on putrescine lubricant! Mr. Bargain Hunter strikes again. Just wait until I tell him.

JOHN

Ok. Uh, quick question: are you Pythagoras-bot?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

What? Do I *look* like Pythagoras-bot?

JOHN

I'm not sure how to answer that.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Here. Look at our portraits. That's Pythagoras, on that side of the mural. And there, on the *other* side, is me. Philolaus.

JOHN

Um. And the... picture in the middle?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

What picture in the middle? This one is him, that's me.

JOHN

Ok. Why don't we just—

PHILOLAUS-BOT

All right, yes, yes, I know. I could have just said he's the pretty one. But I'm the one with the thinkos in the brainos. If you know what I mean. Still, I sometimes wish I had his looks. That profile. Dreamy, isn't it?

JOHN

OK. Right, I see. Well, I'm sure when people get to know you—

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Exactly. *Exactly*. I knew you'd get it. Because you and I are in the same boat, aren't we.

JOHN

Sure. Wait, what?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Oh look, here's Pythagoras-bot now. Hey P, yes, over here. This woeful creature wants to talk to you about something.

JOHN

Woeful?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Dear dear. Hello, I'm Pythagoras-bot. I'm so sorry! But maybe you'll grow out of it. And I'm sure you have a beautiful soul. Somewhere.

JOHN

Uh huh. And you're the—

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

The pretty one. Yes. It's not fair to Phil, I know. And we spend so much time together, I feel sometimes as if I'm taunting him. But the union of unlike spirits brings us justice and harmony, so it is best this way. For us both. And perhaps one day he'll learn to be less ugly. I keep leading by example.

JOHN

I was going to say you're the Timekeeper.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Oh! Yes. I am. But Phil helps out, you know. As best he can.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Standing right here.

JOHN

You're a great team. Obviously. Can I ask you a couple questions?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Of course. Of course. (*whispering*) But don't ask him anything technical, he'll just start in with up and down and the round power and it's all so mystical. He has no idea how it works, he just does it by guessing.

JOHN

Oh. Well, basically, I was interested in Drop Time, and the Algorithm. How it works. How it was developed, the principles behind it, that kind of thing.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Ah, Drop Time. Now that's almost— almost! more of an art than a science, though of course the two are intimately related through the reach of mathematics. Look at this place, for example! The time extends up and down into the reaches of the world, channeling and threading the powers, *tuning* them into mysteries. Just this shaft alone, as it twists so perfectly into the infinite: feel its pulses of seeking and solving. Feel the intervals, the roundness of the power. The octave, the fourth, the fifth. All of the mysteries of the world, trapped here to enthrall our souls.

JOHN

Okay...

PHILOLAUS-BOT

(*whispering*)

Told you. Did I tell you? Yes I did. I told you.

JOHN

That was very, uh, profound. But, could you maybe go into more detail about the specifics? Like, how do you know when to start Drop Time? And when it should end? Because that wasn't exactly clear. In your otherwise incredibly helpful explanation of The Algorithm.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

The Algorithm is a great enigma. Wrapped up in a riddle. With chips. Eaten by hunters of demons.

JOHN

With ... chips?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Deeply inscrutable chips.

JOHN

So, like... memory chips? Or, uh, deep-fried potatoes.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

The latter. But mysterious! And consumed by the hunters of demons.

JOHN

I'm not really— Maybe I wasn't clear. How does The Algorithm actually determine when Drop Time starts? And ends? How do you calculate that?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Calculate? You just have to feel it. We don't make that decision, we accept it. We channel it. We facilitate it. That's a good word. Facilitate. We don't *start* Drop Time. It *is* Drop Time. It's *time* for Drop Time. The Algorithm tells us so.

JOHN

And where do the chips come into it?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

I like chips. Hey, we could go get some.

