

Star Trek: Lexington Signs Amongst the Ruins

By David Falkayn

"Assume standard orbit, Ms. Bathory." Commodore Robert Wesley ordered as the image of the barren near-waterless world, Eleuthra IV grew larger in the *Lexington's* viewscreen.

"Aye, Sir." Aliz Bathory, the *Lexington's* pixyish Hungarian helmsman acknowledged as she smoothly slipped the *Constitution* class into orbit. "Standard orbit achieved."

"Class L planet..." Lieutenant Commander Talana Zha'Thara reported, her face covered by the scanning visor she was currently hunched over, "...with water mostly confined to the polar regions. Approximate age—eight billion years. Animal and plant life present. No sign of active sentient life. Scratch that..." the Andorian science officer interjected, her antennae twitching as the commodore leaned forward slightly in his seat, "I'm picking up faint power readings near the north polar region apparently coming from deep underground just below what appear to be ruins."

"Interesting..." Wesley drawled, hiding his excitement. "Is protective gear required for a landing party, Ms. Zha'Thara?"

"Hmmm...I'd suggest parkas...it gets pretty cold when the sun goes down in that area—for humans and Vulcans that is," Talana replied, her scanning visor conveniently hiding the smirk on her face, "And it probably wouldn't be a bad idea for the landing party to receive tri-ox injections as the oxygen content is somewhat less than Earth normal."

"All right..." Robert decided as he turned to the burly Russian who served as his first officer, "Commander...you'll lead the landing party."

"Da, Commodore." Alexei Kuznetsov acknowledged in a deep voice, "Lieutenant Commander..." he instructed, addressing Talana, "...you will accompany as will you Mr. Lawford." The Bear further directed, addressing the ship's navigator, "You need more experience planet-side." Speaking once again to the commodore, Alexei requested, "I'd like to have Dr. Vincent on the

landing party as well.”

“All right. Sounds like you’ve picked a good team, Commander.” Wesley declared, “You beam down in one hour.”

Materializing on the planet’s surface, the first thing that struck the landing party was the chill. Tightening the neck of his parka as the wind whistled about them, Dr. Vincent grumbled, “Damn. It’s colder than a witch’s...”

“Ha!” Alexei laughed, “It’s perfect! Just like Irkutsk!”

“It does feel good.” Talana, wearing parka, boots, thick blue shirt and pants in lieu of the standard female mini-dress, grinned as she reveled in the chilly clime.

“It would to you.” Lawford jibed, “You Andorians are used to the cold.”

“Poor pinkskin...” The lovely Andorian teased, only to be abruptly cut off by the burly Russian in command.

“Enough.” The Bear rumbled, “We’re here to do a job, not stand around freezing our asses off. Lieutenant Commander...what are you reading.”

“Right.” A chagrined Talana replied as she took out her tricorder. Her eyes falling on the ruins nearby, she reported back, pointing at a series of tumbled down columns and what looked like they might once have been steps. “I’m picking up faint signals coming from those ruins over there.”

“The same that you picked up on the *Lexington*?” Kuznetsov asked.

Nodding her head, the lovely Andorian answered back, “Yes, Sir. The exact same.”

“Then, that’s where we go.” The burly Russian declared as the cold air condensed around his warm breath, “Let’s move!”

These ruins are OLD! The Andorian science officer thought excitedly to herself as her antennae twitched. Approaching a column, Talana gasped in awe as her

eyes took in the intricately carved patterns around the thick circular base.

"Takes your breath away, doesn't it?"

Smiling as she recognized Dr. Vincent's New England twang, Talana answered back as she began to take readings with her tricorder, "It sure does, Charles." Shaking her head in disbelief, the blue-skinned Andorian exclaimed in a voice filled with awe, "If these readings are correct, then what we're looking at here is over three billion years old!"

"Three billion years?" Lawford gasped in awe. "Life was just beginning on Earth at about that time."

"Kinda humbling, isn't it, Kid?" Charles remarked, "To discover that as far as the universe is concerned, we're nothing but momentary blips. These people lived, built, and died just as the first amino acids were coming together to form the first primitive one-celled animals back on Earth and now they're gone." Shaking his head, the doctor mused, "And one day billions of years from now maybe someone will be poking around a bunch of ruins on Earth going gaga over how old they are..."

"Perhaps." Alexei replied, "Perhaps not. But what I want to know..." the Russian commander asked, shaking his head in disbelief, "Is how? How are these ruins still even standing after all this time? Erosion should have worn them away a long time ago."

"Tell that to them." Talana quipped, her sly humor beginning to return. Her smile fading away, she explained, "This column is not made of any substance known to us. Whatever the material is, it's durable enough to withstand the effects of over five billion years of wind and..." she noted, pointing towards what looked like an ancient dried lake bed, "...water erosion."

"What I want to know..." Lieutenant Lawford interjected as he pointed at the bas relief etchings at the base of the column, "...is what they used to carve those figures?"

"I'd say it would have to be a very powerful cutting beam." Alexei concluded with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Or something even harder than the material that made up the column." Talana demurred as she knelt down next to the base of the column, "Harder and able to keep a sharp edge. Hopefully we'll be able to find a smaller

fragment of the same material that can be brought back to the ship and analyzed.” Closely examining the carved etchings on the bottom, Talana gasped in a soft voice, “Hmmm...that’s interesting...”

“What, Lieutenant Commander?” The Bear asked as he bent down to get a closer look.

“Some of these figures...like this one...” Talana replied, pointing at what appeared to be a representation of something reptilian, “...are also on the database that we got from the anomaly.”

“Do you think the people who built that station might have come from here?” Terrence inquired as he hugged himself in an effort to stay warm as the wind whipped around the landing party.

“Can’t say one way or the other.” The lovely Andorian answered back, “Not without collecting a lot more evidence.” As she moved her hands about the base, Talana felt the faintest of movements. “That’s interesting...” Rotating the base slightly, she frowned as nothing seemed to happen. “Maybe if I rotate it further...” she speculated as she rotated it ninety degrees.

“Still nothing.” Alexei noted dryly as his eyes quickly scanned the surrounding area. “Maybe it was purely decorative?”

“Or it might have served as part of a calendar or dating system?” Lawford offered, “Like what the Mayans on Earth used to do...”

“Possibly...” Talana allowed, “Or it might be just a piece of something bigger,” she averred as she took one more set of readings with her tricorder, “I’d recommend that we move on.”

“Where next?” Terrence asked with a grin, “Hopefully some place with heating.”

