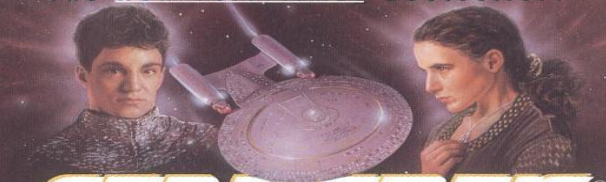


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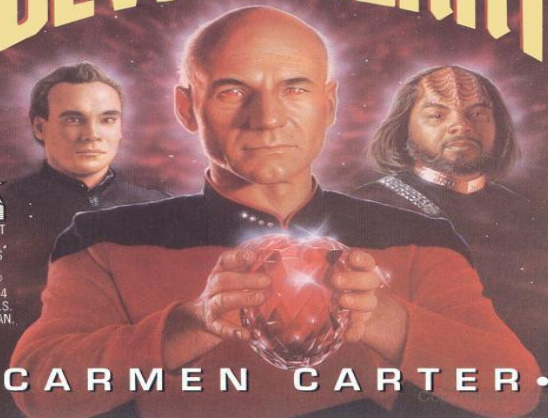
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by
Carmen Carter

Volume I of Three Volumes
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Carmen Carter's first Star Trek (R)
novel was Dreams of the Raven. With
the advent
of Star Trek The Next Generation (TM),

however, she turned her attention to the new crew of the U.s.s. Enterprise (TM) in The Children of Hamlin and then coauthored Doomsday World. After twelve years of urban living, she has recently resettled in Northern Virginia where she can see the Blue Ridge Mountains from her front porch.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dedicated to Kate,
who read my books
even before she knew me.

Acknowledgments

Dave Stern believed in this story from the very beginning and fought for two years to provide me with the opportunity to write it. If not for him, you would be holding some other Star Trek book in your hands right now. I owe him a debt beyond measure.

Thanks, Dave!

Many of my friends have followed the progress of this book since its inception, some page by page.

Their wealth of comments and reactions helped me

to structure the book and then to polish it. My

special thanks go to

Kate Maynard, who casually said, "Why don't you make the archaeologists Vulcans?"

T'Sara was born as a result of that suggestion,

and my path into the story began to unfurl.

Cary Dier, who wanted to read this book years before the first words were written and never lost hope that the Heart's story would eventually see print.

Her keen eye and relentlessly linear mind made her an invaluable editor.

Delia Turner, who steadfastly wielded her blue pencil over the manuscript pages when she would rather have just enjoyed a good read.

Jessica Ross, for letting me use the idea behind the Borg sequence.

The Star Trek universe has become

increasingly complex, so there were times when I needed to delve into technical details beyond my own understanding. Several people provided me with timely assistance.

Betsy Ramsey and Cary Dier provided me with computer terminology that wouldn't make hackers scream in agony or die laughing, and thus saved me from public humiliation. "Doc" Audrey Gassman cast her professional eye over Beverly Crusher's medical scenes. I confess that I decided to let dramatic license overrule

authenticity
in a few instances, so don't blame
Audrey
for the results.

I also relied heavily upon the
STCCTNG
Technical Manual by Rick Sternbach
and
Michael Okuda for information about the
construction and
operation of the Enterprise. Any errors
in that
area are due entirely to my
misunderstanding of their
exceptional reference work.

Great Minds Think Alike Department
In the two years between the submission

of my first
proposal of The Devil's Heart and the
final acceptance of the storyline by
Paramount,
Peter David wrote Imzadi and saw it
published. By sheer coincidence, both of
us made
use of the Guardian of Forever, although
it plays
only a minor role in my story. For the
record, neither of us was aware of the
duplication.

THE DEVIL'S HEART

Prologue

Iconia was dead.

The planet itself would remain intact until its sun went nova, but the world he had known, the soft tissue of life rooted on the fragile mantle, had already been destroyed.

Constant
weapons bombardment had vaporized its
shallow
seas, incinerated its verdant plains, and
eradicated all who had once inhabited
its
surface.

Barbarians.

Kanda Jiak swayed on his feet as yet
another tremor rocked the Gateway
chamber.

The station was shielded against
detection and proof against
even a direct photon blow, but the land
itself was
shifting under the impact of ceaseless
explosions.

Could there be anything left worth

attacking on
Iconia, any city that had not been razed
by the
firestorms? Or was their hatred so fierce
that they
prolonged this holocaust out of sheer
bloodlust?

After First Contact, the philosopher
Senega had
warned that a disparity in technologies
could
unsettle other races; she predicted that
knowledge of
Iconian superiority would foster fear and
distrust; and as a final legacy before her
death, she
prophesied the final fatal connection

between fear
and the rage to destroy what could not be
understood.

Demons of air and darkness, that is what
they
call us.

Ironically, after the diplomats failed
to turn back the space-faring hordes
gnawing at
the edges of the Empire, the Gateways
that
inspired such superstitions had provided
the
ultimate salvation for the surviving
Iconians.

Over the last few days, ten thousand of
his people had
slipped through narrow rips in the fabric

of
space; they and their descendants would
build new
homes on the remote outposts of Ikkabar,
DiWahn, and Dynasia. Iconian
language and culture would survive even
if this
world was pummeled into dust.
Now it was Jiak's turn to cross the
threshold.
He settled the weight of the Gem into the
crook
of his arm. In a room of gleaming metal
panels, humming consoles, and the
crackling blue
energy of the Gatekey, this rough rock
seemed

strangely out of place, yet it had built this structure just as surely as the legions of architects, engineers, and technicians. The secrets of the entire universe were locked inside this ancient relic, and three generations of Iconians had only begun to coax out that knowledge. Blue. Red. Blue. Jiak tapped out a familiar sequence on triangular buttons. A jagged bolt of light shot out of the central control globe, forming a dancing umbilical cord to the narrow frame of an activated Gateway.

He scanned the cycle of shifting
landscapes.

Three habitable worlds were open to
him, yet his
final choice meant nothing to him; all
were
primitive compared to Iconia.

Farewell.

Jiak stepped forward, and through.

No! This is wrong!

On the other side, the blare of a red sun
seared his eyes, and a gust of dry, heated
air

sucked the moisture from his lungs. He
sank

deep into the ground as shifting grains of
sand gave

way beneath his feet; his weight had doubled under the force of a heavier gravity.

This desert world was not of his choosing, and he could not survive in this harsh climate.

"Save me!"

For the past three decades, the Gem had been

his talisman. He stroked the stone in supplication, but in the midst of this blazing oven it had turned ice cold.

Jiak collapsed onto the ground. The Gem fell from his weakened grasp, and he watched it roll out of his reach.

"Betrayed," he whispered hoarsely.

"You have
betrayed me. Why?"

Alone out of all the Iconians, Senega had
called the Gem a curse rather than a
blessing ...

the price of True Knowledge comes high
... too
high.

As he slipped toward death's embrace,
Jiak dreamed that his life was nothing
but a mirage
shimmering in another mind ...

She cried out her fear of dying alone in
the
desert until her flailing arms wrapped
themselves

around the stone.

Not lost after all. Not dying.

She awakened enough to separate her
own

thoughts from Jiak's identity, to
remember that she was

safe in her own bed on a planet called
Atropos. Her covers were tangled about
her

feet, but the Gem's heat warded off the
chill

night air seeping into her tent. With a
sigh of

relief, the old woman curled on her side,
tucking herself around the sphere as if
afraid it could

still tumble away from her.

Ko N'ya.

Yes, that was the Gem's name in her language

... and that language was Vulcan.

I am T'Sara.

Even lying still on her cot, T'Sara's body felt limp, drained by the ordeal that had been

Jiak's and her own blurred together.

True

sleep would help restore her strength, but she

begrudged the waste of time. She wanted to explore the lives of all who had held this

stone before her, and that quest could take many years

to complete.

Tonight, in this dream, T'Sara had seen her

homeworld through the eyes of an alien being, felt the

heavy pull of its gravity on a body that was not

her own. Most important of all, however, she

had discovered another bridge in the meandering path

of the Ko N'ya. The leap from far-distant Iconia to Vulcan would have eluded her otherwise.

Any thought of embarking on another search was

suspended by the sound of movement in

the compound
outside. The other archaeologists had
cleared the
rubble from around their shared
habitations, but T'Sara
had no patience for such domestic
touches. She
could hear the scuffle of boots climbing
over
mounds of fallen stonework and
crumbling walls.
By her count, at least four Vulcans were
headed
toward her tent.
The visitors came to a stop just outside
the
domed enclosure. Someone's hands
brushed

lightly across the fabric wall until
probing
fingers found purchase on the ridged
seams marking
the entrance. A shaft of moonlight
slipped through
the widening breach.

"T'Sara?"

Because it was Sorren, she said,
"Enter."

The young man slipped inside, then
resealed the
portal with more care than she had taken.
Each day
she was less and less concerned with the
basic
necessities of survival. If not for

Sorren's prodding, she would forget even to eat.

She made no move to activate a lantern, and he did not ask for light. The darkness made it easier for him to ignore the Ko N'ya when they talked.

"T'Sara, your cries have awakened everyone in the camp ... again."

The others who had kept him company remained huddled outside. She could hear them taking shallow breaths of the frigid air. "I was restless."

"These spells of unrest are becoming more frequent."

"I have slept away too much of my life," said the woman. "I intend to make better use of my remaining years."

"I am still young, however; and I will never reach your august age if I am robbed of my sleep now." There was a hint of wry humor in Sorren's remark, a rare self-indulgence from such an earnest young Vulcan.

"Then go back to bed, my child, and I promise not to wake you again." Her position as

leader of the
expedition invested her words with the
authority of a
direct command.

"Very well," he said. She heard the
rustle
of the seals parting, felt a cool draft of
air,
then saw Sorren's willowly silhouette as
he
stepped through the opening. "I will
bring you some tea in
the morning."
He closed the entrance, plunging her
back
into darkness and warmth, yet T'Sara
could hear him
whisper to his waiting companions. "It

was only
a bad dream."

"That is what you said last night," said
Sohle. His gruff voice merely roughened
when
he tried to speak quietly.

"It is no less true for having happened a
second time."

"How many disturbances does it take to
convince
you, Sorren?" asked T'Challo. "T'Sara
is ill."

"My last medical scan did not confirm
any
ill health."

"You are no doctor," said T'Challo.
"And

it is time we ..."

The voices faded away before T'Sara could overhear any more of their discussion, but she had no interest in their bickering. Morning was still a few hours away. She had just enough time to fall into another dream.

CHAPTER 1

Captain Jean-Luc Picard slept with the same air of authority he carried with him on the

bridge of the Enterprise. Even in the privacy of his darkened cabin and the haven of unconsciousness, he maintained a commander's demeanor. The silken blue pajamas he wore only emphasized the hard contours of his body he lay flat on his back, his lean frame held at attention except for one arm flung above his head; his lips were set in a firm, unyielding line. It was not a comfortable pose, but then Picard was not a comfortable man.

A spacious cabin with generous furnishings, their smooth wash of pastel colors, a lush plant gracing the table by his bed--none of these luxuries had softened his sense of responsibility, or his conviction that danger could be held at bay only by unceasing vigilance. As if to vindicate his subconscious wariness, the trill of a communications call marred the silence that had surrounded him. The captain was awake and

alert before the second ring of the summons had sounded. Quickly rolling to a half-sitting position, he cleared his throat to erase any trace of sleep from his voice.

"Picard here."

"Incoming message from Starbase 193, Priority Two."

"Thank you, Ensign Ro. I'll take it here in my quarters." Knowing the commander of the starbase in question, Picard automatically scaled down the urgency of the call by at least one degree;

Miyakawa had a tendency to overdramatize,

an occupational hazard for officers
mired in the
mundane activities of an administrative
post. He allowed himself the indulgence
of a
leisurely stretch before slipping out of
bed
to activate the transmission.
At his touch, the viewscreen on the wall
flickered to life. The first part of the
communiqu`e was
brief and to the point, but then Vulcans
were not
given to circumlocution. Miyakawa's
subsequent request for aid was brusque,
even
imperious, as if she suspected the

captain of the Enterprise might balk at such an insignificant task.

Perhaps there were some captains who would resent the diversion of a galaxy-class starship on a small errand of mercy, but Picard was not one of them.

Besides, he wanted this particular mission.

A combination of natural reticence and Starfleet training stripped Picard's voice of emotion as he activated the intercom and issued orders to the bridge crew. His excitement was

strictly personal and had no place in the execution of duty.

"Course change initiated."

Data's voice betrayed no reaction to the new coordinates, but Picard could swear he

heard Ro Laren's muffled curse in the background.

Merde. The captain belatedly remembered

the consequences of this diversion on the crew's own

affairs. "Increase speed to warp six."

That was

faster than the assignment warranted, but a more

moderate pace might tax everyone's

patience.

In the time it took him to step out of his pajamas

and into a clean pair of uniform pants, Picard

was hailed over the intercom yet again. "Riker to Captain Picard."

"It's a routine diversion, Number One," said Picard, aiming his reply at the ceiling

intercom. "At warp six, we'll only experience a short delay." He slipped the

tunic jacket over his head, confident that the

heavy cloth could not drown out his first officer's

emphatic response.

"With all due respect, sir, routine missions aren't rated Priority Two. If this takes more than a few extra days ... well, it's damn inconvenient for Geordi's maintenance agenda at spacedock."

"Ah, yes, the new magnetic constrictor coils," said Picard, careful to keep the smile on his face from seeping into his voice. Reaching for his boots, the captain did his best to allay Riker's anxiety. "In my opinion, the urgency of the situation was slightly overstated, so

we should be able to make up the lost time without too much difficulty. Schedule a briefing this morning for all senior officers so we can ensure a swift completion of this mission."

"Aye, sir."

The soft hum of the open channel cut off. Now that the immediate demands of duty had been fulfilled, Picard walked out into his living room and turned his attention to breakfast. As was his custom, he ordered a light menu for two from the food synthesizer. However, reflecting

over

Riker's strained reaction to the change of plans,

the captain considered the probable effect on his

guest's more volatile temper.

"Computer," he said quickly. "Extra butter

and cream."

He had added two different fruit juices and a jar of orange marmalade to the spread on the

table when his chief medical officer arrived. Some

mornings, Beverly Crusher appeared with the

slightly rumpled look of a doctor just coming off

duty, her eyes darkened by fatigue, but the previous night must have been free of medical emergencies because her face was free of stress; the lines of her blue medical coat were sharp and crisp, and her long red hair was neatly coiled at the nape of her neck.

"What's the special occasion?" Crusher asked, surveying the offerings.

"Nothing beyond the pleasure of your company."

"Hah!" She spooned a large helping of eggs onto her plate. "If I weren't so

hungry, I'd seriously question your motives."

"I'm wounded by your suspicion, Doctor."

Fortunately, her mouth was too full for her to press the issue, even in jest. Judging from her animated spirits, Beverly

seemed to have missed the news working its way through the ship's grapevine; he would be able to inform her of the diversion himself. Later. He sought safer ground

by asking about the progress of her latest theatrical production. Unfortunately, his mind

was too preoccupied with their new destination to actually absorb much of her answer. Picard had started on the French toast when she turned their conversation to the ship's next port of call.

"There's a restaurant on Luxor IV," said Crusher, her blue eyes bright from the recollection, "that serves the best pancakes in the entire Federation. It would make a great place to celebrate--" she caught herself ju st in time,

"shore leave."

"I'm afraid there will be a slight delay,
just

a day or two, in our arrival to Luxor IV.

We've been diverted to a fringe-territory
star

system on a medical assistance mission."

Picard assumed a look of nonchalance in
the

face of Beverly's sharpened attention.

"In

fact, the Enterprise was chosen

specifically for

this mission because of your expertise in
handling

Bendii's syndrome."

"What?" she stopped mid-bite into a

scone

lathered with butter. "I'm not an expert in Bendii's syndrome! I've only seen one case in my entire medical career."

"Yes, well, it seems that even one is one more than any other doctor outside of the Vulcan

Medical Academy."

"And Ambassador Sarek wasn't even my patient," she said, shaking the scone at him for

emphasis. "I didn't treat him, I just diagnosed the condition."

"Think of this as an opportunity to expand your medical experience."

"Thank you, Captain, but I prefer to do that

on my own time and not at the expense of my patients."

Picard poured her a fresh cup of tea with a

generous measure of cream. "We're also the only

Federation starship within easy reach of the system. Under

the circumstances, there is no other option for you or

for your new patient."

The doctor sighed in reluctant agreement.

"So just who is this Vulcan with Bendii's syndrome?" She hastily popped the last bit

of bread into her mouth, then accepted the cup he offered her.

"A scientist. T'Sara."

Beverly frowned. "You say that name as if I should know her."

"Forgive me," Picard said. "Just because I've followed her work for years, I expect others to be aware of her as well." He nodded in the direction of his bookshelves. "She began her career as a preeminent folklorist renowned for

her work in comparative mythology, then moved on to archaeology."

"Ah, so that's why she's out in the back of beyond."

"Yes," said the captain. "For the past ten years, T'Sara has been the expedition leader for an archaeological excavation on Atropos.

Her assistant radioed for medical assistance, claiming that her erratic and irrational behavior appeared to be symptomatic of early stage

Bendii's."

"She was diagnosed by an archaeologist?"

Crusher rolled her eyes in exaggerated despair. "Save me from amateurs."

"I'm sure Sorren will welcome your professional assessment."

"I'm sure he's very welcome."

Despite her sarcasm, she seemed resigned

to the necessity of the mission. Picard smiled with

satisfaction as he offered the doctor another

scone.

Timing is everything on a starship from the warp

drive engines that mesh matter and antimatter for a duration measured by the single pulse of an electron, to the life support systems that regulate the smooth flow of air through the vessel, even down to the measured movements of the crew who control the day-to-day operations of the ship.

First Officer William Riker was a master of timing. And the master of time aboard the Enterprise. His skillful juggling of the

duty
schedules had created a small window
of
opportunity, one that allotted a select
group
of people the same break from their
respective shifts.
Five senior officers, the same ones who
were
due at a mission briefing later that
morning, were
gathered together in the close confines of
Riker's cabin. Their captain, however,
was
conspicuously absent.
Picard's quelling influence fostered a
degree of decorum that was entirely
lacking at

this assembly. During the early days of his posting on board the Enterprise, William Riker had tried to mimic the captain's imposing demeanor, only to find that he had a tendency to bluster and bully when he asserted himself. Over the years, the first officer had developed his own style, a looser and less obvious grip on the rein of command. So, for the moment, he let the meeting run its course without his participation; instead, he sat with his large frame sprawled

carelessly over
a chair, one leg thrown over the armrest,
and
watched everyone from under hooded
eyes.

Geordi La Forge was the first to speak
out. His
metal visor might mask the
expressiveness of
his face, but he managed to communicate
his
indignation without any difficulty. "I say
it's
a trick! Somehow the crew of the
Telarius
managed to bribe someone to pull us out
of the
sector."

"Oh, honestly," said Deanna Troi. She had been the last to arrive and was perched on the edge of the sofa with her feet dangling uncomfortably off the floor. Her dark, exotic features and shapely figure usually inspired immediate gallantry from the men around her, but on this occasion not one of them had given up his seat. Riker suspected that the unintentional slight was at least partly responsible for the edge of asperity in her voice. "No one would go to that much

trouble just for
a--"

"You'd be surprised, Counselor," said
Geordi. "Anybody who works on
Starbase
193," he grimaced when he mentioned
the base,
"would sell his grandmother for ten
credits."

"Cowards. They have no honor," said
Worf.

At the start of the session, before Riker
could call out
a warning, the lieutenant had settled his
weight
into a soft chair that would offend his
warrior
sensibilities as much as it offended his

spine;

Riker judged that the Klingon was as uncomfortable as

Troi, but the sensible solution, an offer to trade

places with her, probably reeked too much of

Human courtesy. "Of course, a Klingon ship would never waste time on a medical call."

"Stop glaring at me," said Crusher to the security officer. "It's not as if I volunteered for this mission."

"However," said Data. "If not for your specific medical expertise, the

Enterprise

would not have been chosen for this

particular assignment."

"Nonsense. Captain Picard told me we were the only starship in range of Atropos."

The android's face creased into his best approximation of a puzzled frown. If he saw

Riker's frantic hand signal from across the

room, he failed to fathom its meaning; Data

continued inexorably. "I am afraid the captain was in error. At the time we received the

distress call there were two other starships which were in greater proximity to the star system."

"Swell," muttered Geordi.

"This is not my fault!" Crusher's grim expression was a sure sign that she had just added deception to her list of grievances against Picard.

Now was the time, calculated Riker.

"I'm glad we've been diverted."

With all heads snapped around to stare at him,

he followed the heretical declaration with a broad,

flashing grin. "The delay gives us that much more time

to hone our skills, and it gives the crew of the

Telarius a false sense of security. They know we're their only serious

competition, and if they think we won't show, we can catch them off guard."

"Yeah, but what if we don't make it to Luxor IV in time?" demanded Geordi.

"Nah," said Riker with a dismissive wave.

"This is a routine pickup. We'll be on our

way back before you know it. The trick will be to make

sure we don't arrive too soon. We may have to find some excuse to slow down our return

trip, a way to ensure a proper entrance

...

say, five minutes before the

championship
begins."

His confidence was infectious, and he
noted with
satisfaction that Geordi had started to
smile at
the dramatic image Riker had conjured;
Worf
never smiled, but at least he had stopped
snarling.

Unfortunately, Troi still looked dubious;
Riker wondered if she could sense the
uneasiness
beneath his bluff. To his relief, she
played
along anyway. "Will, what about
Captain

Picard? Won't he suspect that something is going on?"

"Oh, I'll take care of the captain," said the first officer without blinking an eye at the ethical contortions that simple statement might involve. "All you have to worry about is improving your game."

Springing out of his chair, Riker flourished the deck of cards that he had kept nestled in the palm of his hand. Data was right on cue, as

well, whipping out his dealer's visor and a stack of chips.

"We have just enough time for a practice round."

Riker shuffled the deck back and forth in an arc

through the air like a juggler. "Ante up, my friends,

ante up. We're going to be the next poker champions of Starfleet!"

In the normal course of events, Picard resisted the temptation to read while on duty; his

love of the written word was so intense and his

concentration so focused that he never

trusted himself
to pay sufficient attention to the demands
of command when
he held a book in his hand. Just as a
proper
gentleman never shared his affections
with more than one
woman at a time, he confined his reading
to his
leisure hours.

On this mission, however, Picard had
decided
that a review of T'Sara's texts would
help
prepare him for his impending
interaction with the
scientist. After the briefing session with
his senior

officers, he had retrieved the Vulcan's books from his cabin and carried them off to his ready room. He even went so far as to sit on the sofa, rather than behind his desk, but he did so with the firm intention of only glancing at a few of the more recent forewords.

Reading her spare yet elegant prose, he was newly reminded of T'Sara's ability to present brilliant insights as if they were self-evident truths and to use logic to convince and persuade with a skill that was

almost seductive.

For a Vulcan, she possessed a keen understanding of her very emotional subjects.

When the door chime pulled him back to the

present, Picard noticed with a start that he had

been immersed in Oral Histories from the

Andorian Middle Kingdom for over an hour.

And the chime had been ringing repeatedly.

"Come."

The doors snapped apart and the ship's first

officer barreled through the opening.

"Captain, are you
al--" Riker skidded to a sudden halt. His
worried frown transformed into a
knowing
smile. "Oh, you've been reading."
"Guilty as charged." Picard sighed and
tossed the book aside, only to
automatically
pick up another in its stead; this second
choice
had vellum pages that were thickly
covered with the
patterns of an alien script.
"We're within hailing distance of
Atropos, but
we haven't raised the campsite yet."
Riker

canted his head to one side in order to read the title on the spine; his lips tried to form the words, but failed. "I didn't know you could read Vulcan, Captain."

"I can't." Picard's eyes skimmed down a page. "At least, I shouldn't be able to ... but occasionally, as I look over the text, I gather a hint of meaning in certain words and phrases."

"A legacy of your mind-meld with Ambassador Sarek?"

"Yes, I believe so." Picard set down

the book on a side table with an exaggerated care that bordered on reverence. "This volume belonged to him; it was a gift to me from Perrin after his death."

One of the traits of a good first officer, as well as a good friend, was knowing when to share silence. A few minutes later they walked out of the ready room.

As he crossed the deck of the circular bridge, the captain noted which of his crew were working at the back duty stations. Deanna Troi and

Beverly Crusher were already seated in the central command area behind the helm; Ensign Ro and Data were operating the forward stations. All accounted for, all as it should be, but he tried never to take that for granted.

"Still no response from the archaeological camp," said Worf from the aft deck. "Continue hailing, Lieutenant," said Picard as he settled himself down into the captain's chair between Riker and the ship's

counselor. "Status, Mr. Data?"

"Estimated arrival at Atropos in eleven minutes, thirty-two seconds."

"Steady as she goes, Helm." Picard fixed his eyes on the main viewscreen, studying a single pinpoint of starlight and the space that surrounded it. A most unremarkable sight, he concluded. At the beginning of time, when countless cosmic wonders had been sown throughout the galaxy, this area had been overlooked. In fact, to the best of his knowledge, the Federation's claim

to this sector had been made solely to facilitate traffic through the territory; until T'Sara's expedition, no one had bothered to linger.

Troi spoke quietly, easing her way into his thoughts. "Beverly tells me you've followed T'Sara's scholarship for years. You must be looking forward to meeting her in person."

"Yes ... very much so." He could never tell when the counselor used her empathic abilities to read him or simply judged his moods by subtle physical cues that he was

unable
to repress. Either way, Troi always
caught him
when he was brooding, so there was no
point in trying
to disguise his one misgiving about this
encounter.

"Yet, on the other hand, I do not relish
watching
another brilliant mind disintegrate from
illness."

"Perhaps T'Sara will be spared Sarek's
fate," said Crusher. "Medical research
has
advanced considerably in the last year;
treatment,
even a cure, may be developed in time to
help

her. That's assuming the diagnosis is correct; after all, I haven't confirmed anything yet."

"Well," said Riker. "If she does have Bendii's, we'd better warn Guinan to put away the breakables in Ten-Forward."

Crusher shook her head. "Psychic disturbances like the ones broadcast by Ambassador

Sarek don't occur until a more advanced stage

of ..." She turned to the captain. "I only know that because I've been studying the medical

literature on the syndrome. Any doctor in the Fleet could read a casebook file and do

what I'm doing."

Just as Picard had feared, Beverly must be

suffering the brunt of the crew's frustration; a

speedy conclusion to this diversion would improve

tempers all around. "Lieutenant Worf, have you

established contact with the Vulcans yet?"

"Channels are open, but they are not answering our hail."

"You can't trust a bunch of academics to operate a simple subspace radio," said

Riker with a heartiness that seemed a little forced.

"And archaeologists are the worst offenders,"

added Picard. He caught himself rapidly tapping one finger on his armrest and stilled the impatient motion.

"Long-range sensor scan complete, Captain." Data looked up from his console

to confirm the transfer of incoming data to the main

viewscreen, then nodded with satisfaction at the

image of a marbled orb that appeared there.

"Increasing magnification."

Picard leaned forward to study the surface

features that were slowly coming into focus; gaps in the dusky-red cloud cover revealed mountains,

valleys, several large canyons, scattered seas. "Data, are we close enough to scan for

life-forms?"

"Accuracy may be somewhat compromised by the distance, but it is technically within range." After a

few minutes of manipulating the console controls, the android turned around to

face the
captain. "Sensors detect no
life-signs."

Riker shifted uneasily in his chair. "Try
another pass, Lieutenant."

"Scanning the campsite ... expanding the
search

area." At the sound of a soft beep, Data
studied the console output. "Confirmed;
there are

no discernible life-signs on the surface."

The captain rose from his chair, taking a
step

forward as if to confront the planet
itself, but the

clouds had thickened, shrouding the
surface below.

"Well, Number One," said Picard. "It

seems this is not a routine mission after all."

CHAPTER 2

The United Federation of Planets was founded on a tenet of inclusion. Thus, as Starfleet charted and explored ever greater tracts of space, new worlds and their civilizations were eagerly drawn into the loose web of interstellar government. As in any rapidly growing organization, however, the Federation's reach occasionally exceeded its grasp.

Inevitably, the grip of central authority weakened as it stretched out to the most recent annexations along an ever-expanding frontier.

Starbase 193 was held very lightly indeed.

From a distance, the station looked like a gleaming metal teardrop suspended in space. Its recent construction guaranteed a level of technology far superior to older, more established structures; and the sophisticated docking and maintenance services it offered were crucial for

supporting commercial traffic through the sector.

However, aside from the base itself, Federation presence in the sector consisted of one career officer.

Commander Miyakawa was forced to work without one of the standard benefits of a bureaucratic posting closer to home a well-regulated support staff. Most of the day-to-day operations of the base were dependent on a shifting pool of labor settlers who had run out of money before reaching their

chosen paradise, technicians who had
overslept a shore leave and lost their
berth on a
freighter, or confirmed drifters who
would leave
when the tendrils of civilization crept
too
close for comfort.

The permanent inhabitants of Starbase
193

were employed in business ventures of
their own.

DaiMon Maarc sauntered into the murky
recesses of the Due or Die with an air of
confidence that marked him as an
especially
prosperous merchant among a race of

merchants.

His tailored gray business suit was cut to flatter his form; its sleeves were embellished with bands of jewel-encrusted cloth; and the broad, soft collar was studded with gold pins. For a Ferengi, it was a discreet display of solid financial success.

A DaiMon of means would usually avoid a bar as dingy and cramped as the Due or Die.

Beauty was not the only quality that was missing from the establishment; cleanliness and comfort were also in short

supply. However, Maarc had little interest in the quality of the decor. Tourists and the credit-poor rabble of the station might come here for cheap drinks, but he had come to see Camenae. As he threaded his way between wobbling tables, the Ferengi calculated his current cash reserve for speculative ventures. Any purchase he made today would be expensive. Most of Camenae's clients came to the bar with a specific question; if they could meet her

price, most walked back out with an answer.

Sometimes they paid with a handful of round tokens, the only currency that had any meaning inside the bar, but it was common knowledge that Camenae preferred an exchange for new information to tuck away in anticipation of future requests. Besides forming the basis for her business, facts were also her private passion, and matching the right fact with the right customer brought Camenae a deep

sense of personal satisfaction. So, on occasion she informed certain select individuals that she possessed an answer to a question they hadn't thought to ask yet. Just such a notification had reached the Ferengi a few minutes earlier, and he had not wasted any time in responding to the call. Through experience, DaiMon Maarc had learned that Camenae did not let her goods grow stale. He would have been a much richer merchant today if he had paid more attention

the first time she offered him a question. "I'm expected," boasted Maarc to the Norsican who blocked his way. The guard nodded and stepped back to allow the Ferengi to pass through another door into an even darker room. Maarc's steps faltered as he waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light, but there were no unseen obstacles waiting to trip him. Shadows were the only decoration in the bare interior, and the only touch of color was in Camenae's

burgundy robe.

New clients expected a greater display of security, but in time they realized that Camenae stored her most valuable capital beyond anyone's reach her dark, round face betrayed no secrets, and a sleek cap of black hair covered the impenetrable vault of her mind.

Tokens marking a financial transaction were redeemed elsewhere.

"I got your message." Maarc settled down at the small table where Camenae held

court. "How much will this information cost me?"

She named a sum that made the Ferengi merchant

hiss with outrage.

"A consortium of DaiMon in your guild could gather the necessary funds," she said, unruffled

by his reaction. "And given the amount involved,

I'm willing to extend a line of credit."

"That is very generous of you," he sniffed,

"considering that you approached me with this offer. Be

warned, I have no intention of assuming a ruinous

debt to satisfy your greed."

"The price would be much higher if you were my first customer."

"What!" His gnomish face squinched into a

mass of creases. A certain amount of theatrics

was obligatory, but Maarc's irritation was only partially feigned.

Camenae shrugged an apology. "My preferred customer list has grown so large that there are, inevitably, certain conflicts of interest."

"Double insult!"

"It was never my intention to offend,
DaiMon.

To make amends for any ill feelings I
have
inadvertently created, I offer a discount."
He grunted in disdain, but his nose
twitched
at the whiff of a bargain. She knew him
well enough
to sense his renewed interest.

"Against my usual policy," said
Camenae,

"I will waive the charge for the
question."

"You would have charged me for the
question itself!" This time his
outrage was completely genuine.

"Of course," she said. "Good questions are often

far more valuable than the answers."

"You should have been a Ferengi."

Maarc's good

humor was partially restored by her audacity. "So,

what is the question I should have asked?"

When he heard Camenae's reply, the DaiMon quickly reached into his vest pocket.

Withdrawing his hand, he placed a token on the

table. "Here is a deposit. I will raise the full sum of the answer's price within the hour."

He stacked a second token on top of the first. "I will double the amount if you also tell me the identity of your first client."

Then he added a third token to the pile. "And

I will triple the amount if I am your last client to receive this information."

Camenae smiled as she gathered up the coins.

"It's always a pleasure doing business with a professional, DaiMon Maarc."

CHAPTER 3

As the Enterprise swung into orbit around the

yellow sun's lone planet, Counselor Troi had already begun her reconnaissance work for the mission. However, unlike the Away Team members who would soon transport to the ground below, her terrain was the flaring emotions of the crew. Data's announcement had set off a tremor of tension through the bridge, and Picard sat at its epicenter. His rising anger was probably rooted in frustration at arriving too late to prevent whatever catastrophe had occurred on

Atropos. Since the captain had a tendency to view this type of event as a personal failure, Troi made a mental note to monitor this reaction over the next few days.

There should be no problem unless he persisted in blaming himself, but Picard usually recovered his perspective without her intervention. Troi had exerted her empathic abilities to read the captain, but she strengthened her block against Will Riker's mind; Imzadi was all too easy to read, and at close quarters his

emotions

blared out like a siren. Each visit to a new world

keyed the first officer's nerves with excitement, but

this time the additional element of unknown danger let

loose a surge of adrenalin that urged him to leap

forward, to move, to run, to shout. Riker continued

to sit quietly in place next to the captain, but

she could see the younger man's cheeks flushing from the

strain; still, he would be fine as soon as he had

permission to lead the Away Team to the

surface.

Beverly Crusher was another matter; her anticipation had soured into apprehension when she learned the results of the sensor scan.

"Beverly?"

"At least before I had a chance of helping my patient," said the doctor under her breath so only

Troi could hear her. "Now ..." She lifted the

medical field kit off her lap and slung its strap over one shoulder in preparation for the Away Team's departure.

"Landing coordinates confirmed,"

announced

Data as the flow of sensor information to the computers

finally slowed. "The campsite appears intact."

Captain Picard's silent nod released a storm of movement.

Riker shot out of his chair, finger stabbing at the

two helm positions. "Ro, Data, with me."

Dr. Crusher was already ahead of him, striding

up the ramp to the aft turbolift.

"Energizing."

At the sound of Chief O'Brien's warning, Crusher braced herself for the frisson of

the
transporter beam. Seconds later, a
whistling
shiver rippled its way through the cells
of her
body, and when the shiver faded, the
bright glare of
sunlight stabbed her eyes. She dropped
her
head down, blinking furiously to clear
away the
dancing hot spots on her retinas. When
the
doctor's vision cleared, she could see
her
boots resting on a ground cover of
orange
moss.

She could also see a dead body lying at her feet.

Crusher lifted her gaze and counted three more bodies of Vulcans in the campsite one stretched across the threshold of a field tent, two others fallen in a tangled heap onto the ground in the center of the compound. More bodies were probably hidden amidst the ancient, weathered blocks of stone that had tumbled from their foundations.

"Well, that accounts for four out of the

ten," she
said, pulling out her medical tricorder.
She
passed the instrument over a Vulcan
male in his
middle years, but the scan was little
more than a
formality since the cause of death was
all too
obvious his chest and face were charred
from a
close-range phaser blast.
She proceeded on to the intertwined
bodies.
Dropping down to a crouch, she started
another
scan.
At Riker's direction, the rest of the

Away

Team kept moving, spreading out to survey the area around the landing coordinates. Their progress was slow as they skirted crumbling walls and broken columns and sought firm footing over piles of debris.