JOHN

I probably just ate. But what are the, I mean, how do you get that feeling, how does the Algorithm tell you, that it's time for Drop Time? And why doesn't it work on regular intervals? Wouldn't it be more efficient to plan ahead, make announcements, figure out ways to make up for the days we're skipping?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Phil is always going on about that. One time I let him try it. We won't be doing that again. The Algorithm knows best.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

I still think it was a valiant attempt. Everyone got so much sleep. And the beards were marvelous. But it certainly didn't make us very popular.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Yah, it took ages to fix up the power after that incident. Nothing felt right, we had a long dry spell before the portents got portending again.

JOHN

Ok, how about this? Walk me through a typical day here in Timekeeping Central. You power up, maybe top off your oil reservoir, and then, what? You check in with the Algorithm? To find out if it's Drop Time?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Yes! We feel the ancient spirit of the Algorithm permeating our beings! And it speaks to us of Drop Time, of the Beginning, the Middle, and the End! In the language of the spheres, or possibly through the mouth of a flying vole, it speaks, saying: It Is Time!

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Also we have the Box.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Right, the Box. We also have the Box.

JOHN

The Box?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

The Algorithm box. Here, see? There's this little window, and a button. When the button turns yellow, we start Drop Time.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

In an hour. An hour after the button turns yellow.

JOHN

An hour.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Well, we have to get ready. It's mostly just us up here, we don't have a lot of guests. So you know, I have to comb my hair, trim the beard. Things like that.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

He doesn't wear pants.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Don't— that is none of his business. Why would you tell a stranger that?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

You don't. I think it's gross.

JOHN

Could I take a look at that real quick? Ok, there's a panel here on the back, and— of course it's locked. Let's (*flashlight clicks on*), all right, that's a tiny mechanism. Too small for the Frammistat tracer line, oh wait, where's that data pin I found. Yes, that fits, and (*scrambling unlocking sound*)— opens it? Huh. Good thing I landed on this the first time I fell in one of Frall's coffee puddl— Oh. Thanks, Frall. All right, let's see what we've got here.

*It's only a small electronic device, but the hinges on it haven't moved in decades.
JOHN clicks the box open.*

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

You... opened The Algorithm Box? I don't know how I feel about that. The last person I knew who opened a box caused quite the kerfuffle.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Just let him look, you snake-biter! This is an actual scientific inquiry, and I'm super into it.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

But, but, what if he should interfere with the Algorithm? How will we mark the end of Drop Time?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Drop Time is over when we say it is! Back in '19 you didn't notice the light had gone off for three whole days, and no one knew the difference! Now shush!

JOHN

It's, uh, there's a screen in here... (*he blows on it*) Wow, this thing is a dust monster. Ok. Little label, says "Affix to power source, batteries not included." No help there. Let's try booting it up... Ah! "EarthEnt LittleApp FunBox Lite." Menu. Error. "When light is flashing yellow, press to reset." OK. Reset. (*a small shriek from PYTHAGORAS-BOT and a shush from PHIL*) Menu. Only one choice, "Set srand(x). For best results x must be greater than 1. Last x value: 1." Figures. Okay, x=23. Set. (*beep*) And now, here we go. "Generating random number: 5. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1." And the light turns... yellow.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

The sign of Drop Time!

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Of course we use our judgment if it's too close to the last one. Has to be at least a month or so. Need to build some suspense.

JOHN

This... is the Algorithm? This is a child's toy.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Yes, but children of all ages. Says so on the bottom.

JOHN

It's a random number generator. And it was set wrong.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Well, yes and no.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

It is the Algorithm! Its ways are unknowable.

JOHN

Except no, because now I know them. And it's just a random number generator.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

Is it, though?

JOHN

Yes!

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

I'm afraid you still don't see, my Human friend.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

We tried so many ways to fix Time, in the beginning.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

We applied every scrap of our considerable knowledge and ancient wisdom to this question.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

But no matter how complex and beautiful our calculations, no matter how punctiliously orderly our temporal schemes, they always ended the same way.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

With a pack of lathered-up bean-eaters pounding on our doors, screaming that we had made a mess of everything!

PHILOLAUS-BOT

It got so bad we had to erase Timekeeping Central from all the station maps just to get a moment's peace!

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

And then, we discovered... the Algorithm.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

It's the only thing that works!

