



Episode 5 “The World Is The Universe And The Universe Is The World”

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Space the final frontier, these are the continuing missions of the Starship Eagle, our goal is to advance federation knowledge and explore the unknown regions of space, we are the federations first lines in exploration and defense, The Year is 2290 and these are the adventures of the USS Eagle.

=\=Chapter 1=\=

"If we stay on schedule we should be within communications range of the Federation in fifty days." Torrell said. "I have it computed in hours and minutes if you want the figure Captain."

"Add it to the log. It'll be interesting when we file the mission report to see how close we come to that prediction." Carter answered.

"The estimate is travel time without interruption of course."

"Of course."

Things were quiet for a few minutes. Then...

"Sir. Something unusual on the sensors. I've never seen readings like this."

"I believe we have an interruption." Carter said.

"I'll develop new figures when we're back on course at speed." Torrell said without smiling.

"Adjust course, drop to impulse. Let's check it out."

"Aye sir."

The USS EAGLE slowed to impulse and began a turn toward the object the sensors had picked up.

"I've checked the records of our outbound trip. The object was at the very edge of sensor range. At the time, it was dismissed as an anomaly. But it is obviously a real object." Mohammad said from the science station.

"OK, but what is it?"

"Acquiring further data sir."

"Object in visual range, magnification, only factor six sir. It's huge."

The screen showed something that seemed to be daring their eyes to believe the sight.

"Hold position here." Carter said to Torrell as the enormity of what they were seeing began to register.

"Its five, six... seven planets, or one..."

"The outer atmospheres are in direct contact... There is gas exchange between the planets. Under other circumstances I would say that was impossible." Nebrell said.

Captain Carter blinked away his amazement and turned to his Science Officer. "Report."

Mohammad was at a loss. "This phenomenon is, unprecedented, Sir. There is nothing in the database in any way resembling it."

"Could it be natural?"

"No sir. There is a gravity negating field being artificially generated from the center planet."

Torrell added some more to the mystery. "The, planets, aren't orbiting a star sir. They are rogues."

Riley Berry had some of his own. "I'm picking up transmissions sir. But it seems to be coded or scrambled or something. Working on it."

"OK people... everybody get your data together, bring in all your department's people. Full briefing in..." He looked back at the screen. "Let me know when you have more answers than questions."

"If we circumnavigated it we could get more complete observations." Mohammad suggested.

"Agreed. Helm, take us once around, then hold station here when complete. Maintain current distance."

"Working on it. Object is moving... Relative velocity 108,000 KpH." Nebrell said from the navigator's position.

"Relative to what?"

"The rest of the galaxy sir. The planets are moving counter to the rotation of the Milky Way."

"OK. Set course, engage when ready, one third impulse, relative to... them."

"Locked in."

"Engaging." Torrell said.

The EAGLE turned in space and began a long slow orbit of the objects. The scientists on board working frantically to answer questions that hadn't even been asked yet.

Three hours later they had completed their trip and were now holding a position to one side of the planets' as they continued on their long slow journey.

Carter called his department heads into the briefing room with open channels to various other departments and labs throughout the ship.

Now they were all looking at him to start the session.

"Let's begin at the beginning. Is it what it actually appears to be? Seven planets held together artificially and traveling through our galaxy on their own power."

"Short answer?" Mohammad asked. Carter nodded. "Yes sir. They appear to be exactly that."

"Agreed?" The captain looked to the others. Most of them agreed. "Now. Long answers. Who did it? Where did it come from..."

"I've been working on the transmissions from the... what do we call it?"

"We've been using the term 'multiplanet'." Mohammad said.

"That works."

"The transmissions from the multiplanet." Berry stopped for a second and keyed up something for the viewscreen. It changed into a slightly wavering image of several humanoid beings standing on some sort of platform staring at them. "They're hailing us; but I have no idea how to respond. We can't unscramble the audio, and this is the best I can get on the visual side. It's on a really unusual high frequency microwave band that's being distorted by the multiplanet's gravity canceling field."

"If we got closer could we clear it up?"

"Possibly."

The figures on the screen then brought the discussion to a stop by seeming to react to the discussion. Then the image wavered some more. Then the one in the center of the picture was suddenly standing in the room with them.

It was slightly taller than an average human with an athletic build under an outfit of a dark flaring jacket with thin silver metallic trim and dark trousers with no visible seams or features. It looked around the room slowly then cocked its head to one side and sort of nodded.

"Nobody move. Mister Maxwell, at ease." Carter said. Then he looked at the being. "Welcome to the USS EAGLE from the United Federation of Planets. I'm Captain Austin Carter."

The being stood there. Then it cocked its head and nodded.

"Anybody getting anything? Telepathy? Anything?"

"No sir."

The figure looked back at Carter and the corners of its eyes turned up slightly. It spread its hands in a welcoming gesture, nodded again. And vanished. No transporter shimmer, no flash of light, first it was there, then it wasn't.

"Well. I guess they've made first contact." Carter said as the shock wore off.

The EAGLE crew kept studying and researching the multiworld.

Three of the planets were class M including the center planet. One of the was a class L with a planetwide rain forest. The planet at the 'bottom' of the group was a fiery Class A world of active volcanoes with smoke and toxic gasses in the atmosphere. The remaining two worlds apparently had been partially terraformed to be what they were now, one was covered with a shallow ocean, the other, at the 'top' of the group, was basically a Class N, resembling a slightly larger version of Venus more than anything else. With all six of the planets that surrounded the slightly larger center world at equidistant right angles to each other.