“How about over there?” Talana replied, pointing towards another set of ruins about fifty yards to the east. “That structure over there...the one that looks like it might have been a temple or something similar. If we’re lucky, we might find a records cache more or less intact.”

“I cannot see how anything recorded on any known media could survive such a long period of time.” Alexei remarked dubiously.

"The ruins survived..." Talana pointed out, "So did those etchings. Perhaps they found a way to record data that can survive billions of years. Besides..." she shrugged her shoulders, "...what else can we do?"

"We can go back to the ship and hit the coffee mess..." Charles grouched, flashing an ironic grin.

"Since we're here anyway..." Alexei decided, ignoring the doctor's flippant comment, "We might as well check out. Let's go."

The wind seemed to whistle a mournful, funereal tune as the landing party approached the temple ruins. The group ascended the cracked, ancient steps wordlessly, until, upon reaching the summit, they encountered a sight that brought a smile of appreciation to the face of the Andorian science officer. As she saw the dull orange K-class sun Eleuthra hanging in the sky, seemingly supported by one of the columns, she remarked in a quiet voice, "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Da..." Kuznetsov replied in a gruff tone, "It's beautiful. Now—let's get to work."

"Pffft...Alexei, you just don't have a soul." Talana riposted as she activated her tricorder. "That's interesting..." the science officer murmured, "I'm picking up faint energy readings—the same ones that we picked up in orbit." Pointing towards what appeared to be a pedestal in the center of the ruined building, she called out, "It's coming from over there." Approaching the pedestal, Talana noticed even more of the bas-relief sculpted pictographs. Only this time, they weren't merely lining the base. They covered the entirety of the pedestal, their still gilt edges glinting as the dull rays of the rising sun touched them.

"Is it an altar of some sort?" Terrence asked as he joined the Andorian science officer.

"While I don't think we can rule that out..." Talana answered back thoughtfully, "Something tells me that that's not what it is. It's something more..." she remarked, her voice dropping to a whisper as she drew closer, "...much more."

"What is it then?" Commander Kuznetsov asked as he joined his science officer and navigator. "A stand for an idol?"

“Fascinating...” The lovely Andorian whispered, Alexei’s words not even registering on her consciousness as she found herself drawn almost involuntarily to the figures on the pedestal. Her voice taking on a more wistful tone, she remarked, “I wish I knew what those symbols mean...I can’t help but think that they’re saying something important...more than just ‘Look at us! See how great we were’...”

“Perhaps...” Alexei suggested with a grunt, “...you don’t have to translate all of the symbols. Maybe...if we concentrate on deciphering the more obvious pictographs they will give us the information we need?”

“Or at least point the way for us?” Lawford interjected.

“Makes sense to me.” Charles agreed in his New England twang as the wind whistled about the columns. “The people who built this place obviously intended for these columns and the symbols on them to last far beyond their own lifetimes and even the lifetime of their race. Seems logical that they’d make at least some of the symbols easy to decode for whoever came after them.”

“Good point.” Talana agreed as she examined the symbols more closely. After an hour of intense study, the blue-skinned science officer, her antennae twitching in a display of growing frustration, cursed in a loud voice, “Dammit! I feel like I’m this close to cracking it, but I’m missing a piece.” As the others gathered around her, she explained, “You see...this disk here—I’m convinced that that is Eleuthra. The pillar—I’m willing to bet that that is this pedestal here. See how Eleuthra is positioned just over the pedestal...”

“Like it’s resting on it.” Lawford noted.

“Like now.” Charles exclaimed, “See how the rising sun appears to be resting on the pillar? That has to be it.”

“Maybe...” Talana disagreed, shaking her head. “But I think there’s more. Look at this pictograph over here...” she directed, pointing at the symbol immediately beneath the pedestal, that of a circle in the middle of a rectangle, rays radiating outwards, each ray connecting with one of four smaller circles lining each edge of the rectangle.

Standing next to the pedestal, Alexei scanned the entire area with his eyes, turning in place until he had completed a complete circle. His lips turning up into a smirk, he declared triumphantly in his thick Russian accent, “I’ve found

it!" Pointing first to the column from which had just come from, the Bear then pointed to three other similar columns, each located so as to form the corners of a quadrilateral. "Those columns are the outer circles."

"And the pedestal is the inner one." Dr. Vincent interrupted, "But the sun's in the right position—nothing's happening."

"You're forgetting, Charles..." Talana smirked, "The column we left had a rotating base. I'll bet that the columns are just like that one. Also, take another look at the markings. See how there's no shadow being cast?"

"So, we need to align the bases of the other columns with the pedestal." Kuznetsov concluded.

"Exactly. But we need to wait until noon. Until then, we can each take our positions at the different columns and carry out some scans and such." Talana grinned, her antennae twitching in anticipation as she reveled in the cold. Pointing at the column to the southeast she declared, "I'll get this one."

"Right." Alexei confirmed, "Doctor, you take the one to the northeast. Lieutenant, you've got the southwest, and I'll get the last one. Let's get going—we have work to do."

As the sun neared the zenith, Talana flipped open her communicator. "All right, everyone, it's time. Let's see what happens." Closing her communicator, the Andorian science officer knelt down at the base of the column that she had been assigned. Grasping the base with her hands, she rotated it until the ray symbol pointed towards the central pedestal. Standing up, she waved towards Alexei, who waved back at her and then at Lawford and Vincent who waved as well. Opening her communicator again, she advised her fellow explorers as she stepped out of the pathway between her column and the central structure. "People...it might be a good idea to move out of the way—just in case."

Moving out of the way just in time, Terrence noticed the base of his column beginning to glow a warm yellow. Then, just as the sun reached its apex, a yellow beam shot out, striking the pedestal in the middle just as similar beams emitted from the other columns impacted, bathing the pedestal in a warm glow. Hearing a gentle humming sound, the navigator tried to speak into his communicator only to hear static in return. Vainly attempting to adjust the gain as the static grew louder, Lawford, in disgust, finally closed his communicator as the humming grew even louder, matching the increasing

glow being emitted by the beams until, finally, a bright red yellow beam shot out from the pedestal towards the star. The beams now took on an orange color as now the columns were glowing as well until even more beams lanced out from them, these beams connecting the columns with each other until they formed a wall of orange energy surrounding the ruins. Slowly, the wall took on a more solid form of swirling plasma as the glow around the pedestal began to fade until it had disappeared entirely, leaving a silver disc on top of the waist-high structure.