"There's someone over here," called out Ro.

Crusher glanced up to watch as the ensign stepped over a moss-covered ridge to inspect her discovery. Whatever she saw on the other side

sent the Bajoran stumbling backward.
"Also
dead."

The doctor bent back down to complete
her
inspection. The man and woman
appeared to have been
struggling over the phaser locked in the
grip of the
man's hand, then both had been killed by
its
activation.

"Some of the equipment was also
damaged by phaser
fire," said Commander Riker when he
had circled
back to the starting point. "But the

wreckage is haphazard and nothing of value appears to have been taken."

Just their lives, thought Crusher, as she snapped shut the scanner.

Riker sighed as he surveyed the carnage. "We had outbreaks of violence on the Enterprise when Ambassador Sarek was on

board; could T'Sara's illness have triggered a mass homicidal rage among these Vulcans?"

"Please, Commander," protested the doctor, as she rose to her feet. "It's far too early for me to speculate on--"

"Over here!" Data rarely raised his voice; she and Riker whirled around at the android's shout. "I detect life-signs ahead ... extremely faint."

Crusher broke into a run to follow Data down a twisting path, rushing past more dead bodies, ignoring everything but the call of the living.

It was a very weak call indeed.

When Crusher fell to her knees by the side of the elderly Vulcan woman, she feared that Data was mistaken or that T'Sara had loosed her

hold on life only seconds before their arrival. The shadows of a looming tower had shielded the archaeologist from the full heat of the planet's sun, but the phaser wounds on her side and shoulder should have killed her long before.

"Data, I'm not getting any readings." Then the medscanner trilled once; the life-signs were not only faint, they were also widely spaced.

"Of course," said Crusher. "She's in a Vulcan healing trance. I must get her up to the

ship immediately." She hit her comm link.

"Emergency transport! Two to sickbay." T'Sara was no heavier than a child when Crusher gathered her up in her arms. The doctor whispered in the woman's ear, "You're safe, you're among friends, and you're going to live!" As the transporter beam took hold of the doctor and her patient, Beverly Crusher hoped she could keep that last promise.

Over the many years of their service together, Picard had learned to trust his crew's

observations and perceptions, to let them serve as his eyes and ears on Away missions. This rapport had helped ease the captain's sense of frustration at remaining so far removed from the reconnaissance of Atropos. The planet loomed large in the conference room windows as two members of the landing party summarized their activities of the last few hours. Between Data's detailed recital of the essential facts and Riker's more subjective evocation of the

carnage, Picard was able to recreate their

experience in his own mind.

His first officer had worked his way through a list of the

dead to the last archaeologist. "We finally found

Skorret at the bottom of one of the excavation

pits. He had been working near the edge, evidently cataloging some ceremonial weapons,

when someone took the broken shard of a

sword and stabbed him through the back."

"I detected blood-stained fingerprints on

the
hilt," said Data, "so it will be possible
to determine who is responsible for
Skorret's
murder. Unfortunately, culpability will
prove more difficult to establish in most
of the other
cases."

"Under the circumstances," said Riker,
"the question
of guilt or innocence hardly matters
since the
murderers are all dead, too. Assigning
blame for this tragedy won't provide
much comfort
to their families."
In Picard's experience, Vulcans were
less

interested in comfort than in truth. "This is not so much a matter of justice, Number One, as it is of discovery. In order to unravel why these murders occurred, we must catalog the way in which they occurred."

"Standard forensic recovery procedures are already in effect," confessed the first officer. "Two paramedic teams have been assigned to remove the bodies from the planet surface and take them

to sickbay for autopsies."

As Picard suspected, Riker's instincts were

sound, even when he professed to balk at Data's dispassionate perspective. The captain smiled at the quizzical look on Data's face. The android appeared confused by the apparent contradiction between the first officer's words and his actions.

Checking a final notation on his padd, Riker then said, "Lieutenant Worf will supervise the removal of the team's personal effects from the

planet surface, but what should we do about the research equipment and camp facilities?"

Unfortunately, Picard realized, this was one

detail Commander Miyakawa had not thought

to clarify in her briefing report. "Data, check the camp records to see who has jurisdiction over the property. We'll need

instructions on whether the excavation will continue without

T'Sara and the other Vulcans."

"I can't imagine it would be abandoned," said

Riker. "From what I saw, the ruins are quite extensive. There must be hundreds of artifacts to be recovered."

"How odd." The first officer's observation triggered a new avenue of curiosity for Picard. "What you describe would be considered a major research project, yet I don't believe I've ever heard of this site before."

"Falling behind on your journal reading, sir?"

"On the contrary," said Picard. Having achieved minor acclaim as an amateur

archaeologist, he made a concerted effort to remain current in the field. "I used to follow T'Sara's research reports with great interest, but her last publication appeared nearly two decades ago, before the departure of the Stargazer on an extended deepspace mission. By the time I returned to the Federation, I had lost track of her whereabouts." As soon as the captain turned to Data, the android nodded and said, "I will

broaden my search
to cover a profile of the expedition."
"Thank you, Mr. Data."
The background information would be
useful, but
Picard doubted it would provide any
insight
into the mystery of the violence on
Atropos.
Instead, his thoughts shifted to sickbay,
where the
answers to his most pressing questions
lay just out of
reach, locked deep in T'Sara's mind.
He would continue his investigation
there.

She had a gaunt, wrinkled face and hair

leached white by the passage of centuries.

Curled on her side, covered by a light blanket, T'Sara appeared to be sleeping peacefully on the diagnostic bed. The only

clue to her steep dive into a healing trance was the

weak flutter of indicators on the medical scanner; her life-signs barely registered.

The loose sleeve of Beverly Crusher's coat brushed against Picard's arm. He couldn't

tell if the doctor had moved to his side to offer silent comfort or to seek it out for herself.

"She's much frailer than I expected,"

whispered Picard. He knew T'Sara was
unable
to hear him, yet he couldn't bring himself
to speak
louder. "Her writing is so robust that I
unconsciously imagined her to be a
Vulcan
Amazon, strong-limbed and tall."
"She must have an incredibly strong
constitution
to remain alive this long." Crusher's
voice
matched Picard's in softness.
"Professionally
speaking, there's little more that I can do
for her except
trust that the powers of her mind will

heal the
damage."

He stepped away from the bedside so
that

he could speak more freely. "The
recovery work on

Atropos is only beginning, but I will
order an

immediate departure if you feel her
condition warrants

the attention of a starbase medical
facility."

"No." Crusher's answer was swift and
firm. "I've already discussed that option
with Dr.

Selar, and we both determined that our
medical

assistance is equal to any provided

outside of
Vulcan. We could never reach one of
their master
healers in time to make any difference to
T'Sara's
recovery. The outcome will be settled
within the
next twenty-four hours ... one way or
another."

Her prediction measured out hope and
despair
in equal portions. Picard decided he
must
balance his expectations on the same
razor-edge
of uncertainty.

One of the medical staff had been

hovering
discreetly out of range of the
conversation between the
captain and his chief medical officer.
She quickly
took advantage of Picard's silence and
stepped forward.
"Yes, Nurse D'Airo?" asked
Crusher.

"The first shipment from the planet
surface has
arrived."

Picard could see the muscles in
Beverly's
neck tighten, and he realized the nurse
was
referring to the bodies of the Vulcan
archaeologists. The doctor's voice

flattened
into a monotone as she issued a set of
instructions concerning the preparations
in the two
surgical suites in sickbay.

When Nurse D'Airo had jotted the last
instruction on her data padd and slipped
away,

Crusher turned back around to face the
captain.

"I hate autopsies," she said with a
grimace.

"When do you need these results?"

"As soon as possible. Until T'Sara
awakens, the results of the examinations
are our
only clues to explaining the murders. Not

to mention
that those results may serve to
corroborate her
future testimony."

"What?" said Crusher. "Captain, you
make
her sound like a suspect in the murders.
Remember that she was one of the
victims."

"Beverly, given Sorren's misgivings
about
T'Sara's failing mental health, I can't
afford to accept her explanation of the
events on

Atropos without some supporting
evidence."

Looking over at the huddled figure of the
elderly Vulcan, Picard wondered if she

would
live long enough to tell her version.

The encampment on Atropos was still
bathed in
daylight when the Enterprise cycled into
night.

Seventeen hours after the priority
distress call
had pulled the starship off its course,
weary
crewmembers drifted into Ten-Forward
or sought
quiet refuge in their quarters; corridors
fell silent, drained of their traffic; and
lights
dimmed or guttered into darkness.
Of course, there were some exceptions--

a few
stubborn pockets of activity--and one of
these was
the captain's ready room.
Picard rubbed the bridge of his nose in a
futile effort to ease his aching head and
blurring
vision, then he scanned the text on his
desk
computer one more time.
"No, that's not right either," he muttered
and
tapped a key that would delete the
paragraph he
had just written.
The preliminary mission reports
to Miyakawa and Starfleet command had
been easy

to draft, but the captain was experiencing more difficulty with his personal message to the director of the Vulcan Science Academy. On the surface, Vulcan culture was straightforward and rational, but appearances could be deceiving; logic took some unexpected twists and turns when mixed with primal issues such as murder and death. Picard had written and rewritten his description of T'Sara's injury and the death of her colleagues, but

although his instincts could lead him away from certain phrases that might offend, he was less sure of what words to put in their place.

The trill of the ready room doorbell was a welcome distraction from the frustration of his task.

"Come," called out Picard, then waved his visitor to one of the chairs on the other side of the desk.

"Good evening, Captain," said Data with typical formality. "I apologize for taking so

long to prepare my report. I was delayed by an unfortunate discovery the camp's computer data files were erased by the electromagnetic pulse from a phaser blast."

Merde. Picard assumed the Vulcans were methodical enough to maintain duplicate records elsewhere, possibly at Starbase 193, but tracking them down would take more time.

"Fortunately," said Data, "I was able to reconstruct the broad outlines of the expedition's history from our own

library
archives. The project's formation was
quite
unusual."

"In what way?" asked Picard.

"Earlier Federation surveys established
that
most items of note were removed from
Atropos
several hundred years ago by the
original
inhabitants. Although the reasons are
obscure,
the colony was deliberately and
methodically
abandoned, thus rendering it of minimal
scholastic
value. As a result, T'Sara was unable

to secure support from academic institutions to explore the ruins, and eventually she sold her family estate on Vulcan to fund the venture herself."

"A private expedition? That certainly bespeaks considerable dedication."

T'Sara's reputation for radical departures from conventional scholarship was well-founded. "So what was the basis for her fascination with Atropos?" "The avowed purpose was considered to be

"illogical," even downright eccentric. T'Sara claimed that an artifact called the Ko N'ya was buried somewhere on the planet."

"The Ko N'ya?"

"Yes," said the android. "The Ko N'ya is--"

"Thank you, Data." Picard had become adept at stemming the android's excess of information. "However, an explanation won't be necessary. I'm quite familiar with the legends of the Ko N'ya, quite familiar indeed." Ko N'ya.

Years had passed since Picard had

uttered
that name aloud. The emotions it evoked
were rooted in
childhood and threaded through the long
years of his
adulthood. His earliest recollections
surfaced first and sent a shudder of
excitement and
fear up his spine and out through the tips
of his fingers.
It was a delicious sensation.

CHAPTER 4

When the Iconian people fled through the

Gateway

to seek safe havens, Ikkabar was the most inviting of the new worlds. Its lush plains and shallow seas were familiar to homesick eyes, and a walk along the curving coastlines of the northern continent could trick the mind into thinking Iconia's destruction had been nothing more than a fading nightmare.

To this first generation of settlers, Ikkabar was a clean slate on which to reconstruct their history

and culture. They raised cities filled with the same delicate architecture that had been trammelled to dust by enemy weapons, then they picked up the threads of their past lives as if nothing had changed. Many called the planet New Iconia, and this belief in a serene rebirth clouded their vision with bright colors that had been mixed under the light of a different sun. The next generation was not so complacent. Children born to this world saw more clearly than their

elders; young eyes were not so easily fooled by the appearance of tranquillity. There were shadows on this landscape that had not been charted, subtle intimations of a darker geographic history that no one had bothered to read. The children still called themselves Iconians, but they restored the planet's name to Ikkabar as a reminder that they were strangers to this place. Over the following centuries, vague fears of

lurking danger began to harden into grim knowledge. The temperate climate that had greeted the early settlers was only a brief respite in a pendulum swing from one harsh extreme to another.

The planet's orbit was irregular in the extreme, and its climate equally so; there came a time when the warm seas dried entirely in the heat of summer, leaving nothing but sucking mud flats that stretched to the far horizon; in winter, torrential rains washed away the mud and

flooded the plains. Growing seasons
contracted,
bringing famine to a people who had
never wanted for
food. The foundations of their buildings
began
to shift and slide in the softened ground,
then harden
at angles with their walls cracked open
and lofty
spirals splintered.
Old traditions were abandoned as each
succeeding
generation desperately searched for new
ways to grow
food and to build structures that could
safely house their families.

Nevertheless, their
offworld heritage was still treasured.
When Ikkabar
cycled back to a temperate climate and
the
halcyon days of legend returned, the
Iconians rejoiced. There was talk of a
cultural
renaissance, and ancient tomes, carefully
preserved, were opened and read by
those who still retained
some measure of that dying skill.
The joy was short-lived. Bitter
disappointment
took its place as the weather began to
grow
colder, and the seas turned to ice rather
than mud.

Much of the knowledge brought from Iconia was lost forever as precious books were burned as fuel. A few of the elders fought to save those relics; they were burned as well.

The hardy survivors of ancient Iconia now called themselves the Ikkabar. They moved from their ice-block fortresses to grass huts and back again with greater ease and fewer deaths, but even so, their numbers continued to dwindle. Few remembered the sprawling cities that had

been their first home; however, the
buried remnants
of these ancient settlements served as a
beacon
to space-faring races. The sensors of a
passing
Federation starship traced the record of
past
grandeur hidden beneath layers of ice
and mud, and a
discreet probe gathered data on the
people who lived
on this harsh planet. Little was done
with the knowledge until
an ethnographer at the Vulcan Academy
of
Science happened to read the field

report.

Each year after that, T'Sara petitioned the

Federation for a more extensive survey of Ikkabar,

and each year she was refused, but her constant

pressure pushed its name higher and higher on the

list of projects waiting for funding and personnel. At last, eight years after its first

visit, the USS Galeone returned to the planet.

There were even fewer people alive on the surface

now.

The census results unleashed a storm of

controversy among the members of the survey team.

T'Sara led a faction that favored First Contact

so the Federation could provide aid to the scattered

hunting tribes scrabbling for food. The

Vulcan argued that these were the

descendants of a people

dependant on a highly developed

technological culture. They were ill-

matched

to this primitive world and its demands;

and just as one

rescued the crew of a wrecked ship,

these

people were in dire need of assistance.

Unfortunately, her evidence for this theory was weak. Memories of Iconia and the Gateway had degenerated into a vague creation myth of a lost paradise, and the similarities to real places and events were impossible to corroborate. The opposing faction in the observation team maintained that the hunters were native to Ikkabar and that their evolutionary history had been erased by the same

climatic upheavals that had toppled their ancient civilization.

That winter, more of the Ikkabar died than were born.

Despite the continuing drop in numbers, T'Sara could not convince her colleagues that this was not part of the normal fluctuations of population growth. There was ample precedent for the wisdom of leaving a preliterate culture in strict isolation, so the expedition withdrew. As decades passed, one after another of the observation probes malfunctioned,

stressed beyond
tolerance by the brutal weather.
Mounting tensions between
the Federation and its enemies channeled
Starfleet
resources in other directions, so the
probes
remained silent for several years.
When the Federation was finally free to
turn its
attention back to Ikkabar, the children of
Iconia
had lost their battle to survive on this
third
world. All that remained of these long-
suffering people was
one hungry child found huddled by the
coals of a fading

fire.

The boy clung to his alien saviors with a desperation born of fear and loneliness.

With what

little they knew of his language the crew of the

USS Clements learned he was called Kanda

Jiak. T'Sara could have explained the importance

of this name, but she had left Vulcan to continue her

search for the Ko N'ya, and the news never reached

her.

Fourteen years and a few months after he was

rescued from Ikkabar, young Kanda Jiak took his first trembling steps toward reclaiming his lost Iconian heritage.

The decision to set off on this quest had been made on the eve of Jiak's departure from his second home on Redifer III. Perhaps it had been made even earlier, because he was one of the few students on that world who applied to an off-planet college. In either case, the trip to Terra Sol University had provided him with a convenient cover for leaving

Redifer, one that
would not arouse any opposition from
his parents.

His resolve held firm throughout the first
week

of travel away from home, but when the
passenger

liner actually docked at Starbase 75,
Jiak

cowered in his cabin for the first hour of
the brief shore

leave. It would be so much easier, so
much safer,

to continue on to Earth as everyone
expected him to do.

His quest could wait until he was older.
Yet somehow the last survivor of

Ikkabar
suspected that if he failed to act now, he
would
never walk down this path in the future.
After a
few more years, Kanda Jiak would be
fully
assimilated into his life as a citizen of
the
Federation. The tattered threads of his
origins were
already worn too thin for memory; what
little he
knew of his people came from reading
the ethnography
reports from the crew of the Galeone.
So, just a few minutes before the
passenger

recall sounded, Jiak walked off the transport liner.

He had half-hoped someone would stop him, but the

ship's first officer had smiled perfunctorily

at the request to permanently disembark, and a

harried crewman had ushered him to the docking

gate. Evidently passengers frequently changed their itinerary midway through a trip.

Jiak faced a second trial of courage when he walked through the series of interconnecting

domes that formed the main terminal.

Overwhelmed by the
massive complex and the jostling
crowds that surged in
currents around him, he felt like a small
boy
about to drown in a treacherous sea.
Rooted in place by fear and indecision,
he
automatically scanned the stream of
alien faces
for one that matched his own in color
and shape. It was
an old habit, a holdover from his early
childhood when he still believed that
someday his own people
would miraculously appear to whisk him
back
to Ikkabar. Over the years he had grown

to love
his adopted world and his foster parents,
yet the
impulse to search persisted. On all of
Redifer, and even here where over a
dozen different
races were passing by him every minute,
Jiak was
unique.

That would change soon.

"Hey! Are you lost?" The question was
followed by a
sharp jab to his arm.

"No," he said, turning to face his
inquisitor.

"You look very lost." The woman was
dressed

in a rumpled blue jumpsuit, but he noticed the row of captain's pips on the collar. They weren't Starfleet design, so she was in charge of a civilian ship, possibly a freighter. "I know where I am now," said Jiak, mustering a bravado he did not feel, "and I know where I'm going next, so I don't see how I could be lost." Her hand darted upward to tuck a stray wisp of her hair back into place. It was a futile

effort; the twisted braid she wore was bristling with errant curls. "So where are you going?" His final destination was none of her business, yet the young man was grateful for her concern, even if it was rather roughly expressed. Jiak compromised by revealing an intermediate stop.

"Well, as it happens, I'm on my way to Davenport V."

The captain snorted derisively at his answer. "And have you already got a ticket?"

He shook his head. "I need to buy one now."

I'd be in your debt if you could show me where to--"

"It's not a big tourist spot and that means top rates." Then she quoted the price of passage to that distant world.

The cost was staggeringly high. Jiak had been

sure his spending allowance for the first term would cover

all his travel expenses, but instead this one

ticket would wipe out the entire allotment on his

credit chip. He would be left with no funds for the

final leg of his journey from Davenport

to DiWahn.

His dismay must have been obvious,
because the woman

sighed heavily. "Go back home, kid."

"I'm not a kid, and I'll find another way
to get there." He would have to find it
soon. In

another few days his mother and father
would learn that he

had never reached Earth and would
begin to trace his

steps. They had no authority to stop him
now that

he was of age, but Jiak wanted to escape
their

pleas for him to return to the comforting
familiarity of

Redifer.

As if she had been reading his thoughts,
the woman

said, "I guess you're too old to be
running

away from home, but you're still young
enough to have stardust in

your eyes. That won't last long on my
ship."

"What did you say?" asked Jiak.

"The name is Captain Del," she snapped,

"and I'm not offering you a glamorous
job. Some

kids expect a joyride through space, but
you'll

work damn hard for your berth."

"I don't want glamour, just free

passage off this starbase."

"As long as you remember that, we'll get along fine." Del jabbed a finger at the bundle

by his feet. "Is that all your freight?"

"Yes. I travel light."

"Good." She smiled her approval at this evidence of thrift. "Come on, then. Don't dally. I have a tight delivery schedule." Still too startled to fully grasp his good fortune, Jiak hoisted the backpack into place

and trotted after Del.

In truth, he hadn't had time to retrieve the rest of his luggage from the passenger liner, and those heavy cases were on their way to Earth

by now. With careful tending, however, he could make do with the one change of clothing he carried with him. His only other remaining possession, the one that weighed most heavily on his shoulders, was a copy of T'Sara's Legends of the Iconian Diaspora.

CHAPTER 5

Even from his position at an aft station console, Data easily followed the overlapping exchange between Captain Picard and Dr.

Crusher.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but there has been no change in her--"

"What about the--"

"The autopsy reports are still being--"

"Let me know as soon as you have anything to report."

Data noted the way in which the two officers consistently anticipated the next request for

information. Humans persisted in this curious

behavior even though his own observations indicated

that it often led to misunderstandings.

Data heard the captain's chair creak ever

so
softly as Picard's weight was lifted from
the
cushions. With his acute senses, the
android
easily followed the sound of Picard's
distinctive tread as he moved up a side
ramp
to the elevated deck. He walked to a
spot just
behind Data's chair and stopped.
"Yes, Captain?" Data turned
around, thus observing the cultural
dictate of
face-to-face interpersonal interaction.
"I'd like to see the team profiles again."
Data had kept the files cued for instant

access. On reflection, he realized that this was an example of anticipating the captain's request.

Picard leaned over Data's shoulder and called the names out one by one.

"Skorret ...

Sohle ... Sorren ..."

Data was careful to run the biographical profiles at a speed that would accommodate the captain's slower neural responses. The android's own positronic brain had already committed all the information on the archaeological team to memory after one scan, but he

accepted the
fact that Humans required this continual
review
process to fully assimilate new
information.
"Soth ... T'Challo ... Tessin ..."
The lagging pace was never boring,
however, because
Data could occupy himself with alternate
sensory
input, such as the conversations of the
bridge crew
passing by the science station; he could
also generate
simulated poker hands to calculate odds
and
refine his betting strategy; or he could
compare

various renditions of musical compositions to better understand the aesthetic impact of a conductor's style. At the moment, he was doing all three of the above.

"Run the Vulcan distress call again," said Picard.

"Yes, Captain."

Data cued the transmission to begin with the archaeology team's identification frame, written in both Vulcan and Federation Standard.

This was followed by the image of a

Vulcan male
with the long face and high cheekbones
characteristic of his
species; although exact age was always
difficult
to determine in such a long-lived race,
he
appeared to be less than a half-century
old.

He was dressed in a dusty worksuit; the
ruins of
an ancient alien edifice served as his
backdrop.

"I am Sorren, assistant to our expedition
leader, T'Sara. It is the consensus of the
archaeological team that T'Sara is in
need of

medical attention. Her behavior is growing increasingly erratic she is prone to outbursts of emotion and persists in ..."
[crackle] ...

"There," said Picard, with a jabbing motion of his hand. Data responded instantly, freezing the badly fragmented image on the screen. "That short burst of static obliterates part of Sorren's message. From the context, it appears to be an elaboration of what constitutes T'Sara's erratic behavior." The hand

dropped and Data continued the review.

"... is my belief these symptoms are characteristic of Bendii's syndrome. I request immediate transport so that T'Sara can receive appropriate medical treatment before her condition deteriorates any further."

Data stopped the recording and waited for the captain's next command.

"That missing segment was unimportant while Sorren was alive," said Picard with a thoughtful

rub of his chin. "But now it may be our only clue as to what happened in the camp these last few days. Is there any way to recover the information?"

"If the team followed standard communications procedures, an intact original would be stored in the memory banks of the subspace radio transmitter. Unfortunately, the equipment damage erased all records of previous activity."

"Just as the expedition's data files were destroyed," said Picard. "If this

vandalism is
an example of T'Sara's "erratic"
behavior, she was also extremely
methodical in
its execution."

Data added two new tracks of activity
to his mental processes. In one of them,
he
analyzed the captain's voice and
identified the
stress pattern as indicative of irritation,
suspicion, and curiosity; of all the crew,
Data found Picard's complex emotional
states
the most challenging to unravel. The
second train
of thought led to an announcement.
"Captain, I have

identified the static interference as a substantial burst of Hovorka radiation." Given the captain's lack of reaction, Data belatedly realized that the conundrum was not self-evident.

"Hovorka emissions are generated during the collapse of brown dwarf stars, but there are no such sources for this radiation anywhere in this sector or in the area stretching between this solar system and Starbase 193."

"Then how can you account for its presence?"

"I cannot." Then, anticipating the

captain's
next question, Data said, "Neither can I
theorize a
connection between the events on the
planet and this
anomaly; nevertheless, the radiation
should not be there."

Picard was just as quick at anticipating
Data's next request.

"You know how I feel about mysteries,
Mr.

Data; it may be inconsequential, but I
still
want it explained. Proceed with your
investigation."

The slow, measured beat of the
diagnostic

scanner exploded into a flurry of sounds and flashing lights. Seconds later the chief medical officer and two nurses were clustered around T'Sara's bed. The Vulcan woman had remained limp and unresponsive when her wounds were first tended, but now her limbs twitched ever so slightly with muscular tension. "She appears to be coming out of the healing state," said Crusher as she tracked the life function indicators. Despite the wild fluctuations, the overall pattern was of an increase in

cellular and metabolic activity. "But dammit, it's too soon! The tissue damage has barely begun to regenerate. If she wakes

up now, she'll die of her injuries."

At this point, Crusher knew the ideal treatment was for a Vulcan healer to forge a

mind-link and guide the patient back into the

trance, but not even Selar was qualified to initiate that therapy.

Fortunately, there were cruder methods available to persuade the body to resume its

regenerative efforts.

"Ten cc's of Tochizine." Crusher held

out
her hand and felt the satisfying weight of
a loaded
hypospray slap into her open palm.
The doctor pressed the instrument
against the base
of the patient's neck and triggered a
spray of the
drug through the skin.
"Metabolic activity is stabilizing ...
decreasing," confirmed Nurse D'Airo.
She
began to read off the declining values,
then
paused. When she resumed the count, the
numbers were
climbing again.
"Fifteen cc's of D'armacol," ordered

Crusher, but neither that nor an additional fifteen cc's of Hyzolidine had any lasting effect on the readouts. "It's as if her body is constantly adjusting to the injections and neutralizing the effects."

Crusher accepted a recharged hypo from D'Airo and positioned it against bare skin, but she did not trigger the blast. The Vulcan's drive to regain consciousness could not be repressed without a massive chemical assault that would do equal

damage to her weakened system.
Then T'Sara snapped open her eyes; they
were
onyx-black and clear of any confusion.
"All right," said Crusher softly. "If this
is what you want."
T'Sara extended a thin, spindly arm
toward
the doctor. From a Human the gesture
might have
appeared imploring, but there was no
mistaking the
imperious demand of a Vulcan. The
fingers of the hand
flexed, then clenched like steel clamps
around a
fold of Beverly's coat. Even nearing

death,
T'Sara had sufficient strength to pull the doctor closer until the old woman's mouth was pressed against Crusher's ear. T'Sara's hoarse whisper was like a gust of desert air. "Ko N'ya ... the blood never stops flowing."

Picard had managed to catch a few hours sleep since his last visit to sickbay, but he suspected his chief medical officer had not been so lucky. Standing in the close confines of her office, he could hear a rasp in Beverly's

voice and see dark smudges forming beneath her eyes.

"Are you sure that's what she said?" asked Riker.

"Yes, I'm sure." Crusher had delivered her medical report with a crisp detachment, but now that it was over she shoved aside her medical padd and sagged back into her desk chair.

"T'Sara spoke quite clearly ... before she died."

Picard saw Beverly's gaze shift away to the sickbay ward outside her office;

he
glanced back in time to see two nurses
lift a
still, covered body onto an antigrav sled.
By the time he and Riker left this office,
T'Sara would be gone, whisked away
from the
presence of the living.
Having witnessed Sarek's last days of
suffering
from Bendii's syndrome, Picard
wondered if
this was a more merciful end.
"What does that mean? Ko Ni--" Riker
faltered over the delicate contraction of
the
syllables.
"Ko N'ya," corrected the captain with a

grasp of the inflection that came naturally to him through long usage. "The name is ancient, with origins in a pre-Reform Vulcan dialect. There is no direct translation, but the cultural concept is roughly analogous to "the Devil's Heart"."

Crusher frowned at the explanation.

"What an odd choice for one's dying words."

"Not so odd for this particular Vulcan," said

Picard. "For the past two decades, T'Sara

has ... had been obsessed with tracing an

object which she believed appeared in the mythology of disparate worlds. Her theory, widely discounted by other scholars and historians, is that this talisman really did exist and that it was the factual source for all those legends. She also believed that the Ko N'ya had somehow ended up on Atropos, and she spent the last ten years trying to find it there."

"What a waste," said Riker. "Could this obsession of hers have been caused by

the
Bendii's?"

"Would everyone please stop
speculating ahead
of the evidence," snapped Crusher.

"Sorren was
an archaeologist, not a doctor, and he
was not
qualified to diagnose such an extremely
rare
disease. Until my lab tests confirm--"

"How soon--" began Picard.

"I'm working as fast as I can, Captain,"
said

Crusher stiffly. "My staff is working as
fast as

they can. When the results are ready, I'll
let--"

She stopped suddenly, took a deep breath,
then began again. "And when I've gotten some
sleep, I may even remember how to be civil
again."

"No offense taken, Doctor," said Picard. Sleep might help, but he suspected her weariness had another, darker,
source; Beverly's next task was all too obvious.

His chief medical officer rose from behind
her desk. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen,

I have another autopsy to attend to."

"Captain?"

"Sorry, Number One," said Picard, when he realized that he was still standing in the corridor

outside sickbay, lost in thoughts of T'Sara and

her fruitless quest. He launched himself forward,

setting a brisk pace. "You were saying?" Riker fell into step beside him.

"According to Worf's progress report, the research camp is almost completely dismantled. We should be able to break orbit in the next few hours."

"Not yet," said Picard. "Not until we have a clear idea of what happened down on the surface. We may need to examine the site again."

There was sufficient truth in this statement to ease Picard's conscience. An additional, unspoken reason was his need to make peace with T'Sara's murder. His grief at the scholar's death was more intellectual than emotional, yet an empty feeling of deep loss could not be

dislodged no
matter how fast he walked.
"I think it's time for me to see Atropos
for
myself." Without slowing his pace,
Picard executed
an abrupt turn to his right and marched
through the open
doors of a turbolift that had just
discharged a
passenger. "Deck 6."
Riker dashed into the compartment just
before the doors
closed. As the turbolift whined into
motion, the first
officer said, "Are you going down there
as an
archaeologist or as a detective?"

"A bit of both," admitted Picard, "but also to pay my respects."

When T'Sara's life had been cut short, her ceaseless quest for the mythic Ko N'ya had

also come to an end. Atropos, with its covering of

ruins, was a fitting tombstone for both of them.

The hard metallic grill of the transporter platform transmuted into spongy turf, and Picard felt his boots sink ever so slightly into the ground.

He surveyed his surroundings, from the plants

crushed under his boots to the strange jumble of

ruins, like the bleached bones of an ancient
goliath scattered all around him.
Massive tiles had once paved the area
with
alternating squares of bright colors, but
their pattern was disrupted now. Some
tiles had
settled unevenly, their surfaces tilted at
wild angles; others were shattered into
pieces;
all were smeared with a thick layer of
dust and dirt.
In the center of the plaza was a jagged
ring of stone,
all that remained of a high tower that had
crumbled
down to its base. Judging from the

amount of
debris, the structure had dwarfed every
other
building within miles; even its ruins still
reached
high enough to block out the sun.
The air was dry and tartly scented, and
he
inhaled deeply, eager to flush his lungs
of the
odorless mixture of gases that filled the
starship. Picard smiled, savoring the feel
of his
mind stretching to encompass an alien
landscape.
The smile faded when he caught sight of
a

small metallic tag driven into the ground;
it

marked where a body had been found.

Four

archaeologists had died in the plaza that
sprawled
out before him.

Lieutenant Worf stepped out of the
shadows where
he had been waiting for the captain's
arrival.

He pointed to a marker by his feet.

"T'Sara
fell here."

Three other tags were arranged in a
rough
semicircle around the Klingon, placed

where the
archaeologists had gathered to face their
leader.

According to Riker's mission report,
Soth and
T'Challo were also armed, and T'Sara
was caught
in their cross fire.

Picard tried to reconstruct the scene in
his
mind, but it was difficult to place
Vulcans in
the midst of such violence. For ten years
T'Sara
and her colleagues had patiently worked
their way
through these ruins. What combination of
actions and

reactions among them could have led to this fatal tableau?

"Lieutenant, where was their last excavation site?"

"Over here." Worf retreated into the shadows.

The captain followed, picking his way through a maze of fallen blocks, wary of loose tiles that rocked underfoot.

"We removed a scanner and several sonic

tools from this area," said Worf.

As his eyes adjusted to the shade, Picard

could
see that a patch of ground had been
cleared of
stones to provide access to a delicate
bas
relief of hieroglyphics carved on the
tower
wall. One section was partially restored,
but if the Vulcans had managed to
decipher the
alien language, the message had been
lost again
when the expedition's data files were
erased.
"I had hoped for something more
momentous," said
Picard with a sigh, "but I'm afraid this
would

only have been a footnote in her latest--"
He spied a black shadow breaking the
expanse of gray wall; it was tall and
narrow,
like a doorway.

Curiosity demanded an explanation.

Picard

walked to the wall, but even up close his
eyes

strained to see through the opening. He
stretched out an

arm. His hand sank into the darkness and
touched air that

was several degrees cooler than where
he stood.

"Another footnote?" asked Worf.

"Perhaps. Why don't we find out?"

Picard stepped through the opening.
The tunnel was narrow--he could hear
the sound of
Worf's shoulders brushing against the
sides of
polished stone--and if the light grew any
dimmer
he would be foolish to forge ahead. The
darkness did
not thicken, however. Instead, a glowing
light
beckoned him to continue his
exploration.
They soon discovered that the
illumination came from
a field lamp abandoned in the corridor.
Its

light revealed that the end of the tunnel had once been bricked over, but the archaeologists had cut through the barrier to reach the circular chamber beyond.

"More than a footnote," said Picard when he caught sight of the interior.

A huge throne, hewn out of the same stone as the tower above, was set in the center of the bare room.

The attenuated figure that sat on the throne was no statue, however. On his first breath, Picard

had inhaled the musty odor of mummification. Skin and tissue had dried, shrinking against the skeleton beneath.

In life, the alien had been tall and willowy; in death, it was crouched like a spider in its web.

"It's holding something," he said, observing how its arms and hands came together as if cupping a small object in its palms. When Picard approached for a better look, his boots stirred dust motes of decay into the still air.

The object was gone.

He knew the prickle of apprehension that shuddered through him was irrational and unwarranted.

Surely, the contents of this chamber must have been

plundered centuries before the Vulcans had

set foot on the planet.

"I've seen enough."

Worf nodded impassively, but he scrambled

out the portal somewhat faster than he had entered.

Picard ducked his head as he edged through the breach, then froze in place.

"Captain? Is something wrong?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, although I suppose it hardly matters now."

The signs were so clear; surely T'Sara had

seen them, too? Picard reached out one hand,

trailing his fingers over the crumbling bricks and

mortar, wondering what fierce emotion had driven

the hands that had built this wall.

