

Starship: Excelsior
"Wires and Lights in a Box"
(Season 6, Episode 1)
by Aaron J. Bossig

Transcribed by Peter Stine

Note: Lines in brackets were recorded but interrupted. The complete line is left here for fuller context:

SCENE 6A-01**LOCATION: BLUEGILL ALIEN QUARTERS**

NARRATOR: *One year after the arrest of Alcar Dovan.*

JANATH: Dear Diary, It looks like my host used to write in you every day. I'm still figuring out how to be humanoid, and I think it might help if I kept it up. Her echoes finally stopped last night. I... felt them stop. I told Doctor Essam, and he just grunted and handed me another round of dream-killers.

(Doctor Essam hands over a bottle of pills.)

DOCTOR ESSAM: Safer to be sure.

JANATH: And he shoed me out of the infirmary! When I told Aftran, he just turned back to the conduit he was fixing.

(Conduit repair sounds.)

AFTRAN: Hand me that hyperspanner?

JANATH: Nobody wants to talk about it. I guess I don't want to talk about it either. It's just... something happened here. It was her body -- my host's, Faeriel's -- and now this body has chosen me and Faeriel is... gone. I think I need to make sure Faeriel's body--sorry, my body-- lives a full, long, healthy life. I'm not sure I could live through the echoes again. I know they weren't real, that Faeriel stopped living before I ever saw her body, but... they felt real. She was a good person. I see it in her diary entries. Her name meant "laughing," in the language of [her native people, the Treeborn.]

(Alert klaxons go off.)

BLUEGILL KING: Alert status. Alert status. All personnel to duty stations. This is not a drill.

(She stands.)

JANATH: Uh-oh. I have to get to my damage team. See you later, diary.

(She exits into the corridor.)

LOCATION: BLUEGILL CORRIDOR

JANATH: Aftran! Hey, Aftran!

(Someone running by comes to a stop.)

AFTRAN: (panting) Janath, you need to get to your duty station!

JANATH: (quickly) I know, I'm on my way, it's just--what's going on?

AFTRAN: (quickly) The engine's overloading, nobody knows why. If you ask me, we need to turn around, because there's no way we can make it to Parudon Six. Now go!

(She runs off.)

SCENE 6A-02**LOCATION: EXCELSIOR BRIDGE**

UNDERWOOD: Captain's Log, Stardate Six three one nine seven point four. The *Excelsior* remains on course for Parudon Six, the source of the mysterious tightbeam homing signal we received one week ago. The Parudons have invited us to make orbit and agreed to a scan of their territory, a diplomatic hat trick I must credit to my very capable Exec.

LORHROK: Thank you, sir, but, really, they were eager to have us.

UNDERWOOD: Nonsense, Commander. Six times the Federation's made diplomatic overtures, and six times the Parudons've politely brushed us off without even letting us map the system. And I was in Attempt Number Three. So I want to know your secret.

LORHROK: I wish I knew it myself, Captain. If it's any comfort, I only got the Parcheem hemisphere to receive us. The Mazeki government, on the far side of the planet, won't even take my calls.

YUBARI: And the Parcheems said they had no idea who sent the signal we got?

LORHROK: Chancellor Whitlov honestly seemed surprised.

NEEVA: If it was a Scion homing signal -- and I still think it was a Scion signal -- some old Iconian artifact on their planet could have sent it without anyone noticing. It was on such a narrow beam that it could have been left on for years, maybe centuries, before someone with a subspace transceiver bumped into it. We just got lucky.

SYLVESTE: Approaching Parudon Six, sir.

LORHROK: Standard orbit, Sly.

SYLVESTE: Standard orbit, aye, sir.

UNDERWOOD: Any sign of the source of that so-called Scion signal?

LORHROK: Sensor sweeps should see solutions shortly, sir.

UNDERWOOD: Oh-ho, splendid! You're getting quite good at that, Exec.

LORHROK: If the captain enjoys alliteration, it's the first officer's duty to model it for the crew.

NEEVA: If you're through patting each other on the back, I've got something. But it's not on the surface. A small station in very high orbit -- way out at the L-two Lagrange point.

UNDERWOOD: On screen.

YUBARI: I'm no expert, but that sure looks Scion to me.

UNDERWOOD: I am an expert, Commander, and it's not just Scion. That appears to be the first intact Iconian navigational array ever discovered.

YUBARI: Why would the Scions... Iconians, whatever, why would they need these? They had the gateway network.

LORHROK: That's exactly why they did need navigation arrays, Asuka. The gateways couldn't be constructed without incredibly detailed maps. But imagine what a map looks like when the shortest distance from one place to another isn't a straight line.

SYLVESTE: Sounds like a headache.

NEEVA: Sounds like the jackpot. We only have theories about what these maps contain, but Starfleet's research into the Mapstone suggests they recorded everything, from dimensional shifts right down to hyperstring vibrations.

UNDERWOOD: On the *California Explorer*, we always hoped finding one of these might help us understand the gateway network, maybe even find and control more of it than the three gates Starfleet currently has. We need access to that station.

NEEVA: I'm getting lifesigns. Sixteen Parudons aboard.

UNDERWOOD: And it's within their sovereign territory. This could be tricky.

YUBARI: Sir, Chancellor Whitlov of the Parcheem continent is hailing.

UNDERWOOD: Just the man I needed to see. On screen, Commander.

(Yubari activates the viewscreen.)

WHITLOV: *Captain Underwood, welcome. Please consider yourselves honored guests.*

UNDERWOOD: Thank you, Chancellor. We are prepared to receive your delegation aboard the *Excelsior* this evening, if that suits you.

WHITLOV: Why wait? Please, let us be good hosts. Beam down a delegation of your own, as soon as convenient.

UNDERWOOD: Beam down?

WHITLOV: Yes, my office. In the City of Parliament?

UNDERWOOD: Please forgive my surprise, Chancellor. On my last diplomatic mission to Parudon, no alien was allowed to scan your planet, much less visit!

WHITLOV Yes, we once suffered from rather a bad case of xenophobia. Wretched, wasn't it? Now, you've come all this way and we ought to be feeding you real food instead of making you dress up that replicated pap for us.

UNDERWOOD: We'll... be beaming down momentarily, then! Thank you, Chancellor! *Excelsior* out! (viewscreen deactivates) Commander Neeva, Commander Yubari, Exec, you're with me. Lieutenant Sylveste, you have the conn.

(Underwood's already heading to the turbolift, and the Away Team is right behind him.)

SYLVESTE: I have the conn, aye, sir.

LOCATION: TURBOLIFT

LORHROK: Transporter Room One.

YUBARI: (cynical) Well, they're friendly.

UNDERWOOD: We've certainly never given them any reason not to be.

NEEVA: Parudon is isolated. It's situated in one of the Little Empties, the inter-spiral space between the Norma and Scutum-Crux Arms of the galaxy. Very few star systems. Even less intelligent life.

(They exit the turbolift.)

LOCATION: CORRIDOR

LORHROK: That's probably why the Scions built a nav array so far out. They could get a clear view of half the galaxy from here.

UNDERWOOD: We had the same idea. Six times now, even though the planet isn't unified, the Federation has offered both sides a trade arrangement that is, frankly, rank bribery on our part... because Starfleet Intelligence would very much like to set up an observation post in this system.

NEEVA: What does S.I. want to look at so badly?

UNDERWOOD: Sorry, Commander. Classified, level sigma-five.

YUBARI: That's regulations-speak for "we're pretty close to bluegill territory," right?

LORHROK: Let's focus on the mission, Commanders. Whatever the reasons, these natives want to throw us a welcome party, which doesn't exactly happen every day on this ship. I, for one, plan to enjoy it!

YUBARI: What about the other half of Parudon? The Mazeki still won't talk to us. What if they're the side that controls the array?

LOCATION: TRANSPORTER ROOM

UNDERWOOD: Then we'll find a way to warm them up. But if Whitlov's side controls the array, and this reception goes well, we'll be too busy to worry what the Mazeki side thinks. Four to beam down, energize.

(They beam out.)

SCENE 6A-03**LOCATION: WHITLOV'S OFFICE - DAY**

(The away team materializes.)

WHITLOV: Captain Underwood, welcome, welcome, after all these years, welcome back!

UNDERWOOD: You remember me?

WHITLOV: Unlike you, Captain, we don't meet aliens every day. I've known the names of everyone in Ambassador Hist's third delegation since I was a young man. I've learned everything my world knows about the Federation, from your Prime Directive of non-interference to the high art of Aldea.

UNDERWOOD: Then allow me to introduce you to my senior staff. This is Lieutenant Commander Lorhrok, my executive, Lieutenant Commander Yubari Asuka [see pron. key], security chief, and Lieutenant Commander Neeva, chief of operations.

(Whitlov starts walking down a staircase into the parliament building. The crew follows.)