Reaching the central pedestal almost simultaneously, the four Starfleet officers eyed the disc with rapt curiosity. Taking her tricorder, Talana attempted to scan the device, only to shake her head. "Whatever it is..." the lovely Andorian declared, "...it's blocking my tricorder scans. But if I were to hazard a guess..." she remarked as she pointed down at the circular shaped recesses located in the middle of each of the plasma 'walls', "...I'd say it's a key of some sort."

"Recommendations?" Alexei asked in his usual gruff tone.

"Well..." Talana replied, "...I don't think we have much of a choice. If we want to find out what's going on here, we're going to have to use the disc. In any event..." she quipped, her lips turned up in a crooked grin, "...I don't think we're going to be able to get out of here without using it."

"So..." Charles snorted, "...we're damned if we do and damned if we don't."

"That's about the size of it." Talana riposted as she picked up the disc.

"We are wasting time." Commander Kuznetsov rumbled as he nodded his head at Talana. "Go ahead, Lieutenant Commander, use the disc."

"Commodore?" Ensign Jennifer Watley called out from the sciences station, "I'm picking up a massive buildup of energy in the region where our landing party is."

"Raise Commander Kuznetsov." Commodore Wesley immediately ordered.

"Unable to make contact, Sir." The *Lexington's* communications officer, Lieutenant, junior grade Cilla Oudekirk responded. "There's a lot of

interference from the surface.”

“What are you picking up, Ensign Watley?”

“Whatever that energy field is, Sir...” The dark haired science officer responded, “...it’s reflecting all my scans back. I can’t penetrate it.”

Hitting the intercom button on his chair, Robert commanded, “Mr. Mtolo? I want a security detail ready to beam down to the landing party’s coordinates as soon as possible.”

“Aye, Sir.” The Zulu security chief crisply responded. “I have a team ready to go now.”

“Jennifer?” The commodore asked, “Can we beam down there safely?”

“I don’t know, Sir.” The young ensign replied, shaking her head. “Whatever’s doing this is putting out an awful lot of energy. It could disrupt our transporter—we might lose whoever we send down.”

“Very well...” Tapping his intercom again, Wesley, this time speaking to his chief engineer commanded, “Mr. G’arv? I want you to beam down a probe to the landing party coordinates. I want to make perfectly sure that we can transport down there safely before I risk sending down any more people.” Speaking now to his helmswoman, Robert ordered, “Ms. Bathory? Prepare a probe capable of atmospheric operations. If we can’t get down there via transporter, we might be able to do so by shuttlecraft.”

“Aye, Sir.” The Hungarian pilot responded. “Probe launched.”

“Receiving telemetry.” Lieutenant Cilla Oudekirk called out. “Energy readings are off the scale.”

Moments later, Aliz reported in her Magyar accented voice, “Sir? We’ve lost all contact with the probe.”

“Either the electromagnetic interference is too severe...” Jennifer conjectured, “...or the probe broke apart.”

“I’d say it’s the interference, Commodore.” Lieutenant Oudekirk opined. “If the probe had broken apart, the data stream would have indicated that.”

“Perhaps.” Wesley mused, “Perhaps not. We’ll try another probe later. Right now...continue monitoring. Let’s see if there’s a pattern working in all this.

“What about the Commander and the others?” A worried Jennifer asked.

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the Commodore replied in a grim tone, I’m sorry, Aliz. Until either this interference clears up or we find a way to cut through it, I’m afraid that Alexei and the others are on their own.”

“So...” Talana asked as she gazed at the niches in each of the walls. “Which niche and which wall?”

“Reminds me of that old short story...” Dr. Vincent remarked with a worried frown, “The Lady or the Tiger...”

“I remember that one.” Lieutenant Lawford chimed in, “A condemned criminal is sentenced to choose a door to open. Behind one door there’s a beautiful woman. If he chooses that door, he’s freed and he gets the girl. But if he chooses the other door...”

“He gets eaten by the tiger.” Charles concluded with a grimace. “I always hated that story.”

“So...” Talana remarked as she walked towards the north wall and placed the disc in the corresponding niche, “Lady...or Tiger?”

The moment the disc was seated comfortably in its slot, it began to emit a dull blue glow. Then, suddenly, a brilliant blue light lanced out, barely missing the Andorian who had stepped to the side just in time as the beam struck the far wall, bathing it in its light. Slowly, as the four officers trapped in the structure watched with rapt eyes, the wall appeared to shimmer and then turned opaque.

“Bozhe moi! What is this?” Alexei gasped in a low voice as images began to appear on the wall. A pastoral scene dominated by meadows appeared and then faded away to be replaced by a stark, forbidding landscape. That image then faded away to be replaced by a pitch black darkness within which tiny globules of light flitted about. Then, the inside of what appeared to be a large spacecraft that had apparently seen better days—its hull showing the many stress fractures of excessive wear as beings who were apparently human

could be seen applying some sort of plaster to the fractures. More and more images appeared, remained for a few moments, and then were replaced by others—some of the images so strange that they defied description.

Her tricorder running, Talana shook her head. “I don’t know.” She replied in a low voice as what appeared to be a familiar image then appeared. “Wait!” She exclaimed, “That’s Andoria!” Then, her eyes spying a party of blue-skinned males, the science officer gasped, “That’s a hunting party...but what they’re wearing...the weapons they’re using...no...” Just then, what appeared to be a spear thrown at the prey the hunters was stalking emerged from the wall, almost striking an astonished Lieutenant Lawford who dodged at the last minute.

“Damn.” The English navigator swore as he picked himself up off the hard floor. “That almost gutted me.”

“Let me see that.” Talana said as she picked the spear up. Examining the stone point and its seating, the Andorian woman whistled softly.

“What is it, Lieutenant Commander?” The Bear growled as the frozen Andorian landscape gave way to another image—this one with what appeared to be an intact ancient Greek temple with glistening white marble sitting on the top of a hill dominating the country around it.

“Sir...” the science officer reported, her antennae twitching as she spoke, “The stone material of this spear point, its shape and design, and the way it’s bound to the shaft all point towards this being a *Col’ashka* Point...”

“And your point?” The burly Russian interrupted.

“Sir.” Talana took a deep breath and then slowly exhaled, “The *Col’ashka* Point was used approximately by my people approximately five hundred thousand Earth years ago—during our equivalent of your Paleolithic Era.”

“So...” Dr. Vincent speculated, “...what we’re seeing isn’t just a visual display...”

“It’s a gateway.” Talana completed in a hushed tone. “Probably very similar to the one that the *Enterprise* discovered recently.”