"This chamber was sealed from the inside."

CHAPTER 6

Embedded discreetly along the outer

shell of
Starbase 193 were a series of subspace
signal collectors, a small part of the vast
communications network that linked one
end of the Federation
to another. These electronic scoops
gathered up
decaying transmissions from passing
freighters or
from settlements uneasily perched on the
fringe of
Federation territory, then computers
sorted the
compressed digital packets and directed
them
to the appropriate transmitter along the
upper
rim of the station. The newly fortified

signals were
flung back into the void toward their
destination or
to yet another of the relay boosters
seeded throughout
Federation territory.

The process was automatic, so the
communications packet from the
Enterprise passed
through the system in a matter of
seconds. It would
have taken even less time, except
Captain
Picard's mission report had to be
detached from
the compressed bundle before the
remaining portion of the

transmission was sent on its way to Vulcan.

Suffering yet another half-second lag, the captain's report was routed through a short system

subroutine. Following the program's instructions, the computer created a duplicate of the

transmission and shuttled this copy to an untitled

buffer file. The original proceeded to Commander

Miyakawa's message terminal.

Minutes later, a technician in the communications center accessed the duplicate and

perused its contents. After the first quick

reading, a nervous tic began to tug one corner of his mouth askew. He read the message a second time.

This breach of security procedures would have been more difficult to implement on a starbase fully staffed by Starfleet officers, but Thomas Grede often worked unsupervised, so the subroutine had been relatively easy to install. None of the other operators knew the system well enough

to discover the alteration, and few would have cared.

He was depending on this same apathy when he slipped away from his post in the middle of a shift.

No one noticed his departure, but then no one

noticed Grede much of the time anyway.

He was a

slight, timid man who had grown accustomed

to being overlooked by the people around him. Competent and

reliable, his only weakness was a hunger for

attention, yet this craving had persisted

unfulfilled for most of his life.
On Starbase 193, one person had seen
his
need and used it to her advantage.
As a matter of routine, any new
employee
hired by the base commander was soon
tempted
to provide certain business interests on
the station
with private services. Grede had stood
firm
against repeated bribes, and over
several years of
steady if unspectacular performance, he
had
earned a high security clearance. During

this time,
however, Camenae had patiently
cultivated his
friendship with a few kind words and
the occasional free
drink at the Due or Die. This mild
flattery was all it took to buy his loyalty.
Grede grew anxious to please her.
Without
any prompting, one day he came to her
with the gift
of a coded communiqu'e to Commander
Miyakawa that
he had skillfully intercepted. Camenae
had
paid him for the betrayal, but it was her
smile of
appreciation that thrilled him.

Unfortunately,
her gratitude did not last very long, and
soon
her manner toward him grew cool and
distant.

Desperate to regain her favor, the
technician
realized that the only way he could
maintain his good
standing was with a constant stream of
tribute.

Today, as he scurried through the doors
of the Due
or Die, Grede belatedly admitted that the
price of pleasing Camenae was climbing
higher
than he could afford.

"I have information." These were the magic words that had first fulfilled his desire to impress the knowledge-broker. These three words persuaded the Norsican guard to move aside and allow Grede access to the inner sanctum. He knew the way into Camenae's shadowed office by heart, but he stumbled over the threshold anyway, his feet tangled by haste and a fear so strong it weakened his knees. She waved him to a chair, but he continued to stand, bouncing on the balls

of his feet, ready to sprint away again.
"I've just seen the latest report
to Miyakawa from the Enterprise," he
said, still
panting from his run to the bar.

"Camenae, the
Vulcans on Atropos are dead!"

"So the Enterprise is handling this
matter.

That's definitely information I can use."
She
reached into the folds of her robe and
withdrew a
token.

"No," cried Grede, his voice rising in
pitch. "I didn't come here to sell you
something.

Camenae, this situation is getting out of hand.

We're talking the death of prominent Federation citizens. That means an investigation, questions, officials prying into every corner of this starbase."

She shrugged. "I'm not responsible if you failed to consider the consequences of our last transaction."

"Dammit, I could get into serious trouble for what I've done!"

"In that case," she said, palming the coin he

had rejected, "I'll put this on your account.

You may have need of it in the future."

He searched her face for some sign of compassion. The corners of her mouth were turned

down, but not out of concern for his misfortune.

Camenae was merely impatient for him to leave.

Sendei shut his eyes.

After a century of practice, this simple act should have slipped him easily into meditation, but

today that skill eluded him. The Vulcan struggled

to submerge himself and failed. He

could still hear the
muffled exchanges between students and
professors
in the hall outside, and the outlines of his
office
remained clearly visible in his mind.
He took a deep breath. Then, like a child
just
learning the first steps of emotional
control, he
summoned the construct of two hands
and imagined them
cupped over each of his ears.
When all sounds had faded, Sendei
passed the
hands in front of his face, and his
awareness of the
room in which he sat receded as well.

The
removal of these distractions released
other
thoughts that were not so easily blocked.
He was haunted by memories of the
dead.
Over ten years had passed since he had
found
T'Sara standing on the crest of a moonlit
dune,
gazing out across the plains to the
blackened
silhouette of Mount Selaya. Sendei had
argued with her for hours, nearly until
dawn, but
logic could not deter T'Sara from selling
her

estate to continue her search for the Ko N'ya. He had stormed away when his emotional reserve finally shattered against her obstinacy. By the time he had recovered his composure, she had left Vulcan.

He never saw her again.

T'Sara had no close family, and the distant branches of her clan had severed all contact after she ceded her ancestral lands. As of this moment, Sendei claimed her as his own kin. He would

write her name in his family's annals so that his children's children would revere her memory.

Her image faded and he was alone in the desert.

Dipping his hands into the dune, Sendei filled

cupped palms with sand, then focused his attention

on the grains as they streamed from between his fingers. This

second construct helped him descend to another

level of the meditative state.

He did not see Sohle's face, but he remembered the gruffness of the man's

voice. Although
Sohle had never professed belief in
T'Sara's quest, he had been the first
archaeologist at the Academy to
announce his
decision to accompany her to Atropos,
and he had
met the storm of criticism leveled
against his
participation with a short answer. "I will
learn more from
her folly than from the wisdom of my
colleagues."
Other professors and students had been
persuaded by these words, so T'Sara did
not leave
Vulcan alone.
Now Sendei would have to inform

Sohle's children that
their father was dead, just as Tessin's
brothers must be
told that their only sister would not
return home.

Skorret would never finish his
dissertation on
pre-Reform metalwork, and the
Academy had lost
forever T'Challo's insights into early
Vulcan
art forms.

So many names lost ... so many lives
disrupted
... so many families wounded by this
tragedy.

Drifting grains of sand could not shore

up his
crumbling emotional defenses. Sendei
loosed a thundering earthquake across
the desert. The
ground trembled and shook until a
jagged
fissure opened beneath his feet. He
dropped down
into total darkness, into the very center
of his despair.
Sorren is dead. My son is dead.
Sendei's reaction was Vulcan, silent but
deeply felt. Offworlders often mistook
that
lack of outward show for indifference,
but the pain of
such a loss was not meant for display.
Few

Vulcans managed to extinguish all emotion, but most had mastered the ability to contain it. According to the philosophy that the Vulcan race had adopted, there was no reason why any emotion, no matter how intense, should influence behavior or cloud the path of logic.

Deep in meditation, Sendei searched for a final construct that would contain his unruly emotions. He chose the image of a river rushing through an underground

chasm. Here his rage and grief could run freely
and purely in their own channel until death brought him inner peace.

CHAPTER 7

"There is no Bendii's!"
Beverly Crusher had charged through the doors of the captain's ready room after only a token ring of the chime. She was brandishing her medical padd like

the head of a vanquished enemy.
Picard lowered the teacup that had been
on its
way to his lips and waved the CMO to a
chair in
front of his desk. "I take it your medical
report is ready."
"Yes, by god, it is." She moved into
place
with the grace of a dancer, the tails of
her lab
coat billowing out behind her. "Tissue
cultures
from T'Sara's metathalamus were
negative for
Bendii's syndrome. In fact, during the
autopsy I found no signs of any kind of

pathology in her brain or nervous system
no
lesions, no tumors, nothing organic that
could
result in violent or irrational behavior."
"Then what could have triggered such
violence among
the Vulcans?"
"Oh, but I'm not convinced of that
either," said
Crusher. Heightened spots of color on
her
cheeks betrayed her excitement. "I
may be rusty on the finer points of
forensic
medicine, but it appears that several of
the Vulcans

were stunned before they were killed, and almost all of the bodies show obvious signs of having been moved after death."

She jabbed at her padd screen, consulted the

new readout, then continued. "For instance, Soth was

found lying facedown in the plaza, but blood had

pooled on the back of his body;

T'Challo's

arms had small scrapes and bruises that occurred after death, and three of Sohle's fingers

were broken after rigor mortis had set

in,
apparently to force his hand around a
phaser grip."
Picard already had a notion of where
this discussion was
leading, but he sipped his tea as Beverly
continued
to develop her argument.
"Not to mention that Tessin's fingerprints
were found
on the weapon that killed Skorret, even
though the
rate of cellular degeneration suggests
she died
at least a half hour before he did."
Tossing the
data padd onto the captain's desk like a
gauntlet thrown down in challenge,

Crusher

said, "Frankly, I find it highly unlikely that a group of homicidal Vulcans would concern

themselves with moving their victims from one place

to another; a far more likely explanation of the

entire situation is--"

--is that off-planet intruders staged a clumsy cover for the murders."

"Exactly!"

The new scenario unfolded before his mind's

eye T'Sara caught unawares, falling under the

unexpected barrage of phaser fire,

victim
of an attack from without rather than
from within. Although the
forms that wielded the weapons were
shadowy and
undefined, their existence had the
solidity of
truth.

"I concur with your interpretation of the
evidence,"
said Picard. "The question remains, who
would do this and
why?"

She shrugged. "Sorry, Captain, that's not
my department."

"No," he sighed. "But it is mine." The
answers to T'Sara's death danced just
out of reach,

elusive, tantalizing. What would it take to bring them into focus?

He tapped the communicator on his chest.

"Picard to Data What is the status of your current project?"

"I have not yet concluded my investigation, but there is sufficient progress to warrant your attention."

"Thank you, Data. I'm on my way to the bridge." The captain rose from behind his desk.

"Doctor, I think you should hear this, too."

Riker's steps echoed loudly as he

crossed
the deck of Cargo Bay 12. The loading
crew
was gone, as was the fleet of airsleds
they had
driven into the spacious hold. After a
brief
frenzy of activity, Worf's team had left
behind a tidy mountain of faceted
shipping cartons.
Each carton had a number stenciled on
its
surface, and as Riker entered that
number into his
data padd, the tablet's display screen
revealed
the contents stored inside. The first
series included

tents, computers, dating scanners,
thermal
sensors, laser drills, and sonic picks.
Every
last stake and stray piece of rope had
been
gathered up and packed away.
Next, Riker checked through the artifacts
uncovered by the excavations shards of
pottery and
statuary, broken weapons, small pieces
of
jewelry. These were the discarded
remnants of a
society, not its treasures. According to
the captain,
it was from precisely this sort of detritus

that
most archaeologists teased their
understanding of a
culture, and T'Sara had displayed a
genius for
making these extrapolations.
The last two cartons were filled with
items
found in the archaeologists' living
quarters.
Vulcans were not a materialistic race, so
the
list Riker scanned was spare and
consisted mostly
of clothes and books. Even after their
long tenure
on the planet, the scientists had made no
attempt to decorate their tents with

frivolous
trinkets; every personal article was
utilitarian
in purpose and discreetly labeled with
the owner's
name.

Upon a second glance, however, the first
officer
noticed that every member of the team
possessed a
pocket holo. So, at the end of a long day
of
excavation and research, even Vulcans
wanted
reminders of home and family.
Three of them had brought musical
instruments as

well. Riker envisioned a small group of tired men and women gathered together under the stars, listening to the soft strains of a lyre and a flute. The scene made the knowledge of their deaths more poignant, almost painful, but it helped to overshadow his memories of contorted bodies mired in blood.

With a final tap on the padd's controls, Riker transferred the confirmed manifest into the starship's main computers. Nothing of the Vulcans remained below on Atropos. Their

decade-long
presence had been completely erased.

"Sorren's distress call appears to have
been
altered in several ways," said Data.

"The first
modification was to the identification
slate."

Picard automatically leaned closer to the
science station, then shifted slightly to
allow

Crusher an unobstructed view of the
screen. The
circular seal of the United Federation of
Planets--a field of stars flanked by olive
branches--floated on a blue background;
below

the logo was a small block of text.
The two officers studied the slate and its
standard display of information about
Sorren's
message.

Origin UFP 567045-B12-10A
(atropos)

Destination UFP 567045-B23-22C
(starbase 193)

Stardate 45873.4

"I see nothing out of the ordinary," said
Picard
as he exchanged puzzled looks with the
doctor.

"At first, neither did I," said the android.
"However, when I examined the

transmission

envelope I discovered a discrepancy in the date

stamp. Since the envelope is usually accessed

only by the transceiver hardware, its information is

never visible to the recipient of the message."

With quick, practiced movements, Data unzipped the coded interface and called forth a

dense stream of unformatted data.

Numbers

flew by more quickly than Picard could follow until

suddenly Data froze the image. His pointing

finger highlighted the pertinent section of a line.

FMCCUFP567045-B12-10Ast-
TOCCUFP567045-B23-22C/SD-
45873.3

"45873.3," read Picard. "One day earlier!"

"Correct," said the android. "The last digit designating the day has been changed on the identification slate. That alteration obscured

a twenty-four-hour lag between the receipt of the original message at Starbase 193 and the transmission of a forged version to the

Enterprise."

"And during that time," said Crusher angrily,

"the Vulcans were being slaughtered."

"That would appear to be the case."

The screen image shimmered as Data advanced

the recording to the middle of Sorren's communique. Black and white lines lightly

scored the Vulcan's face, then increased in

intensity, fracturing the picture beyond recognition.

Data continued his explanation. "The second

modification involves the sudden appearance of

static that obscures part of the message. Any transmission interference should have been noted by the subspace receiver; however, the data verification field indicates that the Vulcan's message was received intact at Starbase 193. Neither is there any record of difficulty in the transmission from the starbase to the Enterprise. Thus, I surmised that the burst of Hovorka radiation is actually a graphic forgery introduced

to suppress five seconds of the image."
"Can the original be restored?" asked
Picard.

"Yes, I believe so. The transmission
envelope contains a compressed digital
duplicate of lower resolution, but this
copy
contains sufficient information for our
purposes.

By judicious cross-referencing and
multiple
digital sampling I can reconstruct the
missing
segment."

"Make it so."

A high whine ensued as the android ran
the

message at high speed; his fingers blurred with equal rapidity over the console as he adjusted controls, then repeated the process again and again.

With each repetition the tape image became clearer. "This should be sufficient for comprehension."

Sorren's movements slowed to real time, and his voice dropped back to a deep pitch. Despite a slight blurring of image and sound, his words were intelligible.

"Her behavior is growing increasingly

erratic she is prone to outbursts of emotion and persists in irrational accounts of her communion with the Ko N'ya."

"The Ko N'ya again," exclaimed Crusher.

Picard's thoughts flashed to the memory of two gnarled hands, the hands of an alien who had walled itself up alive. What had those cupped palms been holding when T'Sara entered the chamber?

"After all these years of searching," he

wondered
aloud, "could she really have found it?"

Troi stirred in her cabin bed, her legs thrashing beneath the sheets until she kicked off her covers entirely. The loss of warmth and a nagging agitation prodded her up through the layers of unconsciousness.

Her eyes fluttered open for only a second. Fighting against the impulse to wake, she buried her face back into a pillow. This nap was no luxury. The last few days had been filled

with emergency sessions that had pulled the counselor out of her cabin in the middle of the night. That was often the case after Away Team missions that involved violent death, and this time several members of the paramedic team had been plagued with nightmares.

Of their own accord, Troi's feet twitched as if she were pacing back and forth across a deck.

Of course. Imzadi.

Belatedly, the empath realized what was happening. Commander Will Riker was

striding through the
Enterprise with a heightened vigor and
intensity of
purpose, and she was unwittingly
keeping him
company. His forceful emotions often
overrode her
mental block, like rising floodwaters
spilling
over the edge of a dam. Stronger
defenses would
prevent these intrusions, but the effort
would require
a constant mental strain, and it would
also mute the
comforting knowledge of his presence.
Having identified the source of her
unease,

Troi damped down her emotional link with the first officer until the muscles in her legs relaxed. Then she groped for her covers and sighed contentedly at the prospect of falling back asleep.

She drifted lazily into unconsciousness.

"Data to Counselor Troi."

Troi's eyes flew open. "Yes, Data?"

"The captain has called an emergency conference for all senior officers."

Stifling a groan of exasperation, the counselor said, "I'm on my way."

According to the engineering schematics

on file at the
Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards,
Ten-Forward was merely a spacious
room
designated as a crew lounge. All
galaxy-class starships had a Ten-
Forward with
its standard-issue bar and curving
transparent
aluminum windows, but only the USS
Enterprise had Guinan, which made this
particular
Ten-Forward uncommonly special.
Riker welcomed that difference when he
pushed his
way through the familiar double doors.
Ever since his
visit to the cargo bay, the first officer

had been
plagued by a vague restlessness, but now
the urge
to keep moving faded. No one rushed to
leave
Guinan's company.
Her shapeless robes and fanciful
headgear were
flamboyant; Guinan herself was
contained. She
listened more often than she spoke, yet
when she had
something to say, the mellow tones of
her husky
voice were compelling.
"You look like a man in need of a little
excitement," said the hostess, setting a

tall
thin glass of a fizzing liquid on the
counter.

Riker had never seen a drink quite like it
before, but then
Guinan had a fondness for
experimentation.

"Is it that obvious?" sighed the first
officer as
he swung onto a bar stool. "We've only
been in orbit around Atropos for two
days, but
I'm ready to leave again."

"Odds are against it," came a mocking
voice
from behind him.

Riker took a deep breath, then turned
to present a forced smile to the angular

Bajoran

woman who slid into place next to him.

Never

turn your back on Ro Laren. "What's that supposed to mean, Ensign?"

"Just that the ship's pool is running two to one

that we won't make it to Luxor IV in time for a

game of canasta, much less poker. Of course,

the crew of the Telarius would probably win the

championship again anyway."

"O ye of little faith." She was baiting him, and

he knew it, but Riker still couldn't stop

himself.

"As it happens, our business here is almost finished, and a steady warp seven will get us back on schedule. Then the crew of the Enterprise is going to show the crew of the Telarius how real poker should be played."

"Don't waste your bluffs on me, sir," said Ro with an incredibly infuriating and condescending chuckle. "Save them for the championship match ... sometime next year."

"I'm not bluffing."

"A hundred says you are."

"You're on," he snapped. "Guinan, you heard her."

"I heard both of you," said Guinan softly.

"In fact, everyone in the room heard both of

you. Now will you taste that drink I poured for you? The

flavor is very delicate, and it won't last much

longer."

Riker reached his hand out for the glass.

"Data to Commander Riker."

His hand moved up to his comm insignia instead.

"Riker here."

"The captain has called an emergency

conference for all senior officers."

"Understood, Mr. Data," said the first officer

as he pushed away from the bar. "I'm on my

way."

"A hundred credits will come in very handy on my

next shore leave." The Bajoran was openly

smirking.

To add insult to injury, Guinan slid his untouched drink over to the ensign. The bartender

shrugged an apology to Riker, then turned back

to watch Ro's reaction to the beverage.

Heading out of Ten-Forward, Riker grudgingly admitted there was a high probability that Ro would win their bet. Unfortunately, the loss of a hundred credits would not hurt half so much as the loss of his pride.

Each of the chairs around the oval conference table would be filled soon, but for the next few minutes Picard and Crusher had the observation lounge to themselves. After the turmoil of the last few days, the captain welcomed this oasis of

tranquillity.

Usually he would have resented sharing it with anyone else, except Beverly was not just anyone else.

"So," asked the doctor, "when did you develop this fascination for the Ko N'ya?"

"As a child," said Picard. "My brother was the

one who introduced me to the legend.

Although, since

Robert was a bit of a bully, his aim was to terrify little Jean-Luc."

"Did he succeed?"

"Oh, yes." Even after fifty years, Picard could recall trembling in their night-darkened bedroom and burrowing

under his
blankets as if they were armor against
monsters.
"Robert would wait until our parents
were
asleep and the house was completely
still, then he would
whisper yet another impressively
embellished
tale of blood and gore. He developed
quite a
flair for the dramatic and considered
himself amply
rewarded if he reduced me to tears."
"How charming," said Crusher wryly,
but then she
was the mother of an only child. Picard

could never
explain to her the complex web of love
and hate that
bound him to his brother.

"However, as I grew older, my fear
turned
to fascination, and I would beg Robert
for more
stories."

"Let me guess," she said with a smile.

"At that point, Robert lost interest in the
Ko
N'ya."

"Exactly." Perhaps she understood the
relationship between brothers after all.

"So I began
to read the original lore for myself, and
when those

books were exhausted, I moved on to others. That was the start of my lifelong passion for history and archaeology of all kinds."

"Jean-Luc, do you really believe T'Sara could have found this object? Has myth turned out to be history after all?"

"I hardly dare believe it." Yet he still could not shake the image of those mummified hands.

"Touching the Ko N'ya would be like touching history itself. For such an opportunity, I would ..."

Picard groped for the limits of his desire

but
found them surprisingly difficult to
define.
"Sell your soul?" said Crusher.
Her suggestion had been made in jest, so
Picard answered in the same
lighthearted vein.
"No, not sell ... but perhaps rent it for a
while."
Once the words were uttered, however,
he realized
they were uncomfortably close to the
truth.

CHAPTER 8

"There have been some new insights into
the murders

of the Vulcans on Atropos," announced Picard. Then, with a nod, he signaled Beverly Crusher to recite the results of her autopsy findings.

As the assembled officers listened first to the doctor and then to Data, Picard watched the crew's changing expressions. The revelation of each new facet of the deception on Atropos tightened the line of Riker's jaw and deepened the sorrow in Troi's eyes; Geordi

La Forge grew still and silent, whereas Worf shifted in his chair as if ready to lunge at an approaching enemy.

When the reports were finished, a circle of grim faces turned toward the captain.

"Given the circumstances," said Picard, "we

must proceed under the assumption that all our

communications with Starbase 193 are being

monitored. I've prepared a report of our investigations for Admiral Matasu at Starbase 75, but it will take hours for

him to even
receive the message."

"Which means we're on our own for
now," said

Riker, with an emphatic tug at his tunic.
The gesture, one he unconsciously
borrowed from
the captain, was a mixture of defiance
and
anticipation.

Picard was more ambivalent about this
prospect
than his first officer. One of the most
invigorating
challenges of command lay in making
decisions that were
his alone, but autonomy from Starfleet
authority

was accompanied by an equal measure of responsibility for the consequences of his judgment.

Nonetheless, he had already reached one firm resolution.

"Our first priority is to locate the intruders that we believe murdered the Vulcan archaeologists."

"Agreed," said Crusher. "Any delay in pursuit would give them more time to get away." A supporting chorus of murmured assent quickly rippled around the table.

"There's one thing I just don't understand," said La Forge. "Why would anyone be willing to kill for some dusty old relic?" Picard smiled at the engineer's naive description. "Oh, but it's not just any artifact. This is a mythic icon of tremendous allure. Ko N'ya, the Devil's Heart ... it has been called many names in many languages throughout the galaxy." Data cocked his head, silently accessing information from a vast storehouse of knowledge. "The Belnarri call it Nota; the Andorians

know it
as Telev's Bane; and to the Klingons it is
the
Pagrashtak."

"Pagrashtak!" exclaimed Worf.

"The Bloodstone!"

Picard was startled by the intensity of
the Klingon's
reaction.

"So you know about this, too?" asked
Troi.

Picard could practically hear her
clinical
persona click into place. Evidently the
counselor sensed considerable depth in
the
lieutenant's agitation.

"Yes, I have heard of it," said Worf

reluctantly. The captain wondered if his scowl was a product of embarrassment at the outburst or whether the warrior's reserve was still shaken by mention of the Pagrashtak. "According to Klingon legend, Lord Kessec founded the First Empire with its powers ... and Kessec warned that he who holds the Pagrashtak must drain his veins of blood or his next of kin will do it for him." Riker rocked back in his chair, startled by the

severity of Worf's expression. The first officer's eyebrows knitted together in genuine puzzlement. "So what exactly is this thing?"

Where to even begin? wondered Picard as he

struggled to condense the work of T'Sara's lifetime

into a few words. "The Heart's exact nature

is unknown, and its origins are lost in antiquity; all that survives are tales of its passage through different cultures. In the mythologies T'Sara collected, the Heart has been variously described as a stone, a

jewel, even an energy cell. One hypothesis is that the Heart is an artifact of some ancient and forgotten race, one highly advanced in science." His brother Robert's voice whispered another explanation in his ear. "But worlds which believe in magic consider it to be a powerful talisman of Darkness."

"A talisman of darkness?" snorted Riker. "With the power to do just what?" Data was ready with the answer. "No one knows

its true capabilities, but they are
suspected
to be vast, enabling its possessor to
control
men's minds, to amass wealth and
power, even
to change the flow of time itself."
"Data, you don't really believe that?"
"Our belief is not really relevant,"
countered Troi. "T'Sara believed, and
whoever
killed the Vulcan archaeologists must
also have
believed. Regardless of whether this
Devil's
Heart has any real powers, people have
killed to gain

possession of it."

"Devil's Heart, Bloodstone," said Riker. "I begin to see why it has such morbid names."

"Yes," said Picard. "According to many of the legends T'Sara gathered, the price of gaining the stone is death or the spilling of blood. Those who have ruled by its powers have died in combat or been betrayed by their friends."

Troi suddenly switched her scrutiny from

Worf to Picard. "Captain, what do you

believe--"

"Bridge to Captain Picard." A voice brusque with controlled urgency drowned out the counselor's question. "We're picking up an automated distress call from a Ferengi vessel in this sector."

"I'm on my way," said Picard, already rising from his chair.

Riker was on his feet a half second later. "I have a bad feeling about this, Captain."

"Yes, Number One, it does appear this sector is becoming rather crowded."

The Ferengi Marauder-class starship floated in space, drifting listlessly; its crescent-shaped rear hull was pitted and scored, and a gash in the horned front section was charred down to the duranium frame. Lights were scattered at random through the decks, but they flickered weakly. Picard surveyed the damaged vessel with a dispassionate eye and a suspicious nature.

"Raise shields."

"They don't look ready for another fight,"

said Riker.

"Perhaps not," conceded the captain.

After all,

even Ferengi guile had its limits. "But
we

have yet to account for whoever
attacked--"

The deck rocked beneath his command
chair as the

ship's deflector shields sparked and
crackled. Alert sirens blared, and bridge
lights dimmed momentarily as power
was rechanneled

to the defense systems. A less-seasoned
officer

might have mistaken the impact for a
weapons

salvo, but Picard recognized the telltale blue flash of Cerenkov radiation that resulted from a mid-flight collision.

"Helm! Go to quarter-impulse."

As the Enterprise's forward motion slowed, the force of subsequent collisions was diminished to the light patter of hail on a rooftop.

"Power reserves holding steady," said Data

as sensor chatter echoed noisily across the navigation consoles.

"A trap?" asked Riker.

"I don't think so, Number One." Picard

studied the view of the space surrounding them and confirmed what he had expected the Enterprise had plowed into the middle of a field of debris.

Chunks of dark, twisted metal were scattered in all directions, their serrated edges glinting in starlight. "I suspect we've found the second player in this drama."

Flashes of blue light danced across the viewscreen as more of the fragments ricocheted off the protective envelope of the deflector

shields.

"My analysis of the particles supports that theory," said Data. "The total mass of the debris appears equivalent to that of another vessel, although one somewhat less formidable than the Marauder class."

"Any speculation as to its origins?"

"That may be difficult to determine since the wreckage has been distorted by intense heat."

The android magnified several different sections of the viewscreen until he located a

twisted
beam that still retained identifiable form.
"This molded
tritanium truss is characteristic of the
Orion
Signet series."
"An Orion ship?" Riker turned
to Picard. "They usually give wide berth
to the
Ferengi."
"Yet this time it seems two scavengers
have
fallen on each other."
"To the detriment of both," said Data. "I
detect no life-signs aboard the Ferengi
vessel."
"And the blood is still flowing,"
murmured

Picard.

Riker frowned at the repetition of T'Sara's dying words. "So you think this battle is related to the attack on the Vulcans?" Worf's deep voice thundered down from the tactical station on the aft deck. "One can find the Pagrahtak by following the flight of carrion-eaters; keeping it is not so easy." The Klingon leaned over the rail and added a more subdued explanation. "That was a quote from The Ballads of Durall." Riker was struck speechless by the

unexpected
declamation, but Picard's composure
was still
intact. "Thank you, Lieutenant." He
agreed with Worf the mythic quality of
this quest
seemed to invite the heightened language
of
ancient texts.

"Well," said the first officer, "if the
Orions had T'Sara's relic when their
ship was
destroyed, we'll be sifting through space
detritus for weeks. So I suggest we
search
the Ferengi Marauder first."

"Agreed, Number One. Prepare an
Away Team for ..."

Touching the Ko N'ya would be like touching history itself.

"No," said Picard suddenly. "Belay that order."

"Sir?"

"Indulge me, W. I'd like to lead this mission." The temptation was simply too strong for

Picard to resist, but he would prefer to persuade

Riker into agreement. A confrontation over this

issue would only waste time and delay the

recovery effort. "You know that I've been

fascinated by the legend of the Heart for most of my life, and if it should actually exist ..."

To his relief, Riker gave way with a broad grin. "Understood, Captain. Just don't make a habit of doing my job."

He was already out of his chair. "Worf, Data, with me."

With each step up the bridge ramp, Picard felt like he was marching his way into one of Robert's epic tales of heroic adventure. His two Away Team companions followed on his heels

into the turbolift, obedient knights sworn to attend their liege lord.

By the time the three of them reached Deck 6 and

mounted the transporter dais, Picard had banished the fantasy image from his mind. He was

a Starfleet captain on a mission. Of all the

dreams he had held as a child, this one was the most powerful.

"Ready for transport, Mr. O'Brien."

"Aye, Captain." The chief checked his console settings. "I'll set you down in the main bridge."

The transporter chamber glittered away. Then, in the space of a heartbeat, new

surroundings materialized around Picard.

He coughed reflexively as swirling smoke

entered his lungs. The air was cold, a sign that

life support systems were failing.

At a glance, Picard could see that the command

center of the Marauder was smaller than the main

bridge of a starship. Everything in its interior, from

the decks and walls to the computer

consoles, was painted a muted gray. Everything was also broken. Shattered ceiling panels dangled from overhead, spilling out streams of wire; the deck was tilted and walls were buckled; and several cracked equipment consoles squealed softly as if in pain. Scattered throughout this wreckage were a half-dozen bodies of the Ferengi crew. Despite his sense of urgency, Picard realized that the task ahead of them was rather daunting.

If the Heart really was here in the midst
of all this
rubble, how could he find it? Would he
even know it
when he saw it?
"Confirmed," Data said after a sweep of
the
tricorder. "There are no life-signs."
At a nod from the captain, Worf and the
android
moved forward, picking their way
through the rubble.
Picard chose a third path, but he had
taken
only a few steps when his boot heel
caught
on a loose deck plate, throwing him

off-balance. He reached a hand out to the nearest console to steady himself, but a humming sound warned him not to touch the surface. He quickly shifted his weight and recovered his footing.

"The Signet's plasma bolts seem to have fused the electrical system," explained Data.

"And electrocuted the crew," said Worf, warily prodding aside one of the dead crewmen who lay slumped over the helm.

"Are we in any danger?" asked Picard as he stepped over a loosely coiled conduit.

"The initial charge has dissipated," said Data. "However, the short circuits in the system are capable of delivering a shock that would prove uncomfortable to the Human body."

"Thank you, Data. I'll keep that in mind. " His breath was frosting now as the ship's heat continued to leach into space.

Picard continued his inspection while keeping a healthy distance from any sparking equipment panels. He scuffed the toe of one boot kicking aside loose rubble and snagged his uniform

jacket on the sharp corners of twisted metal;
his back began to ache as he contorted his body
to peer into dark corners. From the crashing sounds off
to his left, the captain could tell that Worf's
search technique was even more vigorous.
It occurred to Picard that he might not be the first
one to find the Heart.
"Captain," called out Data. "Is this what you are seeking?"
Casting aside all caution, Picard pushed his

way through the wreckage to the front of the bridge.

He found the android kneeling by the corpse of a

Ferengi DaiMon. Either the electric current

had contorted his face into a rictus of ecstasy,

or he had been killed in the throes of rapture.

In his hands he clutched a dull, rough rock.

"The Heart," whispered Picard. "It must be."

Data carefully pried the object out of the DaiMon's grip and proffered it up to the captain.

Picard could feel his pulse racing as the weight of the stone settled into his palms.

It was warm.

CHAPTER 9

"Captain's Log, Stardate 45873.6
The Enterprise broke orbit from Atropos
to respond to an automated distress call
from a
Ferengi vessel ..."

Picard had aged well, decided
Miyakawa
as she reviewed the captain's mission
report.

As a young cadet, his prominent nose
and forehead

had overpowered his face, but in his middle years these same strong features were compelling. "... encountered a Marauder-class starship ..."

Cadets Picard, Crusher, and Keel had moved in tandem through Starfleet Academy, and the common expectation among their classmates had been that each member of the trio would garner early commissions and eventually end up back at the Academy teaching a new generation of cadets.

Life had worked out a bit differently for them;

Jean-Luc was the only one of the three left alive.

But then I'm not where I thought I'd be either.

"... all crew aboard the vessel were dead.

I'll provide more details when they're available."

To Miyakawa's surprise, Picard's narrative came to an abrupt end at that point.

"Wait a minute! Dead of what?" she demanded of the blank screen on her desk viewer.

Picard had omitted a wealth of vital information from his log coordinates for the Marauder, the basis for its distress call, even the next destination of the Enterprise.

"Dammit, that wasn't a report," muttered the commander as she rocketed out of her chair. "I know a stall when I see one." She also knew where she might find some answers to her questions.

Unhooking her uniform jacket from the wall, Miyakawa stormed out of her office and headed for the

far end of the starbase.

"How dare you call in this debt!"

Anlew-Is slammed a chit down on the table

and continued to pound his fist at regular intervals

while he screamed in Camenae's face.

"I've lost a Signet-class vessel, not to mention five of my best-trained mercenaries, and

you expect payment for my ruin? You should pay me

for the damages I've incurred in this odious

venture!"

Camenae leaned back in her chair, trying hard not to breathe too deeply. She

wondered
whether it was the olive-green skin or
the black
fibrous hair that gave Orions their
penetrating
odor.

"You paid for the information, Anlew-Is,
not for a
favorable outcome to your schemes. If
you want
insurance, go do business with
Aghlarren the Mote."

"But you sold me out to the Ferengi
consortium!

I would have the Heart in my hands if
not for your
greed and treachery!"

"Don't blame me for either your

shortsightedness
or your miserly nature," said Camenae
with a
stern frown. "You know my policies and
my
prices, yet you consistently refuse to
cover the
cost of exclusivity. DaiMon Maarc knew
the value of a long-term investment."
"Ha!" he said, bathing her face with a
blast of
fetid air. "Dead men make no profit."
Camenae sighed, her only concession to
the truth
of that statement. There was little use in
denying
the DaiMon's death; the remaining

members of the consortium were still seated at the bar of the Due or Die, all loudly wailing and keening over the imminent collapse of their fortunes. True, DaiMon Bruk had been sent out on the obligatory salvage mission, but the presence of a Federation starship in the sector had shaken their faith in any recovery effort. Camenae suspected their pessimism was well-founded. The thump of a green fist shook the table again. "I'm made of sterner stuff than mewling

Ferengi merchants I won't pay the balance!"