WHITLOV: Wonderful, wonderful. Now, I've already instructed Doctor Valen and the array staff to prepare for your arrival, [so let's get to your reception.]

UNDERWOOD: How did you know we're here for the array?

WHITLOV: We worked it out. Your colleague mentioned an Iconian signal, and, well... the array is the Iconian artifact to us. It's one of the most important parts of our culture.

UNDERWOOD: Why, that's splendid.

WHITLOV: So while they are sorting things out up there, you can relax and enjoy your reception.

UNDERWOOD: Well, I... there are a few things to arrange, but I'm sure we'd be glad to stop by.

WHITLOV: Oh, please don't blanch like that, it makes me feel like a poor host. It won't be much, just a small gathering, we were expecting twice as many reporters.

YUBARI: Uh, reporters?

(Reaching the bottom of the grand staircase, the doors to the reception hall open wide.)

LOCATION: RECEPTION HALL

(A band is playing alien jazz, quietly in the background. There is a crowd and then suddenly, a hoard of reporters shouting their questions nearly simultaneously.)

REPORTER DOLOKOV: (shouting) What planet are you from?

REPORTER #6A-02: (shouting) What kind of music do they have?

REPORTER #6A-03: (shouting) Have you made any advancements in monopole magnet transistors?

REPORTER MONEL: (shouting) Have you ever had sex with another species?

REPORTER DOLOKOV: (shouting) Do you like our planet?

REPORTER MONEL: (shouting) Where are your erogenous zones?

REPORTER #6A-03: (shouting) Why do you use antimatter for propulsion?

(Fade out)

SCENE 6A-98

Opening theme.

JOSHUA UNDERWOOD: Space, the final frontier. This crew will explore it. Space, the infinite wilderness. This crew will tame it. Space, storehouse of secrets. This crew will unlock it. These are the new voyages of the *Starship Excelsior*, and this crew will live up to her name: Ever upward.

(pause)

Starship Excelsior: A Star Trek Fan Production.

(pause)

Starring Gareth Bowley as Captain Joshua Underwood.

LORHROK: With Samuel Gillis as Lieutenant Commander Alecz Lorhrok.

[Neeva is same, Kestra is same]

YUBARI: ...and Caitlin Heaney as Lieutenant Commander Yubari Asuka.

NARRATOR: *Season Six: "The Odyssey." Episode One: "Wires and Lights in a Box" by Aaron J. Bossig.*

SCENE 6A-04**LOCATION: RECEPTION HALL**

REPORTER #6A-02: (shouting) Do you eat meat?

REPORTER DOLOKOV: (shouting) What kind of sports are on your world?

REPORTER #6A-03: (shouting) What is the character of your consciousness?

REPORTER MONEL: (shouting) What do you think of Parudon so far?

WHITLOV: People, good people, please give our guests some space. There will be time later for them to answer all your questions.

UNDERWOOD: (sotto voce) Is that so, Chancellor?

WHITLOV: (sotto voce) You came here to negotiate a trade deal and access to our satellite, right?

UNDERWOOD: (sotto voce) Right.

WHITLOV: (sotto voce) Then you're doing a press conference. Consider it part of our asking price.

LORHROK: (not sotto) A press conference shouldn't cause problems with the Prime Directive, sir.

UNDERWOOD: (no longer sotto) You sound like a boy at the candy shop asking for his allowance money.

LORHROK: Well... the truth is, sir, I've never been famous. Might be fun to try.

UNDERWOOD: Go ahead, then. Chancellor, if I might first have a word with this Doctor Valen...

WHITLOV: Wonderful, thank you. Doctor Valen is right there, in the golden hat.

UNDERWOOD: Less of a hat, more of a cone, isn't it?

WHITLOV: The latest fashion, I'm afraid. You go have your word and I'll make sure these three get through the press pool alive! If you please, Commanders...

UNDERWOOD: See that you do!

NEEVA: After you, Chancellor.

REPORTER DOLOKOV: (shouting) Excuse me! Excuse me! Aren't any of you worried about the invasion?

YUBARI: Invasion?!

WHITLOV: Mister Dolokov, I will not have you spreading wild tabloid nonsense from *National Report Daily* to our guests!

YUBARI: Neeva, Lorchrok, go on ahead. Chancellor, is my Away Team in any danger?

(Neeva and Lorchrok do indeed go on ahead.)

REPORTER DOLOKOV: Chancellor, didn't you tell the aliens about the invasion?

WHITLOV: You're in no danger, Commander. The Mazeki have been making the media a bit nervous since they elected Provost Bafidi. General Fetz!

(General Fetz approaches.)

FETZ: Mister Chancellor! How can I help? Ah, Dolokov, spreading rumors again?

REPORTER DOLOKOV: We have sources, General. Very high sources!

WHITLOV: (snort) High on what, pharmaceuticals? General, would you mind reassuring our guest regarding the so-called Mazeki invasion?

FETZ: Ah! Yes. Well, Miss -- what I'm afraid the media neglects to mention is that our security has been very effective at neutralizing the occasional incursions from their hemisphere. Their sorties are intercepted by our sky drones within sixty seconds.

YUBARI: So you've adopted a passive defense strategy?

FETZ: Their incursions are a lot more expensive for them than for us.

YUBARI: What if they're just using these incursions to evaluate your tactical weaknesses? Do you have any intel that they aren't building up for an offensive?

REPORTER DOLOKOV: Miss! Does Starfleet view this as a clear weakness in our strategy?

YUBARI: Umm...

(We "whoosh" to another part of the room.)

REPORTER #6A-02: Is the Federation hesitating because our world is divided?

LORHROK: We do hope to see your world unified someday, but I wouldn't say that we're hesitating. As the Klingons say, "He who fights on blistered feet may lose, but he who stops to nurse them has already lost."

REPORTER #6A-03: The what?

LORHROK: A blister? Oh, I guess your species doesn't really have skin as such, so [it's a kind of painful bump you can get from walking in bad-fitting shoes.]

REPORTER #6A-03: No, we get blisters! What's a Klingon?

LORHROK: Oh, another species. They're tough. And they wear these huge boots that don't always fit...

REPORTER #6A-02: Do you have a photo?

(Whoosh over to Neeva.)

NEEVA: Interspecies romance tips? I guess... it would depend on the species, right? Dating a Trill and dating a Jem'Hadar are [not exactly similar experiences.]

REPORTER MONEL: Jem'hadar? Are those like Klingons?

NEEVA: Maybe if you think true romance is a broken femur. Anyway, dating outside your species is just like dating [inside it. Either way, what you're looking for is a best friend.]

(Fade out.)

SCENE 6A-05**LOCATION: EXCELSIOR BRIDGE**

UNDERWOOD: *Away Team to Excelsior.*

SYLVESTE: Bridge here, sir, Lieutenant Sylveste speaking.

UNDERWOOD: *Ah, Sly, good. The Parudons have given clearance for our Chief Engineer and one assistant to beam over to the array. Doctor Valen will meet them there. Please inform Engineering.*

SYLVESTE: Yes, sir. And, sir... I'm verifying it now, but we've just received a transmission from the Westlake Archive.

UNDERWOOD: *The Westlake Archive? I'll be right there. Underwood out.*

SCENE 6A-06**LOCATION: THE ARRAY - COMMAND DECK**

(We are aware of a slow, rhythmic electromechanical hum.)

(Kestra and Adow beam in.)

DR. VALEN: (bowing) Honored guests. Welcome to the Array. I am Doctor Valen.

J'NAYA: I'm Commander J'naya, this is Ensign Adow, and... above our heads, is that all... just thousands of stellar navigation holograms? Are those hyperstring vibration readings?

ADOW: Wait. Is that a map of the interior of Bode's Galaxy?

J'NAYA: I'm not really a cartography expert.

ADOW: It can't be. Bode's is so far... it can't. This is just some kind of light show.

DR. VALEN: Truth to tell, honored guests, to me, it is just a light show. I don't know or care about other galaxies; that's not what we use the Array for. We just can't figure out how to turn all that stuff off.

J'NAYA: Wait, then what do you use the station for?

DR. VALEN: Oh! Watch your feet there! You'll notice the red tape on the floor?

J'NAYA: ...Yes? It goes all the way down the center of the control chamber.

DR. VALEN: That's the treaty line. We Parcheem control this side of the Array; the Mazeki have the other. Crossing this line is technically a sovereign incursion -- an act of war.

ADOW: You just taped off an ancient alien artifact like you're a couple of siblings who can't share a bedroom?

J'NAYA: Haha, Doctor, what Kinash means to say is, um, well, we respect your sovereignty and will stay on your side of the line. In fact, why don't we just, y'know, steer ourselves a little further away from it. Is the treaty going to limit our access?