"It's a nice arrangement." Berry said as they appraised the planets.

"Self contained solar system." O'Dell surmised. "Minus the sun."

"What's their source of energy? How come their not frozen solid out here like this?"

"Geothermal. They've harnessed the Class A world to produce energy."

Mohammad answered. "How they are transferring the energy in a usable form is unknown. I can't find a mechanism for it. There's no energy conduits, no apparatus on the surface of the Class A to harvest the energy. In short we don't know how they're doing it. They just are."

"Four of the planets are showing humanoid life signs, but nowhere near the concentration you'd expect. I'm estimating no more than a billion total population between all the worlds." T'Meir paused for a second. "It would appear that that's all they've ever had although these planets could support several times the current population with no problem."

"Maybe they don't want to get overcrowded or stretch their resources too much."

Carter shook his head. "All we're doing out here is raising more questions." He looked up at the image of the multiplanet. "They've made contact. Let's return the visit."

Torrell raised another issue. "There's no way we can go into anything like a standard orbit around the planets."

"The conflicting gravitational fields, and their counter field..." O'Dell shook his head. "If we got caught in one of their boundary regions, it could pull us apart."

"Understood. Get us in as close as you can." Carter looked around the table and put his hands on the table. "Is there anythi....."

Their visitor was back. Standing in the corner next to the door. It cocked its head and began to nod.

Carter felt the ship lurch slightly, then vibrate.

Maxwell jumped to his feet and shouted something just as the alarm claxon began to announce red alert.

The being raised its hands calmly and nodded slowly while it blinked its eyes. Then it looked out the windows along the side of the room.

They were in orbit around the center planet with two of the others dominating the rest of their field of vision.

"OK. Once again. Nobody move." Carter said waving for Maxwell to relax. "You've brought us into a safe orbit of the center planet." He said to the being. It cocked its head and slowly nodded. "And you wish us to come visit you on the planet."

The being raised its hands again. Then it vanished.

"They're not a real chatty bunch are they?" O'Dell commented.

From their position they were able get detailed scans of surface features and even see some of the activities carried out by the residents of the planets.

"There's no doubt sir. They are moving as freely between the worlds as our visitor moved to and from our ship." Maxwell said. "And I don't have even a good guess as to how. There's no recognizable technology anywhere on the planets. No transporters, weapons... I don't even see an open flame."

"No electronics or machinery." Mohammad added. "They don't even appear to be engaging in active organized farming."

"So where do we beam down to? Is there any sign of a major settlement or centralized authority?"

"No sir."

Carter looked at the screen showing part of the coastline of the center world.

"Well. If you want us to come see you, you have to give me some idea of where you are."

Almost on cue the being that had appeared twice in the briefing room reappeared on the bridge to one side of the viewscreen. It stood there and nodded slowly to them, then vanished.

"I see it on the surface. It appeared right where we were scanning." Mohammad said. "There's no doubt it's the same individual."

"Lock onto those coordinates. Standard away team." Carter looked at Maxwell.

The being was back. Carter looked at it. "Something wrong?"

"I think it has another idea for the away team sir." Ensign Allen said.

The being cocked its head and looked around the bridge. It nodded to several of the crew.

"Well. OK." Carter said to it.

It nodded one more time, then vanished.

In a minute there was a frantic call from Sickbay. "Captain. We just had your visitor down here." Doctor Kavanagh said.

"Tall, rather thin, didn't say anything. Wearing a jacket with silver highlights."

"That's the one."

"Who did it pick out?"

"Doctor T'Mier." She answered. "It stood in front of her and nodded with its hands out."

"That's it. Have her report to the transporter room for away team duty. Standard package."

"She's on her way sir. Sickbay out."

"Sir, I have to state that having the entire senior staff on an away mission under these sorts of uncontrollable circumstances is not acceptable to security."

Carter paused. "Understood. Commander Torrell. Mister O'Dell. Stay behind and monitor the situation. The rest of you, with me."

"Sir!"

The being was back. Standing near Maxwell's station only a meter or so from the security officer. But now its head was cocked down and to the other side. It was obviously displeased.

"So... They should come with us anyway." Maxwell said to it.

It raised its head back up and to the other side. Its eyes turned up slightly. It nodded.

"OK. You're coming." Carter said to the first officer and the engineer.

The visitor vanished.

Maxwell shook his head and almost laughed. "Objection withdrawn sir. Obviously if they meant us any harm there would be little we could do about it."

"So noted. Transporter room in five minutes."

It was a large group that assembled in the transporter room for the trip to the surface. Besides the nine people selected by their 'friend' there were two security guards, a medical assistant, an astrophysicist and an ensign from the anthropology section at the request of Lieutenant Mohammad.

They were to beam down in three separate parties.

Captain Carter, Lieutenant Commander Maxwell with the two guards, and Mohammad got on the platform and prepared to beam down.

"Energize." The captain ordered.

Then as they dematerialized he noticed the rest of the team beginning to shimmer as well.

Except when they materialized on the planet the guards and the other additions to the party were not with them.

"Commander Maxwell." The communicators said.

"Maxwell here. Situation under control. Report."