"Very well."

"What?" His arm stopped in midair, aborting

yet another assault on the furniture.

"In accordance with my policy concerning delinquent accounts, I will be forced to liquidate certain information about your organization that I have

kept out of general inventory. The sale of that information will be applied to your outstanding debt."

"That's blackmail, Camenae!"

"I call it a sound business procedure."

"Damn you!" His fist slammed down yet again,

but this time he left a token in the wake of the

hammer blow. "You'll get another next month

and not a day before."

He turned and stomped his way across the deck

with a deafening clatter.

"Anlew-Is," she called out. "Do you

wish
to be kept informed of the Heart's
location?"

"No," he screamed from the doorway.

"The
Heart can go to blazes for all I care!"

The Ferengi had given much the same
answer an
hour before, although the whole troupe
of them did not
generate half the commotion made by
one Orion
black marketeer.

In the blessed silence that had been
restored to her
chamber, Camenae considered the
selection of her
next customer.

When Anlew-Is erupted out of the bar's back room, Miyakawa leaned farther back into the shadowed recesses of her booth. Her caution was hardly necessary since the Orion was far too preoccupied with broadcasting his indignation to pay any attention to his audience. As she listened to his loud ranting, and to the background chorus of the doleful Ferengi, the commander gleaned enough details to reconstruct their recent activity in the

sector.

Anlew-Is was still fuming when her eyes tracked a robed figure gliding across the bar and

into Camenae's office. Reyjad@an was a permanent resident of the base, so Miyakawa

knew his name and his homeworld, but the details of his

personal life were a mystery. The DiWahn was

an alien who kept to himself, rarely appearing in

public. However, if he was one of Camenae's

customers, it might be prudent to learn more of his background.

The glass in Miyakawa's hands was empty,
but the commander feigned a sip of her drink so the waiter would leave her alone. Like a hunter tucked in a blind, she was in the mood to remain undetected and wait for more game to pass by.

The creature was swathed in cloth from head to toe, although Camenae was not entirely sure the figure hidden beneath the heavy robes possessed either of those features. Its voice issued

forth from
the folds of a drooping hood, and it
spoke as if
an oily, serpentine tongue formed its
words.

"I am Lord Reyjad@an. Your servant
outside referred to me as "the DiWahn."

You
are both in need of correction. I am
unDiWahn one who is from, yet not of,
that world.

My people's origins are of greater
eminence than that
rough planet could ever generate."

"Thank you for that clarification."

Camenae
automatically filed away this free fact,
although

its value was dubious. "I have information you seek."

"The Dream Gem!" it said with a dry rattle of alarm. "What you call the Heart--the rumors of its discovery are true?"

"Yes. It has been found."

"Why was I not informed of this earlier?" hissed the cowl. "I stated my interest in the Gem ten years ago when I first arrived on this starbase."

"I noted your demand at that time," said Camenae with a dryness that was lost on

the alien.

"But I have other customers who make greater use of my--"

"Kei! I do not involve myself with gossip or deal in issues of petty trade. My only concern is with the Gem. Where is it?"

"The answer to that question will cost--"

"Such insolence," said the alien. "You cannot put a price on my birthright."

"I can, and do, put a price on everything that is said in this room, Lord Reyjad@an." After adding an extra ten percent exasperation tax to her previously decided on

figure, Camenae firmly stated the cost of the proposed transaction. "Take it or leave it.

I have other customers who would--" "Spare me your tiresome haggling tactics.

I will pay the sum in full." A jangling sound came from inside the voluminous sleeves, and a necklace crafted of refined dilithium crystals spilled out onto the table.

Camenae shook her head. "I only accept--"

"But I expect full service from you," said the

alien. "There will be an additional requirement for the fulfillment of my quest, and I expect it to be provided without additional charge."

"Oh, very well," she said, impatient to end the transaction. After all, Aghlarren the Mote would offer a fair price for the crystals. "What is the additional service you require?"

To Camenae's intense regret, the demand he outlined was reasonable and easily arranged.

Half an hour after Reyjad@an's departure, Commander Miyakawa had just about decided to put an end to her afternoon of hiding in the shadows of the Due or Die when Thomas Grede skulked into the bar and sidled through to the back room. She settled back into her seat and ordered another drink. Base personnel were not prohibited from frequenting the Due or Die since such a regulation would have been impossible for her to enforce,

but the technician's familiarity with the Norsican guard betrayed more than a casual acquaintance with the staff. The knowledge that Grede merited a solo audience with Camenae was even more intriguing.

I'm just one officer. I can't supervise all my personnel.

Miyakawa had been promised more support,

but most of Starfleet viewed an assignment

to Starbase 193 as a punitive measure and a

blot on their record. So far, all the

officers
designated to serve on the station had
successfully
wrangled reassignments; the most recent
lieutenant to be posted to the station had
chosen
to resign from Starfleet instead.
Until reinforcements arrived,
Miyakawa would do her best to hold the
fort. Today
that meant having a little talk with Grede
after his
next duty shift.

"I have some information for you."
"For me?" said Grede. "But, Camenae,
you
know I haven't got enough credits to buy

anything from
you."

"Oh, but this information is free."

"Free?" He squirmed uneasily in his chair. She could see fear pooling in his eyes.

"According to my sources, Starbase 75 is now receiving Captain Picard's mission reports."

Unfortunately, the contents of the communiqu`es were beyond her reach, but this fact alone was sufficient for her purpose.

Grede was a little slow to make the obvious connection, but it finally came to him.

"They must know
the distress call was altered." That
realization
drained color from his face.

"Furthermore," said Camenae. "A
Tellarite freighter headed for Orion
passed
within hailing distance of the Enterprise;
it appears
to be on a direct heading for this base."

The
starship's destination would be common
knowledge within the hour, but
the captain of an outbound vessel loaded
with
contraband had gladly paid for the early
warning.

"Camenae, you've got to help me!"

"Help of that magnitude is not free. It requires another investment on your part."

"Another ... but that's how I ..." His voice trailed off in confusion. "I'm in enough trouble already."

Camenae assumed her most reassuring smile. "I can arrange for your transport beyond

the reach of the Federation authorities."

"How soon?" he croaked.

"Just as soon as you transmit a series of coded messages for one of my clients and then

erase all records of the proceeding."

Grede seemed to fold in upon himself, shoulders slumping and head drooping. As she waited for the technician's answer, Camenae felt a stab of irritation at the difficulty he had making such a simple decision. Finally, he mumbled his assent.

Commander Miyakawa tossed two tokens next to her empty glass before slipping out of the booth. There was no point in trying to pay for her bar tab--she had lost that battle long ago--but

as a compromise she always left a hefty tip
for the waiter.

The money was well spent. Over the last few

hours, Miyakawa had surmised much of what

Captain Picard had left out of his mission

report. Now all she needed to know was why he had

held back this information from her.

CHAPTER 10

"T'Sara."

She did not want to let loose her dream,
but

somewhere on the other side of
consciousness there came
an insistent demand for her to wake. Her
name was
repeated over and over again until she
grew weary
of resisting and opened her eyes.
"You sleep deeply these days," said the
man
who knelt before her. The muscles of
Sorren's
face were marshaled into an impassive
mask, but
he still lacked the necessary discipline
to erase concern from
his voice; she hoped he never learned to
tame his

dark, expressive eyes.

Despite the lingering memory of a soft cushioned bed, T'Sara realized she was sitting

upright and the wall against her back was hard and unyielding.

"I was dreaming that I was a man asleep--

dreaming of mad Vulcans sifting a dry dusty

planet in search of lost shards of knowledge. When he

wakes, my life will fade away, as will all the

stone and mortar surrounding us."

"You spend too much time in this

chamber."

Sorren was unaware of the frown that slipped past his control; he glanced up at the enthroned figure that loomed over them. "I do not fear the dead, but neither do I seek out their company." "The Collector was a less pleasant companion when she was alive," said T'Sara before she thought to curb her tongue. His fierce glare was like a shout of anger. "Another dream?" She tightened her grip on the Ko N'ya. He had tried to wrest it from her once before when she

spoke of Surak on the plain of Ishaya. Logic dictated that a young male approaching his physical prime could easily overpower an old woman, yet he had failed to take it from her then.

"No, T'Sara, I did not come to argue with you over the stone." He still refused to utter its name. "The time for discussion has passed."

"Explain."

"I feel honor-bound to inform you of the action we

have--"

"We?" she demanded.

"Sohle, T'Challo, the entire archaeological team. It is our unanimous decision that your thinking has become increasingly disordered and that you are in need of medical assistance. This morning I received confirmation that a Federation starship has been authorized to return you to Vulcan."

"My colleagues at the Science Academy will not thank you for that," she said.

"My enemies have thought me mad for over a century, and

even my
supporters are embarrassed by my
empathy for
alien cultures. They all would rather that
I confine
my ravings to a small group of students
as far from
Vulcan as possible."

"There is a difference between
unorthodox methods
and insanity. I have long admired and
respected
your research, and I value highly what I
have
learned of your excavation techniques,
but even I
have lost patience watching you
squander your

abilities on this quest for the Ko N'ya.
And
your recent behavior ..."
were Vulcans always so long-winded,
she
wondered as Sorren prattled on, or had
her
patience worn as thin as her aging skin?
Her
wandering thoughts seized on his earlier
words.
"Sorren," she said with a sharpness born
of
alarm. "Did you speak of the Ko N'ya in
this
message of yours?"
"What?" After a moment to reorient

himself to her
question, he said, "Only in passing."
"Child, you must not let your adherence
to logic
block your understanding of races who
act on their
emotions. News of the Ko N'ya is a
beacon
for the greedy who ..."
She fell silent.
"T'Sara?"
The walls of the chamber were too thick
for sound
to penetrate, rather she had felt the
shouts ringing in the
air outside. An inchoate mental surge
washed over her again.
"A Call," she said.

"Yes, I heard it, too!"

They both scrambled to their feet, but Sorren was young and supple and left her far behind as he raced through the dark tunnel toward daylight.

Pushing her bones and muscles beyond the petty annoyances of pain, she gained a new burst of speed and emerged from the ruins. The noonday sun was baking the tiles of the plaza.

"Sorren!"

He was standing just a few meters ahead of her.

At her cry, he twirled to face her, and

she
saw that his chest had blossomed into
fire.
Horror thwarted her understanding, then
she realized
he had been shot and the force of the
phaser blast had
thrown his body around, because Sorren
himself was already
dead. His husk twitched, then collapsed.
T'Sara caught a fleeting glimpse of
armored figures, tall men with dusky
green
skin, rushing toward her. Orions were
not known for
showing mercy to their victims. Before
she could escape
back into the shadows of the tower, she

was buffeted
by two hammer blows of searing heat.
As she fell to her knees, weakened by
the
destruction gnawing its way through her
body, the
desire to retaliate against her attackers
raged
through her mind. She could will their
death and the stone would
obey.

No, T'Sara, only a foolish old
woman would ignore the wisdom of
Surak any
longer.

She let loose her grip, dropping the Ko
N'ya. It hit the ground with a ringing

sound, then
rolled away with a curious vigor. As the
intruders scrabbled in the dirt to recover
it,

T'Sara curled in upon herself with one
last conscious
thought.

I will not give it to any living being.

The desert sand faded out from under her
...

... to be replaced with the smooth texture
of
fabric.

The man shivered in the cool air of the
cabin and

wrapped the covers more tightly around
his body. The
sensation of a burning pain in his side

faded away,
but the landscape of the dream itself was
etched into his
memory.

I am ... Jean-Luc Picard.

He opened his eyes and saw T'Sara's
stone
glittering in the dark by his bedside.

CHAPTER 11

The chime trilled for a second time, then
faded
into silence.

The door remained closed.

Beverly Crusher silently debated the wisdom of pressing the call button a third time. She was beginning to feel oddly conspicuous standing in the corridor outside Picard's cabin at such an early hour of the morning. Not that their breakfast routine was a secret, but she was wary of drawing too much attention to any intimacy between the captain and his chief medical officer. This balancing act between duty and friendship was hard enough

to sustain without an audience.

Before she had taken more than two steps away,

Crusher heard the door whooshing open behind her.

"Beverly."

The slurred quality of Picard's voice prepared her for the sight of his rumpled pajamas.

"Good morning, Jean-Luc."

He squinted in the bright light of the corridor.

"Sorry, I was up late writing reports for Admiral Matasu, not to mention the Vulcan

Science Academy. Then I had the strangest

dream ..."

"I'll take a rain check on breakfast."

"No, please come in." Picard moved aside to let her pass through the doorway. "I

want to tell you about my dream."

She set about ordering tea and biscuits from the

replicator while Picard changed into his uniform in the bedroom. By the time the coffee table was

set, he had emerged a transformed man, dapper and alert.

"That's the Heart?" asked Crusher when she

saw the object the captain carried with

him. She
had heard a secondhand recounting of
the discovery from
Worf late last night when she tended a
gash in
his hand.

"Yes, this is T'Sara's Ko N'ya."

Picard settled down on the sofa beside
the

doctor. "They were both in my dream."

"Tell me." Crusher sipped her tea and
listened to Picard recount his version of
the

Vulcan's death. As he talked he rolled
the

stone over and over in his hands as if
searching for a
chink in its rough surface, a key to the

interior.

"So, Detective Hill," she said when he had reached the end of the tale, "your subconscious thinks a band of Orions killed

T'Sara?"

He glanced up from his study of the Heart. "I

realize it's not such a startling conclusion given the evidence."

"Well, you've got a fifty-fifty chance of being right," said Crusher. From here, the gem that had built empires looked like an ordinary rock.

"But whether it was the Orions or the

Ferengi, there
aren't any criminals left alive to bring
to justice."

"Yet there's at least one accessory
lurking
on Starbase 193. We're due to arrive
there
soon, and I hope the element of surprise
will
give us an advantage in--"

"How could so many people die fighting
each other for that
thing!"

His eyebrows shot upward at her
outburst.

"It's just so ... drab," said Crusher. "I
expected something more dramatic."

"A faceted ruby the size of a

watermelon?"

"Something like that," she admitted with a laugh.

"If this is the Heart, I'm afraid its only value lies in its historic significance."

She leaned over the table and dropped her voice

to a whisper. "But what about its powers over

Darkness?"

Picard smiled somewhat sheepishly.

"Oh,

I grant the legends are grandly melodramatic ... still, it is a rather curious object."

"In what way?"

He started to speak, then hesitated, then began

again. "Perhaps its my overactive imagination at

work, but I can feel a heightened quality about it.

Nothing I can put into words." He shrugged away

his inability to explain. "Perhaps Data will be able

to quantify its properties."

"This should provide material for an impressive article for the next archaeological

symposium. Not bad for an amateur."

But she

could tell from his lack of reaction that Picard wasn't listening to her anymore. Propelled by an inner train of thought, the captain suddenly bolted from the table and was halfway across the cabin before he remembered he had company. "Oh, my apologies, Beverly. It's just that Data is expecting me to bring the Heart to his laboratory." "But, Jean-Luc, you haven't eaten a thing." Even his teacup had gone untouched. "I'm not hungry. No, really, I'm not."

"Well, I am. Do you mind if I stay here long enough to finish my biscuit?"

He had the good grace to flush. "Please make yourself at home." Stopping in the doorway,

Picard called back, "I'll make it up to you. Why don't we have dinner tomorrow night?"

"Yes, I'd like--"

Then he was gone.

"This may take some time," said Data as he carefully placed the stone in the center of a small metallic stage.

"Actually," said Picard, craning his neck to follow Data's movements, "I'd like to

stay and
watch."

"As you wish, sir." The weight of the
specimen
triggered a ripple of electronic chirps
across

a control console; Data quickly tapped a
series of minor adjustments to the
estimated
calibration figures he had entered
earlier.

After he positioned the first equipment
array over
the stage, Data provided a running
commentary of the
laboratory procedure in specimen
analysis. To his gratification, the captain
appeared to welcome the information;

unfortunately,
this was not always the case.
"By combining the three different
techniques," the
android continued, as he concluded the
final step of the
third measurement, "I should be able to
determine the
age of the stone to a value of plus or
minus one
hundred years."

The results of the calculation were not
what he had
expected.

"Is something wrong, Data?" asked the
captain, stepping closer to the
equipment. "What

have you found?"

"Preliminary dating analysis indicates the

object is remarkably young, falling in a range between eight hundred and one thousand years

old. This would fall far short of the reputed age of the Ko N'ya."

Picard was silent for a moment, then said, "I

suggest you run the dating analysis again."

"Certainly, Captain. As you wish."

Data reached out to reconfigure the equipment

for a repetition of the dating scans.

"What else did you find?" asked Picard.
"Meir-Delaplace analysis indicates the rock was formed from a mixture of a common

crystalline form of silicon dioxide and a metamorphic sandstone--"

"Data!" Evidently this answer did not please the captain either. "T'Sara did not spend

over a hundred years of her life looking for a

rock. It may look like rock, but it is ... well, more than that. According to her theory this relic possesses unusual and puzzling features. For

instance, what about the warmth?"

Data assumed a slightly puzzled frown as a visual adjunct to his reply. "I record no difference between the temperature of the object and that of the ship's interior." "But when I held it before I could feel the warmth." Picard shoved aside the equipment array to seize the rock. "I can feel it now." "Indeed?" Data double-checked his instrument readout, but there was no indication of a scientific basis for the captain's perception.

"Perhaps you could hold the stone while the analysis is in progress?"

"Certainly, if that's what it takes to prove my point."

Before Data could activate the appropriate equipment, they were interrupted by an intercom call.

"Riker to Captain Picard."

"Picard here."

"We're being hailed by Starbase 193. Commander Miyakawa requests a conference with you concerning your mission progress."

"I'll conduct it in my ready room, Number One." With a sigh of

exasperation,
Picard sketched a parting wave to Data.
"You'll have to carry on without me."
"Captain?"
"Yes?"
"I would like to continue my analysis of
the ...
object." Data pointed to the stone still
cradled in
the crook of Picard's arm.
Picard stopped in mid-stride. "Oh, yes,
of course."
Data retrieved the specimen from the
captain,
then stood in place holding the stone in
his hands.
It never warmed to his touch.

"Qu`e pasa, Picard?" Estrella Miyakawa still rolled the r in his name, but her Mexican accent had been muted over the years.

He studied her image on the desk monitor and noted a few streaks of white in her straight black hair; otherwise, time had touched her very lightly.

"Estoy bien," answered Picard. She had taught him what little Spanish he knew in exchange for tutoring her in calculus; he

never
mastered the language, and she failed the
Academy course.

"So why have you been sending me
mission reports
that could be written on the head of a
pin?"

Age had not softened her blunt manner.

"Perhaps I erred on the side of
succinctness," said

Picard, displaying his most genial,
diplomatic
smile.

She laughed in his face. "Captain, you've
cut me out of the information loop since
your departure

from Atropos, and I want to know why."

"Commander, my last report on the

Ferengi
distress--"

"Did not contain one word about the
destruction of the
Orion ship Dark Runner."

"How did you hear of that?" asked
Picard.

"News travels fast in this sector.

Although,
as a Federation official, I was probably
the
last person on the starbase to find out.

Any
idea why they were fighting, or are you
going to keep
that to yourself as well?"

He sighed at the increasing tone of

bitterness in
her voice. Any further attempt at
secrecy would only alienate his one ally
on the
base, not to mention cost him the
goodwill of an old
friend. "Estrella, I have reason to
believe that the
security of your communications system
has been
breached. Until the source of the leak is
found,
I prefer not to discuss the details of the
mission."
"Oh, I have a pretty good idea of who's
responsible already," she said grimly.
"One of
my communications operators--Thomas

Grede.

Unfortunately, Mr. Grede met with an accident last night. It seems that when he came

off shift, he took a wrong turn and walked out an airlock."

"He was murdered."

"Thank you, Jean-Luc, but that thought had

occurred to me already. I'll fill you in on the

details when you arrive."

There went his advantage. "How the devil

did you know the Enterprise was headed for Starbase

193?"

"The usual base channels," said Miyakawa with a wry smile. "I overheard it in a bar."

"Of course, it's not just any bar," explained the commander later that day as she and Picard walked through the doorway of the Due or Die. "This is Camenae's bar, and that makes all the difference." The dimly lit room was crowded, with no empty tables, but one of the waiters waved them over

to a booth. Two Tellarites and an Andorian scrambled off the benches with half-filled drinks still clutched in their hands. Picard heard their muttered curses as he and Miyakawa settled into the hastily vacated booth. Another waiter swept by and left two glasses of synthehol in his wake. "Are these the perks of base command?" "Some of the very few," sighed Miyakawa. "Camenae, for reasons I haven't yet

fathomed, likes to maintain the fiction that I'm a power to be reckoned with on this station. Perhaps the tourists find the illusion of law and order comforting."

"You weren't this cynical at the Academy."

She shrugged and gestured toward the patrons of the densely packed bar. A group of Ferengi merchants were huddled at one end of the room;

Orions were at the other end; in between, Picard counted at least ten other alien races,

none of
them known for their pacifism or a
highly
developed sense of ethics.
"I'm one Starfleet officer working alone
in a
den of smugglers, thieves, and cutthroats.
If
I ever manage to get my hands on any
hard
evidence of criminal activity, I'll
probably end up walking out an airlock
just like
Grede." She downed her drink in one
gulp, then
said, "Which hasn't stopped me from
trying, mind you.
However, Camenae is fond of me, so she

works

very hard to keep compromising materials out of my reach."

"Just who is this Camenae?" asked Picard.

"Officially, she's merely one of the inhabitants of the starbase, but unofficially,

I'd have to say that Camenae is the real administrator of this place. I may supervise the base's technical services and

facilities, but Camenae runs its affairs. She always knows what's going on in every corner of this

sector, so if someone wants information,

she
sells it to them; when something needs to
be done, she
arranges it."

"Does that include murder?"

"I'm sure it does." Miyakawa frowned,
then shook her head. "But I don't think
she

ordered Grede's death. It was a sloppy
job,

and Camenae would never allow one of
her informants

to be killed in such an obvious way."

"But you think she knows who did?"

"Yes. Not that I'll ever be able to get that
information out of her; and unless she
gives the

signal, there's not a single being on the

starbase

who will talk to me about Grede's death."

"So you're telling me that the murderer will go free?" said Picard angrily.

"Without any evidence, or any witnesses, my hands are--"

Miyakawa was cut off by the crash of heavy furniture and a stream of curses uttered in a mixture of Ferengi and Federation Standard.

"Nothing!" continued the Ferengi who had

overturned a chair as he staggered to his feet;

he was weaving back and forth in place.

"Bruk

says he found nothing in the wreckage but my

brother's corpse!"

One of his companions plucked at the sleeve

of his gray jacket, but the Ferengi swatted

away the restraining hand.

"The salvage effort alone will bankrupt me.

All it brings me is the trouble of selling Maarc's ship for scrap metal and the exorbitant expense of the crew's

funeral."

"I think I've met his brother," said Picard softly. "Perhaps we should leave before--"

"Ah ha!" The Ferengi was staring directly at them. "The captain of the Enterprise has come to laugh at my defeat."

"Too late, Jean-Luc," said Miyakawa, as the bantamweight Ferengi bore down upon them as fast as his unsteady legs could carry him. His domed head and flaring ears had flushed a deep red from too much drink and an

excess of rage.

"You were there, thief!" His finger jabbed repeatedly at Picard's chest. "Return what is rightfully mine, what you stole from my brother!"

Before Picard could form a reply, a dark hand settled on the Ferengi's shoulder. The woman's grip was firm enough to choke off any further accusations.

"DaiMon Tork," she said in a low voice. "I prefer my customers to conduct

their
private business with greater discretion
and
decorum."

So this was Camenae.

Then the bar owner turned her attention
to Picard, and he was struck by the
intensity of her
gaze. There was a familiar quality to her
face
that he couldn't quite place.

"Welcome to the Due or Die, Captain
Picard. My apologies for the
disturbance."

The Ferengi uttered a strangled squeak
of
protest.

"DaiMon Tork," said Picard in a

voice loud enough to carry to all corners of the bar.

"You have my word that we took nothing that belonged to the Ferengi off that ship."

Camenae's lips curved into a smile, and she released her hold on Tork.

"Just as I thought," the DaiMon groaned, collapsing onto the floor. He rubbed gingerly at his sore shoulder. "Scrap metal and funeral expenses."

With a snap of her fingers, Camenae signaled

Tork's companions to carry him away, and they

scurried forward to do her bidding.
The sense of familiarity deepened.

"Have we
met before?"

"I'm disappointed, Captain Picard. I
expected a more original opening line
from you."

En garde.

Perhaps she would respond to a direct
approach. "Commander Miyakawa tells
me

you're in the information business. I'd
like to become
one of your customers."

"That's a much better tactic," she said.

"Unfortunately, Starfleet doesn't have an
account with me, and I'm not accepting

new clients
at the moment. If you like, I'll put you on
my
waiting list."

Lunge and parry.

"At the very least," said Picard, "I'd like
the
opportunity to talk to you in private ...
about

Thomas Grede."

Camenae shook her head gently.

"I have nothing to say to you that can't be
discussed right
here in the middle of the Due or Die.

Private

meetings with Starfleet officers are bad
for my

business reputation." Touch`e. "Now, if

you'll excuse me, Captain, I must get back to work."

She glided away.

The memory of Camenae's smoky eyes haunted Picard all the way back to the Enterprise. However, standing in his brightly illuminated ready room, Picard realized that his impressions of the Due or Die and its elusive owner would be impossible to convey in words. He restricted himself to relating the bare bones of his experience to his first officer. "That's it?" Riker rocked back in his

chair
so he could look Picard in the eye.
"Grede was
the victim of an accidental death under
unknown
circumstances?"
Picard's hands gripped the back of his
desk
chair. He could not bring himself to sit
down since
at any moment he should receive a call
that would pull
him away. "I'm not comfortable with
Miyakawa's
preliminary ruling either. However, I
have a better
appreciation for the difficulties of her
situation

now that I've actually visited Starbase 193.

The Federation's control of this area is relatively recent and definitely precarious."

Riker held up one hand and ticked off the points of contention across his fingertips. "So the Orions can't be brought to justice because they were killed by the Ferengi, and the communications officer who leaked the information about the Heart has conveniently died so he can't be charged, and the case of the murder of ten Vulcans is now closed."

"Yes, it is suspiciously neat and tidy," said the captain. The call still had not come, and he began to admit that the delay worried him.

"So what do we do now?" asked Riker. Picard appreciated the effort it must have taken for his first officer to maintain a neutral tone to ask this question. At warp eight the Enterprise could still reach Luxor IV in time for the poker tournament. "I've assured Commander Miyakawa that we'll remain in the area another

twenty-four
hours to provide at least a token show of
strength
in the sector."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir."

Despite the personal sacrifice involved,
Riker's reaction seemed sincere. Picard
knew the first officer disliked letting
bullies go
unchallenged. "Will you consider
allowing shore leave
privileges--"

"Let's continue this discussion later,
Number

One," said the captain. He moved out
from behind the
desk at a brisk pace. "I should have
received

Data's report on the Heart by now." Picard bolted out the door before his first officer could trail after him.

Data accepted as an axiom of his construction that he did not possess emotions; therefore, he could initiate yet another repetition of his laboratory procedures without an accompanying sense of frustration or anger. However, based on his experience with the crew of the Enterprise, the android greatly suspected that these were precisely

the set of emotions that he should be feeling at this time.

Moving the equipment array into position over the specimen, he closely monitored his actions so that he might detect any departure from his previous routines. No difference. He had followed the same pattern of movement with the same precision each of the four times before. Data repeated the dating measurement a fifth time.

A new result appeared on his viewscreen.

Entirely new. Over the course of hours, he had not been able to obtain the same age for the specimen twice in a row. Since there was no reason to believe that a sixth attempt would reveal any new insights, Data concluded that another approach was required. Unfortunately, the formulation of such an approach eluded him. The android was pondering the nature of scientific inspiration when the doors of the

laboratory parted to admit a swiftly moving

Captain Picard. Judging from the somewhat grim

set of the captain's facial features, Data surmised there was no need for an exchange of

pleasantries and launched into an immediate explanation of the project's difficulties.

Picard's expression hardened even more as he listened.

"The largest given value was twenty million

years old," continued Data. "Which would

be consistent with the theory of the Heart's involvement with ancient history. Unfortunately, the extreme variations raise considerable doubt as to the validity of any of the results I have obtained."

"Obviously your equipment is malfunctioning, Mr. Data," said Picard. He plucked the stone off the scan stage and carefully examined its surface for signs of damage.

"I ran extensive diagnostic tests subsequent to each of the anomalous findings. There is no sign of malfunction. Furthermore,

my
measurement of all other test objects has
been
consistent and predictable. There
appears to be some
substance in the specimen itself which
interferes with the
scan."

"Earlier, you claimed it was nothing
more than a
rock."

Data attempted a shrug. "Apparently the
composition analysis was in error. I
shall repeat
that procedure as well."

He extended one arm, reaching for the
stone, but
Picard took a step backward as if to

evade

him. "I think we should suspend any further

analysis until you've straightened out the technical difficulties in the laboratory equipment."

"Captain, the specimen would be useful in

determining--"

Picard stepped away again. "Until you can

establish the nature of the malfunction, I won't risk inflicting any damage to the Heart." Cradling the stone in the crook of his

arm, he said, "I'll keep it in my cabin for now."

Data searched for the emotion that might
best suit
this situation. The answer came to him
just after the
captain's departure exasperation.
He wondered what it felt like.

END OF VOLUME I

THE DEVIL'S HEART

by
Carmen Carter

Volume II of Three Volumes
Pages i-ii and 159-344

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THE DEVIL'S HEART

CHAPTER 12

For one hour every night, the Due or Die was closed for a perfunctory cleaning. Grumbling patrons were pushed off the premises or carried out into the corridor if they lacked the ability to walk by themselves; it was an open secret on the starbase that the synthehol served at the bar had an unusually potent effect on anyone who slipped

a hefty tip to the bartender.

Other branches of Camenae's business, however, were open at all times. So while Orlev

wiped stains off the pitted countertop, Camenae

perched on a barstool, waiting patiently for the

arrival of one of her operatives.

"We've been very busy lately," said the bartender as he gathered up an armful of dirty glasses.

His breathy, sibilant complaint reflected her own train of thought. She sighed in agreement.

"For ten years we laughed at that old

Vulcan

woman and her quest for a mythical treasure. But

now, it seems the joke is on us. She found that

damn Heart--and disrupted this entire sector."

Of course, the greedy scramble after the relic

had also fattened Camenae's coffers, but she

distrusted these windfall profits. They were

short-lived and unpredictable, not to mention that her

overhead had also risen sharply.

For instance, there was the matter of Thomas

Grede.

She had promised to transport him to safety, and she was in the habit of keeping her word. After all, broken contracts were bad for business.

A warning whistle from Kajima announced the arrival of someone at the threshold of the bar.

"It's the Squib," announced the guard after he checked the image coming from the security camera.

Camenae nodded and slipped off the barstool.

The Norsican knew to wait for her
retreat
into the back office before he released
the lock on
the entrance.
She was seated in her customary place
when she
heard the clicking sound of chitonous
legs on the
metallic deck. Krtakk scurried forward
to greet her with a customary wave of its
eye
stalks. As a longtime operative, it knew
not
to waste any more time on extraneous
civilities.
"As you suspected, Camenae," it said in

a
chittering voice. "Lord Reyjad@an stole
the
transport papers from Grede and
obtained free
passage on the Villareal all the way
to Smelter's Hold."

"After that?"

To her disgust, Krtakk bobbed its hard-
shelled
body up and down, a submissive gesture
that
signaled failure. "I could find no trace
of the unDiWahn after leaving the
Villareal.

He has gone into hiding somewhere on
the Hold, but
it will take time and money to determine

who is
sheltering him."

"Continue the trace, whatever the cost."
The Squib chirped its acceptance of the
task.

"There is one item more Grede was
supposed
to erase all traces of the alien's
transmissions, but the new tech in
communications was
able to recover a scrap that escaped
overwrite."

Krtakk executed a rapid series of
nervous
bobs. "Unfortunately, the price for
commissioning
the effort was exorbitant and the result

disappointing."

"Let me hear it anyway," said Camenae with a sigh of resignation at the escalating cost of her revenge.

A tentacle looped up over the table edge and dropped a small vocoder into the palm of her hand. Camenae pressed a control switch and sound issued forth from its speaker.

"... seeking has ended. The Gem has been uncovered, and it is again ..."

That was all. Such a small scrap and yet so very revealing.

"Thank you, Krtakk. You have done well."

The Squib squeaked, surprised by her praise, then scuttled away with a churring

prattle of self-congratulations.

Camenae played the short recording over

several times, listening carefully to the quality of the

voice instead of the words. The content was indeed

unrewarding, but there was an unexpected value in

hearing Reyjad@an speak in private his crisp enunciation of Federation Standard was devoid

of the thick oily accent and hissing sound he had used with her.

Evidently she had underestimated the unDiWahn. And poor Grede had paid the price of her miscalculation.

Some men turned to fat in their old age, but

First Prefect Lorris had added no weight to his lean, muscular frame as decade piled

on decade. By his ninetieth year, his eyesight had not dimmed, the peaked scrollwork of

his ears missed no whisper of gossip or slander,

and his dry laughter had developed a

blade-sharp
edge that could cut his victims to the
quick. If his
reflexes had slowed any since his youth,
Lorris had hidden that change beneath an
imposing
dignity of bearing.
His one concession to the passage of
time was a
diminished patience for disruption and
disorder. So, as
his family size swelled with succeeding
generations of
offspring, Lorris retreated more and
more often to the
sheltered confines of his library.
Only on this morning, when the prefect
entered

his sanctuary he found it already occupied. His irritation at the violation of his privacy was mollified once he recognized the uniformed intruder. Subcommander Vedoc was rooted in place by one of the tallest bookshelves, head bent over an open book; he was so immersed in his study that he had not heard the door of the room open.

"For a soldier, you read a great deal of history, Nephew."

The young man twirled around. Then,
with a smile
of greeting, he ducked his head in an
informal
gesture of respect that acknowledged
close
family ties yet did not forget the distance
between
their ranks. "Your library is impossible
to resist, Uncle. I have spent many of my
ship
leaves in this room."
"Hah! If you value your career, you
should be out
whoring and drinking with your
shipmates." Settling
into a broad chair in the middle of the

room, the
old man beckoned his sister's son to
come
closer. "There was a time, in the early
days of the
Empire, when an officer was despised
as a
common throat-slitter if he did not also
cultivate a knowledge of art, music, and
literature. Those days are gone. Most of
my
fellow prefects are either mercenaries or
bureaucrats, and I suspect that they
consider me
to be a peevish eccentric."
"Then I appear to take after you."
"You could do worse," said Lorrin with
a

sniff. Vedoc had always been a favorite of his, more so than any of his own

spawn. The prefect was struck with a sudden

inspiration, and he forged his attack strategy with the

same rapidity that he had used as a commander in

battle. "That book you are holding is contraband."

The young man looked down in surprise at the

volume in his hands. "But if that is so, however

did you obtain it, Uncle?"

Lorris chuckled at the boy's na@ivet`e.

"One of the advantages of a military career is the chance to make contacts with unsavory characters; the Ferengi, for instance. A loathsome race, but they do have their uses."

"They smuggled Federation books to you for payment?"

"For payment, yes," said the old man.

"But also for trade. There are those in the Federation who are equally curious about the Romulans. In fact, as a centurion I provided the author of

that very
book," he pointed once again to the tome
in his
nephew's hands, "with a copy of the
early history
of the Romulan people."

"I've read several of her works here in
the
library," said Vedoc eagerly. "She's a
fine
scholar."

"Was a fine scholar. According to my
contacts,
T'Sara died just a few days ago."

"Of old age?"

"Perhaps," said Lorris with a shrug.

"She must
have been close to three centuries old.

Yet the
report is that she died along with a group
of other
Vulcans, which implies the death was
not
natural."