DR. VALE:

Not really. All the databases you're interested in are shared, and certain controls are timeshared under the treaty. Only primary functions are secured.

ADOW: It's a navigation array. Maps are its primary function.

DR. VALEN: They were for the Iconians.

J'NAYA: Well, what are you using it for, then?

DR. VALEN: Telecommunications! Our planetary broadcasting and social networks all grew up around this array, centuries ago.

J'NAYA: I thought you'd only had manned spaceflight for a few decades.

DR. VALEN: The array is tethered to the surface by a space elevator. Ah, Commander, the wars that have been fought over the entrance to that elevator...

ADOW: Wait wait wait... you have an ancient alien artifact that apparently knows more about our galaxy than the rest of every known empire combined... and your government is using it to run TV shows?

DR. VALEN: Oh, we're not the government, Ensign! Didn't Whitlov tell you?

J'NAYA: We didn't actually speak to him.

DR. VALEN: This half of the station is controlled by the Parcheem Broadcasting Co-operative. I'm their Chief Technology Officer. Our counterparts on the other half represent the Mazeki Broadcasting Service. (pause) That's how they settled the last war: control of the array, and all communications on the planet, went into the hands of private companies. One for each of the two last great nations.

J'NAYA: So your company controls everything the Parcheem half of the planet sees and says...

DR. VALEN: ...and M.B.S. provides the media infrastructure for the Mazeki side, yes.

ADOW: Well I guess you must have a TV show to run or something. Can you point us toward the disused back corner where you keep the most valuable nav hookups in known space, so we can get started?

SCENE 6A-07**LOCATION: EXCELSIOR BRIDGE**

(Underwood tromps out of the turbolift.)

SYLVESTE: Captain on deck!

UNDERWOOD: As you were, Lieutenant.

SYLVESTE: Sir, I've just verified the Westlake Archive message. It's authentic. Code Forty-Seven: captain's eyes only.

UNDERWOOD: I'll take it in my ready room.

SYLVESTE: Aye, sir. And, sir, there's some[thing else.]

UNDERWOOD: Hold that thought, Lieutenant. General Hanas does not like to be kept waiting. (he takes a step and then pauses) Oh, and, tell Mister Warrick in Strategic Ops that we need a forensic analysis of military buildup on Parudon over the past twenty-four months.

SYLVESTE: Aye, sir.

UNDERWOOD: Good man.

(Underwood enters the ready room.)

LOCATION: EXCELSIOR READY ROOM

UNDERWOOD: Computer, accept transmission.

COMPUTER: *This is an emergency communiqué. It is not to be discussed with fellow officers unless deemed absolutely necessary. There will be no computer record of said transmission.*

UNDERWOOD: Understood. Voice print identification: Underwood, Joshua Wardell, Captain, U.S.S. Excelsior.

COMPUTER: *Voice print verified.*

(The screen switches on.)

HANAS: *Captain, I don't like to be kept waiting.*

UNDERWOOD: My apologies, General Hanas. I was on an away team.

HANAS: *I see. (pause) Captain, the Archive has picked up some odd chatter from the bluegill fleet. Apparently, one of their dreadnoughts has been destroyed.*

UNDERWOOD: One of their cube-killers?

HANAS: *Ralkolian-made.*

UNDERWOOD: Ralkolians? They're the best shipwrights in the Zero Empire. What on Earth attacked it?

HANAS: *Nothing.*

UNDERWOOD: Nothing?

HANAS: *Apparently... it just exploded. No survivors.*

UNDERWOOD: That's a bit unnerving.

HANAS: *Not as unnerving as this: the dreadnought was in your sector, on a direct course for Parudon Six.*

UNDERWOOD: What? Why? This is well outside the bluegill sphere of influence.

HANAS: *My guess, from their course? The dreadnought picked up the same homing signal you did. Based on the chatter, the rest of the bluegills don't seem to know about it. But they've already dispatched ships to investigate the accident site.*

UNDERWOOD: ...so they'll be coming here soon after. Planetary infestation?

HANAS: *Unlikely. As you said, it's outside their sphere of influence, and the last Borg offensive hasn't left the buggers with enough spare queens.*

UNDERWOOD: Good. The Parudons deserve better than enslavement.

HANAS: *Mmm. The investigation ships will be there in about three days. Find out what that dreadnought was looking for, Commander, and then... make sure the other buggers don't find it.*

UNDERWOOD: How do you mean, ma'am?

HANAS: *I don't need to spell it out for you, Underwood. Westlake Archive, out.*

(Underwood, sighs, rises, and heads back out to the bridge.)

LOCATION: EXCELSIOR BRIDGE

UNDERWOOD: Thank you, Leftenant. Now, what was the other thing on your mind?

SYLVESTE: Sir, we may have a... situation... developing on the surface.

UNDERWOOD: How so?

SYLVESTE: On screen.

(The viewscreen activates.)

REPORTER #6A-02: *Responding to the Mazeki invasion plan, young men are lining up to join the armed services.*

MILITARY RECRUIT: *If the Mazeki are going to try something, they'll have to get through me first! We all have to do our part!*

REPORTER #6A-02: *The invasion plot was discovered by the visiting Federation military advisor, Admiral Yubari, who pointedly warned senior generals against dropping "F-bombs" during any Mazeki confrontation. Her findings were swiftly brought to the attention of the Supreme Commander, General Fetz, who ordered prompt mobilization.*

UNDERWOOD: Admiral Yubari?

FETZ: *While we are still trying to understand the "F-bomb" threat, we thank the Federation for bringing this to our attention. To our Mazeki friends across the border: even at this late hour, the Parcheem nation wants only peace. But, if you follow through with your offensive, you will not catch us asleep. Thank you and may the gods smile on our great nation.*

UNDERWOOD: Superlative...

REPORTER #6A-02: *There seems to be no limit on Federation heroism. In other news, Commander Neeva, a living legend among her Organian people, has caught the imaginations of youth across Parcheem. A former bounty hunter, Neeva was recruited by the Federation for her expertise on fighting the lawless "Klingons." Casting has begun for a movie based on her life, tentatively titled, *From Kling With Love*. Meanwhile, in emulation of rugged frontiersman Alecz Lorhrok, youth counterculture is [quickly assimilating the ideals of the Klingon lifestyle into its fads and fashion.]*

UNDERWOOD: Screen off. I'm going to have to kill them.

SCENE 6A-08**LOCATION: THE ARRAY - COMPUTER CORE ACCESS**

(Adow and J'Naya are working on opposite sides of the cluttered room.)

(Adow works on a device.)

ADOW: That should about do it, boss!

(Data pops up on J'Naya's screen.)

J'NAYA: Yep! The next tranche is coming through now! Nice job, Kinash!

ADOW: You know there's way too much info here. Even if we get it all unlocked...

(Adow does some more gizmoing with thingamajigs.)

J'NAYA: I know, we have nowhere to put it. Search me how the Iconians managed to cram so much data into just a ten-story computer core and still run a broadcasting network on top of it.

ADOW: Ah, I think I've got that part figured. Look.

(More data pops up on J'Naya's screen.)

J'NAYA: Huge data monoliths on the surface?

ADOW: Yep. Buried beneath the space elevator. These morons must know about them, but probably haven't figured out it's where most of the actual processing happens.

J'NAYA: Well, that explains how the Iconians were able to amass so much information. It doesn't help us figure out how to fit that information into the *Excelsior* computer.

ADOW: Couldn't we just take the most valuable data?

J'NAYA: I'm no cartographer, but... look at these equations. This place is like a Rosetta Stone for gateway physics. If the Federation studies this for long enough, forget finding one or two more gateways. We'll have the whole gateway network. Give us twenty years and we might be building our own! (sigh) But that never happens if we can't get this data home. I want every scrap.

ADOW: We'll be here all week!

J'NAYA: We'll stay here all month if we have to.

(A man enters.)

KITELY: Oh, I don't think you're going to be staying anywhere near that long.

J'NAYA: Well, mister, if you have any sugg--(gasp!) gun!

(Kitely cocks the gun.)

KITELY: That's right, alien. Hands behind your head if you want to keep it. You're now a prisoner of the Mazeki Security Bureau. Where's the other one?

J'NAYA: Who?

KITELY: Both sides of the treaty line saw the two of you beam in, outworlder.

J'NAYA: Oh, you mean Kinash? I needed a phase calibrator.

KITELY: So...?

J'NAYA: So she beamed back to the *Excelsior* five minutes ago -- from here, so nobody saw. Kinda wish I'd got the calibrator myself now, if I'm being honest.

KITELY: She won't be beaming here again anytime soon. (he jabs a wrist communicator) Kelsian, room's secured, P.B.C.'ers are neutralized. Bring the jammers up. And then call Parliament. Tell 'em we want to talk to the Chancellor.