"What happened sir?"

"Evidently our friends only wanted the ones they picked coming to visit. Stand by."

Carter looked around. The being that had been on the ship was standing off to one side with several others. Now they could see that there were some slight differences

between them, as one human is different from another, as well as the same sorts of similarities. Only the one that had been to the ship was wearing the jacket with the trimmings. The others were similarly dressed in sedate colors with only slight variations in styling.

The one in the silver trimmed jacket spread its hands to them and nodded again. Carter and some of the others returned the gesture.

"Nice place." O'Dell commented as he looked around. The sky was dominated by parts of the three planets on this side of their world. The sea they had seen from orbit stretched out to the horizon behind the landing party. A large forest dominated the area behind the group of beings. A slight breeze was blowing across the beach carrying the scent of dense foliage and dew with it. The beach wasn't daylight bright, instead the sky seemed to be in a perpetual state of twilight. Where the light was coming from since there was no star in the vicinity to provide it was another mystery they would have to address.

The lead being once again nodded to them, this time with its left hand over its stomach.

Captain Carter was unsure of the next step. "Where do you live?"

The beings stood still for a moment, then another one stepped forward and indicated they were to follow it with a very slow sweeping gesture.

"Sir?"

"OK, let's split up. Mohammad, take a small group with our new friend and see what's there is to see. The rest of you, we'll think of something."

"Do you think that's wise sir?" Torrell asked.

"I don't think we're going to get any answers standing on the beach nodding to each other."

"Very good sir." She volunteered to go with Mohammad's group.

As the others followed the being with its slow gliding walk Carter wondered if perhaps he was being a little too trusting of these strange quiet beings. He looked at the aliens with a new suspicion then he turned back to watch the party walk into the forest when the group vanished at the edge of the trees.

"What happened? Where'd they go?" Carter asked almost too loudly and with an almost violent gesture.

The being in the trimmed jacket seemed taken aback by the outburst. It raised its hands in front of it and suddenly Carter was with Mohammad's group.

"Captain?" She said surprised at both their own transit and his subsequent appearance.

"Maxwell to Captain Carter." The captain's communicator said.

"I'm here. So are they. I... I'll... It's ok." He said.

The being that led the group simply stood there with two or three others of its kind and nodded.

He looked at Mohammad. "Just checking on you." He said with a bit of a sheepish grin. "Thank you. I'll relax now."

It raised its hands and Carter was back at the edge of the forest where the group had vanished.

Carter took a deep breath. "They have their way of moving around here don't they?"

"Yessir."

Mohammad took out her tricorder and began an examination of the small buildings gathered around a small clearing.

Doctor T'Mier was doing some examining of her own. She had tried to scan the being that had appeared in the Sickbay, but it was in and out too quickly for that. The ones at the landing site were too far away. But now she was standing right next to one of them. She scanned it from head to toe, to a rather amused look from the being. Her results gave her some pause, then she saved them and moved to the next being.

"This is a most fascinating structure." Mohammad said. She was scanning the doorway of what could only be described as a hut from ground to roof. "It is living plants." She said to Torrell.

Berry was still searching for anything electronic. "I'm picking up very low level emissions. I'm not sure what it is." He changed his settings and walked away from the group trying to isolate the readings.

Captain Carter's party was walking along the beach. The beings still in their small group watched from where they had been standing since the EAGLE team had beamed down.

"EAGLE to Captain Carter. Come in please." Their communicators announced. In the background they could hear a beeping alarm.

"Carter here. Report."

"Lieutenant Stewart sir. Sir. We've had multiple intruders appear throughout the ship. They appear, look around, then vanish. They're those people from the planet sir. Like before."

"Understood Lieutenant. We'll see if we can stop them from down here. But unless they interfere with ship operations, let them look around and go. Schedule a check in every two hours if the situation doesn't change."

"Yes sir. But they startle people when they just appear from nowhere."

"I've seen it myself. It can be upsetting. If somebody has a tricorder handy when they appear get a good scan in. Otherwise, don't interact with them. We're not sure what we're dealing with yet. This is a first contact situation."

"Understood sir. I'll pass the word."

"Landing party out."

"It is what it appears to be." O'Dell said. "Seawater. A little high in nitrogen, but otherwise, nothing special." He changed a setting on the instrument he was holding. "Fish, some bacteria, I'm not sure what that would be... maybe a jellyfish." He handed the tricorder to Nebrell.

"It's a group of jellyfish." The Vulcan said. "And they would appear to possess mild stinging cells."

"I won't go swimming." The engineer said.

Maxwell was still uneasy. "There's still nothing." He was holding a large multicorder, deeply scanning for weapons, energy outputs, explosives, almost anything. "How do they do what they do?"

"Magic?" Carter said. Maxwell looked at him with an un-amused expression. "Then you explain it." The captain said to him.

They were nearing where the forest met the beach. But O'Dell and Nebrell were still intent on the readings they were getting on the animals in the ocean.

"Chief!" Maxwell called out.

It was too late. The two officers vanished.

"Well?" Maxwell said to the captain.

"Let's follow them." He answered and took a couple of steps that way followed by the others.

Back on the beach the being with the silver trim on its jacket's eyes were turning up. It nodded to the others around it.

"OK. Where are we?"

"Someplace dark."

"Thanks O'Dell."