"Her loss will be a blow to Federation
science."

"I agree, but the Vulcans do not value
her
scholarship as highly as we do.

Evidently
T'Sara's uncanny understanding of alien
emotion
offends their delicate sensibilities."

The young man frowned. "There is much
I do not

understand about the Vulcans."

"They are a dull race, Vedoc. Their philosophy of logic leaves no room for the

vices that make life worthwhile." It was time

to test the waters; with a deep sigh,

Lorris

added, "Yet the only vice I have carried into my

old age is curiosity ... and I am curious to learn how T'Sara died and what has come of her

research into our legends. The answers I seek

may do nothing more than satisfy my meddlesome nature, but then again ...

well, t hey
may do far more."

Vedoc's eyebrows angled upward; this
turn
in the discussion had definitely piqued
his interest.

"I have the ear of the Praetor," continued
the first
prefect, "and in payment for some long-
standing debts
born of my attention to his private
affairs,
he has agreed to send a warbird beyond
the
Neutral Zone to investigate the matter."
His nephew's interest heightened into
alarm.
Eyes wide with disbelief, he said, "He

would
violate the Neutral Zone treaty for this
venture?"

"For a chance to possess the Ko N'ya,
the

Praetor would do anything." Lorris
chortled

softly. "Or at least, order someone else
to do
anything."

"The Ko N'ya," whispered the young
man. The

library was warm, yet he shivered as if a
cold

draft had chilled his bones. "A myth
risen from

the Vaults of the Dead."

"You have a vivid imagination, Vedoc, but then so did I at your age. Military service will teach you how to channel that faculty into more sensible pursuits."

His nephew stiffened to attention, a tactful response that did not commit him to agreement.

Enough dallying, thought the prefect. There was not much time to implement this revision to his plans. "It would please me to have these proceedings supervised by someone who is personally

concerned with our family interests."

Vedoc caught his meaning without difficulty.

"Can you arrange for my transfer to the warbird?"

"Oh, yes," said Lorriss with a wry smile.

"I have nearly as many favors to call in as I have

books on these shelves."

"Then I am yours to command, Uncle."

"Excellent. Prepare to leave this house within

the hour." Lorriss was impressed by the young

soldier's courage. His sister's son would make

a fine prefect some day and bring new

honors
to the family name.
If he survived this mission, of course.

Those called to the Gathering began to
assemble when
the first moon of DiWahn started its
climb up
through the twilight sky. Out of houses
and inns, through
darkening streets, the robed figures
streamed
toward the Gateway Temple. Heavy
cowls hid the faces of those who called
themselves the
unDiWahn. Some walked singly, others
in
pairs or small groups, but by the time

they reached
the tiled plaza surrounding the high
tower, their
swelling numbers had merged into one
mass of the
Faithful.

Townspeople not sworn to the Faith
cowered in
their homes, for within memory there
had never been a
Gathering as large as this one. Every
Guardian on the
face of the planet must have journeyed to
the walled
city of Iconiad@an, but no one outside
the
order had envisioned there were so
many to answer the

call; the sound of their swishing robes
seeped like
flood waters through barred doors and
shuttered
windows.

Those men and women who had settled
into a
complacent acceptance of their adopted
world were
reminded once again of half-forgotten
legends of
ancient Iconia and its lost grandeur. In
fearful whispers, they wondered what
cabalistic
cataclysm had roused the Guardians. The
Faithful kept alive the memories of their
race before the Passage through the

Gate, and they
possessed knowledge beyond the
understanding of farmers and
merchants; therefore, whatever alarmed
the Guardians
might well terrify a commoner.
When the moon reached its zenith,
tolling bells
chased a few stragglers through the
massive archways
at the base of the tower, and thick doors
hewn from
the strongest wood swung back into
place to seal
all entrances against any uninitiated
intruders.
Body pressed tightly against body inside
the

domed chamber that barely contained the assembly; but in the very center of the densely packed crowd there was a clearing just large enough for one hooded figure to sit cross-legged on the floor. The abstract mosaic design beneath this Guardian marked the spot where the first Iconian had stepped through the Gateway; only a handful of the Faithful had the right to occupy this place of honor. After the last knell faded into silence, the Master rose from the floor and pushed

back the heavy folds of the hood to reveal a man in the middle years of his life. The scalloped ridges of his forehead were plainly patterned, devoid of beauty yet not quite ugly; his skin was the pale shade of violet that marked him as a native of the southern hemisphere of the planet.

One by one, the members of the Gathering followed his example. When all of the Guardians had bared their heads, Kierad@an spoke in a deep, melodious voice that could reach every straining

ear and fill it with honey. The only sound from the listening host was their soft breathing. "Here is the story, as my grandfather told it to me ..."

When I was a young man, newly initiated into our order, an offworlder came to my village to live. She was a tall woman with delicate, sweeping features and hair the color of ash; her dark eyes burned with the desire to learn the language and ways of our people. I had never seen

her like before, and she said that she was the first of her race to set foot upon DiWahn; however, my elders among the Faithful knew her already. At that time, I was still too young to have learned more than a half dozen Dreams, but Ikajad@an assured me that T'Sara was part of the Gem's lore and that she was destined to become one facet of the Dreaming. For weeks I listened as the Guardians debated their part in the Gem's plan and how to fulfill it. Some among them said it

would be
sacrilege to even contemplate action,
that such
direct interference would actually
disrupt the course
of the Dreaming; others denounced this
passivity,
believing instead that the unDiWahn had
been chosen
to set T'Sara on the proper path.
In the end, the way was simple.
Ikajad@an invited her to attend the
Tellings. There was no precedent for
allowing one
unsworn to the Faith to hear the Dreams,
and
T'Sara quickly sensed that she had been
greatly

honored. So night after night she joined me as

we took our place in the circle of Guardians; and each night someone recited one

of the Dreams recorded by our Iconian ancestors, although never one in which she had a part.

She listened patiently at first, then with a growing hunger that carried her through the entire winter.

On the first day of spring, Ikajad@an recounted

the death of Iconia, and thus reached the end of the

ancient lore. By this time, T'Sara yearned

to discover what had become of Kanda
Jiak's

Gem and to fully understand its powers.
Her restlessness drove her away from
our world,
but she was not lost to us. Always I
knew where to find
her, and those Dreams were the ones I
never tired of
hearing.

Kierad@an paused for breath, then
said, "That is the end of my grandfather's
Telling, but
the story does not end there.

"For many years, T'Sara sent word of
her
search to several of the unDiWahn who

had tutored
her. Then, one by one these Guardians
grew old
and died, until there was no one left
among the
Faithful who was known to her, and her
letters stopped.
"My father took part in the Gathering that
chose one
of its number to leave DiWahn and seek
her out.
Jaradad@an spent the rest of his life on
this
mission, wandering from one planet to
another in
T'Sara's wake, always careful to keep
out of her
sight. His son was born offworld and

continues the work
of his father."

Raising his hands high into the air,

Kierad@an

proclaimed, "Reyjad@an has this to say
to us

T'Sara's seeking has ended; the Gem has
been uncovered; and it is again time for
the Faithful

to take a part in the Dreaming."

His words unleashed a storm of emotion
from the

Guardians. Shouts of joy mixed with the
sobs of

those moved to tears by the arrival of a
day foretold in

myth. Young and old, men and women,

strangers and
friends, all embraced each other as kin.
Kierad@an waited for the throes of their
fervor
to calm, then he drew a scroll from the
folds of
his robe. The parchment was yellow
with age, and it was
tied with leather laces.
"We have prepared for this day in many
ways. There
are those among you who were chosen to
pave the path we
must follow, others to walk its length."
He
scanned the multitude of eager faces that
had
turned back toward him.

"Daramad@an!"

A large, heavyset man pushed his way through the assembly to the center of the chamber. Few of the Guardians had ever met this man, but everyone knew of him by another name; his inclusion in the order had never been revealed before.

"Are you with us?" asked Kierad@an. It was a ritual question, but the answer had never carried so much weight as it did tonight.

"I am with you," said the one that most of DiWahn knew as Admiral Jakat. "As

are my forces."

"Hai!" A chorus of voices scattered throughout the crowd attested to the loyalty of the senior officers Daramad@an had brought into the order.

Bowing his head in a gesture of subservience, the admiral of the DiWahn space fleet asked,

"Where are we to go, Master?"

"To the Appointed Place," said Kierad@an.

At his touch, the brittle leather ties circling the scroll crumbled into dust. He unfurled the

sheet and held it high so all could see
what was
drawn on its surface.
It was a map filled with stars and a
single blazing
comet.

CHAPTER 13

The sighing winds carried aloft the
moans and
cries of the dying as if beseeching the
heavens for
pity, but the red sun was merciless.
Blazing in
noonday splendor, it dried the throats
and
tongues of men too weak to crawl

toward shelter,
and beat down upon bodies that had no
warmth of their
own. Small fires smoldered in the
blood-sodden ground, then guttered out
in trails
of dark, foul smoke. Here and there
across the
littered field were flutters of movement
the
trembling of limbs as death finally took
hold of
an eviscerated warrior, the lazy flap of
wings
as a carrion-eater feasted on the carna
ge, the
rippling of a clan banner whose broken
staff was

driven through the chest of the standard-bearer.

As the sun tipped over on its westward descent toward the jagged peaks of Mt. Selaya, and the dry desert breezes gathered

strength, one lone figure broke the taut line

of the horizon. He picked his way carefully,

stepping over the fallen warriors if possible,

skirting around them when the mounds of intertwined

bodies grew too deep. His tunic was clean,

unspotted, untorn, but his legs and sandal

laces were streaked with the olive color
of drying
gore.

The boy stopped for a moment, winded
by his long
run from the mountain village and his
tortured
progress through the battlefield of
Ishaya;
closed eyes gave respite to his mind. His
mother and the healers had demanded
that he stay in
isk'Kahr, but he had twisted out of
T'Leia's grasp and raced away.
"Wait!" they had cried after him. "You
are
too young," they had Called into his

mind when he
passed beyond hearing.
He was much older now.
In the last hour he had learned that the
colorful
scenes of clashing armies intricately
embroidered in tapestries and the lilting
melody of the War Ballads were all
treats for
children, just like the tales of wise old
sehlats who
talked to lost hunters. Emerald-green
thread
shimmered in lamplight, but the blood
that covered his
own legs was not so pretty, and armor
had no
luster when it was splattered with gore.

Five

Vulcan clans had emptied their veins
into this
sandy plain, sullyng its air with the stink
of
putrefaction; few survived to sing tales
of
bravery, or even of treachery. Where
was the glory
in this silence?

Come.

The need to continue pressed against his
mind again.

He had mistaken the desire for his own
curiosity, for his own willfulness, but
now he
recognized that the summons was from

without, a Call
from someone alive and adrift in this sea
of
corpses. He opened his eyes and
scanned the
torn landscape.

"Father?"

He was answered by a visceral tug
toward the
north, as if a hand plucked weakly at his
sleeve when lips could no longer form
words.

His pace quickened now that he had
been given a
path to follow and a sense of purpose.
Even the
horrors of the killing field were less
shocking

than before. The endless variations of mutilation--charred limbs, split skulls, sunken chests--all played out the basic theme of death. The weapons also varied in configuration, yet all had drawn sufficient blood to silence their enemies. Some of the slain were unmarked, showing no open wounds, but their faces were clenched and contorted in the grotesque physical manifestation of the Calls that had expertly twisted their minds. The tattered remnants of a bright red flag

caught his eye. He approached it with
dread,
torn between the urgency of his father's
Call and fear
of where it drew him. Yes, his family
had fought
here. By a freak accident of the wind, the
cloth was
draped like a shroud across the body of
one of his
clansmen, mimicking the act of a healer
acknowledging the limits of her art. His
search was
almost over.

My son.

The Call was weaker than before, yet
still he could

sense that his father lay nearby.
He took one step forward, then faltered
when
he saw the face of the body lying in his
path.
Surrell lay crumpled on the ground
where a shard of metal had pinned him
down; he had
died in agony, thrashing to free himself.
To lose
any brother was a cause for grief, but
this brother
had been a favorite, and his death
brought more pain
than all the other horrors the boy had
witnessed.
A second step revealed another slain

brother.

Then a third.

All the dead before him had names; he
had seen

each of these still, pale faces laughing in
the

radiant moonlight during the last Festival
of

Moons. Brothers, uncles, cousins; there
were

too many to mourn.

"Father!"

"Here." The soft word was spoken, not
Sent.

The boy frantically scrabbled through
the dead

bodies until his hands touched warm
flesh. He

fell to his knees by the side of his father. Stef's face was covered with blood, blurring the familiar angular features. His eyes, normally dark and piercing, were clouded with pain and exhaustion, but they cleared when he felt the touch of a hand on his arm.

"I've come, Father."

"What, no other sons left?" asked Stef, his weak voice hoarse with anger.

"No, Father, just me."

"So be it. I will have more sons." With a gasping breath to gather strength for movement,

Stef drew
back his cloak to reveal a small object
nestled by his side. "Behold your
birthright and
your future the king-maker, Ko N'ya!"
"This is what my brothers died for?"
asked the
boy. He had overheard Surrell and the
others
whispering in the dark when they had
thought he was
safely asleep; they had spun strange tales
of a relic of great power that would
bring immense
wealth to the clan that possessed it. Yet
this dull
gray rock was not worth one day of
Surrell's

life.

"Death is a small price to pay for our place in history. My dynasty shall unite all

Vulcan," said his father. He lifted up the stone

and his voice grew louder. "We will live forever

... rule forever."

The boy reached out to touch the rough surface of the

Ko N'ya, but Stef pulled it away.

"Mine!" he hissed. "Do not be so eager to succeed me."

"No, Father, I never meant--"

Stef's cry of pain cut off the boy's apology. A spasm racked through the

man's body, twisting his muscles into knots and robbing him of the strength to hold the stone. It slipped from his trembling fingers, and the boy lunged forward to catch it before it hit the ground.

Mine!

"Father?"

The soft flutter of Stef's Calling mind faded to silence.

The boy rocked back on his heels, the Ko

N'ya in his hands. He was the only living being

left on the plain of Ishaya.

Desert nights are chill on Vulcan. The
borrowed warmth of the sun does not
linger for very long
in the dark. A young boy in a linen shirt
and
sleeveless vest would need to huddle
close to the
licking flames of a fire in order to
survive
until morning.
Not this boy.
He sat cross-legged on the cold ground,
yet his limbs did not shiver and tremble.
The stone
rested in the palms of his hands where
he held its
weight all night without strain. Under

moonlight
it transformed into a crystalline gem,
glittering
and sparkling as if lit from within, but at
dawn the
spell was broken.

A hoarse shouting reverberated across
the plain,
and the boy looked up to see figures
moving in the
distance. At first he assumed the people
of his village
had finally arrived to seek out their
dead, but as the
group drew nearer he caught the foreign
lilt
to their voices. They spoke with the
harsh bark of

warriors, not healers. Another clan, probably the Ghe'Hara, he guessed once he could see the cut of their armor. He counted eight men scouring the field, darting here and there and rummaging among the dead as if in search of something. More fierce shouting ensued when one of the men gestured toward the red flag of Stef's clan. The troop began to run across the field, heedless of the dead underfoot, and in their haste one of the

warriors nearly trampled over the boy
where he
sat silent and unmoving.

"Th'a!" cursed the man, jumping back as
if

a serpent had crawled out of the grass.

He took

a wild shot with a phaser, and the boy
felt the

breath of the beam's passage a scant inch
from his

cheek. "Garamond, come see what I've
found!"

One of the warriors veered aside
to answer the call. He was tall and
carried himself

with a confident swagger. Where his

companions wore the functional armor that would repel modern weapon fire, his suit was crafted along ancient design; and the decorative sword that swung from his belt was just as lethal as their phasers.

The sight of the boy, and what he possessed, brought a grunt of surprise to Garamond's lips. "You have something that belongs to me."

The boy looked up, but did not speak. Garamond stepped back, instinctively brandishing his sword. A trick of the morning light

had given the boy the face of an old man.
One

blink and the illusion was gone.

"Give it up to me, child."

"My name is Surak," said the boy
quietly. "And I will not give you this
stone. I will

not give it to any living being."

"Are you so eager to die, young one?"

Garamond

resheathed his weapon, more curious
than kind in the

face of this unexpected defiance.

"No, I don't wish to die," said Surak,
"but I could not live with that deed on
my conscience."

"Then you propose to keep this bauble to

yourself?"

The boisterous laughter that followed his question covered a growing uneasiness. Garamond's grip on the sword handle tightened again. If the stone held

Powers, then this boy could be as dangerous as his elders and must be killed after all.

"No, I have no need for it now that the sun has

risen." To Garamond's relief, the young boy

bent forward and placed the stone on the ground.

"You have given it to me after all," the man crowed

as his fist closed over the rough rock and
hefted it
high into the air.

Surak shook his head. "You have taken it
of your
own free will."

"A fine distinction, my young
philosopher,"

said Garamond with a lifted brow. "But
why do you
disdain these Powers. It is rumored this
dull gem
you have tossed aside can fulfill all
desires.

The Ko N'ya could even raise the dead
of your
clan."

Surak surveyed the field of slaughter with a new dispassion. "They chose this fate, so restoring them to life would only prolong the battle."

His hands clenched, then eased again. Laying his open palms down upon his knees, he continued.

"I don't seek the fulfillment of desires. I have chosen to end the desires themselves."

I have chosen to end the desires themselves.

The words were spoken in Ancient Vulcan, with the

lilting cadence of a pre-Reform dialect.
Picard shifted in his bed, and the
movement pulled
him closer to consciousness.

The phrase whispered again, but this
time he could not
fathom any meaning in the guttural
sounds.

He slipped back into another dream.

The bedchamber walls were hung with
intricately
woven tapestries of panoramic views
that
rivalled nature, but the fabrics were
muted by dust
and heavy shadows. Rugs covered the
flagstone

floor, but their colors and patterns had
been
worn away by the scuffle and tread of
five
generations. Once the room had been
filled with
rich furnishings of dark wood deep
chairs that
invited guests to linger and tables spread
with trays
of wine and bread to entice them to stay
yet awhile
longer. These were all gone now,
removed one by one
as the desire for fellowship dimmed,
then guttered
out like the cold torches set in their

sconces.

A pall of age and decay draped like a discarded veil over the entire room, but it coiled

most thickly around the bed and the single frail

figure nestled deep in its embrace.

"I am old, J'ross. Our people die young on

this new world, but even by our reckoning before The

Crossing from Vulcan, I am old."

Garamond had uttered this petulant complaint

so often that the woman at his side no longer tried

to frame a soothing reply. Instead, she studied

the blotchy, wrinkled skin of his face
with new
interest; his complexion had an ominous
brown tinge
that had not been there yesterday. His
lean, bony
features had turned gaunt. She wondered
if
either of the chamber's sentries had
noticed the
changes.
Her hand searched for the basket tucked
under the
bed. The contents were intact. She
pulled out a
small leather-bound book and turned to a
marked

page. "Shall I read to you this morning?"

"No, I am dying."

He had said this before as well, day after day for the last year, but she thought that today he might be right.

There was a soft, dry rattle when he breathed that warned of lungs grown brittle overnight. Garamond had wakened only an hour before, yet there were dark smudges beneath his eyes and their puffy lids drooped down lower and lower.

His eyes closed. He drifted off to sleep. Laying the book facedown, J'ross

carefully shifted her weight off the bed
so as not
to wake the old man. With expert
movements born
of much practice, she straightened and
tucked the
tangled covers. He did not stir. She
picked
up the book and bent down. Her hands
sought out the
basket again.
"Who is there?" cried out Garamond,
waking
suddenly. His fingers clutched fitfully at
his
side. "Gone! It is gone!"
"Hush, my husband. It was only hidden

by the
covers." She guided his fumbling hands
to the right
place, then cast a glance over her
shoulder
to check the sentries' reactions.
Pymer had come to immediate attention
with a drawn
knife balanced in his palm; he took a
hesitant step forward. Deemus was less
alarmed, but his hand rested on the hilt
of his sheathed
sword. They craned their necks to see
what was
happening.
"I commend your diligence." She moved
aside
to give them a clear view of the bed

where the old
man cradled the stone in his arms. "But it
was only
another nightmare."

Pymer grunted, then slumped back
against the
wall and began idly picking at his teeth
with the
blade. Deemus sighed heavily.
They were, to the best of her knowledge,
loyal
to Garamond, but there was far less
reason to trust
their loyalty to her. J'ross feared that a
dying
king's young wife, no matter how
beautiful, could

hardly compete with Garamond's nephew.

Taramuk's political sway was based in part

on his bloodlines, but even more on his ambitions

he promised the Aegis a new purpose.

Where

Garamond had reduced the guard to a decorative, but essentially unnecessary, appendage

to his House, Taramuk promised the soldiers

global warfare, and ultimately, an empire.

All he needed was the Ko N'ya.

She moved back to Garamond's side,

anxious to quiet his mewling. Pymer was bored, and bored soldiers were too curious for comfort's sake.

"Betrayed." Fortunately Garamond's voice had sunk to a whisper. "You have betrayed me."

"No, not so." She tucked a lock of straggling white hair back behind the elegant point of one ear. Despite his age, he had been a handsome man when they first met. "I have been true to you, Husband, in my own way." He fell back against the pillows,

exhausted
by the outburst, and the stone tumbled
out of the crook of his
arm. When he made no move to recover
it,
J'ross tucked it against his side. Then she
took a soft cloth and wiped the tears that
streamed
down his sunken cheeks, but there was
nothing she could do
to ease his labored breathing or still his
feebly
thrashing limbs.
An hour passed, then another. She
waited
patiently until Garamond exhaled
deeply,
then stirred no more. Her fingers pressed

against his
wrist, searching for a pulse. There was
none; he was
finally at rest.
J'ross pulled the basket out from under
the bed
to set about her next task.
"The king is sleeping. Do not disturb
him," she
commanded as she walked past the
guards.
Deemus nodded; Pymer sheathed his
knife and
fell into step beside her. As the lady of
the manor
she had the right to an armed escort, but
over the last

year she had noted a subtle shift in the guard's demeanor, an increased vigilance and attention to her activities. As Garamond's health worsened, the privilege of Pymer's company had become more difficult to decline, and the few opportunities to slip away from his supervision had been hard won. Her guard was rapidly becoming her jailer. They proceeded to the House kitchen in silence since her past attempts to make light conversation

had only rendered Pymer more surly.

This

failure to charm confirmed her

suspicious that the

Aegis soldiers were ready to transfer

their

loyalty to Taramuk.

"Th'a! It's hot down here," cried Pymer

as they descended the back steps. "This

is no work

for a soldier."

"The king's chamber is cool. You could

have stayed

there."

He only scowled.

No queen had set foot in the kitchens

before

J'ross, but then no other queen of the House had been a baker. Some of the servants admired her ascent into nobility, while others scorned her common origins; they all kept their distance when she entered their domain. She threaded her way between bustling cooks and table servers with their trays, but the soldier was less nimble and earned several muttered curses when he blocked their path or tripped their feet.

By the time he caught up with her, J'ross had pulled a ball of dough from her basket and was pinching shut the cracks in its surface. She then placed it on a wooden paddle and shoved it inside the nearest oven.

Pymer began to sweat. "How long is this going to take?"

"Not long," she said. "Spiced kahla doesn't need to rise."

His scowl etched deeper and deeper into his face as they waited, and his face had

flushed a
bright green from the radiant heat before
she
pronounced the crust to be properly
browned.
"Anyone could do this," said Pymer as
they
retraced their path to the king's chamber.
Irritation
had loosened his tongue.
"It's not so easy as it looks," said
J'ross. She swung the bread basket from
one
arm, but her free hand wiped a trickle of
sweat
from her brow.
Their entrance into the chamber caught
the single

sentry in the middle of a yawn. "The king is still sleeping."

"I hate to wake him, but he must eat to keep up his strength." She raised her voice as she approached the bed. "I've brought you fresh baked kahla, my lord. Your favorite delicacy." She peered down at the old man's face. "My lord?"

She dropped the basket and fell to her knees by his bedside. "My lord! My lord is dead!"

Her cries turned to sobs as she threw

herself
over the still body. She could hear the
pounding of the
sentries' boots as they ran toward her.
"Move aside, woman!" commanded
Deemus,
shoving her away so that he could
examine the king for
himself. He touched the man's face, then
snatched
back his hand. "Th'a! He's already cold."
"Then he died on your watch," said
Pymer
quickly.
"Idiot, Taramuk won't care when the old
king died." J'ross watched Deemus
scrabble
frantically through the bedcovers. "It's

the rock that
matters now. Where is--" He spun
around,
sword drawn clear of its sheath by the
time he
faced her.

Deemus, reflected J'ross ruefully, was
much brighter than Pymer.

"Drop it, m'lady, or I shall be forced
to kill you."

"Brave man, to attack the holder of the
Ko

N'ya." To her relief, the soldier froze in
place. "With a single tap on this stone I
could

burn out your heart and twist your
entrails into a

knot. A wave of my hand and this castle
will come
crashing down over your heads, plague
will kill
any survivors, and monsters will grow
in the womb
of any woman who walks over this land
for the next
ten generations."

From the look of terror on his face,
Pymer
might have let her flee the room just to
stop the
stream of curses, but Deemus was
almost grinning
at her recitation. Almost. A sliver of
uncertainty stayed his hand.

"Well said, my Queen, but I'll let my
betters judge the weight of your threats."

He
edged backward toward the door. His
eyes never

left her or the stone she held. Pymer
scurried after, and together they bolted
shut the door.

She was left alone with the dead king.
J'ross calculated that a swift messenger
could carry the news of Garamond's
death to his

nephew in just over an hour. It should
take

somewhat longer for Taramuk to make
the return

journey from his neighboring estate. If

the
Aegis was on his side, they would make
short work
of any token opposition to the joining of
the two
Houses.
Her fate would be settled by dusk.
Contemplation of her own death did not
frighten
J'ross. She had known the risks when she
married old Garamond and then bore
him a child that
usurped Taramuk's position as heir; she
had
gambled that Garamond would live until
her son
was old enough to defend his reign, and
she had lost.

Death was the likely forfeit for her;
however, if
Rume had followed instructions, her
child would
survive. That was a victory of sorts.
The sun was still a finger's width from
the horizon
when she heard the sound of marching
feet outside the
chamber. There was a hasty scrape of
metal against
wood, then the doors burst open,
shouldered apart
by a force of Aegis soldiers.
As I expected.
To give him credit, Taramuk led the
assault. Garamond's nephew was

broad and carried his bulky armor with ease.

Elaborate designs of beaten gold added luster to the metal breastplate. He was a warrior who planned to be an emperor. J'ross raised the stone up above her head.

"I have powers that are greater than those naked swords."

Taramuk merely laughed. "It takes more than a few hours to learn to wield those powers,

J'ross. However, I expected some move for power on your part, so I've come

prepared."

He clapped his hands and a soldier stepped

forward. He was carrying a small squirming

bundle. As the heavy cloth fell away, J'ross heard the crying of a child.

Seconds

later a naked boy tumbled out onto the flagstones.

"Did you really think you could hide him away?

His wet nurse offered him to me for a single gold coin."

"Let him go!"

"Give the Ko N'ya to me," Taramuk said, "or the child dies."

J'ross shook her head ever so slightly.

"Kill the king's son and rightful heir?

Not even

you would dare do that."

"Do you take me for a fool, J'ross?

Garamond was nearly three hundred years old,

too old by a century to sire a son." He prodded the trembling child with a boot.

"You've been

seen speaking to your village lover; this is the

spawn of a potter, not the king's own flesh and

blood."

"You're wrong. The child is blood of this

House, Taramuk, which makes him kin
to a
butcher!"

Taramuk snapped two fingers.

"No!" she cried, but it was too late
to forestall his order.

The guard's cutting slash brought forth a
gout of

blood from the boy's neck; waves of
bright

emerald green cascaded down his chest.

The child's

limp body collapsed into a crumpled
heap

onto the faded carpet; J'ross dropped to
her

knees as if felled by the same blow.

"You will be next," said Taramuk.
Even as he spoke, J'ross had let
loose the stone. It tumbled from her
slack hands,
rolling across the floor toward his eager,
grasping
reach.
She remained silently in place, head
bowed,
as two guards stripped her of the gown
she had been
wearing, their rough hands tearing away
the fabric
until she was naked. Her jewelry was
removed
with equal force, raising welts and
bruises about

her neck and wrists; a trickle of blood
marked where an ear-gem had been
wrenched free of the
lobe. Even her slippers were forfeit.

They could
not untangle the leather ties that bound
her braided
hair, so the braid itself was lopped off
with the same
knife that had slain the boy.

When the men had finished their task,
she lifted
her head high, as if in anticipation of a
final
killing blow.

Taramuk waved back the guards. "If you
were

less liked, and less beautiful, I would
kill
you myself. Instead, I will spare your
life if you
return to the mud village where my uncle
found
you."

"I won't beg for mercy from you," she
said in a
flat voice, "yet give me leave to take a
cloak with which to cover myself and a
loaf of bread
to eat. To do less would shame your
House. After
all, I was its queen."
"You were a better baker," he said with
a sneer,

but he plucked a cloak from the back of
one of his
soldiers and threw it onto the floor.

"Now
go!"

With a clumsy bow of acquiescence,
J'ross
scooped up the cloak and wrapped the
cloth
tightly about her body and over her head.
Then,
taking up her bread basket, she walked
past
Taramuk with the same bearing and
poise that once
carried her across a throne room. The
House

guards hastily stepped back, eyes
averted in
acknowledgment of their betrayal. She
left

Garamond's bedchamber unhindered.

The estate appeared deserted by
servants and

Family alike, but she sensed eyes
following

her stately passage through the corridors
and

heard whispers coming from behind
closed doors. Those

who would have championed her cause
were dead or in
hiding.

She strode faster down the halls, through

doorways, under arches, over steps and out into the courtyard. From high above her, a wailing of horns announced the king's death to the countryside.

Impatient to escape the same air that Taramuk breathed, she ran over cobblestones until she reached a dirt road, one that led to the village of her birth.

J'ross waited until the looming towers of the House had faded into the distance before she loosed the laughter welling up inside her. Her feet

had
grown soft over the last few years of
manor
house living, and they pained her
already, yet she
danced barefooted over the rough
pebbled surface.
By the time the sun had set, she would be
safely
home.
"I am a better baker than you know,
Taramuk the Mighty, Taramuk the
Empire-Builder, Taramuk the Dead!"
The basket she carried was heavy, far
heavier
than a round loaf of kahla should weigh.
Tonight she and her family would feast
on the thin

crust of stale bread that covered the Ko
N'ya
baked inside. Taramuk might dine on
fresh
meats and wine, but it would be his last
meal. The
rock he carried into battle had been
formed in the
heat of a potter's kiln, and a lump of
fired
clay would offer little protection to him
or his
armies.
She and Rume would live to spit on
Taramuk's grave. If even half the stories
of the Ko N'ya's powers were true, her
lover would

spend the rest of his days making the
statues he
loved; and Garamond's infant son would
grow
tall and strong while the bones of that
poor dead
child--Taramuk's own whelp by a cast-
off mistress
--turned to dust.
J'ross stopped her dance for a moment,
struck
by an unsettling thought. If old Garamond
was
to be believed, she herself had a long
life waiting
to be filled. Regaining possession of the
House

would not occupy more than a few years of that span.

What, then, was she to do for the next three hundred

years? Unlike the king, she had no interest in

idle pleasures of the flesh, neither did she intend

to end her life alone in a dusty bedchamber.

After a moment's thought, she had her answer.

Taramuk was treacherous and cruel, but he was not

entirely a fool; neither was she too proud

to learn from her enemy. She had

enjoyed being queen
and had run the House with admirable
skill; that
same talent for organization could work
as well for
an empire.
Perhaps she could even return the
Romulan people
to the stars.
J'ross resumed her dance down the path.

CHAPTER 14

"Twenty ... nineteen ... eighteen ..."
Chief O'Brien had started the final
countdown, and most of the people
gathered in Ten-Forward
had quickly joined him.

Geordi La Forge was not one of them. "Look," he said to his table companion, "if just one more starship is diverted at the last minute, they won't meet the five-ship quorum for calling a championship match." "Too late," said Worf, quaffing his prune juice in one gulp. "The USS Venture docked there an hour ago. That gives them six." He waved to Guinan for a refill. "What!" cried Geordi. He had been too busy talking to take more than a few sips of his own drink. "But the Venture wasn't even scheduled for RandRather at Luxor IV."

"Chief Engineer Logan reported a baffle plate malfunction yesterday."

"Yeah, right." Finally acknowledging defeat,

Geordi slumped down into his chair.

"And what

do you bet he has it fixed by the time the game is over?"

Worf's glass was still empty. The Klingon

raised his hand to signal again, but when he saw the

number of people pressing up against the bar he decided

the effort was futile.

"... fourteen ... thirteen ..."

William Riker sniffed at the colorful concoction that Guinan had dropped on the counter in front of him. His nose wrinkled at the burst of bubbles that rose to the surface.

"I ordered a Finnegan's Wake," he called out when the lounge host passed by again.

Guinan paused in mid-stride, a tray full of glasses balanced in her hands.

"As far as I'm concerned, that is a Finnegan's Wake."

"Since when is a Finnegan's Wake purple?"

"Since half the starship crew decided

to drop by Ten-Forward this morning," she said firmly and sped away.

"I hate bubbles." Riker pushed aside the drink and began to toy with several stacks of colored poker chips. Even seated, he towered over the woman who was perched on the stool beside him.

"I tried to get Beverly to join us, as a member of the team," said Deanna Troi as she dug her spoon into a mound of chocolate ice cream, "but she insisted she had too much work to do.

I suspect our CMO is brooding instead;
she
seems to think that everyone blames her
for our
diversion from Luxor IV. I wish you
would talk
to her."

"I don't know, Deanna," said Riker with
a
shrug, "if it hadn't been for Beverly--"
"Will!"

"... seven ... six ... five ..."
Having spied the first officer from
across the room,
Ro Laren jostled her way through the
milling crowd
to reach the counter. The ensign was

slim and muscular
and used her sharp elbows to good
advantage. "Are
you ready to pay up, Commander?"
Riker shook his head. "Not until the
game
actually--"
"... one ... zero!"
The room echoed with a collective
groan as
somewhere on Luxor IV, the first hand of
the Fleet
poker championship was dealt out.
Riker heaved a sigh and shoved the
stacks toward
the ensign. Red, blue, and green chips
cascaded across the countertop. "Here's
your

hundred."

"Poker chips?"

"You never specified the exact form of payment," he said with a perfectly sober face, but there was an undercurrent of smugness in his voice.

"So I've decided to pay up in chips."

Ro called out to Guinan as she swept by.

"Can he do this?"

"What now?" asked the designated arbiter as

she looked over her shoulder. Ro

pointed to the

chips on the countertop. "Yes, I'll allow it

as legal tender."

"Fah!" said Ensign Ro as she scooped up the tokens, but the sight of Riker's amusement brought a wry smile to her own face.

"You'll probably win every one of these back from me."

Riker's grin widened even more. "I certainly intend to try. Care to test your luck at tonight's game?"

"No, thanks," said the Bajoran. "I'd rather lose my money on Starbase 193."

The first officer shook his head. "Sorry, Ensign Ro, no shore leave privileges at

this port."

"None?" Troi looked up from her dessert. "Not even for senior officers?"

"No one from this ship goes on that starbase,"

said Riker. "It seems the owner of a bar called

the Due or Die is some kind of black market

knowledge-broker, and the captain is concerned that she'll

find a way to pump the crew for information on our

current mission. Evidently, listening is her

specialty."

"What did you say?" Guinan doubled

back in
her tracks to confront the first officer.
"What's
the name of this woman?"
"Something exotic," said Riker,
searching his
memory. "The captain said it was from
Greek
mythology ..."
"Camenae?"
"Yes, that sounds right. How did--"
But Guinan had already slipped out from
behind the bar
and was halfway to the doors of Ten-
Forward.