SCENE 6A-09**LOCATION: PBC STUDIO**

COPEL: What do you say, then, to voters who think the Federation is rushing us into a trade deal? Is your sensor station that important?

LORHROK: Well, Mister Copel, in a sense, we've been working on this deal for ten years. The only thing that's changed is the Chancellor said "yes." But we know our agreement is not binding under Parcheem law until ratified by a popular vote, and Captain Underwood and I strongly believe you should take all the time you need. We're eager for your friendship, but we know that takes time and trust.

COPEL: Thank you, Commander Lorhrok. That concludes our interview, and the plebiscite is now open for voting. If you support ratification of the trade agreement, dial three-seven-five-six-one. If you oppose, dial three-seven-five-six-two. A five-eighths majority is required for ratification.

LORHROK: You're taking a phone poll?

COPEL: We're conducting the referendum. Again, that's three-seven-five-six-one for yea, five-six-two for nay.

LORHROK: This television show? Is the actual popular vote? I'm sorry if I'm being rude, it's just a very unfamiliar process to me.

COPEL: We're proud to show you the heart of our democracy, Commander.

LORHROK: What if the same caller dials in twice?

COPEL: Well, why shouldn't our most passionate citizens have a little more say in public affairs?
(pause) I'm being told that voting is now concluded. With forty-six million, two hundred eleven thousand, six hundred sixty-one votes in favor, and twenty-one million, one hundred four thousand, two hundred and change against, the Federation trade agreement is formally ratified and effective immediately. Thank you, Commander Alecz Lorhrok, for joining us tonight... and congratulations.

LORHROK: Well, um, wow, thank you, Mister Copel.

COPEL: No, thank you, Commander. Next on *Public Forum*: you'll consider Gint Gessler's renomination to Chairwoman of the Agribusiness Prefecture... right after these messages.

SCENE 6A-10**LOCATION: WHITLOV'S OFFICE - DAY**

(Underwood beams in.)

WHITLOV: Captain Underwood! Have you seen? The Parudon people can't get enough of your crew!

UNDERWOOD: Indeed. That's why I asked to meet with you.

WHITLOV: Oh?

UNDERWOOD: A press conference was one thing, but we're well past that. I'm under very strict orders not to interfere with your society. So I think it would be best to pull my crew out of the spotlight for the remainder of our stay.

WHITLOV: Captain, I'm afraid that won't be possible. Not now.

UNDERWOOD: To allay any ill-feeling over this misunderstanding, I am prepared to renegotiate our trade deal on more favorable terms.

WHITLOV: Oh, Captain, you couldn't hurt my feelings if you tried. That isn't the problem. It's the broadcasters.

UNDERWOOD: I don't follow.

WHITLOV: Well, through the Parcheem Broadcasting Cooperative, they control access to the array, not I. And, right now, your crew is making P.B.C. and its affiliates what I understand to be an exorbitant amount of money.

UNDERWOOD: They won't cooperate with their own chancellor?

WHITLOV: There's a great synergy between the government and the press. They provide me with a direct conduit to The People of our great nation, and their reporting never fails to strengthen this government -- whether their stories are approving or not, though I'm pleased to say the press has found much to approve in my Administration.

UNDERWOOD: And, in exchange, you maintain their monopoly, which ensures their profits, and suffocates competitors in the pram -- competitors that could be more critical of your government. (pause) Where I come from, "synergy" is a dirty word.

WHITLOV: Captain, I fear I've caused a misunderstanding. If you'll allow me to [explain using an analogy...]

UNDERWOOD: There is a time for diplomacy and a time to be plain, Mister Chancellor. The bottom line is, if I pull my people off the media circuit, you'll pull our access to the array?

WHITLOV: Decisions about the array belong entirely to Doctor Valen and the P.B.C.'s-- (A desk phone rings. Whitlov jabs the speakerphone button) Miss Tavistock, I ordered that we not be disturbed.

SECRETARY: Chancellor, you'd better turn on the news.

WHITLOV: Which channel?

SECRETARY: Any channel.

(Whitlov flicks on a wall-mounted futuristic computer monitor with a remote.)

(We hear three gunshots and a scream coming over the screen.)

REPORTER #6A-02: *Gunshots aboard the Broadcasting Array, just before all contact ceased with the control room and security footage cut out. Nothing further is known at this time, but Parcheem military units are mobilizing to the equator to protect -- and, if necessary, seize -- the space elevator. Mazeki units [cannot be far behind.]*

(The phone rings again, and Whitlov swiftly switches off the TV via a remote and answers.)

WHITLOV: Yes?

SECRETARY: Chancellor, the, um... sir, the Array is on line three. They say they're Mazeki, and they say they have a hostage.

(Whitlov presses a button, which beeps, switching the line.)

WHITLOV: This is Chancellor Whitlov. Surrender the array now and we'll go easy on you.

KITELY: *Now, is that really how you want to begin a hostage negotiation?*

WHITLOV: Doctor Valen understands. He knows his duty.

KITELY: *Valen's already dead. I've got someone much more interesting here. Say hi, outworlder.*

J'NAYA: *J'Naya, Lieutenant Commander Kestra! Serial number CX-Five-One-Nine-[Two-Nine-Nine-Two!]*

KITELY: *Oh, shut up. So, as you can see, Whitlov, my hostage is a full diplomatic incident ready to blow. You really wanna tell them you let one of their pigs get captured? Let's start again.*

UNDERWOOD: Let's not. This is Captain Joshua Underwood of the Starship *Excelsior*. If you do not want an armed company of one hundred and seventeen marines beamed directly to your location [you have ten seconds to release my officer.]

KITELY: *Oh, you're there too, Captain E.T.! Perfect! Now I can talk directly to the man running Whitlov's puppet government. Even if you could get through our transporter jammers, outworlder, I doubt you could materialize before I had three bullets in this pig's head. No, you and Whitlov are going to meet my demands, to the letter.*

WHITLOV: (heavy sigh) And what are those demands?

KITELY: *Immediate removal of offworld subhumanoids from this star system. Immediate surrender of the entire array to Mazek--OOF!*

(Kitely is struck in the back of the head with a heavy piece of engineering equipment and crumples to the ground, unconscious).

ADOW: *Heh, I guess those T-Eighty-Eights are good for something after all. You could brain somebody with one of these!*

UNDERWOOD: Ensign Adow?

ADOW: *Yes, yes, the gunman is down. He'll be out for a while. If this blood's anything to go by, Parudon skulls might not be as thick as they look.*

J'NAYA: *J'naya here, sir. Kinash, that was absolutely brilliant. I owe you several drinks and, sir, this man absolutely needs hospital care.*

UNDERWOOD: Can you seal the door?

ADOW: *Tighter than a Ferengi contract.*

UNDERWOOD: Then do so. Chancellor?

WHITLOV: We should be able to break through the Mazeki jammers in short order, Captain. The only thing holding us back was the hostages.

UNDERWOOD: An *Excelsior* marine platoon will beam aboard to assist, and a squad will remain aboard to protect my engineers. We'll treat the hostage-taker aboard the *Excelsior*.

WHITLOV: My security personnel would like him interrogated.

UNDERWOOD: You can have his co-conspirators until we're finished. My people were attacked, I need to know it won't happen again.

J'NAYA: *Sir, we're staying?*

UNDERWOOD: That data is too important to leave, Commander. And we're on a deadline.

J'NAYA: *A deadline?*

UNDERWOOD: We're leaving the system in three days. I'll explain later. Underwood out.

WHITLOV: About your marines...

UNDERWOOD: Surely you agree they should be aboard the array after what just happened.

WHITLOV: I do, Captain, of course, but, remember, it's not up to me. The P.B.C. would be well within its rights to expel your engineers from the array altogether -- and who could blame them, after what's just happened?

UNDERWOOD: Chancellor, we need that data. The repercussions go far beyond this single world. We cannot allow a single cowardly provocation to jeopardize all that we've built together this week.

WHITLOV: Perhaps if you could give the P.B.C. something of value, in exchange for continued access...

UNDERWOOD: ...Very well. I'll remind my officers to strictly adhere to the Prime Directive in all their... (sigh) future media appearances.

WHITLOV: (sincerely) Thank you, Captain. Democracy, for all its gifts, does make diplomacy a little trickier.

UNDERWOOD: The Mazeki -- do they have a democracy?

WHITLOV: In a sense. They think so.

UNDERWOOD: They vote?

WHITLOV: Oh, yes. And, yes, their elections are free, open, and reasonably fair!

UNDERWOOD: Then [aren't they right in thinking it's a democracy?]

WHITLOV: In what sense is it not a democracy? Hm. (pause) Suppose a ruler were elected who had the power to make the voters believe whatever he wanted them to believe. Not just lies, but obvious lies, against their own self-interest. Could someone with that power ever lose an election? Would he function any differently from an absolute dictator?

UNDERWOOD: You're saying the Mazeki State controls its media.