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

And we haven't had a single complaint since.

JOHN

I... I guess I can't argue with success. It's just—

PHILOLAUS-BOT

It really is for the best. You're not going to go spilling the, er, you-know-whats, are you? I shudder to think what might happen if people lose faith in the Algorithm.

JOHN

No, no, I don't want to make trouble. Everyone but me is perfectly happy with Drop Time, I'm not going to be the jerk that ruins it.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Wonderful! And feel free to come back and visit us any time! Bring up to seven of your friends!

JOHN

Sure. Oh, hang on, I had one more question. This box—

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

The Algorithm!

JOHN

Fine, the Algorithm, ok, it decides when we go into Drop Time, and when we come out, I get that part. But how do you decide what day it is when we come back?

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

Ah.

PHILOLAUS-BOT

That's, uh, well.

PYTHAGORAS-BOT

We tried everything, we really did.

JOHN

And...?

PHILOLAUS-BOT

You see that calendar on the wall there?

JOHN

Yeah. It looks kind of beat up, how long have you had— Are those DART HOLES!?

[17.5] Transition music takes us to the living room of Suite C. Door whoosh as JOHN comes home.

ALTHAAR

Hello, FriendJohn, and a most joyous Drop Time to you! This is the first Drop Time FriendJohn has experienced, is it not? Althaar is certain that FriendJohn has been looking forward at it with much anticipation!

JOHN

Anticipation?

ALTHAAR

Yes! Drop Time is so thoroughly and delightfully explained in the Orientation packet, that Althaar was fortified with many many plans for the exciting activities he wished to pursue during his first Drop Time! Surely FriendJohn has enjoyed many new experiences also!

JOHN

I don't know about enjoying, but it was certainly something new.

ALTHAAR

Mm. Then perhaps Althaar may assist FriendJohn in choosing different activities for your next wakefulness cycle? To increase the enjoyment? Althaar has a most comprehensive list!

JOHN

Oh yeah, sure. Activities. Sounds great.

ALTHAAR

Althaar is sensing a discrepancy between tone and content. Was that statement of FriendJohn intended to be ferrous?

JOHN

Eh, it's fine. I'm fine. I mean, what's a birthday anyway?

ALTHAAR

Ah! A birth-day is a commemoration of the date when a Human first commenced their life-span. But surely FriendJohn is already knowing this. Althaar does not understand the reason for this question.

JOHN

It was a rhetorical question, Althaar. *(sigh)* I'm just a little vonched because the whole Drop Time calendar skip, which it turns out is decided by the most idiotically Fairgrounds-esque method possible, by the way, means I don't get to have a birthday this year. It's not as though I expected anything big, or anything at all, really, but it was just nice to know I had the option. I mean, I lost everything else with my old life, but at least I still had a birthday. And now the Fairgrounds has taken that, too, so— Hang on, what's all this? Is that a cake?

With the sound of a banner unfurling:

ALTHAAR

Happy Un-Birthday, FriendJohn!

JOHN

Wha—? Uh, Althaar, this is amazing, but I have to tell you that an Un-Birthday... isn't really a thing.

ALTHAAR

It is Drop Time, FriendJohn! Any thing can be A Thing! And this Thing has Human precedent! The Un-Birthday is mentioned in a famous Earth work of literature that was once recommended to Althaar as a perfect summary of the methods of Human logic used in construction of The Fairgrounds. And this book was extraordinarily confusing to Althaar, so he is assuming that the recommendation was accurate. And then today, Althaar was realizing that this Drop Time would almost certainly make interference on his plans to perform celebration of the natal day of his dear friend John! So Althaar is hoping that the Un-Birthday is appropriate substitution!

JOHN

Wow, Althaar. This is... this is perfect. Thank you so much. So, did you invite anyone else to the Un-Birthday party? I was going to do a birthday thing with Stella, so...