Picard's desk was cluttered with piles of
books, yet her eyes were drawn

immediately to a
dull gray rock lurking amidst the
disorder. It
hunched half-hidden beneath the cover of
an opened
volume. "Am I disturbing you, Captain?"
Laying aside the thick textbook he had
been reading, Picard said, "No, Guinan,
come
in." Yet she could see that his eyes were
still clouded
with thoughts far removed from her
presence in the ready
room. She remained silent and watched
as his
distracted gaze moved downward to the
desk
surface and his hand strayed out to

stroke the rough
surface of the rock.
Age emanated from it in waves. At
times,
after prolonged contact with short-lived
races such
as Humans, Guinan felt herself to be an
old
woman; this small object reminded her
that she was
still a child in the universe.
"That's a very unusual paperweight."
"What?" When Picard caught her
meaning, his
fist closed over the stone. Several
seconds
passed before he reached the decision to

tell her more.

"It's called the Devil's Heart."

Yes, the stone was very old indeed. "I've heard of it." She had heard other names for it as

well, darker names that had laced through the mythology of her homeworld. That world was gone now, and so were her people's legends.

The stone had survived.

Picard was rubbing the bridge of his nose. She

studied the cast of his shoulders, then said,

"You look tired."

"Do I? Perhaps because I haven't been sleeping

too well lately." He took a deep breath and recovered the sharp inquisitive look that

usually resided on his face. "So, Guinan, has the wake in Ten-Forward driven you to the bridge?"

"According to Commander Riker, you don't know anything about that."

"The innocence of the young is frightening," said

Picard with a smile. "As a newly promoted

lieutenant, I lost a month's wages betting on my ship's crew at the same floating poker

championship. All we needed were five starships in the same place, so as soon as I saw the docking roster at Luxor IV, I knew someone would call for a championship game."

"The crew were disappointed to miss the game."

"I knew they would be." The captain's expression of geniality evaporated. "But we were unavoidably delayed." His gaze flickered briefly to the Heart, but he offered no further details of their mission. "What can I do

for you?"

"I'd like to visit Starbase 193."

He stared up at her for a moment, then said,

"Surely you know that I've canceled all shore

leave privileges for the crew?"

"Yes, but I'd like to go anyway."

Picard was not given to prying into her personal

affairs. He grimaced before he asked,

"For

what purpose?"

"I'd like to see an old ... acquaintance."

Guinan had been about to say friend, but too much time

had passed for her to make that assumption.

"I see." From the thoughtful expression on his face, she realized that he had made the connection very quickly. "Very well, Guinan. You have my permission for shore leave."

"Thank you, Captain."

Just as she reached the doorway of the ready room,

Picard added, "When I first saw

Caménæ, I

had the distinct feeling that we had met before. Now

I realize that I was mistaken; instead, she reminded me of someone I already know."

She smiled and slipped quietly out of the room.

As soon as he was alone again, Picard picked up the book he had been reading and resumed his study of its contents.

Surak ... Ishaya ... Garamond ...
J'ross ...

Familiar names and places met him at every turn of a page, yet the factual details of the pre-Reform era were difficult to separate from legend. Several dry accounts of Surak's life contradicted the possibility of his

stark
walk through the field of dead on the
plain of
Ishaya, and only one of his
contemporaries had
recounted a version that echoed Picard's
dream of that
pivotal moment in the philosopher's life.
The confusion only deepened after the
exodus from
Vulcan. T'Sara's foreword warned that
her
original sources for early Romulan
history
were impossible to confirm through
other records. Those
who had spurned the path of logic were
the only

witnesses to the taming of their new world and the building of new empires.

Picard snapped shut the book.

He had found the obvious root of his dreams.

Even though some twenty years had passed since he had last read this history text, the names must have remained nestled in his memory.

Finding the Ko

N'ya had triggered his imagination to embroider an unusually elaborate tapestry around them.

Dreams ... they were only dreams.

When Guinan walked into the Due or Die, the Andorian bartender pointed the way to the back of the establishment. Each step she took in that direction filled her with distaste. The lighting was dim, but not dim enough to hide the scruffy floor and battered furniture; the few customers scattered here and there at tables were bent over their drinks, gazing too intently upon an inner landscape to notice her. She expected a challenge from the stocky Norsican guard at the back, but he stepped aside without

comment to let her
pass through a doorway.
The shadowed interior of the next room
was bleak
and barren. It prepared her for
Camenae's
glacial expression. The woman sat
motionless,
with her hands folded together on the
tabletop; only a
flicker of Camenae's eyes betrayed any
sign of recognition. She uttered no
greeting
to her visitor.

"I get the feeling I was expected," said
Guinan in Federation Standard. She sat
down in a
chair that was uncomfortably hard, but

then no one
would choose to linger in this room.
"When the Enterprise docked at this
starbase,
I considered the possibility of your
coming here."

"Then you knew I was working on a
Federation
starship?"

"You've been with them for several
years," said
Camenae. "Word gets around."
But you didn't call me. "I heard
rumors you were off-planet when the
Borg
attacked, but I was never able to confirm
that you were still

alive. Or to find you."

"It's a large universe," Camenae said in a flat voice. "We were scattered apart by the solar winds." Then she dropped into the language of their race. "Leaves that have fallen from a tree do not attach themselves to a branch again."

There was a vestige of lyric poetry in her words, but her verse had never dealt with images of death or decay. The woman Guinan remembered had laughed often; now Camenae's face

was carved
in somber, unyielding lines.
Guinan shook her head, warding off the
morbid
spell cast her way. "I prefer to think of
us as
cuttings from a plant; we will grow tall
in new
soil."

Dropping back into Federation Standard,
Camenae
countered, "You won't grow at all if you
continue
working on a starship like the
Enterprise. Wasn't
one encounter with the Borg enough?
Why must you persist
in confronting them over and over

again?"

"Danger comes with the job."

"And what of this visit? Is it also part of your job? Did Picard send you here to interrogate me?"

"No," said Guinan with a weary shake of her head. "I came because I wanted to see you again."

"How flattering." Camenae smiled, but it was not a pleasant expression. "I'm not sure that I believe you. Your captain was curious about the

murder."

"Murder?" said Guinan. "I've heard about the deaths of the Vulcans on Atropos, but Picard already knows they were killed by Orion mercenaries."

"You must not be a very good Listener. One of my operatives on this starbase was killed as well."

Guinan shrugged away the insult. "That's not the type of information I seek out, and the ship's officers don't discuss classified matters with

me, just personal ones."

"There's no profit in mending people's love lives."

"Is that what you do? Listen for profit?"

"Yes," said Camenae. "And what I hear is far more interesting than the petty problems of some homesick ensign."

"So you do know who murdered your--"

"Answering that question would betray a client confidence, a confidence I have been paid to keep."

"Let me get this straight," said Guinan incredulously. "You won't betray the murderers and thieves who are crawling over this

starbase because
they paid you?"

"My business ethics are the only
principles I have left. I'm loathe to give
them up."

Beneath the cynicism was a kernel of
truth that
saddened Guinan enough to bite back
any more
recriminations. Instead, she said, "Then
I'd like
to become one of your customers."

Camenae laughed with genuine
amusement rather than
scorn. "You can't afford me, Guinan. Not
on
a bartender's wages."

"My expenses are low; I can pay the

debt

off if you'll extend me credit."

Camenae shook her head. "Given your penchant for hazardous duty, you're a bad risk."

"Given how often I've survived, I'd say that luck is on my side, and that I'm a very sound investment."

"You're serious?"

"Dead serious," said Guinan.

Camenae frowned as she mulled over the

request. "Very well," she said at last, "I will

take you on." Then, with a swift and

practiced
motion she flipped three tokens onto the
tabletop. "That's your credit stake. You
can keep
asking questions until I take all the coins
back."

There were many questions Guinan
wanted answered, but
one above all others. "Tell me about the
Heart."

"What do you know of its history?"

"Enough," said Guinan. "I'm more
interested in
current events."

After a pause to order her thoughts,
Camenae
recounted what she knew of T'Sara's ten-
year

quest on Atropos; then she described the Vulcan distress call that Grede had brought to her, the alterations to the message that had delayed the arrival of the Enterprise, and the frantic scramble among the Orions and Ferengi to take possession of T'Sara's discovery. At the conclusion of her tale, Camenae reached out one hand and picked up the first token.

"Vulcans can be such fools at times. They may lack the capacity for greed, but they

should remember
how many other races do not."
"Do you know who has the Heart now?"
asked
Guinan.
"As fact, no," said Camenae thoughtfully.
"But I can offer a conjecture at a very
reasonable
price." Her hand hovered over the next
token.
"I'll pay you to keep that conjecture to
yourself."
The second token disappeared. "And to
keep any
more information you hear about the
Heart out of
circulation."
"Exclusivity is hardly worth the expense

at this point," said Camenae. "The news is beyond recall and spreading quickly."

"All I'm asking is that you don't fan the flames any further."

"Very well," sighed Camenae. She swept the last token from the table. "That concludes our business for today."

It was an abrupt dismissal, but Guinan had lost all desire to prolong their reunion. Gathering up the skirts of her robe, she rose from the table. She said good-bye in their old tongue

and waited for some response from Camenae.

"I won't sell you information about my clients," said the woman. "But I will offer one piece of advice as a parting gift. Beware the race called the unDiWahn. They are more dangerous than I had judged." After her warning, she fell silent again. Guinan left her sitting in the darkness.

By the time the end of Sendei's communique had scrolled across the screen of Picard's desk terminal, the captain was battling down

a
substantial tide of anger.

According to Sendei's instructions, the
bodies of the

archaeologists and the items salvaged
from the

encampment were to be shipped to the
Science

Academy. The director himself would
then

supervise the distribution of personal
effects

to the heirs; all of T'Sara's property,
consisting of the research equipment and
the excavated

artifacts, had been willed to the
Academy itself.

Sendei claimed the Heart as part of that

bequest.

Yet the director did not acknowledge the discovery of the Ko N'ya. His brief reference

implied the stone was merely a curiosity crafted

by the original artisans of the Atropos colony.

"In the absence of medical validation by Vulcan physicians, I consider it prudent

to accept Sorren's diagnosis of Bendii's syndrome. Unfortunately, the relic you recovered from the Ferengi provided T'Sara with a focus for her delusions."

With typical Vulcan condescension, that

one

paragraph summarily discounted Doctor Crusher's medical evaluations and Picard's scientific assessment of the stone's origins.

Worse yet, Sendei dismissed T'Sara's achievement as the product of madness.

Given that

interpretation, he expected the Heart to be

packed into a cargo container along with the rest of the

shipment and shuttled from the

Enterprise to any

freighter on its way toward Vulcan.

Picard's every instinct argued against this prosaic

conclusion to the starship's mission to Atropos and such a casual disposal of the Ko N'ya and T'Sara's remains.

No, I will not do this.

The captain cleared the screen of text and

began to draft yet another communiqué to Admiral Matasu. Sendei's position at the Academy had gained him prominence in

Starfleet circles; but Picard was not without

influence of his own, and he intended to take full advantage of it now.

"No, I'm not much of a tea drinker," said

Guinan, waving away the steaming cup.
"Take it anyway," said the captain. "I
find that just the act of holding a cup of
Earl
Grey has great therapeutic value."
She couldn't help but smile.
Picard settled down beside her on the
sofa, and
they sipped the hot tea in silence. Guinan
had
never lingered in the ready room before;
she had always
thought of it as Picard's office, a place of
business, but now she realized that it
could also serve
as a safe harbor from turmoil. The
window behind the
captain's desk offered a miniature

version of the panoramic view in Ten-Forward, and for a while Guinan loosed her mind to wander idly from one star to another. The plush sofa eased the tension in her body, and Picard's undemanding companionship eased other deeper and less obvious aches.

"She's not the first to change so drastically from the person I knew before," said Guinan at last.

"It affects some of my people that way. The loss of

our families, our world, everything that we were, is simply too great a pain to bear. A part of them withers away, and they turn dry and bitter."

"You, however," said Picard softly, "chose to embrace life."

"That's my way of honoring the dead ... perhaps even of mourning for them."

She had been born to a race of Listeners and had spent centuries honing her skills, but right now she needed someone to listen to her.

Picard sat quietly as she recalled memories of Camenae as a girl, then as a young woman maturing into an accomplished poet, and of a friendship that had seemed strong enough to last a lifetime.

And then Guinan told him of Camenae's warning.

Picard set down his cup and moved to the ready room desk. Picking up the Heart, he said, "I welcome the information, but I don't think there is any need for concern about these unDiWahn.

We'll be leaving Starbase 193, and this

sector, very soon."

"You've received new mission orders?"

"No, I've requested permission to divert the

Enterprise to Vulcan." He seemed to be speaking to the Heart when he said,

"We're taking
T'Sara home."

CHAPTER 15

DaiMon Tork twirled the heavy ring on the

third finger of his left hand as he calculated its

worth and what percentage of that figure he could

actually obtain for it at the open bazaar.

Not enough.

A cut-rate sale of his entire payload had just managed to pay off his portion of the

consortium debt, but he had been left without

sufficient funds to continue docking his Marauder

at Starbase 193. The last of his fuel had brought him to Smelter's Hold, only to find that

the news of Maarc's debacle had preceded him. No one was willing to extend him

credit to purchase new stock, for nothing scared

away old associates so fast as financial

failure.

Cursed be the day that Maarc had drawn him

into that transaction with Camenae!

"You eat too much of my food," Tork said,

lashing out at his first officer. Kazago was perched

on a pile of boxes containing the last of their

personal possessions and some items too worthless to be sold. He was crunching his way through

one of the ration packets they had scrounged from the

ship's emergency stores.

"It's not as if I like this food," said

Kazago with sullen impertinence. "But
you haven't
paid me any wages for a month,
DaiMon, so
I can't afford to buy anything else to eat."
He
resumed his crunching.

"Enough of your complaints. I'll think of
something; I always do."

Tork peered out the grimy window of the
stockroom. Now he was in debt for a
day's
rental of this space, and the means of
paying off even
that pittance had eluded him so far;
however, the
bazaar down below was filled with

customers spending money. There must be a way to siphon some of those funds back into his own coffers. That was when he saw them two Vulcans walking side by side down an aisle sporting used engineering parts. Traders by the look of them. Vulcans usually stayed within the boundaries of Federation space, but this pair probably had been detoured to the Hold by an engine malfunction. Even before Tork had formulated a plan, his

instincts had centered on them as an essential

element to recouping his fortune.

A scheme began to gel in his mind.

"Did we sell that universal text translator?" Tork asked his first officer.

"No, DaiMon."

The details clicked into place. It was, he concluded, a workable plan. Best of all, if

it failed with the Vulcans, he could rework it to use on another alien race.

"If you ever hope to receive your wages, Kazago, keep those two Vulcans in sight and

guard them from the crooks and thieves

on this
outpost. They're our prey."
Throwing aside his half-eaten food
packet,
Kazago raced out of the room; Tork
pulled out the translator and a writing
padd and
began to compose a letter.
Ten minutes later, the DaiMon had
finished
constructing his first prop; the other he
already had in
inventory. He ripped the printout from
the padd and
scurried down the staircase to the
bazaar.
Kazago was hovering nearby and
pointed Tork in

the right direction. To his relief, the Vulcans had drifted even closer to his stall. "You! Vulcans! I would speak with you." "As you wish," said one, and they both came to a halt. Their unadorned tunics reeked of spice and grain. "Vulcans are honorable, that is what I have always been told. So, like a fool, I believed this myth; I trusted a Vulcan when I wouldn't trust my own grandmother. But one of your kind has tried to dupe me! He owes me a king's

ransom and paid for it with a worthless bauble."

"What is this to do with us?"

They had listened to his ranting with more patience and

civility than he had dared hope, but it was time

to present the bait and see if they were hungry.

"This note," he shook the printout in their faces, "supposedly explains his perfidy, but

it is written in Vulcan!"

"I see," said the taller one with a solemn nod. "You have need of a translation."

"Brilliant deduction," exclaimed Tork with an acid sneer. "Your rapier mind

should bring
you much wealth and happiness." In his
experience,
sarcasm and verbal abuse disarmed
suspicion
by misdirection watch my temper, not
your
purse.

He shoved the flimsy into the hands of
Short
Trader. "Tell me! What do those
ridiculous
squiggles mean?"

The two bent their heads together and
scanned the
text. After an exchange of veiled
glances,
Short Trader spoke.

"It is addressed to DaiMon Tork. "I lack the funds to honor my debt at this time, so I have sent a family heirloom as a bond of my good faith. The item itself has little value, but my family holds it in great esteem." It is signed by one named Suprell."

Got them! exulted Tork to himself. The message he had forged clearly stated that the debt was paid in full with the Ko N'ya. So, as he suspected, even Vulcans had their price; everyone did.

"What am I to do?" Tork stormed,

presenting his marks with the opportunity to take advantage of him. "I need funds, not promises."

"You have not been misled, DaiMon," said

Tall Trader. "We Vulcans are an honorable race, as I will prove to you. Suprell's family is known to me, and I will redeem the heirloom and assume his debt."

"Excellent!" Tork beamed happily. For all their much vaunted intelligence, Vulcans were an absurdly naive race when it came to practical matters. He would have to

pursue more
business transactions with them in the
future.

"Come this way, come this way, so that
we can arrange
this matter in private."

He grabbed the sleeve of the nearest
trader and
led them both through the crowds and up
the narrow
staircase to the rented stockroom. The
soft
snick of the door closing behind them
was like the teeth
of a trap snapping shut.

After throwing off the boxes that
covered a large
chest, the DaiMon made a great show of

fussing
with the lock and then rummaging
through the jumbled contents.
His hands closed around a large round
shape.

"Ah, here it is!"

When Tork turned around with the
synthetic gem in
his hands, he immediately realized his
mistake.

Vulcans did not smile, yet both of these
men were smiling broadly. Then Tork
saw the

Romulan-issue disrupters they were
slipping out from
behind their cloaks.

Their trap, not mine.

The house in the Old Quarter was still standing after five centuries, proof of the skill of the architect who had designed its massive chambers and sprawling wings. In the beginning it had been grandly furnished, but each succeeding generation had stripped away its treasures room by room to slow the pace of their slide down into poverty. Eventually, all that remained of past glory and past wealth was the house itself. Tonight a young warrior strode through the cold,

empty halls. Despite the reversal of his family's fortune, he carried his wiry frame with a strutting arrogance that was the equal of any Klingon on the planet of Kronos. Passing by the foot of a wide spiraling staircase, he ducked down a shadowed corridor that led to the warmth and light of the servant's hall.

The last servant had left long ago; the old man who waited for him inside was the master of the house. Kruger sat hunched over a low trestle

table, too absorbed in his dinner to look up at

the sound of the opening door.

"She's dead," announced the warrior.

There could be only one "she."

The old man tore another mouthful of meat from

the joint of beast. He chewed. He spat a piece of gristle onto the bare floor.

"Fifty years ago I would have cared."

Kruger's grandson sat down at the table, but

he did not pluck any food from the platter.

There was little to spare, and he would eat better fare

elsewhere at the expense of wealthy

sycophants
in awe of his ancient lineage.

"According to security
reports circulating in high Federation
circles, she was killed by Orion
smugglers."

"Did you learn this from your cousin?"

Kruger
spat out the last word with even greater
distaste than
he had the gristle.

"Grandfather, Ambassador Nedec has
access
to classified documents, and according
to those
documents--"

"Nedec is a toady to that upstart
Gowron,"

shouted the old man. "Nedec throws you favors like scraps to a targ. You, who should be his emperor!"

He threw the chewed bone onto the floor. "After my death, of course."

"According to those documents," persisted Kruger's heir, "the Ferengi were also involved with T'Sara's death."

"Meddlesome Vulcan crone! Your father was a fool to talk to her, revealing what should only be known to the Family."

The young man shouted back into his face.

"You're the fool!" His impudence won a moment of silence and his grandfather's undivided attention.

"Don't you see? She found something, something that both the Orions and the Ferengi wanted. Something that the Enterprise is carrying back to Vulcan."

"The Pagrahtak?"

"Yes, Grandfather. I think it must be." Kruger took a swig from a tankard of ale.

His close-set eyes were slitted in

thought. "So,
perhaps your father was not so much the
fool as I
believed."

"I think not. After all, she kept her word
and
did not publish the account of Kessec's
disgrace
in her texts. Instead, it seems she used
the knowledge
of his actions to trace the path of the
Pagrashtak."

"Our Pagrashtak," said Kruger firmly.
"Yes, Grandfather. I will see to that
personally."

Diat Manja wept at the news of
T'Sara's death.

Nearly sixty years had passed since she had last set foot in this room, yet there were reminders of her presence everywhere he looked.

Her textbooks and monographs were scattered throughout his bookshelves, along with bound volumes of their correspondence. She had sat for hours in this carved wood chair beside his desk, leafing through his translations; at other times she had nestled in the deep bay window to soak up the warmth of the sun as

she read. He could open any of those manuscripts and find her scribbled notes in the margin of a page.

So few of the Iconian Dream texts had survived from ancient times; if there had been more,

perhaps she would have stayed longer.

Most Dynasians on campus had been vaguely repulsed by the offworlder with an unadorned

forehead and pale green skin, so young Diat had

been the only scholar in his department who

volunteered to help with her research.

Unlike the

others, he had been moved by her intensity of purpose and her complete disinterest in the opinion others held of her; both were qualities that he lacked.

His hands reached for the tails of the tattered scarf draped around his neck, and his fingers stroked the rough weave as if caressing the face of a lover. The scarf was made of a sturdy Vulcan fabric, and T'Sara had worn it throughout her visit because even

during a heat wave the Dynasian summer was colder than Vulcan's winter. For years Manja had wondered if she left it behind by accident or by design. Vulcans were unsentimental by nature, yet she had fathomed the emotions of the beings in a multitude of cultures; and if she had suspected his love for her, then she had saved a poor young professor from humiliation by tactfully ignoring that fact.

After her departure from Dynasia, he had worshiped her from afar and taken what comfort he could

from the letters they exchanged. Some would consider that meager fare, yet this meeting of minds exceeded any pleasure he had ever found in the arms of his consort.

Now there would be no more letters. Three days ago he had sent an urgent message to T'Sara telling her of a lost Iconian scroll that had been discovered in the archival vaults of the Flight Engineering library. The star map had been improperly cataloged as a technology-related text until one of Manja's former students

stumbled
upon it and recognized it as part of the
Dream series
he had studied in a literature class.
However, T'Sara had already died
before the news
reached her, and one of her colleagues
had answered
instead.

The professor reached for the crumbled
communiqu'e that had arrived just an
hour ago and
smoothed out the creases. Through eyes
still fogged
by tears, Manja read the short message
one more
time. Like a typical Vulcan, Sendei had
reported the tragedy in terse, dry

language;
yet, upon this second reading, Manja realized the double tragedy in the scientist's account of T'Sara's death.

The members of the Vulcan Science Academy did not even recognize T'Sara's greatest achievement! The director believed she had died in the first stages of madness.

"No!" cried out Diat Manja. "They must honor her success. After a century of searching, she found the Ko N'ya, the Gem of Ancient

Iconia. I will see to it that the entire Federation learns the truth of her discovery!"

Then he slumped back into his chair, his skin flushing to an indigo hue from embarrassment at his outburst.

How could he possibly keep this vow?

He was a tired, old man with no influence, even on Dynasia. Professors of ancient literature were held in low esteem on a world that hungered for technological sophistication.

Besides, T'Sara herself would have cared little about her reputation.

Yet she had always championed the quest for truth.

Diat Manja took up a pen from his desktop. It was the only weapon he could wield, so he would have to wage this campaign with words.

There was one person on Dynasia who might have the power to call attention to this issue, one who was in constant communication with members

of the Federation Council; and while Manja had no influence with the warden, one of Manja's former students was now the man's secretary. Ganin would see to it that Warden Chandat read this letter, and then surely Chandat would see to it that justice was done. Manja began to write.

CHAPTER 16

A cushioned sofa was positioned only a few steps away from his desk, but Picard had

waited
too long to seek out its comforts. Sleep,
held
at bay for hours, suddenly swept over
him,
robbing him of the strength or desire to
move.

The book he had been reading fell from
numbed
fingers onto the desktop. Shoving the
volume
to one side, he dropped his head down
into the
cradle of his arms and released his hold
on
consciousness.

The sound of the captain's breathing
could barely be

heard, and his body moved
imperceptibly with the
steady rise and fall of his chest. The
fingers of one
hand twitched until they brushed against
the rough
surface of the Heart, then they stilled
their
movement.

As time passed, overhead lights dimmed
automatically, tricked into quiescence by
the still
silence of the room. In the darkness, the
gray rock
came to life with an inner glow that
dipped and
flickered like the flame of a candle.

The man's lips began to move, framing alien words.

"This one is ..."

"... is dead," said Telev automatically, yet when he looked up there was no one to hear his pronouncement.

The nearest aide was at the far end of the ward passing out bowls of soup to those strong enough to feed themselves. If there was time, and food enough to go around, she would try to help the weaker ones eat. The woman stopped ladling for a moment, wracked

by a chesty
cough, and Telev suspected that before
too long he
would find her lying on one of the cots
herself. He
only hoped there would be someone left
to bring her
food by then.

The healer turned back to the dead
man. A cursory search of the body
confirmed that
it carried no identification beyond a clan
scarf.

Telev studied the vaguely familiar
pattern,
but his mind was so numbed with fatigue
that the answer
was slow in coming.

Ah, yes, Assan.

There had been three family members
attending
an Assan in the ward just last week ...
weavers

by trade ... too poor to leave the city, but
not

too poor to pay for hospice treatment.

Telev

took a closer look at the puffy face of the
man and recognized him as one of those
three. So

there were probably no Assan left alive
or

they would be here at this bedside.

Telev draped the scarf over the young
man's

throat. Eventually someone would come along and haul the body outside for the next passing death cart.

They rumbled through the streets at all hours now, piled high with corpses, carrying their load to the funeral kilns that burned day and night to keep up with the victims of the Scourge. Telev moved on to the next bed, where two sleeping children were huddled together as if for warmth.

Chills and a creeping cold over the extremities were the first sign of the

pestilence, but perhaps they only sought the comfort of each other's embrace. He listened to the steady sound of their intertwined breathing and was relieved that their lungs were still clear; their skin was still a pale blue, free of any mottled dark patches. By all rights, they were too well to merit space in the hospice, and the continued confinement put them at risk of contracting the Scourge, but as orphans he feared they would roam the streets of Andor until they

starved or
fell ill. There were more ways to die
than from
pestilence.

The condition of the last patient on the
row was not so
promising. The healer had known Evalla
since
childhood, had watched a quicksilver
girl grow
into a graceful young woman who had
danced the
sissalya cycles at the last fall
solstice. Now, however, her white hair
had
turned as yellow as a grandmother's and
her once

agile frame was stiff and bloated. Telev
perched on the edge of her cot to
examine her more
closely. Air whistled in and out of her
jointed
antennae, an indication of their inflamed
interior;
her complexion had deepened to purple.
"She won't eat," said Shaav, the
woman's
consort. He held a half-eaten
chunk of bread and carefully picked at
the
scattered crumbs that had fallen from her
mouth
onto the bed.
"It hurts to swallow," she said, gasping

for
breath. "I've gotten worse, haven't I?"
"Yes, quite a bit worse." Telev knew of
several herbs that could at least ease her
pain, but
he had used up the last of them long ago,
and there
was no one left in the hospice who had
time
to search the countryside for more or
even possessed
the knowledge of where to find them.
"Am I dying?"
"Yes." In the beginning, Telev had
offered
hope to any who needed it. False hope.
Most
of the patients had died, as had those

who mourned them. He had no strength left for telling untruths.

Evalla managed a weak smile. "I haven't paid my reckoning, Healer."
"You're in luck. Our collector is out sick today."

Shaav did not react to their words; he was too intent on salvaging crumbs. He had keened loudly when his mother died last month and railed at the death of his young sister soon after, then watched in silence as his father, two brothers, and a cousin were

carried to the kilns in rapid succession.

He
took meticulous care of his sworn
consort, but
he talked very little these days.

As Telev rose back to his feet, an
old woman scurried down the central
aisle
of the ward. She spotted him
immediately, the only
standing figure in a sea of recumbent
forms.

"I need a bed for my son," she demanded
in a
voice that was loud enough to rise above
the moans and
cries of the sick.

The healer pointed toward the dead Assan.

True, there would be no time to change the laying

cloths, but then Telev doubted there were any clean

ones to be had. "If you dispose of the former

occupant, that place is yours."

"Fair trade," she said with satisfaction, and

scurried away to summon assistance in the chore.

A new patient.

And when he was done with this one, there would be another

one, and yet another after that as the

dead were carried
away and the dying took their place. So
much to be
done but so little that he could do.
Telef fled the ward.
All available rooms, even those that
had once served as studies and
bedrooms for the
healers, had been turned over to the care
of the
sick. Nonetheless, he had managed to
keep one
small closet reserved for his own use as
a
refuge. There was just enough space for
a narrow cot, but
he had given that up yesterday, along
with the last of

his extra shirts. All that remained was a hard
pallet on the floor. The supplies that had
been stored here were also gone.
Except for a canister of talla bark. It
had no medicinal value and normally
just was used
to fill the stomach before a purge,
nonetheless he still
experienced a sharp pang of guilt for
hoarding it
away from others.
Telev opened the canister and measured
out a
small quantity of the dry flakes into the
cup of
steaming water he had snatched off a

passing soup
wagon. After a minute of steeping, too
impatient to wait any longer, he eagerly
sipped the hot brew.

Ah, that brings warmth back to my
chilled

...

Yes, his hands were cold and the air, so
balmy
for the last few weeks, seemed unusually
biting
tonight.

So be it. Even healers must die.
He took another gulp of the bark potion.
It

was a poor substitute for tea, but it was
the only
indulgence left to him. If only this were

srjula
that he held in his hands, but the wealthy
merchants
had fled the city at the first news of the
spreading
plague. If there was any tea left in
Andor,
it was locked in warehouses awaiting
the return of
owners and customers with the money to
pay for their
merchandise.
I'll probably never taste srjula
again.

A small window in the outside wall of
the
closet afforded a view of the city below,

bathed in
the orange light of the setting sun. He
leaned his
forehead against the glass and searched
for signs of
life people walking in the streets, lights
springing
up in houses, or even just the flutter of
newly
washed clothes hanging out to dry. Here
and there he
caught some reassuring indication that
survivors
endured, but they were very few in a city
that once
held a half million inhabitants.
He scanned the horizon as well, looking
for the trails of smoke that had curled

around the
mountaintops for the past few days, but
they
seemed to have finally dissipated.

Rumors of vast
fires beyond the ridge were impossible
to confirm.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The rapping on the door was soft with
apology.

Telev crossed the room in two steps and
peered out into the corridor. "What is it,
Sathev?" The aide had been a patient,
one of the
few to recover from the Scourge, but his
face had
been so badly scarred by his illness that

he had
chosen to stay in the hospice.
"There's someone at the south door
asking to see
the healer in charge of new
admissions."

Telev laughed at the absurdity of such a
formal request. Admissions procedures
had
collapsed when the healers themselves
began to sicken and
die.

"Well, I tried to explain how it is," said
Sathev wearily. "But she was very
insistent."

"Do not bother yourself further. I shall
deal with it."

Some people, reflected Telev as he

shuffled his way to the portal, had a remarkable ability to deny reality. The world they had all known was rotting away, yet they clung stubbornly to the old ways.

A woman and two men were waiting for him at the south entrance. At their feet lay a body wrapped in stained laying cloths; he would have mistaken the unmoving bundle for a corpse if not for the sound of a muffled groan. "I am Viloff," said the woman, and lifted

a lantern up to show her face. She was dressed in a nondescript tunic made from the sturdy cloth favored by the craft-trades, but her bearing was not that of a common worker; rather she held herself alert and erect, with one arm swung loosely by her side where it could reach up to her belt knife.

"We need a room for our friend. He is very ill."

"We have no rooms, but in an hour or so we

may have a cot."

"That will not do. He needs privacy.
Now."

He saw her weight shift ever so slightly
as
her hand fluttered upward toward the
weapon.

"You can gut me here on the steps, but
that will not
gain you any space inside; it will simply
make
a mess."

"Enough!" she said. "Take me to your
superior."

That placed her and her silent
companions without
question.

"What is your rank, Viloff?" asked the healer.

"You see too much, old man."

"And you are a foolish young woman, even if you are a soldier." Telev rubbed his hands to ease

the stiffness in his finger joints. "There are no other healers. I am the last one."

"The last one ..." she echoed. Her bravado collapsed like a leaking water-skin. "I was Subcommander Viloff last week, but for all I know now, I could be a battalion

admiral. The
plague hit the camps last month, and then
there was
an attack ... we've traveled for two days
without seeing another officer."
"Bring your friend into the wards," said
Telev,
impatient to escape the cold air. "I will
care
for him."
Viloff shook her head, danced a few
steps
of indecision, then grabbed his sleeve,
dragging him
over to the bundle. Bending down, she
drew
aside a fold of cloth.
Telev saw enough in the circle of lantern

light to grant her demand.

"You can use my room," he said,
beckoning

them inside the hospice.

Viloff's two subordinates hoisted up the
awkward bundle, ignoring a new spate
of

groans that issued forth, and followed
the healer to the

closet. There wasn't enough room for the
entire

group, but the men seemed eager to
leave the matter

to their commander; they stepped back
into the corridor and

stood like sentinels on either side of the
door.

Viloff set the lamp on a high shelf.
Telev crouched down by the pallet
andwitha
trembling hand pulled away the rough
covers. He
had taken the damp patches for blood
until he
saw their deep green color.
"Where did you find ..." He had no
words
to describe what lay before him.
"We were attacked," said Viloff. "In
flying ships that rival anything to be
found on
Andor. Our offensive weapons had no
effect
on them; in a matter of hours they laid

waste
to our forces in the western province.
Then, as if
by a miracle, their defensive shields
seemed
to collapse and one by one we were able
to pick them
off. I searched the wreckage, but this
was the only
survivor."

By now, the healer had completely
unwrapped the
alien creature. Even without a healthy
specimen for comparison, it was
obvious that its
legs were broken; the skin covering its
midsection
was lacerated, the underlying muscles

and organs
torn and bleeding; scrapes and bruises
covered
the rest of its torso and arms.

"Ugly creatures, aren't they?" said
Viloff. "The others, the dead ones,
looked like
this, too."

"I strive to find beauty in all living
beings." Although in this case, Telev
admitted
to himself, he would have to try very
hard. Even if one
could overlook the peculiar dark hair
and olive
skin color, the alien's jutting forehead
and

atrophied auditory organs were quite disconcerting.

Its naked body, when compared to that of an

Andorian, was thick-framed and squat; and the

sexual organs, if that was indeed their purpose,

were in an absurdly vulnerable location.

"I am the Emperor Vitellius!"

Telev twitched and rotated his antennae away from the sound. The alien's voice was

uncomfortably loud, and the strange language was

hardened by a clipped accent and too many

consonants.

"I shall lead the Romulan people to victory."

The alien's limbs trembled, but it was too

weak to even raise itself. Telev noted that its

eyes were not focused, and it had not reacted to their

presence. In an Andorian, these symptoms would

accompany eadiliac failure, but this species

probably did not even possess an eadilium.

"You will surrender to me or die!" The raving and shouting were

incomprehensible.

He guessed that the alien had lost a considerable quantity of the green liquid, but the healer couldn't replace the volume. The standard treatment of an infusion of water might kill rather than cure.

"There's nothing I, or any healer, can do for this creature. It will die before I've learned enough about its biology to treat it."

"Too bad," said Viloff. "There is much we need to know about our new enemies." Telev knelt closer to continue his

examination.

With a start, he realized that the creature was finally making eye contact.

"Let me go! I command you, let me go!"