“Then we have to be careful.” Alexei declared as yet another image appeared, this one an octopoid appearing entity seated in the middle of a what seemed to be a geometric impossibility of lines and shapes. As a single large eye

focused its attention on the big Russian, the Bear's heart froze for a moment. Then, thankfully, the image faded away as another, more pastoral scene, took its place. Breathing deeply and exhaling, the *Lexington XO* emphasized, "Very careful."

"I wonder though..." Dr. Vincent speculated, "...how would you go about traveling between the different gateways?"

"Hmmm..." Talana pondered the question for several moments, her antennae twitching in such a way as to indicate her deep thought. "Going one way is easy—all you'd have to do is step through the gateway. Getting back though...now that's another matter. My guess is that you'd have to establish a connection with the gateway you came from. Once that's accomplished, then I'd say that you'd need to establish a gateway from the other side with your point of origin..."

"And what about the problem of the gateways cycling?" Alexei inquired.

"I think these glyphs provide the key." Talana responded. "The right sequence will probably lock in a given location..."

"While the wrong combination could shut down the system entirely—or worse." The burly Russian XO completed.

"Correct." Talana tersely replied, but was cut off by a shout from the *Lexington's* navigator.

"Bloody hell!"

"Poor woman." Dr. Vincent lamented as he and his companions saw a humanoid woman running for her life to a line of tall trees in the distance. The reason for her flight became soon apparent as a giant ursinoid, saliva dripping down its mouth, its two long curved canines gleaming in the sun, gave chase, gaining with every bound on its hapless prey.

"She's not going to make it!" Lawford shouted in anguish as he drew his phaser, "We have to do something!"

"Belay that, Lieutenant!" Commander Kuznetsov ordered, adding in a much more somber tone, "There's nothing we can do."

"We can't let her end up as dinner for that creature!" Lawford protested as he

stepped nearer the gateway. "We have to do something!" He exclaimed as the woman tripped, falling to the ground as the monster, roaring in triumph, its fangs bared, lunged towards its prey.

"Lieutenant! No!" Commander Kuznetsov called out in vain as the impulsive navigator, phaser in hand, leaped through the gateway.

"Chyort voz'mi!" Alexei swore as the gateway shifted to another image, this one of a large metropolitan area. "We've lost him."

"Not necessarily." Talana exclaimed, "I've been making recordings of how different glyphs light up as the images change. Assuming the glyphs represent coordinates..."

"Then you should be able to enter in the coordinates for wherever Lawford is." Alexei grunted.

"Right." Talana nodded her head, "Problem is...I haven't figured out yet how to activate these glyphs. They don't seem to be touch operated because whenever I touch one, nothing happens." Shaking her head, Talana grouched, "Frak it. I'm not even going to try to figure out how many permutations there are. Maybe I can find something that resembles an owner's manual here..."

"Keep trying, Lieutenant Commander." The Bear ordered in a low rumble as he turned towards Charles, "And Doctor...be ready...just in case."

Appearing suddenly in the grassy savannah, Terrence wheeled about instantly upon hearing a loud roar only to see the giant predator that had been looming over the female humanoid now turn its attention to him. Its fangs bared, the creature charged the trembling navigator, swiping at him with its paw. As the animal's razor sharp claws tore through Lawford's shirt, drawing red blood with its scratches, the young navigator jumped back, tumbling down to the ground as he did so. Seeing that the ursinoid was about to pounce, Terrence, pointing his phaser at the creature, fired and rolled to the side just as the animal attacked. As the blue phaser beam impacted on its target, the animal cried out once. Stunned, the giant predator collapsed on the ground with a thump that jarred the young man lying on the ground next to it. Inhaling and exhaling in shallow breaths, Terrence turned his head towards as the animal next to him was already beginning to stir. "Damn."

“Dozde! Dozde!”

“Wha...?” A still groggy Terrence groaned as he felt a pair of callused hands tugging at him.

“Dozde! Dozde!”

Tilting his head, Lawford recognized the hands trying to pull him up belonged to the young female he had just rescued. “All right...” he said as he struggled to his feet, “...I’m dozdng.”

“Dozde! Dozde!” The woman repeated, pointing urgently at a tree-lined ridge. “Dozde! Dozde!”

Hearing a snort coming from the giant predator that he had just stunned, Terrence nodded his head, pointing at the ridge line, “Right. I get it now. We go there. Dozde.” He added as he took the woman’s hand.

“Dozde!” The woman answered back as she pulled him towards the ridge line, the pair running together as fast as their feet would carry them, not stopping until they finally reached the safety of the trees just as the creature had awakened and regained its footing.

“Kolzde!” The woman vocalized as she pointed to the top of a particularly stout tree.

“Climb?” Terrence asked as he made a motion of climbing the tree, “Kolzde?”

“Kolzde!” The woman answered back, nodding her head vigorously as the creature began to run towards them. “Kolzde!”

“Ok! Right. Kolzde!” Terrence repeated as he began climbing the tree, offering a hand to the woman. Quickly, the pair clambered up the tree, continuing their upward ascent until they had gained a height the woman apparently considered safe.

“Alltes.” The woman said softly as she tugged gently on Lawford’s arm. Pointing at a stout branch that seemed able to support the pair of them, the woman repeated, “Alltes,” as she began to make a bed out of the branches and leaves.

Remembering his Academy survival training, Terrence repeated, “Alltes,” as

he also began constructing a bed. Settling down in his makeshift bed, Lawford had his real opportunity to look at the woman he had just rescued. About a foot shorter than the Englishman, the woman was lean and wiry and wore a simple leather tunic. Her ratty, matted hair was black. The only thing that Lawford could see that marked her as something other than human was that her nose possessed a long, thin depression down its length. Taking out his emergency rations, Terrence ripped open one of the containers only to have the woman start in alarm. "It's all right." The navigator said in a soothing voice as he took out the high-energy bar. It's food." Putting it in his mouth, he then began to eat, "See?" Taking another bar out from the package, he handed it to the woman. "Here...you eat too." Noting her hesitation, Terrence once again spoke to her in a gentle voice as he took another bite from his rations, "It's good for you. Go ahead."

Taking the proffered morsel in her hands, the woman inspected it for several moments as Lawford continued to eat. Her hunger finally getting the better of her fear, she cautiously put the food into her mouth and bit into it. As she chewed, her lips turned up into a wide smile. "Kozhan!" She grinned as she bit off another piece, "Kozhan!"

"I think you're the first person I've ever met to like emergency rations." Terrence joked, his lips turning up into a smile as well as he repeated, "Kozhan!"