Then slowly their eyes adjusted to the lower light level. They were evidently underground.

"It appears to be a natural cave."

Captain Carter looked around. "Where's the light coming from?"

"I can't say sir. It appears to be coming from all around." Nebrell said. "But I can't discern a source."

Now they were more accustomed to the dark and they began to do some more exploration.

There were footprints on the soft sandy soil that led away from where they were, so they followed.

After a short distance they could hear falling water, then the passage they were in emerged into a large chamber. A small waterfall splashed over some rocks into a long narrow pool with a large numbers of tiny silvery fish swimming back and forth in it. Again the chamber was dimly lit from unseen sources. The footprints went through the water and emerged on the other side to continue into another passage.

"Sir." Nebrell said.

Three of the tall slender aliens were watching from a ledge above the pool. They were wearing similar clothing to the ones on the surface. Two of them extended their hands and nodded slightly. The other one bent a little at the waist and bowed.

"Hi guys." O'Dell said to them.

They didn't answer.

"Well. If we go on, we get wet." Carter said.

"How about that way." Maxwell said pointing to another opening on this side of the water, a couple of sets of footprints came out of the water and went that way. Now they could see that the tracks had all been made by the same type of soft narrow moccasin type footwear the aliens had on.

Carter shrugged. The vote seemed to be to avoid the water. Carter indicated that since it was Maxwell's idea, he could lead. The security man nodded to the aliens and stepped around an outcropping of rock then toward the tunnel then.

"Whoa. I wish they'd warn you about those." O'Dell said as he blinked at the sky.

Now they were on the edge of a clearing. Off to one side they could see a low range of mountains.

"That's a different planet than earlier, sir." Nebrell said looking up.

"The water world." Carter said. "That was on the other side from where we beamed down."

"This planet doesn't rotate. We've had to have traveled thousands of kilometers."

Carter shook his head. "We're collecting questions a lot faster than answers."

"Torrell to Captain Carter."

He touched his communicator. "Carter here."

"We've been trying to reach you for some time sir. Is everything OK?"

"Status normal." Carter said. "We've been... underground."

"We've got someone that would like to meet you sir."

Carter looked at the others. "Oh?" He said to the communicator.

Berry answered. "One of... 'our friends' speaks English better than Mr. O'Dell. I met... it... after I wandered through a teleportal."

"I can't wait to hear the story Mister Berry."

"We'll meet you at the beamdown beach."

"On our way." Carter said. Then he spoke to the others. "Do we go back the way we came?"

"That would appear to be the safest option. Since we don't know where these portals are or where another one might lead." Nebrell said.

They looked around. There was no indication of a portal anywhere around.

"Stay together and follow me." Carter said. He took a step toward where he thought they had emerged from the portal to the cave.

"That wasn't it." Carter said.

They were on a mountain ridge. A well worn path led down to a valley below and along the ridge behind them.

"We're not even on the same planet." Maxwell said pointing up. "That's the center world."

"Extraordinary." Nebrell said softly.

"OK, back through there." Carter said indicating the bend in the path where they had emerged.

They were back in the glade.

"There." O'Dell said. "We missed it by half a meter."

There was a place where the grass had been mashed by several hard booted feet.

It led to the cave.

They walked back the way they had come down to the small lake. The three aliens on the ledge were gone now. As they climbed the passage they recognized some of the features in the rock as being near the portal. Without warning they were back at the beach.

"Talk about transporter lag." O'Dell chuckled.

Mohammad and the others were waiting on them.

"What took you so long?" Berry asked.

"We took a slight detour... To another planet."

"Be careful of doing that. Some of them lead to FeriUsis." The being next to Berry said.

"You can talk."

"We all can. Some of us chose not to. I learned your language and love to talk." It said.

"What's your name?"

Berry interrupted. "Sir. That's a long story. They don't... anyway... I've taken to calling ... it... Jim."

"Jim?" Carter said. "OK. What's FeriUs?"

"FeriUsis. You'd call it the Class A world. The atmosphere there is nearly toxic, even to us. Only our Terpias go there. To see to the FireLife's needs."

Carter blinked. "I see." He glanced at Mohammad.

"I've been recording everything sir."

"Fire life?"

"Yes Captain." Jim said. Its expressions were lively and it looked around while it spoke. It was far from the reserved and almost cool expression of the other locals. "We have FireLife, WaterLife, AirLife. Even RockLife and SoilLife."

"You believe there is life in everything?" T'Mier asked.

"No Chief Medical Officer T'Mier. There IS life in everything. Our life is in everything."

"I didn't tell you my title." The Vulcan said.

Jim's entire face was a smile. "We all know it."

"Who am I?" Maxwell said to it.

"Lieutenant Commander John Maxwell. The EAGLE's Chief of Security." It said immediately. "You're from Alberta in your Canada." It smiled at him.

"I see." Carter said. "So you know all about us. How?"

"WorldLife tells us."

"World life."

It gestured out around them. "Yes. That's how I know your speech."

"Tell me about the portals."

"They are also part of WorldLife. To help us take care of all."

"Can you tell where they go?"

"Some yes. Some no. Some change. They are all over, and some come and some go, they may not be there the next time you try to go through. They too are part of the Life."

"One of them went to the ship."

"Yes. And elsewhere."

Carter waited.

"We can go anywhere, if there is no way, we just ask and... we go."