WHITLOV: Nothing so gauche, Captain! When the truth is crushed by an iron boot, the People sense it. Better to choke it off gently, with a velvet glove. (pause) Mazeki journalists and officials go to the same schools, give to the same charities, worship side-by-side. They believe in the regime and, maybe unconsciously, give more scrutiny to stories that harm it. Even if they didn't, their careers depend on access to officials and approval of peers who do. The members of the Mazeki Broadcasting Service are completely free. They enjoy full legal protection and the trust of the population. It's just that every journalist knows that, on certain issues, saying the wrong thing means the end of their career, even if it's true. In the end, no one contests state dogmas like, "The aliens will contaminate our way of life." The conversation never even begins.

UNDERWOOD: The Parcheem used to fear the Federation, too. What changed?

WHITLOV: There was a trickle of truth spoken quietly, in back rooms and written letters -- nothing official. But the trickle became a torrent. I'm conceited enough to think my election burst the dam. Perhaps someday the Mazeki will do the same. (pause) However, Captain, if you'll excuse me now, the Mazeki have just escalated our conflict substantially. If the Parcheem media and I can't find a way to divert public outrage... there could be blood in the streets. Your officers will help save the peace today, Captain. Just not in the way they expected.

SCENE 6A-11**LOCATION: GAME SHOW SET**

(A game show theme plays.)

HOST: Let's move on to the lightning round! In this round, and for all the remaining prizes, our intergalactic guest Yubari Asuka will have to answer three questions correctly. All three questions gets all the prizes! And if she misses even one... you know what that means, she has to...

AUDIENCE: KISS! THE! MUGWUMP!

HOST: Yes indeed! We've taken a mugwump straight from a local farm and asked it to pucker up for our contestant. I guess we could have given it a bath first, but too late now! Asuka, are you ready??

YUBARI: I came on this one because I thought it was called KILL the Mugwump!

(The mugwump stirs in its cage. Scuttering its paws around, snorting. It is clearly not a vicious animal, but, based on its snuffling and huffing sounds, probably not an especially hygienic one. The mugwump's name is Alex Horne.)

HOST: Question Number One! Who was the first man to climb Mount Pullitrupanilo?

YUBARI: Was it... you? This obviously isn't fair.

HOST: It's not supposed to be, Asuka! This audience paid for one thing today: to see how you smooch! Which you'll be doing... right after these messages!

YUBARI: How do I even know which end the mouth is on?!

HOST: Best episode ever!

(A quick stab of static.)

SCENE 6A-12**LOCATION: RELATIONSHIP SHOW SET**

NEEVA: I admit, Monel, you have a point, so let's get back to interspecies dating for a second. I was wrong, what I said before. It doesn't really matter what the species are, because, in the end, we all want the same thing: to marry our best friends.

REPORTER MONEL: But isn't that difficult with someone from a whole different planet, Neeva?

NEEVA: All men are from a different planet, Monel. They can't speak your language, expect you to transform yourself for their convenience, and half of them just want to invade you anyway.

(Murmurs of agreement, laughter from the audience, scattered applause)

REPORTER MONEL: Ain't that the truth, everyone? Ain't that just? With that, Neeva, why don't you answer a few questions from the women in our audience?

NEEVA: Oh, well, I'm not really sure I'm [qualified to...]

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6A-01: Hi, Neeva. My lifemate is so warm and tender, but he wears me out with all his insecurities. Like, he wants me to reassure him ten times a day.

NEEVA: What's he so worried about? Is he dying?

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6A-01: No, he just worries a lot about whether he's in a fulfilling career, whether his friends hate him, whether he loves me as much as he should...

NEEVA: Oh, you can stop there, I know just the type. Your lifemate is a child. You tell him you're sleeping on the couch until he's legal age and see how fast he grows himself up.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6A-0: And then he'll be less needy?

NEEVA: (sigh) No. But it buys me a week or two of peace and quiet.

(Chuckles, scattered applause from the audience.)

REPORTER MONEL: Who's next?

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6A-02: Hi, Neeva. I'm Ora. My betrothed is always too busy to talk about scheduling the marital feast, and I'm just wondering...

(Neeva can't hold back from starting to chuckle)

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6A-02: What?

NEEVA: Oh, you're fine. It's just, you travel clear across the galaxy to meet a brand new species that evolved completely separately from yours and the first question you get is, "Why won't he commit?" Story of what passes for my romantic life.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6A-02: He's committed!

NEEVA: How long have you been trying to have the wedding talk?

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6A-02: ...three years.

(Offended gasps, a few boos from the audience.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6A-02: He loves me, okay?!

NEEVA: He probably thinks he does! Take it from me: I spent years trying to find someone who wanted more than just a pretty girl. When I did, it took me ages to figure out that he didn't love me, either - he loved the feelings he felt when he was around me.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6A-02: What's the difference?

NEEVA: Everything.

REPORTER MONEL: You hear that, Ora? Even the space aliens are telling you to go home and Shut. That. Down.

(Raucous cheering.)

NEEVA: Now, hold on, I didn't [mean she needs to break up this instant.]

(An alien transporter beams Neeva out.)

REPORTER MONEL: Hey, you can't beam out! We still have eighteen minutes left!

SCENE 6A-13**LOCATION: BAFIDI'S COMPOUND - CONTAINMENT CELL**

(Neeva beams in.)

NEEVA: Hey, where am I?

LORHROK: Welcome, Commander.

YUBARI: Looks like the whole away team's here now.

NEEVA: But where is "here"?

LORHROK: An empty cell.

(A stone wall slides back and there is Provost Bafidi with a phalanx of guards.)

BAFIDI: I am Provost Bafidi, leader of the Mazeki State. I assure you we intend no harm.

LORHROK: No harm besides being kidnapped, you mean?

BAFIDI: I urgently needed to speak with you, and I had no other means of doing so.

NEEVA: You could have hailed the *Excelsior* at any time.

BAFIDI: If only that were so. Six days ago, both of our space transmitters were destroyed by Parcheem bombers.

NEEVA: According to our forensic analysis, the border has been heating up for months.

BAFIDI: Not by our doing!

LORHROK: That's what Chancellor Whitlov said.

NEEVA: Forensics couldn't tell who started the escalation. Just that you both played a part.

YUBARI: Either way, our heavily-armed starship is going to rescue us, and it can make your border skirmish look like a teddy bear tea party.

BAFIDI: Oh, I'm well aware of that, Admiral Yubari. If you must punish me, so be it, but, please, spare my soldiers and their families. And please listen.

SCENE 6A-14**LOCATION: SICKBAY**

(Underwood enters, while Maiek is tending to Kitley.)

UNDERWOOD: Doctor Maiek, is our prisoner ready for interrogation yet?

MAIEK: I'm afraid not, Captain. Lieutenant Adow almost killed him.

UNDERWOOD: The Away Team has just vanished. Sensors show they were beamed out by a Mazeki transporter relay. I have questions about the Mazeki that only this man can answer.

MAIEK: I don't think he'll be able to, sir.

UNDERWOOD: It's your job to make sure he can -- and fast.

MAIEK: That's not what I meant, sir. Look at this. His genetic profile. (he picks up a padd from nearby and hands it to Underwood, who starts scrolling through it) Decades ahead of what the Parcheem can sequence. Starfleet procedure doesn't even suggest we run one in a case like this, but the one thing I liked about working for the Tal Shiar was how thorough we were.

UNDERWOOD: I'm not sure what I'm looking at.

MAIEK: The Parudons are the same species, but they've been separated into their hemispheres long enough for genetic drift to leave some distinct markers. We confirmed it with a forensic analysis of pollutants in his hair.

UNDERWOOD: You're saying this man can't answer my questions about the Mazeki...

MAIEK: ...because this man is not Mazeki.

J'NAYA: *J'Naya to Underwood.*

UNDERWOOD: Underwood here, Commander. Can it wait? We have a bit of a situation.

J'NAYA: *I know, I'm watching it on the news.*

UNDERWOOD: Ah, and what is the Parcheem media saying about this latest outrage?

J'NAYA: *We're not watching the Parcheem media. That's why I called.*

UNDERWOOD: You're seeing the Mazeki media? How? They haven't tied us in.

J'NAYA: *Well, we were compressing the relay data into holographic format so we can store it in time, and we were, well... looking for something to watch.*

UNDERWOOD: That doesn't answer my question.

J'NAYA: Well, we saw a show in the database that looked fun [and we hooked in, and--]

ADOW: *Boss or Octopus, Season Sixteen!*

J'NAYA: *I was trying to protect our dignity by not saying it, but okay, and we hooked in, annnnnd, well, we may have merged the Mazeki and Parcheem databases by accident. We have maybe two hours to fix it before the next network sync. But, sir, that's not why I'm calling. I'm patching the Mazeki programs through to the Excelsior. I think you should see them before you talk to Whitlov again.*

UNDERWOOD: Why?