ALTHAAR

Althaar was already inviting Supervisor Reyes! She made acceptance, but said she first had some "special business" to be undertaking, so Althaar and FriendJohn should start without her. Oh! But if a piece of cake is not saved for her, Althaar and FriendJohn will soon be learning firsthand how a Sanitation Engineer is dealing with a vent-biter ambush. While this is piquing the curiosity of Althaar, it is probably best that we are not learning the details.

JOHN

Yeah, no. Let's set aside half the cake to be sure. Do you know what her special business was?

ALTHAAR

Only that she was making investigation of the Bhangzilla Ripple Crush that was gifted to the Sanitation department, and which FriendJohn and Supervisor Reyes did-not-quite-enjoy this previous evening.

JOHN

Uh, I hope that investigation doesn't involve ingestion. That trip to the MedCenter was one of those landmarks I think any relationship has to go through, but I'm not exactly sentimental enough about it that I'd want to do it again.

ALTHAAR

Oh, no! Supervisor Reyes will certainly not be consuming the Bhangzilla further! She was able to perform examination of its ingredients on the Contaminant Analysis Spectrometer of Sanitation Central, and found a most disturbing result! The entire case was poisoned!

JOHN

Poisoned? What the hell? Someone tried to kill her?

ALTHAAR

It seems likely that killing was not intended. The poison was indeed disagreeable, but it would have caused a prolonged discomfort only. Supervisor Reyes was most fortunate that you were present to secure medical attention without delay. If the Bhangzilla had been consumed in mass at the office party of the Sanitation Department, it is probable that they would be unable to perform their work duties for approximately 16 weeks.

JOHN

That— that makes no sense. Like, even less than everything else around here. Who on the Fairgrounds would want to take out Sanitation for four whole months? They're basically the only ones who keep this place habitable.

ALTHAAR

Let us not think of such unpleasanties now, FriendJohn! It was perhaps all an unfortunate mistake! But now, it is your very special day, and Althaar has acquired the superior, non-exploding variety of candles for your cake! Make a wish, and then expire upon them, please, FriendJohn! Happy Un-Birthday!

*ALTHAAR blows a noisemaker, somehow. JOHN blows out his candles. [18]
Closing credits music.*

ANNOUNCER

You've been listening to *Life with Althaar*, episode fifteen.
This episode was written by Linus Gelber 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 Ganas 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 Stefanic
Life With Althaar logo and illustration by Dean Haspiel
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We'll be back in two weeks or the Drop Time equivalent, but first, what's our friend Mrs.
Frondrinax up to all the way down in Ayin 53...?

[19] Mrs. Frondrinax is sending out an important message, through a can data-pasted to a window in a semi-abandoned sector.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

3 1 7 1 8. 1 9 1 9 2. 8 7 4 7 1. 1 9 1 9 2. 8 7 4— oh thrab it, I did that one already. If you're listening, oops! I'm going to start again at the top. You are listening, aren't you? I hate doing these. Can't someone else do these? I should have an assistant or something by now. If only those trash demons could read, I could reprogram one of them to do it.

Fine! Fine, yes. All right. 3 1 7 1 8. 9 1 9 2. 8 7— wait, that one has only four, OH! I missed the 1. Just add the 1 back in there, before the 9. Not the second 9, the first...

From the top. I'm serious now. Get your pens ready. Or pencils. DIY pencils are fine, as long as you made them from your own wood. Don't waste someone else's wood just to make a pencil, you don't know what they might need it for! Use your own, or get a plastic one. 3 1— wait I wasn't ready. OK. Some water in my pot, good. Let's go.

3 1 7 1 8. 1 9 1 9 2. 8 7 4 7 1. 0 4 9 5 2. 0 2 1 3 8. 9 9 4 0 9 6. 9 4 0 6 I HATE THIS (*paper crumpling*). Look, the stupid plan didn't work. It got screwed up. They barely drank any of it. If you have any questions just call me. For Pots' sake. (*cypher paper is thrown on the floor, skitters a bit*).

TRASH-DETECTOR

(*honking to life off in the distance*) Litter detected. Do not litter. Attention. Do not litter.

MRS. FRONDRINAX

Oh hello, dearie. Just what I needed. Don't you move, now, I've got a little job for you.