"Anywhere on the planet? I mean... All of them?" O'Dell asked.

"Yes. And more. If WorldLife needs us to be there."

Counselor Allen was next. "So you take care of the planets, and the planets take care of you."

"Yes. Is that not the way with you?"

"It is, to a point."

"It is all the point with us."

They stood there around Jim for a minute. Looking at it as curiously as it was looking at them. Then all of the sudden several of the beings appeared at the edge of the clearing.

"They wish me to come with them."

"Are you in trouble for talking to us?"

"No no Captain Carter. It is my rotation to do caring work with my group." It stepped toward them. "If you are still with WorldLife I'll speak to you more." It turned and walked with their gliding walk toward the group. Then they were all gone.

Carter stared at the edge of the forest for a long minute. "Observations. Comments."

"Fascinating." Mohammad said.

"World life?" Maxwell asked. "What was he talking about?"

"It's not a 'he'." T'Mier said. "In fact, I couldn't discern a sex among any of them. Nor any sexual or reproductive traits."

"It fits with everything else we've seen. Like the living house, and the fruits of flowers with no stigma or other essential reproductive part."

Carter held up his hands to bring it to a stop. "We've got nothing but questions. If this Jim doesn't give us the answers we need without bringing up more questions, we'll have to get one of the other ones to talk to us. He... it said they can all talk if they want to."

Torrell agreed. "How do we find one that will?"

Carter thought about it. "We ask them." He turned back to the forest. "The village was through that one?" He pointed to some trees.

"Yessir."

They spoke to every individual they came across. Some would answer a direct question. Others wouldn't.

Then as they walked through another portal they emerged at the edge of a large natural amphitheater between the mountains with the forest crawling up their sides and the sea.

"Welcome." The being in the coat said with a gesture and a nod.

"So you can speak."

It nodded and bowed ever so slightly.

"And you know all the things we have questions about."

It repeated both motions.

The EAGLE group walked down into the amphitheater and noticed low benches composed of a woody vine had formed around the figure. There was just enough bench space for nine humans. It gestured to the benches and nodded slowly.

"Ask." The being said.

Carter waited a second, then just as he opened his mouth the being cut him off with its soft voice.

"Even WorldLife does not know who created or constructed our Universe."

Carter realized his mouth was still open. He shut it.

Somebody on the other side started to say something, but they were cut off as well.

"WorldLife is not traveling through what you call space, your space may be flowing past, but we are where we have been and will always be."

Carter thought about it, from its point of view, it was certainly true.

"Yes. Our WorldLife is our Universe. It can be no other way."

This time nobody even got to start a question.

"You are here as part of WorldLife. When you leave, you will no longer be part of WorldLife."

Carter looked down his row of officers. T'Mier indicated she would ask the next question.

"Yes Doctor. Our world is Alive. We are part of its life force, and it ours. We are true symbiosis."

"Where's the energy for all this come from?" O'Dell got out just as it finished speaking.

"From the life force of our universe." It answered. "Our World's supply us with life and we take care of our Worlds." It nodded to them.

They almost expected some grand display of whirlwinds, lightening, maybe a series of large cetaceans jumping offshore or one of the mountains behind them to erupt in a lava fountain. But there was just the one being in its jacket and the slightly smiling eyes.

The benches started to move under them, so they stood up. As they watched the tree root structures withdrew into the soil until it was hard to see where they had emerged.

"I guess the audience is over." O'Dell said as the being walked toward the sea and vanished through another unseen portal.

Carter's communicator beeped. He tapped it. "Carter here."

"Scheduled check in time sir. We hadn't heard from the landing party for two hours."

"How's things up there Lieutenant?"

"Status normal sir."

"Any more visitors?"

"They've slowed down some. But we have gotten some good scans and images of them. We've confirmed at least a dozen different individuals. And the medical team is building a good database of information on them. Is it true they're all one sex?"

"Good work, keep it up. And yes, from what we can tell, their entire species is one neutral gender. Landing party situation normal. Check in in two hours. Carter out."

They stood in the empty amphitheater for a couple of minutes watching the sea, the planets looming large in the sky, the mountains beyond the trees.

"I could see how this could be your entire universe." Berry observed.

"What now sir?" Torrell asked.

"Let's see where some of the portals go. Three teams of three. Two hours, then if you can't find your way back here or to the beam down point call the ship and we'll find you."

Commander Maxwell took the Doctor and the Counselor and picked the far side of the amphitheater where there should be a portal. After some random walking and looking around, they found one and vanished.

First Officer Torrell walked up the hill with Mohammad and Nebrell. They went through the portal they had arrived through intent on backtracking to another location they had passed through earlier.

The Captain was left with Riley Berry and Chief O'Dell. They walked toward the sea where the being in the jacket had vanished to see if they could get some more questions answered before they asked them.

"Well?" Allen asked Maxwell. "Where to now?"

The Security Chief was still scanning with his tricorder. However, it wasn't providing any answers. "Give me a minute." He aimed it across the large slow moving river and took more readings.

Doctor T'Mier was examining the deep thick mud around their feet. "It's quite rich in simple biological life."

"Pond scum." Maxwell said. "Wonderful."

"You want a sample?" The Counselor asked the Doctor.

"Not necessary."