SCENE 6A-15**LOCATION: CHANCELLOR PRESS ROOM**

(There are flashing cameras, etc. as Whitlov takes the podium.)

(These reporter lines are all jumbled together as part of the general scrum.)

REPORTER DOLOKOV: (shouting) Chancellor, comment on the kidnappings?!

REPORTER #6A-02: (shouting) Where were they taken?!

REPORTER #6A-03: (shouting) Chancellor, are we in danger? How did they get through our defenses?!

REPORTER MONEL: (shouting) Can they beam up anyone? Could we be kidnapped right this minute?!

WHITLOV: I have a prepared statement. We have confirmed that our beloved alien guests were spirited away by Mazeki transporters. We did not know the Mazeki could breach our shields. Intelligence is working now to understand how this happened, and I urge you not to panic. The Mazeki will not beam you out of your beds in the middle of the night to a prison camp six thousand miles away. We won't allow it. Our government is still formulating its response to this outrage, but I promise we will announce our actions on planetary address in one hour. For now, let me be clear: we are a peaceful and patient nation, but it is unjust to expect the good Parcheem people to live forever in the shadow of fear. Our national guard cannot function under the strain of constant Mazeki incursions. Nor can we allow Mazeki aggression to create not mere international but *interplanetary* tensions. The Federation must see that Parudon is better than this. If Premier Bafidi hopes to avoid his own destruction, he has one hour to make amends for the actions of his nation. That is all.

(All at once, the reporters start shouting questions again, while photographers snap pictures loudly as Whitlov leaves.)

REPORTER DOLOKOV: (shouting) Chancellor! Are you declaring war?!

REPORTER #6A-02: (shouting) What kind of military buildup is there on the border?!

REPORTER #6A-03: (shouting) How will you prevent more Mazeki kidnappings?!

REPORTER MONEL: (shouting) Will this affect tonight's season premiere of *Wagon Train to the Stars*?!

SCENE 6A-16**LOCATION: EXCELSIOR BRIDGE****(At Red Alert.)****UNDERWOOD: Mister Sylveste, time to optimal firing range?****SYLVESTE: Approaching perigee over the Mazeki detention center in ninety seconds.****UNDERWOOD: Defense capabilities?****SYLVESTE: There's a shield around the complex. But... sir, it's only putting out a few kilohertz. They're no match for the *Excelsior*!****UNDERWOOD: Of course not. The Mazeki are terrified of us! Their news is bad enough, all about how the Parcheem are inviting the end of the world and the death of Parudon culture by inviting us to visit. The old Parudon xenophobia. But the rest of the media is where you really see it.****SYLVESTE: What do you mean?****UNDERWOOD : There's a reality show called *Surviving Excelsior*, where contestants try to get food and water in an apocalyptic wasteland, while occasionally getting attacked by soldiers in Starfleet uniforms. There's a speculative drama about how we kidnap babies by beaming them up to our secret labs every midnight, and the brave scientist-monks trying to find out why. I think that one's called *The Summit*. And we've only been here a few days! Imagine being in that writers' room! But do you know what I don't see on their media?****SYLVESTE: What?**

UNDERWOOD: Any hint that we can be beaten.

SYLVESTE: To them, we're... what, Doctor Chaotica taking over the cosmos?

UNDERWOOD: More or less.

SYLVESTE: But the Mazeki leaders must know better! They've seen us on Parcheem media, even if their people haven't! How many mugwumps do you have to kiss to be the good guys?!

UNDERWOOD: It doesn't matter. The Mazeki narrative needs us to be the Big Bad Wolf; it's easier to blot out the truth than rewrite the narrative. Easier to keep control.

SYLVESTE: But if the Mazeki don't think they can beat us, why did they attack the relay station?

UNDERWOOD: Now, that's interesting: according to Mazeki media... there was no attack on the relay station.

(Alert at Sylveste's console.)

SYLVESTE: Entering optimal firing range.

UNDERWOOD: Lock phasers, stun effects only, minimum power. Just enough to drop that shield with no harm done, eh?

SYLVESTE: Phasers locked.

UNDERWOOD: Fire.

(The *Excelsior* fires one shot.)

SYLVESTE: The Mazeki shields are down.

UNDERWOOD: Splendid. Transporter Room, beam up the Away Team as soon as we're in range.

LORTH: *Aye, sir. Three to beam up.*

UNDERWOOD: And, Chief, I presume my Exec will have a message from Provost Bafidi for me that he will consider quite urgent; he has my permission to beam directly to the bridge.

LORTH: *Understood.*

UNDERWOOD: Bridge out.

SYLVESTE: Wasn't that a little too easy?

UNDERWOOD: Mister Sylveste, hail Chancellor Whitlov. Tell him we've rescued our crew.

(Sylveste tries, but his console denies him.)

SYLVESTE: I... can't get through, sir!

UNDERWOOD: Oh?

SYLVESTE: All subspace communication in Parliament City is jammed at the source.

UNDERWOOD: The "Mazeki invasion," no doubt. And what about Parcheem television broadcasts?

SYLVESTE: All clear, sir.

UNDERWOOD: Curious oversight, don't you think, for a military adversary to cut off a very rare form of communication, only to leave the most important one intact? Tell Engineering to get to work. I'll need to beam someone through that jammer in a few minutes.

SYLVESTE: Aye, sir.

SCENE 6A-17**LOCATION: WHITLOV'S OFFICE - NIGHT**

SECRETARY: Chancellor, you're on all networks in three minutes.

WHITLOV: Thank you. They've figured out the lighting?

SECRETARY: Oh, yes, it looks very dramatic, very serious. Should have a huge impact. Your makeup is perfect. Shall I take you down the hall to the studio?

WHITLOV: Yes, and would you please [call for a glass of water?]

(Whitlov is beamed out! By the *Excelsior!*)

SCENE 6A-18**LOCATION: DARK STUDIO**

(Whitlov is beamed in. Underwood is already there.)

WHITLOV: Wha--where am I? It's so dark!

UNDERWOOD: Chancellor Whitlov, welcome. I apologize for the poor lighting, but you'll find the seats quite comfortable.

WHITLOV: The *Excelsior*! Captain Underwood, I'm addressing half the planet in a minute!

UNDERWOOD: I'm afraid your address will be slightly delayed. I'm sure they can find a rerun to watch while they wait.

WHITLOV: Captain, perhaps you don't understand what a delicate moment this is f[or my world.]

UNDERWOOD: With members of my crew as your poster children, you've gone to the very brink of war. About sixty seconds away, as a matter of fact, if I hadn't beamed you here.

WHITLOV: But your non-interference directive [surely says you can't do that!]

UNDERWOOD: ...demands that I take steps to undo any effects of our interference.

WHITLOV: Then you should be kidnapping Provost Bafidi, for using your arrival as an excuse for open war!

UNDERWOOD: We know about Kitely, Chancellor.

WHITLOV: Who?

UNDERWOOD: This man.

(Underwood presses a button.)

KITELY: (From Scene #6A-08) *That's right, alien. You're now a prisoner of the Mazeki Security Bureau.*

WHITLOV: The Mazeki hostage taker?

UNDERWOOD: Half-right. He's known as Jarem Kately. Here he is again, in a recording made eleven years ago.

(He presses another button.)

(We hear the ambience and jingle from *Kiss the Mugwump* in the background.)

KITELY: *Thank you, I'm so happy to be here.*

HOST: *So, Mister Kately--Jarem--it says here you're an actor.*

KITELY: *Only part-time for now. My day job, I'm a security guard in Parliament City.*

HOST: *Oh? Guarding anything I've heard of?*

KITELY: *If I told you...*

HOST: *...you'd have to kill me. Not if this show kills you first! So I think it's time to...*

AUDIENCE: *KISS! THE! MUGWUMP!*

(The recording ends abruptly.)

UNDERWOOD: Kately isn't Mazeki. He's Parcheem.

WHITLOV: I wonder what the Mazeki paid him to turn against us!

UNDERWOOD: The Mazeki who've had no communications outside their territory for the past week? Are you sure it was the Mazeki?

WHITLOV: Captain, I'm beginning to find this entire line of inquiry highly inappropriate.

UNDERWOOD: There's a time for diplomacy and a time to be plain, Chancellor. You know as well as I do that your people can't spy on the *Excelsior*. And you know I'm bound by the Prime Directive, so I can't just beam down and directly accuse you of anything in public. Your secrets are safe for as long as you keep them.

WHITLOV: Then why bring me here?

UNDERWOOD: I want an explanation. I can't involve the Federation in internal Parudon affairs -- but I don't have to ratify a Federation trade accord with you, either. So choose your next words wisely.

WHITLOV: Oh, cancel the deal, if you want. I just thought you wanted that listening post. The money was never important to me.