Finishing his ration bar, Terrence watched carefully as the woman, who had also finished eating, drew closer to him. Remaining still so as not to startle her, the young human felt her fingers running at first through his hair, picking out insects that had already found a home there, and then doing the same to his shirt. *Grooming*. He immediately concluded as he recalled sitting in Commander Sullivan's required *Contact Protocols* course dealing with lithic and protolithic cultures.

"Now, this will be a sensitive subject to many of you, but it is something you must be made aware of as there is a probability that you might find yourself in one of these situations and you must know how to respond. Grooming—and sex—often play important social functions in many primitive hunter-gatherer societies. They serve to define social position and cement personal bonds; they also often serve as a means of repayment for services rendered such as food or water or protection. You might come upon a situation where you will find yourself being groomed or being expected to groom an individual—possibly an alpha or tribal leader. There is also a possibility that you will be offered sex or will be expected to offer yourself for sex—again generally with a tribal

dominant—but not always. Remember to keep the Prime Directive in mind here. You are obligated by your oath to avoid any cultural contamination. You're going to have to use your judgment in these situations—weigh the possible consequences of refusal versus those of participating.

Some of these situations will, frankly speaking, challenge you morally and philosophically. Remember, there is always the uncertainty factor and your decisions could bear ramifications that will or will not bear fruit centuries or millennia down the line. It is your responsibility to choose wisely."

"How's it going, 'Lana?" Dr. Vincent asked as he peered over the Andorian science officer's shoulder.

Sighing, Lieutenant Commander Zha'Thara replied, "I think I might be making some headway. See these glyphs?" She asked as she pointed to a series of characters. At first, they were a simple series of mathematical progressions. Then they shifted to analogies. Then, progressively complex equations."

"An intelligence test." Charles noted.

"Right." Talana replied, nodding her head. "But with this set of glyphs here, the nature of the test seems to have changed. Look." She said, pointing to what looked like a humanoid figure standing next to a body of water, "You have this symbol of the man here...and then these four symbols..." she then pointed to what appeared to be a boat, a bridge, the humanoid figure swimming to the other side, and the humanoid staying in place.

"But what's the correct answer?" What's the correct answer?" Charles asked with a wry grin, "All of the answers could be correct."

"Da." Alexei, overhearing his two officers' conversation, interjected, "But one answer is more correct than the others."

"So..." Dr. Vincent persisted, "...how do you determine which answer is the most correct. The boat will get you across the water—but you either have to have a boat or build one—and it'll only work as long as the boat remains there. Once the boat sails away—you're stuck where you're at."

Nodding his head, Alexei continued the doctor's line of thought, "And the bridge, while it will allow repeated crossings, must be built. The man swimming is taking a dangerous risk—what if the current is too strong? What if he tires before reaching the other side? It is the riskiest of the four choices."

"While the last choice is the most cautious." Talana observed, adding sagely, "Maybe that's the point of this exercise. It's not so much to gauge intelligence—although that probably is a component, rather it's to measure the character of the being taking the test. In other words—are you worthy enough to be entrusted with the secret of gate travel?"

"Hmmm..." Commander Kuznetsov stroked his chin. Then, nodding his head slowly, a wide toothy grin filled his face as he exclaimed, "Da...that has to be it!"

"So, Alexei...what is it?" Charles grouched as he ran his fingers through his thinning blond hair.

"Don't you see, Doctor?" The burly Russian responded. "We...are the figure standing before the water!"

"Of course!" Talana smiled as her antennae twitched with excitement. "The boat represents normal travel through space..."

"Da! Da!" Alexei nodded his head vigorously.

"Ok..." Charles remarked, "I can see that. And I'd assume that the bridge represents gateway travel. But what about the other two glyphs? The man swimming and the man standing still? What are they supposed to stand for?"

"I think we're going about this all wrong." Talana conjectured, "We're going on the basis that there is only one correct answer—but that's not necessarily the case. Assuming the first two glyphs represent space travel and gate travel..." the lovely Andorian explained, "...then the next two glyphs could be how you go about the exploration."

"I think I see..." The Bear responded, nodding his head. "The man swimming would represent actual hands-on exploration..."

"While the man on the shore would represent passive observation and exploration." Charles completed, adding, "But both have their place. Some situations call for boots on the ground while other situations are best

approached from a distance. So...the question remains...which glyphs do we activate?"

"The one with the bridge and the man swimming." Talana answered immediately as she reached out to touch the two glyphs, only to be restrained by a big, burly hand grasping her wrist.

"Nyet." Alexei rumbled, shaking his head. "The machine wants to know who we are and what sort of beings are we. It knows who its creators are. The boat and the swimming man are your correct answers."

"Are you sure, Alexei?" Charles asked with a doubting look on his face. "If Talana is right and you're wrong and she pushes the wrong glyphs—we could lose Terrence forever."

"Da." The Bear responded with a slow nod of his head. Releasing his grip on Talana's wrist, the big Russian said in a surprisingly gentle voice, "Do what you think is best, Lieutenant Commander."

"Thanks, Alexei." Talana replied, her face growing a bit bluer as her fingers paused over one glyph and then another, until finally, taking a deep breath, she first pressed the glyph of the boat, then the man on the river bank, then the swimming man, and then last of all, the bridge. As she took her finger off the last glyph, all four symbols glowed pale blue, while the large gem in the middle glowed a brilliant green as it emitted a low hum that grew louder and sharper in intensity until all of the landing party had to cover their ears. As the high-pitched hum reached such a crescendo that Talana her knees, her cry of pain inaudible thanks to the loud whine. A green beam of light then lanced out from the gem, hitting the Andorian science officer square on her forehead, freezing her in place.

"Talana!" Alexei cried out as he vainly tried to free his officer from the beam's snare, only to be pushed back by an invisible barrier. Taking his phaser out, the burly Russian aimed it at the gem only to be stopped by a firm hand on his wrist.

"No, Alexei!" Charles yelled, making his voice heard over the high-pitched din. "That barrier surrounds 'Lana and the gem. You fire that, the only things you're going to hit are going to be us."

As she remained bathed in the green light, fantastic images flooded Talana's

mind. Creatures and buildings beyond description...beyond categorization. Mathematical formulae...scripts in unknown alphabets...sentient and non-sentient races humanoid and not. Beings that were apparently cyborgs with a hive mentality ravaging a distant quadrant...a battle of gods being waged in a different universe...familiar faces in unfamiliar uniforms. A universe where life existed in only two dimensions and another of sixteen. She saw Lawford, in a tree shelter sleeping next to a humanoid woman. A numerical sequence then flashed through the Andorian's mind, searing themselves into her memory as another image branded itself in the Andorian scientist's mind—a brilliant red gem seated on a golden altar. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the green beam vanished.