"Let's follow the trail." Maxwell indicated a narrow trail with small footprints coming toward them along the bank. He led the way backtracking them squishing and sloshing through the muck. "Another portal." He said indicating where the tracks ended.

"Ok."

"This is the L Class planet." Mohammad said. "Excellent." She began taking readings with her tricorder.

Nebrell looked around, then he too began taking some readings.

"This is natural landscape, this world hasn't been teraformed." Torrell said examining the escarpment they had emerged near.

"Perhaps their WorldLife doesn't transform a planet until it needs to." Nebrell said. "Either for living space or resources."

"Excellent deduction." The Science Officer said.

"Unfortunately it may well prove impossible to verify."

Mohammad nodded and they began walking along a path at the edge of the cliff. Not far along the trail branched, one continued along the ledge, the other disappeared across a desert plain.

"Let's stay near the cliff. I wouldn't want to loose the trail and end up wandering for our two hours across that." Torrell said indicating the sand stretching to the horizon.

"Lead on." Mohammad gestured to the path.

The Captain's portal emerged in a long dark winding passage between enormous hedges several meters tall and absolutely impenetrable without causing damage to either themselves or the hedges. They shrugged to each other and walked down the veritable tunnel. There was no way of telling if there were more portals in the passage without taking a chance and stepping off the narrow path of worn grass. There was also no way of telling where the being had gone.

"Command decision time." O'Dell said.

"OK." Carter looked up and down, they had walked for almost a kilometer through the maze like corridor between the hedges. There was no way of telling where they were or where the portal they had emerged from. "Here." Carter said. He stepped toward the hedge and found out the sticks and leaves of the giant bushes were somewhat painful to walk into. Several brightly colored birds flitted out of the disturbed bush and

scattered back into the hedges up and down the path. Carter stood there and watched them then shrugged.

"Here sir." Berry found a portal by reaching out toward the hedge near him. His hand didn't touch the leaves of the hedge.

"You first." O'Dell said.

The path along the cliff branched several more times. Sometimes up a natural path to the top of the cliff, sometimes to follow a valley into the cliff, then again across the desert.

On several occasions the tricorders indicated something very large and very alive was out in the desert. But they never saw anything.

"It may be under the sand." Mohammad said. "But the readings are inconclusive."

They walked on slowly. Trying to catch a glimpse of what the instruments said was out in the desert.

"Let's go up." One of them said at a point where the path divided again.

They climbed to the top of the cliff and looked around. On the other side of the line of rock outcropping was what appeared more desert.

"A lot of people come here." Nebrell said looking at the ground. Several sets of tracks went out in several different directions. "I wonder why?"

"Let's follow some and see." Torrell said.

They followed a set that appeared to be one individual across the top of the rise, then down the far side. The tracks stopped where a large fissure ran up the cliff. In the face of the open wound they could see mineral deposits and crystals.

"These are gemstones." Mohammad said. She put the hand sensor from her tricorder near a particularly large specimen. "Amethyst. Several carats worth."

"There's no evidence of mining." Torrell looked at the rocks. "See, they've just reached in and taken them out of the loose rock."

Mohammad touched the crystal. "It's not loose, but if there was a storm or some seismic activity, it might come loose."

"Ma'am." Nebrell said from below them. "They've been collecting them down here." He picked up a handful of gleaming rocks. "Several varieties. I'm not all that familiar with this type of geology."

"So, our Life Force friends like shiny baubles." Torrell said examining the gems Nebrell brought up to them.

"Topaz. Agate. More Amethyst. This would be a Ferringi's dream. Picking up gem quality stones from the ground like this." Mohammad said. She dropped a large crystal back to the ground. "Better leave them. We don't want to offend our hosts."

"Agreed." Torrell said. "Let's find another portal."

Doctor T'Mier was talking to a shorter than normal being in a long garment that was almost a robe. Several others stood around studying them with an almost open fascination.

The being in the robe would answer her with a few words or short phrases then stare at her some more.

Ensign Allen walked unhindered through the small settlement. There were five of the living houses, a couple of very small out buildings and a larger building off to one

side with one door and no windows. They had emerged from the portal inside the building much to the amazement of the five or six beings already there.

The security chief took the opportunity to scan the building looking for the source of power for the portals. The readings were coming back normal for a building constructed of living plants. But they did not show anything for the portals, even when two of the beings walked into the building and through one right in front of him and his multicorder.

"Well, so far, we're not getting very far." Carter said.

Their last portal had been a dead end as far as they could tell.

They emerged in a dark snowy glade. They couldn't even tell which planet they were on. Even if they were still in the WorldLife system. In a minute they turned around and went back to the hedges.

Now it was O'Dell's turn. He walked down the path and put out his arm. Bushes. He took another couple of steps. "OK."

They stepped through and emerged into a deep valley between towering peaks of bare stone.

A loud rumble of thunder shook them from behind. They could smell smoke and acidic fumes were being blown past them on the hot breeze.

"This is the class A planet. Let's get out of here!" Carter said. He turned around and pushed Berry toward the portal, but the portal wasn't there now. Both of them gasped as they faced into the scalding wind.

"Wait a minute! We just came through there!."

"It moved." Berry said. "Remember, Jim said they sometimes move around."

"Fine time for it to happen." O'Dell said coughing at the fumes.

Another rumble made them look up. "That's not thunder." One of them said.