UNDERWOOD: Really? Then what was?

WHITLOV: Your people, on the air. (pause) Others have tried to start a war before--on both sides of the equator, mind you--but you aliens were perfect. I spent years counteracting our ancient xenophobia, knowing that, one day, your people would contact us again, and give me everything. An independent third party to validate the reality of our narrative. As generous as you were guileless -- and so very telegenic.

UNDERWOOD: The truth choked off gently, with a velvet glove...

WHITLOV: Bafidi must be kicking himself for not thinking of it first.

UNDERWOOD: My officers spent forty-five minutes talking to Provost Bafidi before we rescued them, and they tell me that he seems to genuinely want peace.

WHITLOV: Then they're fools. Or Bafidi is. Parudon must stand as one to join the interstellar brotherhood. We have the full support of the populace, and the Kitely operation means we already have troops aboard the array. Once we seize telecom for the whole planet, it will be over fast, with minimal casualties.

UNDERWOOD: And you in charge of the whole planet. A planet full of people desperate to maintain security, rather than risk unrest.

WHITLOV: "Stolid must stand the granite of command." Surely you understand that.

UNDERWOOD: I propose a compromise. Share the planet. Share the array. Hear me out: both tribes get to broadcast to the entire planet. The Parcheem get two hours with the whole planet to themselves... then the Mazeki get two hours. Everyone sees both versions of every story. The bubbles pop. It won't be enough anymore for your narratives to feel right; to compete, they'll have to start actually being true. Your culture will start to unite, peacefully. We won't even

have to change how the array works; I'll just order my engineers not to fix one of their mistakes. Meanwhile, your advertisers will instantly get access to double the audience.

WHITLOV: Captain, why would I compromise? It's too late to stop me, even if your Prime Directive let you. The troops are already on their way. Everything is unfolding exactly as I wanted.

(Short pause.)

UNDERWOOD: Splendid, Chancellor, splendid. But, I think, once more, with feeling... and perhaps try facing Camera Two this time.

WHITLOV: What?

UNDERWOOD: Lights, please!

(Someone flips some big, warehouse-caliber power switches and the lights come up.)

WHITLOV: This isn't the *Excelsior*!

UNDERWOOD: No, it's one of your studios. Not exactly *The Monel Show*, but serviceable.

WHITLOV: WHAT?!

UNDERWOOD: You see, Chancellor, you were right: I really couldn't kidnap you right before you gave a planet-wide address. My predecessor got clapped in irons for that sort of thing. So, instead, I simply beamed you to the studio down the corridor from your office. You just gave your address after all. I wonder how it went.

WHITLOV: This is a privileged conversation during a national security crisis! You can't just... televise this!

UNDERWOOD: As a matter of fact, Parcheem law allows either party to consent to eavesdropping. But I suppose we're about to find out how your constituents view the issue. Screen, please?

(Someone turns a big wall-sized TV at the back of the stage on, and we hear only a flicker of familiar static before the channel settles on *Public Forum with Vex Copel.*)

COPEL: *And the resolution for cease-fire with the Mazeki passes, sixty-three percent to thirty-seven. As the military retreat codes are sent out, we'll move on to consider Captain Underwood's compromise proposal as a basis for a new treaty: should the Mazeki and Parcheem share full control of the telecom array, on a time-sharing basis? Dial three-seven-five-six-one for yea, five-six-two for nay. You've all just heard the case in favor. For the case against, we now welcome Brant [Hadley of NightNetNews -- although, Mr. Hadley, given the popularity of the Excelsior crew, I think we both know you have a chilly room to warm.]*

UNDERWOOD: Mute!

(It's muted.)

WHITLOV: You trampled on your own laws! You exposed all the secrets of my government!

UNDERWOOD: No, Chancellor. I'm afraid I just noted a few adjacent facts. I let you do all the actual exposing. And you seem to have made my crew immensely popular, so I suspect Starfleet will end up with that listening post after all. You see, there's a time to be plain... and a time for diplomacy. (pause) Which seems like my cue to exit! Best of luck, Chancellor. (he hits his combadge) Underwood to *Excelsior*. One to beam up.

(He beams up.)

SCENE 6A-19**LOCATION: EXCELSIOR TURBOLIFT**

(Lorhrok is whistling "Melor Famagal,")

(The doors slide open, and there's Neeva.)

NEEVA: Alecz.

(She steps aboard.)

LORHROK: Neeva. Headed to the bridge?

NEEVA: Mm-hmm.

LORHROK: Resume.

(Long pause.)

LORHROK: That was an interesting interview you did on *Monel*.

NEEVA: Oh, you saw that?

(Pause.)

LORHROK: Should we talk about it? (pause) I want to talk about it.

NEEVA: You didn't when I said all that to your face.

LORHROK: More like shouted...

NEEVA: I think we're past words, Lorhrok.

(Beat.)

(The turbolift slows, stops, and opens again. Underwood enters.)

UNDERWOOD: Ah, Commanders! Excellent. Bridge!

(Turbolift resumes.)

(Pause.)

UNDERWOOD: I'm not, uh, interrupting anything, am I?

NEEVA: No, sir!

LORHROK: No, sir!

LOCATION: EXCELSIOR BRIDGE

(All three egress the turbolift to their stations.)

YUBARI: Captain on the bridge!

UNDERWOOD : Lieutenant Commander J'Naya, welcome back! Now, give me the dreadful news: how much of the archive did we actually get before my deadline? Fifteen percent? Twenty? Perhaps... perhaps as much as one-third?

J'NAYA: Eighty-two percent, sir.

UNDERWOOD: Eighty-two percent?! Why, that's going to revolutionize the astrosciences!

J'NAYA: And then I erased the archive, per your orders. Eighty-two percent is in our memory banks. The other eighteen percent is now lost to the galaxy forever.

UNDERWOOD: An unavoidable tragedy, Commander. The Parcheem didn't protest overmuch?

J'NAYA: Oh, no, actually, they were begging us to do it, once I told them that erasing the astrometric data would free enough processing power to open up a new broadcast channel. But I would still really like to know why we destroyed the most important data cache since the last Slaver box.

UNDERWOOD: I believe you've just answered your own question. How about my time-sharing proposal?

J'NAYA: Well, the Mazeki were a little wary, but, after the first shift gave them access to *Kiss The Mugwump*, they seem to have come around. P.B.C. and M.B.S. are still sorting the details, but at least they've pulled up that stupid tape line.

UNDERWOOD: Superlative, Miss J'Naya. Is there anything else?

J'NAYA: Well, one thing, um... we dumped the Scion archive into compressed holographic memory. Until we offload it to a starbase... all holodecks are offline.

UNDERWOOD: I see. Could you put in a signed memo to that effect?

J'NAYA: Er... why's that, sir?

UNDERWOOD: Everyone's going to want your autograph.

(They all chuckle.)

J'NAYA: Oh, sir, one more thing: on the array, we picked up three unidentified alien ships on ultra-long-range sensors, all on course for Parudon. They should be here in a little over a day.

LORHROK: The chance to open diplomatic relations with two civilizations in one week?

UNDERWOOD: Not this week, I'm afraid. Helm, lay in a course for the Dyson Gateway, warp six.

LORHROK: But, sir, how often do we get an opportunity [like this?]

UNDERWOOD: Helm, take us out.

(The ship jumps to warp.)

SCENE 6A-20**LOCATION: THE ARRAY – CONTROL ROOM**

(Empty, except for one set of footsteps. An Iconian evacuation klaxon is quietly going off overhead.)

NARRATOR: *Twelve hours later.*

PSUEDO: I don't see why we have to actually check the bombs. We could just detonate them remotely. If the array vanishes into a black hole, then we set them right.

BRAHMS: And if we set them wrong, the array could crash and destroy a Parudon city... or be salvaged by the Zero. We spent weeks sending that disguised homing signal to the *Excelsior*, making it look like a coincidence, keeping the Zero from getting here first... I refuse to let all that go to waste.

(Brahms crouches down and opens up a panel. Inside, there's a beeping bomb.)

BRAHMS: ...fortunately, we seem to have set them perfectly. For one instant, the bombs will form a micro-singularity and leave no sign this station, or the space elevator, was ever here. All the Zero will find, on a deep scan, are the monoliths -- buried, badly damaged, and filled with old episodes of *Boss or Octopus*. (Brahms stands up and starts working some controls) Psuedo, you're better at reading Old Iconian. Is there anyone in the shaft?

PSUEDO: According to this: empty. That fake reactor overload you set off has scared them away. I just hate to think about all the media they're going to lose. So many video channels! So many social networks!

BRAHMS: Can't be helped. Underwood wiped the database, which was as much as the Prime Directive allowed... but there can't be any evidence of an Iconian nav station in orbit, or the Zero will take a dangerous interest in this world -- and its inhabitants. Besides, Triassa says the Parudons don't really need the orbital station for telecom.