"Zha'Vala's heart!" Talana exclaimed in a hushed voice as she crumpled to the floor.

Dawn broke with the sound low rumbling sound coming from the floor of the forest. Quickly awakened by the noise, Terrence looked down to see a pair of chubby four legged herbivores munching on some of the tender lower branches and shoots.

"Menesies." The woman said with a smile on her face as she pointed down at the animals. "Menesies."

"Menesies." Lawford repeated. Then, pointing to himself, the English navigator uttered and then repeated his name, "Terrence...Terrence."

"Terrence." The primitive woman repeated as she pointed at Lawford.

"Very good!" Terrence smiled back as he pointed at the woman, "And you..."

Quickly figuring out what the strange man next to her was asking, the woman pointed at herself, saying, "Illa. Illa."

"Well...all right, Illa." Lawford grinned, "Now...we're getting places." Pointing down to the ground, the Englishman pantomimed with his fingers the motion of going down the tree as he spoke slowly, "Can we climb down?"

Once again readily ascertaining the stranger's intentions, Illa nodded her head as she took the lead in climbing down the tree with Terrence following close behind. Ignoring the peacefully grazing furry herbivores, Lawford

pointed to the crest of the ridge, "That way?" Receiving in return a confirming nod for Illa, the blond human grinned, "All right then, let's go!"

As he looked up at the yellow sun high in the sky, Terrence quipped, even though he knew his companion couldn't understand him, "Looks like it's about eleven o'clock. We're making pretty good time." Then, his face broadening in a smile, he pointed first at the sun, making an arc with his arm to mimic the sun's progression through the sky. As he ended with its position at sunset, the English navigator pointed to the top of the ridge, "We should almost make it to the crest by then."

Picking up on the stranger's cues and gestures, Illa nodded her head, saying "Bolza." Then, rubbing her stomach, she said in an almost pleading tone, "Kozhan?"

"Ok." Lawford smiled as he took out another ration bar from his belt and handed it to Illa. "Here. But we're going to have to go easy on these—I've only got a few more left." Looking about, he muttered to himself, "I wonder if there's anything we can use as vines or rope for snares." Turning back to his companion, Terrence pantomimed making and setting up a snare. At first, laughing at his motions, his young companion, finally understanding the human's purpose, nodded her head as she rushed to a nearby tree, ripping off a vine from a low hanging branch. Quickly tying a snare at the end, Illa grinned triumphantly, "Eldal."

"All right!" Terrence grinned back as he took the snare. Then, going to the same tree, he snatched several more vines, "We'll make more of them when we set camp tonight." Laughing as his companion finished her ration bar, Terrence pointed at the crest, "C'mon, Illa, we don't have all day!"

Kneeling down by the side of Talana, Dr. Vincent quickly ran his medical tricorder over the fallen Andorian science officer as he shook his head grimly.

"How is she, Doctor?" Commander Kuznetsov asked, a concerned edge to the Bear's voice.

Her heart and respiration are low...but improving." Charles replied, "But her brain waves...they're..."

“What about her brain waves, Doctor?”

“They’re all over the place.” Dr. Vincent declared in amazement. “They’re spiking and leveling at an astonishing rate.”

“Will she be all right?” A worried Alexei entreated.

“I don’t know.” The balding sandy-haired doctor responded as his medical tricorder continued to oscillate, “I just don’t know.”

“Those snares worked real well.” Lawford grinned as he took out of the fire a small lizard-like creature spitted on a stick. “Caught this little guy...” the English navigator boasted good-naturedly as he handed the skewered reptile to his companion, “...and a couple of his friends.” Taking another skewered lizard out of the fire, Terrence, after waiting for it to cool, bit hungrily into it. “Hmmm...not bad.” He smiled as Illa, also enjoying her meal, smiled back at him. Looking up at the stars, Terrence barely noticed Illa moving in closer to him as he remarked, more to himself than to his companion, “I wonder where home is.” He remarked in a wistful tone. “I can’t recognize any of the stars or constellations.” Shaking his head, the English navigator sighed, “I can’t even be sure whether I’m in my past—or my future—or even if I’m in the same galaxy. There just aren’t any frames of reference for me to go by.” Lying back on the ground as the fire crackled, the English navigator muttered despondently to the woman next to him, “I’m never going to get back home, am I?”

“Ashala.” Illa said softly as her lips gently touched his, “Ashala.”

The two men stood watch over the comatose Talana all night, neither one wanting to—or able to—go to sleep. At regular intervals Dr. Vincent would run his tricorder over the body of his Andorian friend, only to turn his head towards Alexei and shake it glumly as he reported his results, “Her brain waves are still all over the place.”

Taking out a flask from his utility belt, Alexei took a swig before handing the contents to the balding physician, “Genuine Russian vodka.” The burly first officer said, “It’ll take the chill out.”

"Well..." Charles replied with a wan smile, "I guess it'll be ok if it's for medicinal purposes." Taking a nip, the Dr. Vincent coughed hoarsely as he handed the flask back to its owner, "Damn! That stuff's got the kick of a rhino."

"You looked like you needed it." Alexei commented grimly as he slipped the flask back into his belt, "So did I." Looking down at Talana, the big Russian shook his head, "How is she?"

Once again taking out his medical scanner, Dr. Vincent took a deep breath as he ran it over her body, expecting the same results as the all the earlier scans only to break out into a wide grin.

"You're smiling." The Bear remarked as his heart rate picked up, "I take it that means good news."

"Perhaps." The doctor cautiously answered. "Her brainwaves are beginning to stabilize, but at a higher level than normal."

"Higher than normal?" Alexei repeated.

"Yes." Charles nodded his head, "Look...they're stabilizing at twenty-five percent higher than where they should be."

"Could this be dangerous?"

"I don't know." Dr. Vincent demurred, "Maybe. Remember what happened to the Commander Mitchell and Dr. Elizabeth Dehner a while back when the *Enterprise* ran into that magnetic field at the galactic rim."

"Da." The big Russian sighed, "I remember. I knew Commander Mitchell—he was a good man."

"I didn't know either one." Charles confessed, "Although I have read some of Dr. Dehner's work. She was an up and comer—it's too bad what happened to both of them."

"Hopefully..." Alexei said in a soft, almost pleading, voice, "...nothing like that will happen to our snowbird."

Placing a hand on the bigger man's shoulder, the balding doctor flashed a

reassuring smile, "Don't worry, Alexei. Talana's a pretty tough little lady. She'll make it."