Just up the valley an active volcano was throwing dark rocks and soot far into the sky. The thick smoke belching from it was being blown their way.

"We can't stay here." Berry said.

Carter looked at the ground, there were faint footprints leading down the valley. "We follow them."

Something roared. And it wasn't the volcano.

"What was that?" O'Dell said trying to blink away the burning sensation in his eyes.

"THAT!" Berry said pointing up the side of the cliff.

Something huge and lumbering was just coming over the top of the ridge. It was an easy ten meters tall and three wide. Its body steamed as it moved. When it roared again, thin smoke issued from what were its mouth and nostrils.

"Let's GO!" Carter jerked at the other two and they all ran down the valley away from whatever it was.

Their lungs were burning from the toxic chemicals in the air. Before long they'd run as far as they could then they ducked into a small valley that joined the larger one and fought for air.

"Fire Life. I thought Jim meant lava and smoke. Not... Monsters." Berry said.

O'Dell coughed a long time. "Don't you...." He coughed some more. "Riley's law about monsters."

Carter laughed and coughed. "I've heard that one."

Berry started to answer, but was taken with a coughing fit.

They heard the creature roar just around the corner. "That way!" Carter said. They scrambled up the small valley.

"Don't look now. There's two of them." O'Dell wheezed from behind.

Carter stole a look. One of the things was turning sideways to follow them up the cleft in the rock, the other was growling at them with blazing eyes. "Fire Life indeed." Carter muttered to himself.

They reached the top of the narrow channel with burning lungs and watering eyes.

"I know Riley Berry's Sixty-Fifth Law." Jim said from beside them. "If they're a lot bigger and stronger and meaner than you are, see if you can outrun them." It sort of chuckled.

"Jim!" Carter said panting.

"Captain Carter. This is not a good place. We should leave now." The being answered. "This way." It said and even its breath was hissing as it moved.

"Boy am I glad to see him.... It." O'Dell coughed.

They half walked and half ran behind Jim up a rock strewn path. Then Jim paused. "The way is... This way." It said with a hiss and something of a cough then turned and led them through just as the FireLife creature pulled itself to the top of the valley. It roared deafeningly as they vanished.

The Doctor had found something else to study.

"Mice?" Maxwell almost grinned.

"Rodents most assuredly." T'Mier said watching the tricorder, the mice were watching the Doctor just as intently. "But again, I'm not reading any sexual traits in them."

Allen was poking around in a pile of leaves. Then the leaves moved. "Ahhh!" She jumped back startled.

Maxwell was right there with his phaser in hand. "What was it?"

Doctor T'Mier put out a hand to stop Maxwell from incinerating anything. "I believe that would be a bad move."

"Why?"

"There is a larger picture here I am just beginning to see."

Maxwell looked at the trees, then the leaves, then back at the mice. He pursed his lips, then holstered his weapon.

"This is remarkable. A colony this size, and no young, no ill, no... abnormalities at all." Mohammad said scanning a giant hive of insects that resembled honey bees that had been crossed with grasshoppers.

They gathered around the swarming creatures. "Do they have stingers?" Torrell asked trying not to get too close.

"No." Nebrell said as several landed on his outstretched hand and Mohammad scanned them.

"Remarkable." The Science Officer whispered.

Torrell's tricorder beeped. "We're due back in a few minutes. We should get going."

"I've completed my readings here."

"We need to meet the others Jim." Carter said to the being as it watched them take deep breaths.

They were sitting in a large field of wildflowers and small blooming trees.

The being looked around as if it expected the rest of the landing party to be there, then it looked at him with smiling eyes. "Where are you to meet them?"

"The original beam down point. Where I first met you."

"Ahh. Yes."

"How do we get there?"

"We can go this way." It started off at its gliding walk across the field.

"You guys ready?" Carter asked.

O'Dell was still coughing and wiping his burning eyes, but he nodded. Berry got up and they helped the engineer to his feet. Then they followed Jim.

Dr. T'Mier was all over the Captain's party when they came through the portal and she heard O'Dell cough dryly several times.

"You've been exposed to several toxic gases. Aerosolized hydrochloric acid, hydrogen sulfide, high levels of carbon monoxide." She said scanning O'Dell, then the others. "You've all been exposed. But not too seriously. You will come to sickbay when we return to the ship." She aimed the medical tricorder back at O'Dell. "And you two stay away from volcanoes until then. I would like to take Mr. O'Dell to sickbay now."

O'Dell tried to suppress a cough and half glared at the doctor with his bright red eyes streaming tears.

"We'll all go." Carter took a deep breath of the sea air and forest smells. He felt a lot better then. "Where's Torrell's party?"

"I know. I'll go for them." Jim said with enthusiasm. It glided quickly off toward another corner of the clearing and vanished through a portal.

In a few minutes Jim led Torrell and the others through another portal. They were followed by two other beings.

Carter could still smell sulfur on himself, but he stood at attention and greeted the other officers.

"I would like to get Mr. O'Dell to sickbay soon."

"OK. We're going. Jim. I'll be back."

The being nodded and stood where he was.

Carter touched his communicator and requested them to be beamed out in two groups.

Once again, they all dematerialized together, and most appeared in the transporter room.

"Doctor T'Mier?" Carter said. "Chief O'Dell..." He had an idea what happened.

"Carter to T'Mier."