Its hands were clutching at its side, digging in

the rumpled laying cloth. Viloff explained the

action with a rather apologetic sigh. "It carries some sort of talisman, a clan token

perhaps, harmless. We tried to remove the thing when the

alien was first found, but it held fast and wouldn't

let go. Of course, it was stronger then."

"You must obey me, or the Ko N'ya will destroy you."

The alien suddenly lifted up a gray stone and

shook it at them. It was an impressive display

of strength for a being so near death.

"Surrender! I cannot be defeated."

The effort was short-lived; the creature collapsed back onto the bed as if

drained of

all strength.

"I am ... the Emperor ..."

The alien's voice dropped to a weak whisper,

and it shut its peculiar dark eyes.

Pressing a

finger against the short neck, Telev monitored the fluttering pulse and wondered whether the rate was too high or too low, and what he could do about it even if he knew the answer. The fluttering stopped altogether. "It's dead," said Telev. All that remained of this strange being was the simple relic it had carried from its distant homeworld. Curious, Telev plucked the object from the alien's slack hands. "A superstitious race," mused the healer as he examined the rough

stone. It was warm, apparently heated by the fevered body of its owner.

"We shall have to carry the body to the kilns ourselves," said Viloff. She stepped to the door and ordered the men to the task.

"Skae!" cursed one of the soldiers as they roughly bound up the corpse again. "I still reek of its gore."

"Forget what you've seen here tonight, Healer," said the commander. "Andor has enough worries of its

own."

"Who would believe me?" He held up the

stone. "What of this?"

But the soldiers were already gone,
faded into the
shadows of the night. The only proof of
their brief
visit was the ruined pallet on the floor.
And the stone.

It was still warm, easing the painful
throbbing in his
hands, and in the darkness its dull
surface seemed
to glitter and sparkle. So this and the
cold cup of
tea were his only remaining comforts,

yet they were like a
bounty of riches in the midst of
devastation.

Tucking the alien talisman in the
crook of his arm, Telev carried the
canister of
talla with him to the wards. Sathev was
able to steep
five cups of weak tea from the contents
and pass
them around to the few patients who
were still awake. A
soft word, a gentle caress, these were
the only
weapons Telev had left to fight the
ravages
of plague, but he gave these away to all,
even

those who slept through his visitation.
By the time he had finished his rounds of
the
hospice, he was overcome with such a
deep
weariness that he could not go one step
farther, but sank
down onto the flagstone floor and curled
around the
fiery glow of the stone. He felt as if all
his
strength, all his life, was seeping away.
Must the knot untie so soon?
As he waited for the final dissolution of
his bond
with the world, Telev heard the sound of
laughter and the

skipping steps of children running. He knew without seeing that all who had lain dying were now risen from their beds; that Evalla was dancing through the corridors, and Shaav was singing a triumphant ballad about her miraculous recovery; that Sathev was weeping at the feel of smooth skin on his face, and Avae had stopped coughing. I seem to have borrowed a little luck from the stars.

If his life had blazed to its end that much sooner as a result of the talisman's powers, it was still a fair trade. He was a healer, after all.

Eager hands reached out to pull him into the circle of celebration, but he slipped away before they could touch him.

CHAPTER 17

The yellow DiWahn sun had not risen above the horizon, but King Akhanatos was already

awake when a court aide sidled into his bedchamber.

"Your Highness, a visitor to the palace desires a private audience with you."

Before

Akhanatos could dismiss the request, the aide

added, "He is unDiWahn."

The king quickly nodded assent, and the servant

scurried out of the room. The curtains of the

doorway had barely stopped swinging from his

passage when a stranger stepped back through the

entrance. The heavy cowl that covered

his head cast a shadow on his face, but Akhanatos recognized the stately bearing of Master Kierad@an.

The king rose from his couch to greet the robed emissary. Tradition reserved this gesture of respect for the landed nobility. As one of the stateless unDiWahn, this man owned no territories, but he was the leader of the Faithful and thus as powerful as any king. "Well met, Akhanatos," said the unDiWahn. With the arrogance typical of his fellows, he did not bow, nor did he

address

Akhanatos by any of his honorifics.

"You honor me with your presence." The king was relieved that they were alone so none of his other subjects would witness his meek acceptance of this disrespect. He owed the order too great a financial debt to act on his displeasure now, but he noted the incident for retribution at some later date.

"I bring you word from Admiral Jakat." Upon hearing that name, Akhanatos felt

his first
tremor of suspicion. "What do you
mean? My
fleet admiral speaks directly to me."
"No longer." Kierad@an spread wide
his
arms as if to welcome someone into his
embrace.
"Jakat's true name is Daramad@an. He
belongs to the Order of the Faithful and
serves only
the memory of our Iconian ancestors."
"Do not play games with me,
unDiWahn!"
Akhanatos was beyond hiding his alarm.
"On this
morning of all mornings, I have no
patience for

your mystic intrigues."

"Ah, yes. Today you were to launch your offensive

against the Kingdom of Roshamel."

His impulse to deny the truth collided with his

fear of having been discovered. Choked into silence,

Akhanatos listened aghast as the unDiWahn

outlined the assault plans that the king had

delivered in person to Jakat three nights before.

"If you may remember," continued

Kierad@an, "your agreement with my order was that the

ships would be used for peace, not war.

The

Iconian lore in our stewardship is
preserved

for the benefit of all of DiWahn, not the
advancement of one of its petty fiefdoms.

You have

broken that covenant and betrayed our
laws."

"You want peace?" said Akhanatos,
recovering his pride and his tongue.

"Only the

unDiWahn can afford that dream. I paid
a heavy

price for your holy knowledge, and I
paid even

more for the construction of the fleet

itself. Did you really think I would bankrupt my coffers to benefit my enemies?"

"No," the master said with an enigmatic smile, "you have acted just as we expected. Thus, as a penalty for your transgressions against the Faithful, we claim possession of the fruit which was born of our knowledge."

"So, you are turning my own troops against me." Akhanatos finally fathomed the bitter depths of his gullibility. First they had led him

into ruinous debt; now they were taking away the means

for recouping his fortunes in war; and finally they would grind his kingdom into dust with his own weapons.

To the king's surprise, Kierad@an shook his head. "Jakat is no traitor, and we have no interest in taking your territory from you. Instead, the admiral is preparing to pursue a mission of our choosing. If you are still here upon the fleet's return, we will meet again to discuss the terms of its future use."

"If I am still ..." The question faded as Akhanatos answered it for himself. Of course, once Roshamel learned of the fleet's departure, he would attack while Akhanatos was vulnerable. Both of their ground troops were roughly equivalent in strength, which meant any victory would be hard won. The surviving kingdom would be forced to deal with the unDiWahn from a position of weakness. "I can still best you in this game." Akhanatos sneered in the master's face to show his disdain for the

order's devious political strategies.

"Be forewarned. If I make peace with Roshamel, both our kingdoms will thrive."

"We would applaud such a rational action, King

Akhanatos," said Kierad@an. "May your opponents always match you in wisdom."

After honoring the king with a low bow of respect, the unDiWahn emissary turned and swept out of the chamber.

To Kanda Jiak's relief, Davenport Terminal was smaller than Starbase 75 and far

less crowded. After winding his way out of the docking bays, he found that a single dome contained all the passenger operations.

Stepping up to a ticket counter, the Iconian shoved his identity chip into a scan slot.

"I'd like to purchase a one-way passage to DiWahn."

"DiWahn!" The Benzite clerk uttered a barking laugh. He ejected the chip and shoved it back at Jiak. "Out of the question. Even under the best of circumstances, DiWahn is

off-limits to unauthorized Federation citizens.

The entire planet is politically unstable."

"But I--"

"And the best of circumstances no longer exist,"

said the clerk. He sniffed loudly, inhaling the

vapors of the atmospheric inhaler suspended under

his chin.

"But I--"

"All traffic into and out of the system has been

suspended indefinitely. If we had a diplomatic relationship with the planet, which we do

not, it would have been severed this morning."

"This morning?" asked Jiak, dismayed to have missed his opportunity by such a slim margin.

"What happened this morning?"

"That is none of your concern," snapped the

Benzite. He waved aside the vapors from his face and peered at the young man's face.

"According to your bio credentials, you are a resident of Redifer III ... but you bear a passing resemblance to a DiWahn native."

"I do?" cried Jiak. In his excitement, he paid no attention to the figure that had moved up beside him.

"Yes, quite a resemblance," repeated the clerk, and Jiak belatedly recognized the man's suspicion.

"It's just a coincidence," said Del sternly.

The freighter captain shoved herself between Jiak and the counter. "Come on, Kanda. You've overstayed your welcome. This clerk has other customers in need of his attention."

"Indeed I do!" said the Benzite. Like

most of
his race, he disliked having his
bureaucratic
routine disrupted.

Del clamped her hand around Jiak's
upper
arm and jerked him away.

"Let me go." She had no business trailing
after him, thought Jiak angrily. He was
not some

orphaned child in need of a guardian
angel. "I
can take care of myself."

"Quiet down," the captain muttered
under her
breath, "or you'll end up in a detention
cell."

Her warning stopped him from crying

out again, but he
still struggled against her iron grip. Not
that
it did him any good. Del had dragged
him to the
other side of the Davenport terminal
before Jiak
managed to free himself.
"I'm still shorthanded on the Haverford,"
said the
captain. "I could use you on my next
tour."
Jiak rubbed gingerly at the sore muscles
of
his arm. His disappointment at being
shut out of
DiWahn hurt much more. "This was just

my first stop.

I'm going to Dynasia next."

"What! That godforsaken place is a trillion light years away from here."

Despite her exaggeration of the distance involved,

Del jabbed her hand to a specific spot just to the

left of his head. Jiak had no doubt that Dynasia could be found by traveling beyond the tip of

her finger; the freighter captain had an uncanny

memory for all the backroad planets in the

galaxy.

"I don't care how far away it is," he said sullenly. "That's where I'm going

next."

"Then you haven't got the brains of a Meegan glowworm." When he remained silent, she heaved a deep sigh. "The Marshall is docked in Bay 3. Find First Officer Conrad, and tell him I sent you. His freight run will get you to Hayhurst Junction, which is the closest Federation outpost to Dynasia. After that, you're on your own again."

Jiak's face flushed with shame at having resented her interference. "Thanks,

Captain."

"Only members of my crew call me captain," said the woman. "My friends call me

Del." She wrapped the boy in her arms, squeezed the air out of his lungs with the strength of

her hug, then stalked away without a backward glance.

Thanks, Del.

He almost changed his mind and ran after her, but the impulse faded with the thought of setting foot on

Dynasia. Eager to secure his next berth, Jiak settled his pack securely on his shoulders and headed back toward the

docking bays.

CHAPTER 18

"Engage."

In Riker's mind, that simple word was inextricably intertwined with the basso pulse of the starship engines and a dazzling starburst of warp light on the viewscreen. A feeling of suppressed excitement was underscored by Picard's crisp declamation; he never issued that order in an offhand manner.

"At current warp speed," announced Data, "our estimated arrival at Vulcan

will
be in three point six days."
Picard never even slouched when he
occupied the
captain's chair. At his most relaxed, he
might cross his legs and lean back.
Today,
Riker noted, the captain had adopted his
most
regal carriage, with both feet planted
firmly on the deck and his head held high
as he
studied the viewscreen. The very
mention of Sarek and
T'Sara's homeworld seemed to trigger
this
unconscious show of respect; Picard's
only

departure from a formal posture was the crooking of one arm to hold the Heart.

"I've been to Vulcan several times," said the first officer, "but I've never had a chance to actually visit the planet surface. I'm looking forward to that opportunity now."

When the silence that followed this comment lengthened uncomfortably, Troi leaned slightly forward from her position on the other side of Picard. "Yes, I'm also looking forward to shore leave there. It should prove to be very

interesting, if rather warm." She spoke to Riker, but her eyes were on the captain.

Another silence.

"And I'm sure the Vulcan Science Academy will look forward to our arrival," said

Riker, forging ahead despite a growing self-consciousness. He had started this damn

conversation, but he couldn't seem to stop it as

easily. "The Heart is a most unusual--"

"What did you say?" Picard turned to face

his first officer. "What about the Heart?"

"Just that I'm sure the archaeologists at

the
Vulcan Science Academy must be very
curious
about it. As an historical relic, it should
keep
them occupied for quite some time."
Picard reacted to that admittedly banal
statement with a frown. His one free
hand tugged at
the hem of his tunic. "Yes, I suppose it
will."

"Isn't that the purpose of this trip?" asked
Troi, and Riker wondered what emotion
she
sensed that made this request for
clarification necessary.
"To return the artifacts of T'Sara's

excavation to Vulcan?"

"Of course, Counselor," said Picard with a grimace of impatience. "I was under the impression I had made that clear during our last briefing."

Troi nodded, but made no reply.

"In the meantime, it makes a dandy conversation piece," said Riker with a grin. No one laughed.

"Although, I've noticed that it must be lighter than it looks. You don't seem to mind its weight."

This was a rather blatant ploy for a

chance to at least
touch the stone; except for Data, the
captain was
the only one who had held the Heart.
"I hadn't given it much thought," said
Picard.
He did not proffer the stone to his
curious first
officer, and Riker wondered why Picard
had
bothered to bring the stone with him onto
the bridge.
To Riker's relief, the next long silence
finally signaled the death of this
particular topic of
conversation; but his trepidation
returned when he saw
Data swivel around in order to face the

command
center.

"Captain, I have completely reassembled and
recalibrated all testing units in my
laboratory, and I have certified that they
are in
excellent working order. If I could
continue my
examination of the Heart, we could
provide the
Academy scientists with valuable
baseline
information as to its nature."

"That's a very good point, Mr. Data."

"Thank you, Captain." The android
swung

aside the Ops console so that he could stand.

"Don't bother with it now," said Picard.

"I'll deliver the Heart to the lab at the end of

your duty shift."

Data sank back down into his chair.

"Until then," continued the captain, "I have

some historical research of my own to attend to.

Number One, the bridge is yours."

"Aye, Captain."

Riker was actually relieved by Picard's swift departure from the bridge to his ready

room. This was a new feeling, and not

one that the first
officer welcomed.

"He's very tired, Will," said Deanna
before he
could even ask her to comment on the
captain's state
of mind. "I sense he hasn't been sleeping
very
well lately, and that makes him rather
edgy."

"The Borg nightmares again?"

Troi paused, then shook her head. "No,
I don't think so. He's not so ...
shaken. Just tired and somewhat
distracted."

"Perhaps we should ask our chief
medical officer
to prescribe some warm milk at

bedtime."

"Warm milk?" asked Data.

Riker hated having to explain his quips to the

android since they always sounded so lame after a

clinical analysis. "That was just a joking reference to an old remedy for insomnia."

"Ah. Then I might make a similar reference to using a wrench to regain possession of the

Heart from the captain." The android blinked in

surprise when Riker laughed out loud.

"Was that also funny?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, it was, Data," said Riker, but his grin faded when he saw the look of concern on Troi's face. Apparently the ship's counselor was not so amused.

As the chief medical officer of the Enterprise, Beverly Crusher had more than a passing acquaintance with the methods the crew used to deal with stress. Some of the more exuberant attempts at tension-relief resulted in a visit to sickbay. Miles O'Brien, for instance, was fond of white-water rafting, and Deanna Troi tended to eat large

quantities of chocolate; thus the former occasionally needed muscle and bone regeneration, and the latter a stern reminder on the importance of a balanced diet.

Crusher was more inclined to moderation and indulged herself by dancing in the holodeck with a succession of computer-generated partners. However, when she was feeling especially despondent, the doctor ended up in sickbay as well.

"Are you sure you don't mind updating these

equipment inventories, Dr. Crusher?" asked the nurse as he held out his data padd. Lewis was a relatively new staff member, one who hadn't learned to take quick advantage of these rare moods.

"I don't mind at all." Crusher whisked the padd away from the man before he could change his mind. Two other nurses and a doctor had already cheerfully provided her with a full day's worth of mind-numbing busywork projects, the kind she

usually avoided like the plague or foisted off on some hapless resident who had run out of patients.

"Well, I really appreciate this ... " Despite his words, Lewis still looked as if he was waiting for the catch.

"Am I interrupting something important?" came a voice from the doorway to her office.

"Not at all, Geordi." She waved away the bewildered nurse and studied the chief engineer as he walked closer. La Forge showed no

obvious
signs of illness; except for an unusually
somber expression, he appeared to be in
good
health. "What can I do for you?"

"This isn't a medical matter, Doctor.
I just dropped by to see if you were
coming to the poker
game tonight."

Crusher winced with the sudden
realization that this was the
source of her bad mood. Odd how she
had
managed to avoid this self-knowledge
all morning.

Geordi must have seen her reaction,
because he
sighed and said, "Look, I'm really sorry

about
the last few days. We all know it wasn't
your
fault we missed the championship, and
I'd
really feel bad if you stopped playing
poker just
because we've been acting like jerks."
"Thank you, Geordi," she said with a
growing
smile. "As it happens, I have plans for
this
evening, but it was very nice to be
asked."
"Next time?"
"Definitely."
"Great." Her assurance seemed to ease

his
conscience, because he walked out of
the office with a much
lighter step.

As the last tatters of her melancholy
evaporated, Crusher shoved aside the
temptation
to break her dinner date with the captain
so she could
attend the poker game after all. Her
vindication
could wait until another time. Besides,
she hadn't
seen much of Picard lately and ...
She happened to glance down at her
desk, a
desk covered with the mountains of
work that she had taken

on, work she no longer had the slightest interest in doing.

Suddenly the pleasures of this evening lay too far in the future to even contemplate.

Data heard the sound of heavy footsteps marching down the curving bridge ramp. There was only one member of the crew who could overcome the shock-absorbent qualities of the deck carpet.

"Your duty shift is over ... sir."

Data looked up from the captain's chair that he had occupied since Riker's

departure from the bridge. The ship's security chief towered above him. "Thank you, Lieutenant Worf. I was just waiting for the captain." Worf glanced over his shoulder at the closed doors of the ready room. "He is busy." "Yes, it appears he is preoccupied and has forgotten our appointment. Perhaps I should remind--"

The Klingon's bony forehead gathered a new set of furrows. "One who holds the Pagarshatak should not be disturbed for trivial matters ... sir." He shifted his broad

body ever so slightly to block Data's view

of the door. "The captain would be annoyed by an interruption."

"Then my concerns can wait," decided the

android. Despite the belligerent delivery,

Worf's assessment of the situation was probably quite accurate.

"As most senior officer present, do you wish

to retain command of the bridge?"

"No." Data rose from the captain's chair.

"I will be heavily involved in computer

research
on the aft deck. The conn is yours."
This answer seemed to mollify the
Klingon--
his glower softened into a frown--yet
Data was
aware that Worf was still watching him
as he proceeded
up the ramp to the back of the bridge. It
occurred
to the android that Worf could be a bit
overzealous in
the execution of his duties, especially
where
Captain Picard's welfare was
concerned. No
doubt these were admirable qualities in
the chief of

security, yet if Data were capable of emotion he would probably find them extremely irritating at times.

Taking a seat at an empty science console, Data changed its display option to a high-speed scan mode and quickly set to work.

During the last hour of his duty shift, he had prepared a contingency plan just in case he was delayed from working directly with the Heart. In the absence of new test results, he would proceed

under the assumption that the anomalous data he had gathered was correct, and he would conduct a search for similar contradictory findings in both archaeological and geological data bases.

He began by requesting a listing of all instances in which variations in both dating and material composition were linked to one object. Cosmic spacetime distortions were the first items to be ruled out; he narrowed the search field

to objects less massive than black holes.
Then he excluded artificially generated anomalies that were the result of esoteric physics experiments.
Then the screen froze.
A Human would not have noticed; however, given the rate at which Data processed information, the brief lag was quite obvious to him.
After a microsecond flash of a new file listing, the screen returned to the previous display of physics experiments.
"Search complete. No new matches on stated search parameters."

"That is not correct," said Data firmly.

" Access Archaeology File
TGOF-1284-678A."

"No such file is present in the data
base."

The computer was in error. He had
clearly seen
that file listing added, then quickly
deleted.

"Repeat, access Archaeology File
TGOF-1284-678A."

The screen went blank. "Listing error
that
file material has not been entered in the
data
base."

Yet he had noted a considerable volume

size in the file description. He considered a backdoor approach that might open a new access route. "Correlate data on the Devil's Heart with data in Archaeology File TGOF-1284-678A and--" "Starfleet Command override ... Attention Lieutenant Commander Data, USS Enterprise, you have requested classified material. Your current security clearance is not sufficient to allow access to this file." "Intriguing." He tapped his comm

insignia and
began with, "Data to Commander Riker."
Less than ten minutes later, the first
officer
was standing by Data's side.

"Computer," said Riker sternly. "This is
Commander William T. Riker. Show me
Archaeology File TGOF-1284-678A."
The screen remained blank while the
computer-generated voice repeated its
refrain.

"Starfleet Command override ...

Attention

Commander William T. Riker, USS
Enterprise, you have requested
classified
material. Your current security
clearance is not sufficient to allow

access to this
file."

"Damn." The first officer tapped his
comm

insignia. "Riker to Picard."

Less than two minutes later, the captain
had joined them on the aft deck. He
listened

patiently to Data's recapitulation of the
data

base search. "And you think this file has
material pertaining to the Heart?"

Data shook his head. "I cannot
corroborate

any connection until I have actually seen
the

file, but the request for a correlation

triggered the
security procedures."

"Then I agree this subject is worth
pursuing," said Picard. "Computer, this
is

Captain Jean-Luc Picard. I require
access to Archaeology File
TGOF-1284-678A."

"Starfleet Command override ...
Attention

Captain Jean-Luc Picard, USS
Enterprise, you have requested
classified
material. Submit your justification for
access

to Admiral Emm Wilkerson, Director of
Starfleet Special Projects."

"Well, I suppose that's progress of some

sort," said Picard with a wry smile. "I'll send a priority request for an explanation to the admiral right away."

Given their distance from Command Headquarters,

Data quickly calculated that the earliest possible

response could not arrive for hours. In the

meantime, however, he could conduct another round of laboratory tests.

"Mr. Data," continued Picard, "until we've received some clarification from Starfleet

Command, I suggest we suspend any

further
attempts to analyze the Heart."
"As you wish, Captain."
"Why am I not surprised by that?"
muttered
Riker under his breath as he watched
Picard
return to his ready room.
This was a rhetorical question, decided
Data;
he was not required to respond.
Nonetheless, he
noted with interest that his own reaction
matched that of the
first officer.

Beverly Crusher had just started the last
paragraph of the last page of a very

dreary set of reports when she heard the sound of the outer doors to sickbay open and shut. Her fingers picked up their pace over the keyboard. "I'm almost done, Jean-Lu--" Then she looked up. "Oh, Deanna."

"You were expecting the captain," said Troi.

"Yes, actually, I was. He invited me to join him for dinner tonight."

The counselor's eyebrows quirked in surprise. "A very late dinner."

Crusher cast a quick look at her desk chronometer and was amazed to see she had worked through most of the evening. "I've been rather absorbed in my

work and lost track of time. He should have called me hours ago ..." She could feel a slow burn of anger working its way up her neck. "In fact, I do believe the captain has stood up his chief medical officer ... again."

"Oh," said Troi, her eyes bright with undisguised curiosity. "So this happened before?"

"Yes," said Crusher with a tight smile. "Last night we were supposed to have dinner to make up for a breakfast we missed. Only Jean-Luc didn't show up. This morning he

apologized and explained that he had been distracted by an unexpected meeting with Guinan.

To make amends, he promised to meet me for dinner tonight."

"Knowing Captain Picard, he's probably forgotten to eat entirely and is off somewhere studying the Heart."

"Probably." The doctor found scant consolation in this explanation. "He certainly is fascinated by it."

"Well, I just stopped by to see if you wanted

to help me celebrate. I just won fifty credits from--"

"The poker game!" cried Crusher. "I forgot all about it. If the captain had bothered

to cancel our dinner plans, I could have gone to the game instead."

"Beverly," said Troi in her most pedantic

counselor voice, "it's still not too late to call him."

"Oh, no!" she said, sweeping the work tapes

off her desk into a drawer and slamming it shut.

"After all, who am I to come between a

man and his
rock?"

He sat cross-legged on the bed, just as
young

Surak had sat on the cold ground of the
desert,

and the Heart rested in the cradle of his
hands. The

boy had been waiting for morning, but
Picard was waiting for night.

It was so difficult to keep his eyes open,
yet he fought to stay awake just a little
while
longer.

His cabin was dark, just as it had been
that first

night when he wakened from the dream
of T'Sara's

death and saw the stone transformed. He
wanted
to see the change again. Or had its
glittering
light been part of the dream as well?
Could he even tell the difference
between waking and
dreaming any more? For three nights in a
row, he
had been left with memories of other
lands and other
people that were too vivid to dismiss as
fantasy, yet
he had no other name for them.
Visions, perhaps.
Starship captains were not supposed to
have visions.

He knew he should tell someone, but he feared the telling would shatter the spell. So tired. Too tired to watch the stone any longer. He slumped down onto the bed, curling himself around the warm, round shape. Dreams were the voice of the Heart, and he would listen to what it had to say.

CHAPTER 19

Halaylah darted through the gathering crowd, skipping and twisting between the

lumbering heavyset
bodies that towered above her. News of
the
approaching bier had traveled quickly,
outstripping
even her nimble race to the doors of the
Great
Chamber. She wondered, in fact, if that
knowledge had
spread too quickly, whether there had
been an air
of veiled expectation when the cart
lumbered up the
causeway with its blood-sodden burden.
Three armor-clad admirals stood at the
threshold of the throne room, planted
like boulders
in solemn and unperturbable authority,

yet the
guttural exchanges they whispered to
each other
betrayed their unease. As a rule,
Klingons were
not given to whispering; they bellowed
and roared like
wounded targs whether they were in a
good humor or
bad. She had been told they sounded
much the same
in battle or in lovemaking. After a
decade of
living on this planet, she still found the
unleavened
noise of its natives to be the most
oppressive element of her captivity.

Skirting closer to the guarded entrance,
Halaylah caught a whiff of the
admirals' fear, incongruously sweet
compared
to the normal acrid smell of a Klingon
adult.

She listened to their awkward sibilant
speech,
then tucked a hidden smile inside her
cheek.

These mighty warriors, with the blood of
a dozen
space-faring races on their hands, feared
facing the
emperor. Each was desperately trying to
escape
the honor of announcing the processional

that marched
ever closer.
Skipping past the admirals, ducking
under the
crossed swords of the Imperial guards
and under the
arched entrance, she passed
unchallenged into the
interior chamber. This was the privilege
of the
mightiest monarch and the lowliest
servant.
Dim red light obscured the bleakness of
bare
stone walls and a flagstone floor, but did
nothing
to warm the chill air. Even the warriors
among

her people had craved beauty, whereas Klingons seemed to disdain the cultivation of art and music.

When she had ventured to question this lack of aesthetic development, Kessec had reminded her, not unkindly, that her elegant homeworld had been defeated in battle. Still, she wondered if she could have enjoyed victory over the Klingons if Tehalai had been as ugly as this planet. The loss of flower gardens and carved

fountains saddened
her more than the loss of her freedom.
Her slippered feet whisked softly over
the
hard tiles. At their sound, a deep voice
cut through the murky air. "Approach and
be
recog--oh, it's you, child."
Kessec was unattended. More and more
often she
found him alone, yet he allowed her to
enter and
remain when all others had been sent
away.
Despite his seclusion, she always found
him
dressed in ceremonial robes and chain-
link,

sitting erect on the wide metal throne as if

he were about to admonish his admirals and ministers.

And always the Pagrahtak rested in the palms of his hands.

"Do they think I'm deaf?"

His hearing was sharper than hers, but even

Halaylah could hear the muffled murmur of the crowd waiting outside.

"Your sons are bringing a bier to this chamber," she said.

"All my sons?"

"All that are left alive, my Emperor."

"Ah." He, alone of all the Klingons she had met, had the capacity to express himself with subtlety and restraint. He said nothing more until the death marchers arrived.

The security guards moved aside to admit the emperor's sons and the burden they carried, but the procession stopped just over the threshold.

"Approach and be recognized!"

Halaylah, crouching in the shadows by the side of the throne, watched as Mohtr, the eldest son,

stepped forward and saluted. He echoed his father's sturdy build, but his tangled mane was shot with white where Kessec's hair remained black.

"Durall, son of Kessec, has brought honor to his family!"

She glanced quickly upward to study Kessec's face. He betrayed no sign of emotion, yet she knew young Durall had been a favorite of his. She drew a deep breath and learned the smell of grief.

"How many shared that honor with

him?" asked

Kessec.

Mohtr hesitated, emitting the same sweet scent that had glistened on the skin of the admirals

outside. "None. His death was an accident,

Father."

"A very small honor, then," said Kessec.

"There have been many of these accidents of late among my sons bruises, wounds, broken bones. Now death."

"We are warriors!"

Leaning forward, Kessec curled back his lips. "Warriors die in battle, not in accidents; they kill their enemies, not their

brothers."

"You have left us precious few battles to fight, my Emperor," said Mohtr, baring his teeth in return.

"Yes, that is one of the unexpected disappointments of overwhelming victory against our enemies." Kessec sank back against the unyielding throne. "So is watching my sons squabble like scavengers over the right to succeed me."

"If we succeed you. Unlike you, sire, we grow old. Better to die like Durall than to reach our dotage still yearning for our

right
to succession!"

"Enough, Mohtr." Kessec dismissed him
with
an abrupt wave of his arm and called
out, "Bring
me Durall's body."

Even in the murky light, Halaylah could
discern the sullen looks on the faces
of the five bier-bearers as they shuffled
forward and
laid the pallet at the foot of the
emperor's
dais. Durall's body, once possessed of a
wiry vitality, was limp and drained of
color;
his tunic was stiff with crusted blood
where his chest

had been crushed inward. She wrinkled her nose at the whiff of decomposition. Death smelled the same here as it did on Tehalai.

"I see there was no hurry to bring me this honor," said Kessec as he rose from his throne.

The Pagrahtak was cradled in the crook of one arm.

"We were far from home, Father," muttered

Tagre, Fourth-born. "Travel was difficult."

"No doubt." Kessec stepped down from the

circular base. Several of his sons were
taller
and broader of frame, yet to Halaylah
they
lacked his presence and gravity. She
wondered if
he had been born with that quality or
whether it was
another gift of the stone.
With one hand Kessec brushed aside a
lock
of Durall's hair. The gentle gesture
seemed to bring Kessec pain, a physical
pain
that stiffened his body; it lacked the
aroma of
grief. His fingers sought out the young

man's throat.

Time passed, but the emperor's ragged breathing was the only sound in the chamber. Halaylah had never

mastered the Klingon Discipline of Waiting, but she was too frightened to move. She could smell the

changes in the body before she saw its skin darken with the warmth of flowing blood.

When Durall finally stirred, Kessec dropped his hand away.

"Is there anything the Pagrahtak can't do?"

cried Gistad, Second-born. Alone among his brothers, he met the restoration of

life with a
smile of wonder and joy. A politic
reaction, noted Halaylah, for a man who
might
be the next to die.

She also noted the slump in Kessec's
broad shoulders, the effort with which
he kept his head
raised. The arm holding the Pagrahtak
was
drooping by his side.

"You are tired, Father," said Mohtr,
taking a
step closer to the emperor. He averted
his gaze
from the stone, but his body twitched
ever so slightly

when Kessec shifted the talisman to his other hand.

"I will be fit enough by morning, as will Durall. And then we shall hear his account of this accident that befell him."

"Hearing him speak again will be a miracle, but miracles are taxing; you must keep up your strength through eating." Mohtr bellowed out for food. His call had barely stopped echoing before servants came running into the chamber with brimming

bowls of meat, steaming pies, and jugs of ale.

"Such concern for my welfare is touching, Mohtr."

His hand signal was weak, lightly sketched in air, but Halaylah had been waiting for the emperor to summon her. She scrambled out of the shadows to Kessec's side.

"I'm partial to the rougath," he said, scooping out a ball. She leaned forward and sniffed his choice. The smell of the food itself was pure, but the

tart

glutinous paste had been handled by
someone who had
smeared his fear like icing over the top.

Halaylah

glanced up to the emperor and blinked
her eyes in a

gesture of rejection. Better not.

Kessec sighed. "Perhaps I will eat
later."

"You let this slave's whelp run your
life?"

"An eccentricity of mine. You, on the
other

hand, are welcome to ignore her
warning." He

proffered the morsel to his First-born.

"I'm not hungry."

"No, of course not." Kessec dropped the food back onto a tray and carefully wiped his fingers on the rough fabric of his robe.

"Leave me. All of you."

The words were softly uttered, but even an emperor's whisper had to be obeyed.

The servants fled, dropping the tainted bowl, and everything else they had carried, onto the flagstones. His sons were less quick to abandon their dignity, but they too edged away without protest.

As they retreated from the chamber,
Kessec
called out to Mohtr one last time.
"Take a deep breath, First-born.
Deeper! That tightness you feel in your
chest is from
a bout of Gorault's fever that you
contracted as
a boy. Few children survive that
illness."
"My survival is a sign of my strength!"
Mohtr cried in defiance, then marched
out of the
chamber.
"Ah. Of course."
Halaylah stayed. She knew when Kessec
did not want her with him, and this was

not one
of those times.
"Come closer, child." In the early days
of her
service to the emperor, Kessec had tried
to wrap his thick Klingon tongue around
the
delicate syllables of her name, then
joined in her
laughter at the clumsy result; but he had
not
laughed for over a year now, and there
was no one
else to speak her name aloud, no matter
how
mangled.
"I have another story to tell you," he
said, and

she settled herself at his feet to listen.
"In a time before this one, there lived
two
brothers who had been born of the same
mother and on
the same day. Kessec and Batahr, for
those were
their names, were so alike in appearance
that it was as if
they were a single man and his still-
water reflection
walking together on land. Their hearts
were equally
mirrored; within each burned the
bloodlust of a
warrior, and when they fought together
in battle, their

enemies fled before them like dry straw
on a high

wind rather than face their raging fire.

"They shared the honor of their victory,
just as

they shared their weapons, their house,
and their lovers.

In time, they even shared the reign of all
the

territory within a two week's march of
their

birthplace."

His deep, rasping voice fell silent.

"Then it came to pass," prompted

Halaylah when the pause in the story
grew too

long. The form of the telling was

familiar, but she had not heard this tale of Kessec's life before and was curious to hear more.

"Ah, yes, then it came to pass that the brothers defeated their greatest enemy, a neighboring warrior-king, and in their victory found the one thing which they could not share. The first brother to touch the Pagrahtak felt its warmth and heard its whispers; the other held a cold, silent stone. Soon, the first brother was loathe to loosen his grip on the prize. Instead, he swore an oath to share the fruits of its powers. Despite

this generous offer, the second brother
brooded and
grew sour with jealousy and suspicion,
until
he forgot all honor and slew his twin
while he
slept."

Halaylah sniffed cautiously at the lip
of a mug of ale, then passed it over to
Kessec.

He took a deep draft of the hot liquid
before
continuing.

"The traitor grasped the stone and
felt its powers, but he also repented of
his
murderous deed, so he used the stolen

Pagrashtak to bring his dead brother back to life."

"You saved him just like you saved Durall!"

cried Halaylah with a joyful stamp of her

feet. Klingon tales rarely had such a satisfying ending.

"No, child," said Kessec. "Batahr raised me from the dead. And for that deed, I quickly slew

him in turn. Then I burned his body and scattered the ashes so I could never be tempted

to resurrect him."

Not such a happy ending after all, she

sighed
to herself.
"All this happened long ago," said
Kessec,
reciting the formulaic ending of a
historic
narrative. He studied the face of his
youngest
son, the one who looked the most like
him and who, she
realized, must also look like his dead
brother. "Or
so I thought."
Durall's breathing was still labored and
his limbs
trembled with the pain of his wounds.
Kessec laid a
palm flat against his son's heaving chest

and kept
it there until the boy sighed and slipped
into an
untroubled sleep.