PSUEDO: They don't?

BRAHMS: No, the underground monoliths do most of the actual networking, and they'll just route around the loss of the array. (chuckle) You should have seen Zarem's face when I told Triassa this is what they were using the arr[ay for.]

(He's interrupted by something big and heavy docking with the station.)

PSUEDO: Uh, Isaac, what was that?

BRAHMS: Something... something out there just docked with the station!

PSUEDO: From the planet?

BRAHMS: No, they don't have that technology. It's... I don't know. Small. Like an escape pod? An attack shuttle? We need to get over there.

(He starts running.)

PSEUDO: Where?

BRAHMS: There! The airlock on the near wall.

(The airlock is cycling, pressurizing. Whatever just docked is coming out.)

PSUEDO: Should we be running toward them? What if they're armed?

BRAHMS: Then we'll talk very fast until I come up with something.

PSUEDO: Because that always works so well.

(Brahms reaches the airlock.)

BRAHMS: (catching his breath) You're still alive.

(The airlock slides open.)

(Pause.)

BRAHMS: Hello?

(Pause.)

JANATH: Um... hi? Could... could someone help me out? The chronometer says I've been in stasis for a week, and I think I put myself in wrong, because my legs have completely fallen asleep.

PSUEDO: Could be a trap.

BRAHMS: She asked for help. We help. Come on.

PSUEDO: I'm inside your skull! I don't get a choice!

BRAHMS: (to Janath) I'm coming in!

(Brahms steps into the airlock, passing through it, and into the Zero escape pod.)

JANATH: Thanks! Sorry, first body, still making mistakes with it. Can you tell me what species this ship is based on? From the outside, I didn't recognize-- (gasp) Your highness! I apologize! I meant no disrespect!

BRAHMS: You're Zero. Wearing a... Kinjali host body.

JANATH: Well... yes, your majesty. I am *Tesserarius* Janath, and, like you, I serve the Zero Empire as best I can-- in my own small way.

PSEUDO: Oh boy.

JANATH: Your highness?

PSUEDO: Isaac, there's no point getting chummy, we have to kill her...

JANATH: WHAT?! Your highness--!

BRAHMS: Ignore my other half; he's not yet housebroken. Where did you come from? Who is your liege-lord?

JANATH: I was on *R.C.K. Hymnalion* (*him-NAIL-ee-on*) under my lord King Evoldo. I don't think he got off *Hymnalion*. (sad) I don't think anyone did.

BRAHMS: What do you mean, "got off"? The *Hymnalion* had an cascading engine overload! It had to turn around!

JANATH: King Evoldo thought we could get it under control. He held course.

BRAHMS: He held course?!

PSUEDO: Evoldo was always a fool! I told you, Isaac! I told you I couldn't believe they'd given him a ship! Even with his family connections!

JANATH: I only made it because my job was to verify the escape pods. The implosion was too sudden.

BRAHMS: There were four thousand people on the *Hymnalion*. You're the only one who survived?

PSUEDO: She didn't. We still have to kill her.

BRAHMS: Shut UP, Psuedo!

JANATH: Alright, what are you? I can sense your queen, so I know you're Zero, but you're talking with two voices and I don't see anyone else on this ship. I... Hands up! I'm armed!

(Janath snatches up a tool from her waistband and charges it up.)

BRAHMS: (chuckles) With a coil spanner? Your escape pod homed in on a Scion navigation array. A Zero search group is on its way here now.

JANATH: Alright, then, whoever you are, just leave me here. I won't make any trouble, I'll just get back in my stasis pod until they find me.

BRAHMS: Unfortunately, in five minutes, we are going to reduce this array to Hawking radiation, and we don't have the luxury of leaving witnesses behind. What happened to the *Hymnalion* has to look like an accident.

JANATH: You're saying it wasn't?

BRAHMS: He was supposed to turn around! We had to cover up the *Excelsior's* homing signal, keep him away, make it all look like a sensor ghost. I didn't want anyone to die! (shuddering exhale) (pause) I'm not Zero. I serve the Scions of the Stars.

JANATH: The S-- The Scio--

(She starts whimpering then crying, she drops the coil spanner, which hits the floor and powers down, rolling away.)

BRAHMS: What? What's wrong?

JANATH: It's just... the Scions, you know? They're so beautiful. In all the stories. Terrible, but I always wanted... You're going to kill me, aren't you?

(Silence.)

BRAHMS: No.

PSUEDO: Isaac...

BRAHMS: You can come with us.

JANATH: You'll... you'll take me to see the Scions?

(She stops crying, but is still sniffly.)

BRAHMS: (chuckles) No. That's not our penance. But we can take you off this exploding space station. But first I must ask you a question. Answer truly.

JANATH: Y--yes, your highness.

BRAHMS: My name is Isaac. Why were you really in the escape pods on *Hymnalion*?

JANATH: (sharp intake of breath) I saw it. I saw the plasma flow turning red like the sun, I saw the regulators cracking... and I ran. I just ran.

BRAHMS: So you're a murderer and a coward.

JANATH: Murderer?!

BRAHMS: The body that you wear is not your own. (pause) But you told the truth. There may be hope. So come on. Let me save your life.

END CREDITS

SCENE 6A-21**LOCATION: STARBASE 911 PROMENADE**

(J'Naya and Science Officer Jordyn Elbrun are walking along.)

J'NAYA: ...And, of course, if you run into any trouble setting up your lab, you can borrow Petty Officer Demetropoulos for a few days. We're just happy you're finally coming aboard, Lieutenant Elbrun.

ELBRUN: You're happy? When I saw your sensor specs, I cried. Tears of joy, Commander. Can't wait for tomorrow morning. But it looks like this is my stop.

(He stops in front of a particular storefront.)

J'NAYA: The Happy Landings? Really?

ELBRUN: The face you're making worries me, Commander. This is my first time in Union System?

J'NAYA: Well, then, word of advice: there's two hundred and twelve places to eat on Starbase Nine One One, and two hundred and eleven of them are more fun than a dingy little bar that only sells peanuts and stale *hasperat*.

ELBRUN: (sigh) Really? I promised a friend I'd say hi to a bartender he knows. I think he's trying to set me up. Look -- where are you meeting the darts league?

J'NAYA: Over at the Topside Lounge. Three-story windows, great view of the moons, replicators programmed by an artisan.

ELBRUN: I'll meet you guys there.

(He starts walking toward the Happy Baron's entrance.)

J'NAYA: Good luck!

ELBRUN: Sounds like I'll need it!

LOCATION: THE HAPPY LANDINGS BAR

(The bar is small with only a few people in it.)

(Elbrun ambles up to the bar.)

ELBRUN: (whistles grimly) Commander J'Naya was not wrong about this place. Hey, bartender!

LRAAC: Yep?

ELBRUN: Can I get a Denobulan slipstrike?

(Lraac starts preparing the drink.)

LRAAC: Sure thing, Starfleet. What's the big occasion?

ELBRUN: Shipping out tomorrow to my dream job. Say, are you Solian Grit?

LRAAC: Sorry, Sol's out 'til tomorrow. I'm the substitute. Name's Lraac Ovdan.

EL-rack OV-dan

ELBRUN: Jordyn Elbrun.

LRAAC: Want me to take a message?

ELBRUN: Nah, it's not important, I'll just tell Carver it didn't work out. Two Bolians working the same bar, what are the odds? You mind if I smoke?

(Lraac sets down the completed drink in front of Elbrun as Elbrun flicks open a lighter.)

LRAAC: Yes. Can't you read? No smoking.

ELBRUN: It's synthacco.

LRAAC: Then take it up with Solian, but put it out. What ship?

(Elbrun puts out his cigarette.)

ELBRUN: 'scuse me?

LRAAC: Nobody's dream job is on Union unless your name is Athos Parker, so you're either a bureaucrat or you're heading to one of the starships in drydock. Which one?

ELBRUN: Oh, the *Excelsior*.

LRAAC: Hey, me too! I'm Lio's new assistant in the Delta Lounge. Heading over tomorrow.

ELBRUN: Me too! I'm the new Science Officer. You been on a starship before?

LRAAC: Not too long ago, I was living in a monastery. But I got kicked out, always wanted to see the stars...

ELBRUN: You got fired from being a monk? You kill somebody or something?

LRAAC: I... burned down the cloister. (pause) ...Twice. But, in my defense, the second time was an accident!

(Elbrun rises from the barstool.)

ELBRUN: (chuckling a little) No jury would convict, right?

LRAAC: Hoo, made that mistake before.

ELBRUN: Hey, I've got someone to meet. Thanks for the drink... and I'll see you onboard, Mister Ovdan!

LRAAC: Please, Jordyn, we're shipmates. My friends call me L.