"Sickbay here. Kavanagh 's got O'Dell on an exam table." T'Mier said. "You and Mister Berry should report here as well."

"Berry's on his way now." Carter jerked his thumb that way toward Berry. "I need to check in with the bridge and I'll be on my way."

"Very good Captain."

The Engineer was showing some minor lung damage, but he was in good hands and his treatment was progressing nicely. Berry and the Captain were cleared for duty as long as they promised to stay well away from Class A planets for the near future.

"The away team and all department heads. Briefing room in fifteen minutes." The captain ordered into the com once they were through with the doctors. Then he turned to Berry and O'Dell, you both need a shower." He sniffed at his own shirt. "Me too."

"Lieutenant O'Dell, you have another treatment in six hours." Doctor Kavanagh said.

"I'll make sure he's here doctor." The Captain said.

There were still occasional reports of the beings turning up in odd places on the ship, but all they ever did was glide around for a few minutes and watch the crew, then leave as suddenly as they appeared. No portal was ever discovered. Even by crew members who tried to go through the exact spot where the beings arrived.

"OK." Carter said from the head of the table. "Lieutenant Commander Maxwell. You have the floor."

The room was crowded with the entire away team as well as those that had been doing studies on the multiplanet from the ship. Rumor had it that they had some fascinating video of some friends of the Captain and his party from their volcano adventure.

"From the extensive readings from the surface and deep probes from the ship. We have not been able to determine how the multiworld is moving. Whether or not they possess any offensive or defensive abilities. How it is generating the gravity management field. Or how the portals work." He licked his lips. "Other than that... I do not see any significant threat to the ship or the Federation from them." He sat down.

"Commander Torrell."

"We've extrapolated their course back to the edge of our galaxy. They clearly came from beyond the Milky Way, and their current course will eventually take them out of it. How long they've been traveling, they don't even know." She paused. "In fact, they have repeatedly denied that they are moving."

The Captain nodded slowly. "Mr. O'Dell."

"Maxwell said it sir. They're combined worlds are a tremendous source of power. Just the Class A produces geothermal energy by the shipload. How they're transferring it, using it... I can't begin to explain." He wheezed a little and tried to stop a cough. "Sorry. Doc said I'd be doing that for a day or two. Anyway. That gravity field. To keep six planets in close formation like that without tearing each other apart. None of them rotating at all. And warm. And light... It takes power, but I can't tell you how they're doing it."

"Doctor T'Mier. Your turn."

"Through all the specimens we have examined connected with the multiworld. Humanoids, fish, bacteria, plants, giant sand worms and all the rest. All have been healthy for their species. All have been of full adult age for their species. All have been

asexual with no identifiable reproductive glands or characteristics at all. And all have been as curious about us as we were about them."

"How about lava monsters?" Berry asked under his breath.

T'Mier heard him. "Even them. We have observed them on the surface of the Class A world, and without getting close enough to have Mr. O'Dell's problem, the hypothesis holds. The individual creatures we observed and scanned appeared to be healthy androgynous adult... Lava monsters." The Vulcan's face never even hinted at a smile.

"Explain that." Carter said.

"It is a completely artificial system sir." Mohammad said.

"Very well then. Lieutenant Mohammad, continue."

"This entire system is a living, intelligent organism. The individuals we have encountered, be they lava monsters or Mr Berry's friend 'Jim' are parts of the whole, not distinct individuals like we are. The same with the bacteria in the mud or the insects we encountered." She nodded slowly. "It isn't intelligence or possibly even life as we'd recognize it. But it is alive. It has purpose, and in spite of Mr. Maxwell's assertions, I am sure it can defend itself if threatened. Given the observations. I would venture to say that it is not only using gravity to keep itself together, and to move through space, it could use it as a weapon and shields."

Maxwell thought about it. "Possibly. And if so, we would have no defense to it. Nor any way to attack it."

"Star Fleet has encountered beings that used gravity for propulsion through empty space. But never on this scale."

"This is the first time we've ever encountered this being."

The room got quiet.

"Any further discussion?"

"Thank you for your visit Captain Carter." The being in the silver highlighted jacket said from near the door. Its voice was slower and richer than Jim's had been.

"You are most welcome. We have learned a great deal about your World and would enjoy another visit sometime."

"If your universe comes to ours again. That may be possible."

Captain Carter stood up and nodded then bowed slightly to the being. It returned it, then vanished.

The alert claxon broke up the meeting.

The Captain bolted from the room and onto the bridge as if he were spring loaded.

"Report." He said jogging down to the command level.

"The multiworld sir...." The viewscreen didn't show anything. "It pushed us away, then went to warp!"

The senior staff went to their stations trying to verify what happened.

"Yes sir. Some sort of gravity distortion." Maxwell confirmed. "We're nearly half a million kilometers from our last position."

Torrell had even better news. "I've got a faint reading on the multiworld. It's running at just over warp two and accelerating. Quickly."

"Then I guess that was goodbye." Carter sighed. "OK. Check everything out, file your reports. Let's get back to it. Compute and lock in course for Federation Space. Resume mission."

"All systems all stations answering green sir. Forty nine days from Federation contact." First Officer Torrell reported.

Carter stared at the screen. "We're not the only explorers out here. Maybe we'll meet somebody else." He settled into the Captain's chair. He glanced around at his bridge crew. "Let's go. Engage."