Waking up, Terrence glanced at the alien woman lying naked next to him. "Oh hell. I wonder what Commander Sullivan would say about this." The English navigator whispered under his breath as he carefully gathered his clothes and dressed, trying in vain to avoid rousing Illa from her gentle slumber.

"Terrence?" She said as she looked up and smiled at her human protector.

"Morning, Illa." Terrence replied with a nervous grin. "Look...I'm...I'm sorry...I didn't mean..." Seeing that his words weren't registering with the alien woman, Lawford sighed, shaking his head, "Kozhan?" He asked as he handed one of his precious ration bars to her.

"Kozhan." Illa repeated, her smile broadening as she took the bar and began eating.

Waiting until after she had finished, Terrence first pointed to her leather tunic lying on the ground and then at the top of the ridge, "Better get dressed, love. We've got a long way to hike."

Understanding the meaning of her companion's gestures, Illa nodded her head and then slipped her tunic on. Smiling, she pointed at the ridge, "Vazha."

"Vazha, it is!" Terrence grinned, wrapping his arm around the woman's waist. Several hours later, as the pair finally reached their destination, Illa pointed to a cave.

"Vazha!" She cried out in a voice that was a mixture of fear and awe.

"That's Vazha?" Terrence asked as he pointed at the cave entrance.

Nodding her head, Illa repeated, "Vazha."

Cautiously approaching the cave with Illa remaining a step behind, Lawford spotted what appeared to be a dull glow coming from deep within the cave's interior. Pointing inside the cave, Terrence shrugged his shoulders in a gesture that he hoped Illa would recognize.

"Vazha." The alien woman said again, only this time falling to her knees and

prostrating herself.

Sighing dejectedly, Lawford looking down on his companion, helped her back up on to her feet, "I wish I could make you understand me." He spoke softly as he drew his phaser, "Well, love, I'm going in. You stay here until I get back." Gently putting his hands on Illa's shoulders as she approached closer, Terrence smiled at her, shaking his head. "Stay." He repeated, pointing at the ground. "I'll be back."

Slowly nodding her head, Illa whispered in a soft voice as Lawford turned back towards the cave entrance, "Terrence...Mahava."

Looking back at the despondent woman standing alone as he stood at the cave entrance, Terrence's lips turned up in a sad smile, "If Mahava means what I think it means, then Mahava back at you, love."

"Ohhhh..." Her eyes fluttering open, Talana struggled to a sitting position. "I have to..." she uttered in a strained voice as she tried vainly to rise to her feet.

"Take it easy, Talana." Dr. Vincent said softly as he passed his medical scanner over the body of his patient. "You've been through a lot..."

"No time." The rapidly recovering science officer responded as she shrugged off the doctor's ministrations. "We have to move quickly if we're going to get Lawford back."

"What do you mean, Lieutenant Commander?" Alexei asked as he helped the blue-skinned woman to her feet. "Did you figure out how to get Mr. Lawford back?"

"Sort of." Talana replied with a wan smile. "The device..." she explained, "...that beam was some sort of transmission beam. It downloaded that information—and a whole lot more—into me. But we have to hurry—I don't have much time."

"She's right." Charles confirmed, "Her brainwaves are beginning to return to normal. "I'd estimate we only have an hour or so..."

"That sounds about right." Talana declared, "So...we better hurry if we want to

get Terrence back.”

It was slow going for Lawford as he made his way through the cave. At one point, the young navigator had to sidestep along a narrow ledge, pausing occasionally as he jarred loose some rocks. Listening as the rocks fell, a gulp came to Terrence’s throat as he counted the time until they apparently hit bottom. “At least a two hundred meter drop.” The Englishman whispered as he pressed on. Then, as he neared the end of the ledge, Terrence gritted his teeth as his eyes took in the six foot chasm separating him from the relative safety of the other side.

“No way I’m going to be able to get a running start.” Terrence noted morosely as he eyed the narrow, precarious ledge he was on. “Odds are the bloody thing would collapse. Only one way then...” he grimaced as he bent his knees and made ready to jump. “Hope I’ve got one more good standing broad jump in me.” Taking one last breath and exhaling, the young man jumped, barely maintaining his balance as he landed on the other side. “Bloody hell.” Terrence swore as he once again drew his phaser, “That was too damned close.”

Advancing further into the cave, Lawford’s keen eyes immediately noticed that the cave walls were now taking on a smoother appearance. “Something or someone did this.” The navigator remarked to himself as he examined what appeared to be etchings along the side of one of the walls. Taking a closer look, Terrence’s mouth opened in astonishment as he saw that the etchings resembled those he had seen back in the ruins on Eleuthra IV. “Well now.” The Englishman said in a soft voice as his eyes were once again drawn to the blue light. “Maybe I’ve found the way home.” Advancing further, Terrence entered first an antechamber supported by columns exactly like those on frozen Eleuthra. Then, he entered a second room—only this room possessed a console with a glowing yellow gem. The yellow gem blazed brighter and with even greater intensity as he approached until finally the entire chamber was bathed in yellow light.

Reaching the console, Lawford was immediately confronted with a puzzle. Smiling as he quickly realized that the glyphs and shapes represented numerical symbols, the mathematical genius immediately began to work on the puzzle, solving one sequence and then another. Then, as he solved the last sequence, another yellow beam lanced out from the gem, striking the opposite wall, creating what Terrence immediately recognized was a gateway

just like the one that he had leaped through to land here on this unknown world. Shaking his head, the Englishman remarked to himself in a grim tone, "Well...now all I have to do is figure out how to get where I came from. That should take me all of what? A thousand years or so."

As she approached the console station, Talana wordlessly and automatically pressed a series of glyphs. As she did so, the gateway once again appeared. She then touched a few more buttons to reveal what seemed to be the world that Lawford had jumped into. Pressing another glyph, she then called out, "Terrence? Can you hear me?"

His head jerking up as his ears picked up on Talana's voice, Terrence shook his head, "Must be going daft." The Englishman remarked as he once again turned his attention to his console. "Now...which sequence do I try first."

Chuckling as she heard the English navigator's words, Talana raised her voice, "You're not going crazy, Lieutenant. This is Talana and I am talking to you."

"What?" The astonished Englishman exclaimed, "How?"

"Long story." Talana interrupted, "I'll tell you later. Listen. We don't have a lot of time. You have to do exactly what I tell you. The people who built this gateway built it for one way transit. It's not set up for return trips."

"You mean I'm stuck here?" A suddenly dejected Terrence groaned.

"No." Talana quickly responded, "There is a way out—but it's risky and we've got to move fast."

"I'll take it." Lawford declared. Then, remembering Illa, the Englishman quickly asked, "Look...there's someone...the...woman...I helped...I left her back outside the cave mouth. Do I have enough time to..."

"I'm sorry, Terrence." Talana replied, "There just isn't enough time. We've got to move and we've got to move now. I'm already feeling the knowledge slipping from me."

"She's right." Dr. Vincent interjected. "Lieutenant Commander Zha'Thara's brainwaves are returning to normal. We probably won't have another chance

if we don't do this now."

"All right." Terrence sighed dejectedly, "What do I have to do."

"Press the glyphs in the following sequence..." Talana instructed as she rattled off a series of numbers. Pausing after she had finished, the Andorian science officer asked, "Did you get them all."

"Yeah." Terrence replied, thankful for possessing an eidetic memory.

"Good." Talana exclaimed. "You'll have to press them at the exact same time I press mine. Then, once the last glyph is pressed, your gate will open. Once that happens jump at once through the gate. This is important, Terrence—you don't have time to waste. What we're doing here is creating a feedback loop that will destroy both gateways. If you don't make it through, assuming the explosion doesn't kill you, you'll be trapped on the other side for the rest of your life. Got it?"

"Yeah." Lawford responded, "When do we start."

"Now." Talana answered back. "Press the first glyph—now!"

Two different hands on two different worlds separated far apart in both space and time simultaneously operated their respective consoles until at last, Talana announced, "Okay, this is the last glyph. Press it, then, when the gateway opens run through it." Turning to Alexei and Charles, the Andorian science officer warned, "You two better get back, I've got no idea what's going to happen." Taking a deep breath, Talana called out, "Press the last glyph—Now!"

Pressing the last glyph, Terrence's heart raced as the yellow beam brightened, causing a dense cloud to obscure the gateway. Then, the dimensional opening cleared to reveal the ruins and Talana standing at her console. "Run, Terrence! Now!"

"I'm sorry, Illa." Terrence whispered, silently apologizing to the woman he had left behind as he rushed through the gateway, passing through it moments before the yellow gem on the console he was using shattered into thousands of fragments. Passing through the gateway, Terrence appeared back at the ruins only to hear Talana's frantic shout as she dived for the floor.

"Duck and cover!"

Immediately hitting the floor, Terrence curled up into a ball as the blue gem on Talana's console also shattered, raining down thousands of fragments on everything and everyone in the area. Rising to his feet first, Dr. Vincent rushed first to Talana. "You'll be all right." The balding physician declared as he pressed his hypospray against the Andorian science officer's neck. "You've got some lacerations and bleeding..." he remarked as blue blood flowed from the woman's exposed arms, legs, and face, "...but it's nothing a bit of dermal regeneration can't take care of." Making his way to Lieutenant Lawford, Charles repeated his earlier ministrations with Talana, "Same thing for you, young man. Your injuries will heal after a few days. But..." the New England doctor warned with a wink as he jerked his head towards the big Russian currently struggling to his feet, "It'll take a lot longer for you to recover from that giant ass-chewing you're going to be getting from the Bear for that fool stunt you pulled."

"S all right, mate." Terrence grinned as memories of his experiences with Illa rushed through his mind, "It was worth it and I'd do it all again."

Rising to his feet, Commander Kuznetsov began moving towards his errant lieutenant only to hear his communicator beep. Flipping open the communicator, the big Russian responded, "Da."

"Commander Kuznetsov?" Cilla Oudekirk's Dutch voice came through the communicator's speaker. "The Commodore wants to know your status, sir?"

"Landing party is all right. Lieutenant Commander Zha'Thara and Lieutenant Lawford have suffered apparently minor injuries."

Sitting on his high-backed center seat, a slight grin of relief crossed Commodore Wesley's face as he spoke, "Good to hear your voice again Alexei. I can't wait to hear your report. Prepare for beam up."

"Da, Commodore. It will be good to get back home." As the landing party disappeared in four golden glitters, the wind once again rushed through the ruins of Eleuthra IV leaving it—and its ghosts and secrets—alone again.

"Fascinating!" Commodore Wesley exclaimed as he listened to the landing party's report. "And you say that these gateways lead not just to other worlds and times, but also different universes?"

"And different dimensions." Talana interjected as she lay in her bed in sickbay.

"And your experience..." Wesley inquired in a voice filled with concern.

"I feel all right." Talana replied. "Occasionally, a few brief images come and go in my mind—but nothing I can really grab on to." She ruefully reported.

"Her brainwaves have stabilized at one tenth above normal." Dr. Vincent announced in a slightly worried tone. "I think the situation is permanent."

"Any lasting effects?" The Commodore asked.

"I'm not sure." Charles responded honestly. "All we can do is just keep an eye on the situation."

"I hope that doesn't mean you're going to be monitoring me everywhere I go." An exasperated Talana grumbled.

"No." Charles grinned back, "Nothing like that. But I would like to schedule regular checkups for a while—just to be safe."

"I guess I can live with that." Talana riposted, managing a shaky grin.

"Good." Wesley smiled back as he turned his attention to Lieutenant Lawford lying in the bed next to the Andorian science officer. His smile vanishing, the rugged commodore cleared his throat, "And as for you, young man..."

"Yes, sir." The Englishman replied with a subdued voice. "I realize my actions were reckless..."

"Yes, they were. They were hasty, foolish, and you could easily have gotten yourself and maybe even the rest of the landing party stranded or killed." Wesley interrupted, "However, I can understand why you did it. To be honest, if I were in your situation, I probably would have done the same thing. But..." he added in a cautionary tone, "...that doesn't let you off the hook. I'm sure Commander Kuznetsov will have some choice words for you. But..." he said as he placed a firm, yet gentle hand on the Englishman's shoulder, "...they'll wait 'til after you report back on duty."

"Aye, sir." A now morose Terrence Lawford acknowledged, not looking forward to his eventual conversation with the Bear.

"Well...I'll leave you now." The Commodore concluded as he turned to walk away, "Get better soon—we need both of you at your stations."

"Don't worry, son..." Charles said to Terrence in a soft voice as the sickbay door slid shut behind the Commodore, "I'm sure she's all right—after all, it is her world, she knows how to get by."

"Yeah, Terrence." Talana added supportively, "I'm sure she's just fine."

"Yeah." Terrence replied softly in a yearning voice, "I'm sure she is."

One year later

Smiling as she saw the smoke from the village fires, Illa looked down at the young infant boy cradled in her arms, looked up into the night sky and then looked down again, "Terrence." She smiled.

The End