The effort left the emperor so weak that
he lost

his grip on the Pagrashtak. Halaylah
cried

out in distress when the stone rolled
away from him.

Her dismay deepened when she heard
his next

command. "Take it, quickly, before I
recover my

strength. And my greed."

"Sire?"

"Take it!"

She took the Pagrashtak in her hands. It was warm to the touch and not as heavy as she had expected.

"Go," whispered Kessec. "Go as far from here as you can, child. Found your own empire if you must, but take this curse away from me and mine." Slipping the stone into her shapeless tunic where it nestled like a curled beast against her stomach, Halaylah ran from the throne chamber for the last time.

Those light footsteps were still echoing

in
T'Sara's mind when her eyes opened.
She
breathed deeply of the cool air of the
Collector's chamber. The desert night
encircling the tower would be even
colder.

"So that is what you were once," said the
Vulcan woman to the mummified body.

"And
look at what you have become now."
When had the generous young slave girl
turned
into the miserly, grasping, and selfish
fanatic that

T'Sara had met in other dreams?
Ten years of excavation had shown that
Halaylah used the powers of the

Pagrashtak
to found an artist's colony on Atropos,
but it
had flourished for only a century. Over
time,
her desire for creating beauty had
narrowed into a
rapacious hunger for possession.
T'Sara had tried to explain to Sorren
what
had happened, to teach him to feel how
the
self-entombment of their founder would
horrify
Halaylah's followers. While he
acknowledged
the physical evidence of the disbanding

of the colony,
he would not allow himself to fathom
their motivation.

Young Vulcans were like that; too unsure
of their
emotional control to risk the dangers of
empathy.

"But I am old enough to contemplate
what I will
not emulate you wanted to keep the Ko
N'ya
to yourself for all eternity. If not for me,
you would have
succeeded, but I have taken it from you."
T'Sara stroked the glittering stone. "Did
none of them ever wonder what you
wanted, Ko
N'ya? I have seen much of your journey,

but I
keep searching the dreams for a clue as
to where you are
going."

Her head fell back against the chamber
wall.

But I am old ... and so tired ... I
may not have the strength to find your
answer.

Her eyes closed ...

... and the outermost shell of nested
dreams
shattered when Picard opened his eyes.
He felt
as old and tired as T'Sara until he drew
a
shuddering breath and revived his own

strength.

"A journey?" he asked the glowing Heart that

hugged his side. "Is that what this is all about?"

Its inner fire seemed to flare more brightly than before.

CHAPTER 20

Estrella Miyakawa had reached the rank of lieutenant commander of the USS Brande through sheer hard work, but by that point in her career it was obvious that her promotions were lagging farther

and farther behind those
of her Academy classmates. Then
Starfleet
Command had made it clear that a
transfer
off a starship would be her only route to
becoming a
full commander; affronted by the
mandate, she finally
had agreed to an administrative post
rather than
remain at that lower rank forever.
She had expected a prestigious but
routine
desk job at any one of a dozen major
starbases. To her dismay, however, she
found herself in
charge of an isolated docking base on

the
fringes of Federation space. Insult had
been
added to injury.
So for the first year of her assignment at
Starbase 193, Miyakawa had nursed a
bitter grudge against Starfleet and the
character
assessment tests that had robbed her of
the command of a
starship. Then, by the second year, her
innate
sense of honesty had reasserted itself,
and her
resentments had eased in the face of self-
knowledge
while she possessed the independence of

mind that
all good captains needed, she had never
learned
to moderate that trait. Blunt to a fault and
impatient with subordinates, she had
earned a
reputation for being difficult and
creating unnecessary
tension among the crew of every ship on
which she had
served.

By her third year of duty, Miyakawa
knew
she had found her proper niche in life.
As the
sole officer on the base, she had no one
to answer to but herself. On a starship
her brusque

manner and snap decisions had ruffled feathers;
here they had earned her the respect of the hardened
locals and a rapid promotion to captain. Over
the course of five years, Starbase 193 became her home, and Miyakawa lost the
desire to walk any deck other than this one.
Still, there were times when she would have welcomed the
presence of another Fleet officer. Now was one of those times.
The commander scanned the page in her hand once

again. Despite its dry tone, the Starfleet security communique troubled her.

During his

brief visit, Picard had teased her about the

tendency of administrators to exaggerate the

magnitude of their problems. She had bristled

at the implied criticism of her judgment, but

today she yearned to hear his opinion on this matter.

Lifting her gaze to the curving windows of her

office, Miyakawa studied the tranquil scene

of exterior base activity with growing unease.

An Andorian passenger ship floated through

space in search of the orbit

coordinates dictated by the station dockmaster;

maintenance droids swarmed over the hull of a

Tellarite freighter; a shuttlecraft ferried a salvage crew to the remains of a

Ferengi

Marauder. To all appearances, this was the start of

another routine, uneventful day.

Yet, if there was a Romulan warbird out there, it would be cloaked and invisible

to her eyes.
She shook her head and returned her attention to the communiqué. Really, the very notion that there might be Romulans headed for this sector was absurd. Even if Starfleet intelligence was accurate and a warbird had indeed crossed the Neutral Zone, there was nothing of value at Starbase 193 to attract the attention of any enemy of the Federation. Six other sectors had received this routine warning and any

one of them was a more likely target.

Tapping her comm insignia, Miyakawa said,

"Miyakawa to dockmaster."

"Ramsey here."

"Initiate Security One shutdown procedures for all docking operations."

She was accustomed to immediate obedience from her staff,

but Ramsey's brief silence was understandable under the

circumstances.

"What's going on, Commander?"

"I'm feeling bored today." She wasn't ready to explain her decision to anyone yet, not

even herself.

"Right. Well, this should liven up everyone's life. Security One shutdown now in effect."

Within seconds, the Andorian passenger ship came to a dead stop; maintenance droids scurried away from the freighter, then dove through the closing doors of a cargo bay; and the repair shuttle executed a sharp turn on its hasty return to the station. There would be no more dockings or departures without her express permission, and every

crewmember or passenger on shore leave would be automatically recalled to his ship. The decision to suspend service operations would outrage every captain in the sector; it would disrupt tight flight schedules and inconvenience thousands of passengers and merchants. So before the first wave of irate calls could flood through her office, Miyakawa made a second announcement.

"Attention all starbase personnel. Security One alert procedures are

now in effect. This is not a drill. Repeat,
this
is not a drill."

The scramble to close down shops and
return

to quarters would keep everyone quiet
for at least

fifteen minutes. She had that much time
to think of

an excuse for her actions.

Someone tell me I'm overreacting.

Camenae was just the person for the job,
thought

Miyakawa ruefully when the bar owner
swept

into the Starfleet office. Of course,

Miyakawa's open-door policy was not in

effect during a security alert, but Camenae was not known for her adherence to station regulations.

"I need to talk to you, Commander."
If this had been a normal alert, Miyakawa would have had no patience for interruptions, but this time there was no discernible emergency, no further demands on her authority, so there seemed little point in turning Camenae away. "I imagine you're here to register a complaint from the trade community."

"No. I was already on my way here."

The

woman sat down, leaned her elbows on the

desk, and said, "Four twenty-three mark seventy-six mark three sixty-seven."

Miyakawa puzzled over the sequence.

"Those

coordinates are in this sector." She punched the

numbers into her viewer padd, then studied the

screen image. "However, according to Federation star

charts, there's nothing but a few asteroids at that intersection."

Camenae shook her head. "One of those asteroids is three kilometers in diameter, large enough to hide Smelter's Hold in its hollow core."

"What! Starfleet has been trying to confirm the location of the Hold for years; now you walk in here and give me its coordinates. Why?"

"Because I suspect the outpost no longer exists."

The commander's sense of approaching danger grew stronger. "Explain."

"I had an operative working at the Hold,"

Camenae hesitated, then continued with an uncharacteristic revelation, "who was tracking after Reyjad@an."

"The DiWahn who killed Grede?" It was Miyakawa's best guess, but she knew better than to expect any confirmation. When Camenae nodded agreement, the commander's alarm deepened yet again. Camenae began to talk faster, as if rushing against time. "The Squib witnessed a curious

scene at the Hold bazaar. DaiMon Tork was pulling a scam on two traders ... two

Vulcans. He left the bazaar in their company and did not return."

The commander's fist clenched, crumpling the communiqu'e into a tight ball. "What are the odds of any Vulcan trader knowing about the Hold?"

"That was my first thought, but I didn't have the chance to ask any more questions. Our communications were cut.

All contact with the Hold has been lost." With her heart racing from a sudden surge of adrenalin, Miyakawa asked, "Camenae, do you know of any reason why a Romulan warbird would be headed to this starbase?" "I think they are after T'Sara's Ko N'ya." "I find that hard to believe." Yet that very suspicion had been at the root of her apprehension. "Would the Romulans risk an interstellar war with the Federation and its allies for so

little?"

"If the Romulans gain possession of the
Ko

N'ya," said Camenae, "they could
probably win
that war."

Miyakawa reached for her comm
insignia one more
time. "Attention all starbase personnel.
Initiate evacuation procedures. This is
not a
drill. Repeat, this is not a drill."
Finally, she knew what to do next.

"Dispose of him," said Commander
Taris, stepping
away from the limp body.
She waited, seemingly impassive, as

two
security guards rushed forward to
remove the
Ferengi from the chair. In truth, she had
to clench
her jaw to keep from snapping at them to
hurry as
they fumbled with the bindings that held
the subject in
place.

Subcommander Vedoc was less
self-disciplined; she could hear his boot
tapping
impatiently on the ship's metal deck.
"So,
this wretched Ferengi was telling the
truth after all,
and he hid nothing from us."

"I could have done with far less
revelation,"

Taris said dryly. The clever trickster
had

dissolved into a babbling fountain of
information

even before he was attached to the mind-
sifter; she

wondered if all of his species were
equally

weak-willed.

The last of the restraints were
unfastened, and one

of the guards easily lifted the small alien
into the

air. Both of the subject's eyes were still
open,

darting this way and that in independent directions. The highest setting of the mind-sifter seemed to sever the brain's ability to coordinate muscle movement; it severed many other connections as well.

The DaiMon was still alive in a technical sense, but this vegetative state would not persist for long as the body's nervous system functions continued to fail.

When the guards had carried the body away, Taris could speak more freely. "The

Enterprise! I might have known it would be involved with these tales of the Ko N'ya's reappearance."

"But Commander, most of what he told us was speculation rather than fact."

"Learn to trust your instincts, Vedoc." She suspected that instinct was another of the leadership qualities that he lacked; worse yet, he apparently lacked a comprehensive knowledge of their enemies. "The captain of the Enterprise has a

fondness for ancient cultures, and this would not be the first time he has meddled in our affairs." "Then it will be his last!"

"Your enthusiasm is noted," said Taris. The young man jerked to attention, chest puffed out; he had mistaken her sarcasm for praise.

What a shame that his finely chiseled features were not accompanied by an equally impressive intellect.

With a weary sigh, the commander turned on her heel and marched swiftly out of the interrogation

chamber. Vedoc scuttled after her. When they stepped into the circular bridge, the quiet air of efficiency restored her temper.

Unlike the subcommander, the soldiers hunched over their work stations had served on the Haakona for years. Taris had weeded out the weak and the stupid, leaving her with a leaner crew than most warbirds possessed, but one that was more competent.

She stepped up onto the dais of the captain's

chair. Each of the crew cast her a quick side-glance that signaled their ready status; a simple nod on her part would have elicited a verbal report; a series of hand signals could relay her own orders. The subtlety of this silent communication usually unnerved Vedoc, who preferred to bark out his commands.

A flash of orange light warned of a sudden change in the ship's status.

"Third-stage perimeter alert, Commander,"

explained the weapons officer. "Vessel one approaching on a direct intercept vector, seven minutes; Vessel two approaching on a direct intercept vector, eleven minutes; Vessel three will pass within firing distance in five minutes."

The viewscreen was clouded by the dampening effect of the Haakona's cloaking field, but she could see three globular shapes growing in size as they drew nearer.

"We'll be surrounded," whispered

Vedoc.

Even in the subdued light of the command pit, Taris could see him tremble at the thought. "Surrounded by two freighters and a passenger ship," explained the weapons officer without any trace of amusement. Seemus was too well trained to reveal contempt for a superior officer, even one who had not learned the difference between an alert and a warning. "Full power to the cloaking device," ordered Taris. Her voice carried easily across

the still
bridge. "Evasive maneuvers to avoid
collision."
The first of the approaching vessels
filled the
viewscreen, then veered off to one side.
Her
helmsman had steered the Haakona out
of harm's
way with an economy of motion. He
ducked under
the second trade ship, then returned the
warbird to its previous course heading.
"Estimated arrival at the starbase in
twelve minutes."
If fortune favored this mission, the
Enterprise and her captain would soon

rue their
theft of Romulan property.
A new shape took form on the
viewscreen,
the triangular profile of an orbital
docking
station. Even with the compromised
resolution of the
image, Taris could see that the space
surrounding
the station, an area normally cluttered
with stationary
vessels, was empty.
She looked to her navigator for an
explanation.
"Commander," said Etrajan, "sensors
reveal there are no life-signs on the
starbase."

"Your instruments must be in error!"

Vedoc

stepped behind the man and peered over his shoulder

to double-check the instrument readout.

"Life

support functions are still operating ... energy

collectors near maximum ..." He scowled

fiercely, then said, "no life-signs."

"And no Enterprise." Little else mattered to Taris, but Vedoc kept prattling on about the station.

"Somehow they must have been warned!

A

full-scale evacuation explains the ships we passed earlier. We could still catch one-
-"

"No," Taris snapped, growing weary of his inflexibility; a good soldier learned to adjust to the fluctuations of war. "Let them pass on.

We have larger game to track."

"Yes, Commander." He ducked his head, visibly chastened by her reprimand, another sign that he was too easily swayed even from a bad opinion. At the conclusion of this

mission, she would recommend that his highly placed uncle find another post for his nephew; Vedoc would not serve on her ship again.

"What is our next course of action?" he asked.

"Destroy the base as planned."

His large brown eyes blinked rapidly in confusion. "But there's no one even on the station."

"It doesn't matter, Subcommander."

Perhaps, if she was exceptionally clever, he could die honorably in battle; his uncle would probably thank her. "Upon hearing of the destruction of a Federation starbase, the

nearest
starship will proceed immediately to
this sector."

"And that starship will be the
Enterprise," said
Vedoc, finally comprehending the
obvious.

"Photon torpedoes locked on target,"
announced Seemus.

"Fire."

A cluster of dark shapes shot out from
beneath the
warbird's curving hull. She lost sight of
them
as they sped through the void toward
their target, but the
weapons officer tracked their progress.

"... three ... two ... one ..."

Commander Taris smiled as she watched the starbase explode into a cloud of molten metal.

Its fires flared like a beacon in the cold night of space.

CHAPTER 21

Having reached the limits of his own understanding, Data swiveled his Ops station around to face the occupant of the captain's chair. "Commander Riker, I have been reviewing your evocation of "Lady Luck" during the

course
of the game last night. Despite your
repeated
requests for intervention from that entity,
in actual
fact, your poker performance fell below
your usual
standards."

The first officer sighed. "Luck is fickle,
Data."

"And do you believe that explains why
Counselor Troi won?"

"No," said the first officer. "Deanna
cheats."

"Intriguing." Data had not expected that
explanation. "However, I saw no
evidence
of--"

"That was a joke."

"Yes, of course." A very small one, Data decided; he would forgo a laughter response. Besides, according to Geordi, the chuckle he had developed was still in need of refinement.

The android was about to resume a forward position when a soft beep from the aft deck caught his attention.

"Incoming message from Starfleet Command," announced Worf as he scanned the communications console. "A Priority One, security-coded

communiqué from the Department of Special Projects."

"That is probably the answer to our inquiry on the Heart," said Data. The response time was three hours and thirteen minutes shorter than his estimate, which implied a greater urgency than he had assigned to the matter.

"Pipe it to the captain's ready room, Lieutenant," ordered Riker, as he rose from his chair.

Data slipped out from under the console

to accompany the first officer.

"You are not included, Mr. Data," said Worf firmly. "According to my security instructions, only Captain Picard and Commander Riker have been granted clearance to view this message."

The android sat back down.

"Sorry, Data," said Riker. "You know how the Brass loves to guard its secrets; but I'll bet that by the end of this mission, we can fill you in on the details."

"Thank you, Commander. Nevertheless, I suspect

this is one conundrum I will never be allowed to solve. Fortunately, I have no--" "--no emotions." Riker completed the sentence for him.

"Correct. So I am not disturbed by the lack of resolution in this matter."

The first officer shrugged. "If you say so, Data."

"Yes, Commander, I do say so."

However, this clarification only seemed to amuse Riker; he was still smiling when he walked into the ready room.

Data had encountered this same veiled skepticism among members of the crew on other

occasions; Dr. Crusher and the captain often made

similar asides to his declarations.

Data addressed the security chief. "I do not possess the capacity for emotion."

Worf grunted. "I do not care ... sir."

"What exactly is Special

Projects?" asked Riker as he sat down across from the captain.

"Few people below the rank of admiral seem

to know." Picard plucked the Heart off a stack

of books and shoved them to one side. When he had cleared the area around the small viewscreen, he said, "I've heard it called the "black hole" department because information goes in, but it rarely comes back out."

"Well, then, this should be very interesting."

A figure suddenly appeared on the screen.

Admiral Wilkerson was a spare, elderly woman with a tight bun of fading coral-red hair and a brisk but congenial manner.

"Captain Picard, if I played this by the

book, neither you nor Commander Riker
would be allowed
to hear anything I'm about to say.
Fortunately,
Special Projects is given some latitude
in its affairs, and it is my judgment that
you need
to know the scope of the situation."
Her expression grew more somber.
"The analysis anomalies which you
reported
are not unique. They have been detected
emanating
from a ... structure, perhaps even a
being,
of immense age. We call it the Guardian
of

Forever, and there is a strong possibility that the relic you possess is a fragment broken from the Guardian."

Out of the corner of one eye, Riker could see the captain's hands close protectively around the stone.

"If this is so," continued the admiral, "the legends of the Heart's powers may not be exaggerated. The Guardian itself is beyond our comprehension; we haven't even

confirmed whether or not it is sentient ... and it has other properties that are best not talked about."

Like what? wondered Riker with growing unease.

"A team of researchers from Special Projects will be waiting for you on Vulcan; they can take the Heart to more secure quarters.

However, be very careful on your journey here, Captain Picard. At all costs, the Heart must be kept out of the hands of the Federation's enemies."

Admiral Wilkerson blinked away, and once again the screen went dark.

"The Guardian of Forever," said Picard, but

he was looking down at the Heart as he spoke.

"Is that where you belong?"

"Captain?"

Picard looked up as if startled that he was not

alone. "Yes?"

"Up until now, we've assumed this rock was

a harmless archaeological relic." Riker shook his head in disbelief at Starfleet's revelations. "But if what the admiral said is

true, you'd be safer holding a photon torpedo in your hands. Shouldn't we keep the Heart in a guarded security vault?"

The captain frowned at the suggestion. "I don't think deep storage will be necessary. If anything, it will simply draw extra attention to the Heart. However, to be on the safe side, I'll order an end to any more of Data's attempts at laboratory analysis." This wasn't the result Riker had intended, but before he could marshal an argument, Picard added,

"That will be all, Number One."

"Aye, sir." Riker rose and walked swiftly out of the room and onto the bridge.

Data looked up from his Ops console, his gold eyes gleaming with unasked questions.

"Don't hold your breath, Data."

"Sir?"

Riker kept walking.

He passed through the command area and was halfway up the side ramp when he tapped his comm link and

said, "Riker to Counselor Troi. Meet me in the main conference room."

The captain's chair of a starship was comfortable--
Worf knew this from personal experience--but
until such time as he earned the right to assume command
authority, the Klingon preferred his position on
the aft deck. From this lofty perch, he could
observe every action on the bridge and overhear almost
all conversations. He had little personal interest in
most of the information he gathered, but as the chief of
security, Worf felt it was his duty to be

aware of the petty concerns of the crew and the weightier matters that involved the senior officers. So Worf did not miss the anxious look on Commander Riker's face as he strode off the bridge toward the conference room; his call to the ship's counselor was duly noted as well. "There appears to be a problem," said Data. The android had a comment for every event, no matter how minor; he would not have lasted very long on a Klingon warship.

"Messy Human problems."

Unfortunately, Troi's involvement was usually
a warning of an imminent disruption to
order and
discipline on board the ship.

"In theory, the counselor's early
involvement can forestall the
development of greater
difficulties."

"Bad theory." Worf had little faith in the
android's understanding of such matters.

"Klingon
ships have no counselors, and they have
fewer
problems."

Before Data could prolong this

exchange, Worf
turned away to a more concrete task, one
that did
not involve speculation about Human
frailties.

Flickering green lights on his console
indicated the presence of a faint
communications
broadcast in the sector surrounding
Starbase

193. The steady pulse of a blue light
indicated that the signal was an
automated
message, sent out at regular intervals but
without
sufficient power to reach a starship
traveling at
warp speed.

The security chief made a slight adjustment to the alignment of the ship's antenna array. Then another.

By the time Riker had returned to the bridge, with Counselor Troi following in his wake, Worf had established that the call was spread across all the frequencies used by commercial freighters and passenger liners, and that it was broadcast in a scattershot pattern that would saturate the sector. Since only a starbase had the

energy

resources for that effort, the implication was that

Commander Miyakawa was transmitting information of

importance to local ship traffic.

Worf rechanneled more auxiliary power to the

amplifiers of the subspace transceivers.

Deanna Troi rang the chime to the ready room. As she waited for a response from within, she

could feel Riker watching her. The first officer's

concern hovered like a cloud over the bridge, but

during their meeting in the conference

room he had
fumbled for words to explain his unease.
In the end,
Riker simply shrugged and asked her to
see for
herself if she sensed any changes in the
captain.
"Come."

The counselor stepped forward through
the opening
doors, then paused on the other side of
the
threshold until the sliding panels had
closed
behind her; she needed the barrier to
help her block
out Riker's anxiety. Taking a deep
breath,

Troi cleared her mind of expectations,
then
approached the captain's desk.
She had planned to begin this session
with a casual
conversation, thus constructing an
oblique approach
to probe Picard's mood. As soon as she
drew near, however, the empath sensed
an intensity
of emotion that would not yield to such
subtle
methods. Although the captain was
looking straight
at her, his mind was focused on the book
he
held and on the Heart, which rested near

his right hand.

"You've been very absorbed of late,"
remarked

Troi.

"I've been following a hunch," said
Picard. She read an excitement, almost
an
exultation, in that statement. Her timing
was
fortunate; he was in need of an audience.

"I
believe that T'Sara saw a pattern in the
Heart's travels to different worlds, and
that is how
she tracked the stone to Atropos in the
first
place. Although any record of her
conclusions was

destroyed in the attack of the campsite,
many of the original pieces of the puzzle
are still here
in her writings."

"Tell me more," said Troi. She was
mildly
curious about the Heart, but even more
curious about the
captain's reaction to it.

"For instance," Picard said, "the Heart
appears in both Andorian mythology and
early
Klingon history. But how could it
possibly have
traveled from the healers of Andor to the
emperor
Kessec? The key lies in the records of

the first
Andorian/Ferengi contact the Ferengi
threatened
wholesale slaughter of the populace if
they were not
provided with "trade" merchandise."
"How charming." She noticed that the
lines of his
face were more pronounced than usual.
Had he
lost weight in the last few days?
"Among the items of tribute may have
been the
Heart. However, unaware of its true
value,
the Ferengi merely loaded it into the
hold of a
freighter and carried it away." Picard

opened the
book to a marked place near the back.
"T'Sara's appendix includes the ship's
manifest; it lists "assorted baubles and
trinkets" which were later traded to the
barbaric
natives of a technologically primitive
world
known as Kronos."
"This is all very fascinating, but what is
its
significance to our current mission?"
"Deanna, you must see that the Heart is
going
somewhere. It also has a mission."
"Really?" she said. "I'm not sure that I
would

have drawn that conclusion." But Picard did not appear to hear her doubt. He swiveled around his desk viewer so she could see the star map on its screen. His enthusiasm flaring like an aura around him. "If I can chart where the Heart has been, perhaps I can determine where it is going, its final destination ... and its motivation."

"You make it sound alive." She reached down and picked up the Heart. She sensed

nothing from the stone, but Picard's shifting emotions were obvious.

"You resent my holding it. Why?"

"Not at all, Counselor. I'm simply concerned that--"

"Riker to Captain Picard. We've picked up a distress call from Starbase 193."

How ironic, Troi observed, that it was Riker himself who was interrupting the session, one that he had specifically requested.

"On my way, Number One," called out Picard, quickly rising to his feet.

Troi stepped aside to let the captain pass, but he stopped just long enough to pull the Heart

from her hands. With a frosty smile, he said, "We shall have to continue this discussion some other time."

Instead of putting the Heart back on the desk, Picard carried the stone away with him.

Like every member of the bridge crew, Lieutenant Worf held himself to high standards of performance. Fulfilling one's duty was no cause for congratulations; competence was expected, not rewarded. Nevertheless, he felt a measure of satisfaction in having captured the

transmission
from Starbase 193 just before the
Enterprise had
traveled beyond the range of the signal.
He had
undertaken the effort as an exercise in
long-distance
communications recovery, but the result
had proved
to be of far greater importance than he
had
expected.

"Status report, Number One," demanded
the
captain as he strode out of the ready
room.

To the Klingon's gratification, Picard
carried the Pagrahtak with a care and

dignity that
showed the proper respect for its
powers.

Riker rose to his feet, vacating the
captain's chair. "Lieutenant Worf has
picked up an automated distress call
from
Starbase 193."

At a nod from the first officer, Worf
touched his
console to release the message.

Commander
Miyakawa's voice was coldly factual,
but
emphatic.

"... is not a drill. Repeat, this is not
a drill. Starbase 193 has been

evacuated; do not approach the base; do not

attempt to dock. I strongly advise all vessels to leave the sector. This is not a drill. Repeat ..."

Worf cut off the repeating loop.

"Why have they evacuated?" demanded Picard.

"No explanation," said Riker with a shrug of frustration.

After checking another panel of the console, the

Klingon shook his head. "Channels are open, but

there is still no answer to our hails."

"Continue contact efforts, Lieutenant."

The
captain took his place in the command
center and addressed his next spate of
orders to the
helm. "Set course for a return to
Starbase
193."

Even though he concentrated his visual
attention
on the tactical station, Worf still listened
to the
general activity on the bridge Data laid
in the new course, Geordi confirmed
sufficient
power for a sustained warp eight, and
Picard sent the
Enterprise back toward the starbase.
The deck throbbed beneath Worf's feet

as the
high warp speed strained the propulsion
engines
to near maximum capacity. Within
seconds, the
faded distress call from Starbase 193
reappeared on the communications
console.

"Estimated arrival in four hours and
seven
minutes," said Data.

Just under Worf's tactical station, Picard
and

Riker were discussing reasons for the
unexpected
diversion. Their muted voices drifted
upward.

"The likeliest explanation is that the station suffered some kind of equipment malfunction," said Riker.

"But why weren't we notified?

Miyakawa

knew our course headings; she could have sent a

distress call directly to us if--"

A flurry of crimson alarms suddenly tripped across the tactical consoles on the aft

deck. From where he stood, Worf could see

identical patterns washing over Data's Ops

controls as well.

"Captain," called out Worf.

"Long-range sensor scans have detected an

explosion in the sector."

The android confirmed the announcement with a sharp nod of his head. "Magnitude of the energy release would be consistent with the detonation of a starbase's generators."

"And the base distress call has stopped," added Worf. All signs of the strengthening signal had disappeared.

"Damn!" exclaimed Riker, jumping to his feet. "We'll need survival rescue teams, paramedics--"

"Hold on that," said Picard. His order froze the first officer in place.

"Lieutenant Worf, are there any other Federation vessels within this quadrant?"

Worf quickly checked the latest position reports from Starfleet Command. "At warp nine, the Portsmouth could reach Starbase 193 in six point five hours; the Plath would take seven hours."

"Captain!" protested Riker. "Those extra hours could mean the difference between life and death to any people who were on that station." "We will have to trust to Commander Miyakawa's efficiency and assume there was

sufficient time for a complete evacuation. If she had wanted the Enterprise to provide assistance, she would have signaled us directly; she intended for us to stay away."

"But why would--"

"I suspect someone destroyed the starbase while in pursuit of the Heart," said Picard.

"We have become a magnet for trouble, Number One, and our best course of action is to draw that

trouble away from innocent bystanders."
"Deliberately make ourselves a target?"

"Exactly."

Picard rose to his feet, moving to the center

of the bridge. As he turned toward the aft deck, Worf could see that the captain gripped the

Pagrashtak in both hands, just as a warrior

might hold fast to the pommel of his sword.

"Lieutenant Worf, transmit a message to the Portsmouth on an uncoded

channel "Enterprise has urgent business elsewhere, request you proceed

immediately to Starbase
193 to aid survivors." And for good
measure,
send the same message to whatever may
be left of
Starbase 193. Be sure to include our
current coordinates."
Next, Picard turned to face the helm.
"Mr. Data, set course for ... one
twenty-three mark twelve. Reduce speed
to warp six."
Their path was obviously picked at
random, and
this arbitrary choice seemed to disturb
the first
officer; his face creased with worry.
Unlike
Riker, however, Lieutenant Worf knew

their
final destination, and he faced it with
courage and
eager anticipation.
Since the days of Emperor Kessec, no
other Klingon had been honored with the
opportunity
to serve a commander who wielded the
powers of the
Pagrashtak. This journey would soon
become
legend, and all Klingon legends ended in
death.

CHAPTER 22

"Here it comes--brace yourself!" cried Miyakawa as she pressed herself deeper into the cushions of the acceleration seat. The cubical lifeboat bucked wildly, buffeted by the explosive force of expanding vapors and a deadly hail of disintegrating fragments, all that remained of Starbase 193. Force fields protected the pod's hull, but she knew that each muffled impact sapped just a little more energy from a finite supply. Seconds later, the wave of flying debris

had passed and the jarring collisions stopped just as abruptly as they had begun. The lifeboat's reaction control system hissed on and off in short bursts until the craft slowed its tumbling motion, then stabilized with a constant horizon line.

"Down to sixty-five percent of power reserves," she said after scanning the control panel.

"Is that good or bad?"

Miyakawa turned to her companion; the commander

could just make out Camenae's broad face in the faint glow of light from the illuminated console.

"It means we have about fifty-six person-days of life support left, which means the two of us can survive in here for twenty-eight days." The dark wing of a Romulan warbird swooped across the view screen, blocking out the vista of stars.

Miyakawa quickly reached for the pod's manual override switch; even the smallest puff

of the
accelerators could give away their
existence. She
held her breath until the uncloaked ship
had
receded into the distance.
"Of course, power reserves are
immaterial
if the Romulans detect us first," said
Miyakawa in a low whisper. According
to the pod's
rudimentary sensors, the warbird was
traveling through
space in a wide arc, tracing a lazy circle
around the guttering fires of her dead
starbase.
They would be back.
"But we'll have to risk using impulse

engines

soon," said Camenae. "If we're still in this

area when the Enterprise arrives, this lifeboat

could get caught in some very nasty cross fire."

"The Enterprise won't be coming back to this

sector," said Miyakawa. "In

fact, there may not be a rescue effort for quite some time."

"What!"

"I didn't notify Starfleet about the evacuation; instead, I restricted the broadcast

to this sector's traffic channels. The Romulans are using my starbase as bait, and

I wasn't about to help them set the trap."

"I see," said Camenae. She shifted uncomfortably in the narrow confines of her chair.

"This isn't going to be pleasant. I've seen packing crates with more room to move."

Miyakawa couldn't argue the point. The escape pod's truncated cube shape provided storage compartments for generous quantities of survival supplies, but the four crew seats took up most of the remaining

space of the interior.

"I'm sorry, Camenae, but I assumed you would leave the station on a freighter or a liner like

everyone else. If you had followed my orders,

you would have been safely away by now."

"And you would have been vaporized. Like some

melodramatic sea captain who refuses to abandon a sinking ship."

After a long silence, Miyakawa said, "I lost track of time."

The other woman snorted. "There wasn't that

much time to keep track of."

Miyakawa shrugged, then realized that her companion could not see the gesture in the dark. She hadn't made a conscious decision to stay on the starbase, but she hadn't scrambled for the lifeboat until she found Camenae wandering through the deserted docking bay. "Wait a minute. Why were you still on board the station?" Camenae's silence lasted so long that it seemed she was not going to answer at all. There was a

quaver in her voice when she finally spoke.

"I've been through this before ... and I'm tired of being a survivor."

So, they had rescued each other, reluctant heroes sacrificing their own death so that the other might live.

"I'll see to it that you survive again this time, whether you like it or not," said Miyakawa with a fierce conviction that welled up from inside of her.

"A starbase can be rebuilt. Our lives can

be
rebuilt."

"That's a job for the young." Camenae
uttered a weary sigh. "And I'm much
older than
I look."

"Not too old to feel sorry for yourself."

"Thank you, Commander," said Camenae
dryly.

"Your sympathy is appreciated."

Miyakawa laughed. "My charming
personality
is well-known throughout Starfleet.

Think how
fortunate you are to be cooped up with
me for--"

A flashing light signaled the activation
of the

pod's transceiver. "Incoming message."
She released the sound into the cabin.
"Attention USS Portsmouth
Priority distress call ... Starbase
193 has been destroyed ... Enterprise
has urgent business elsewhere ... request
you
proceed immediately to aid survivors."
"I don't get it." Miyakawa shook her
head in disbelief. "That was an uncoded
broadcast. Everyone in the sector
probably
heard that message."
"Look!" Camenae pointed to the
viewscreen.
In the distance, they could see the
Romulan

warbird changing course. Its curved path flattened out into a straight line. As it gathered speed, the ship's image rippled and shimmered, then faded out of existence. The cloaking device had been activated.

"Dammit!" cried Miyakawa. "I risked my life to protect the Enterprise, but they've fallen prey to the Romulans anyway!" "Don't underestimate Captain Picard." Camenae's smile flashed in the shadowed interior of the pod. "I think he's constructing a trap of

his own."

If this was so, Picard's ploy was a dangerous one.

"Good luck, Jean-Luc," whispered Miyakawa.

"Forward thrust ..." ordered Commander Taris,
"... now."

Vedoc staggered back against a metal bulkhead, unbalanced by the Haakona's jolting acceleration to high warp speed. For a moment, before the dampening field could counteract the pressure of inertial forces against his chest, he could

hardly
breathe.

Others among the bridge crew seemed to be fighting for breath as well, but none of them betrayed any surprise at the painful effect, so this was no ship malfunction. Vedoc was familiar enough with the warbird class to know that Taris must have reset the inertial dampening field below standard specifications; undoubtedly this was another small shaving of energy to funnel toward the weapons system.

The crush of g-forces finally eased. With a wheezing gasp of relief, Vedoc lurched back to his position by the side of the commander's throne.

Taris met his return with a condescending smile and said, "Of course, it's a trap." Vedoc assumed a feigned look of surprise just a second too late, and then feared she would begin to suspect his deceit.

To his relief, however, the sneer on the commander's face showed she had mistaken his bad timing for

stupidity.

"A trap, Commander?" he asked with exaggerated bewilderment. Evidently she was convinced that he was an idiot and would continue to interpret all his reactions accordingly.

"Your gullibility is touching, Vedoc." Taris seemed to enjoy displaying her contempt for her subcommander; if she had any weakness as an officer, it was this intractable arrogance. "Picard has given away his position on purpose. The

Federation is very protective of its civilian population, and they will often undertake such risks to shift combat to a more isolated area of space.

All the better; we are more than a match for the Enterprise."

Vedoc nodded obsequiously, too distracted to contrive a suitably inane response for his idiot persona. If the commander's custom modifications to the operating systems of the Haakona were any indication, her boast

was founded
on fact rather than vanity. This
knowledge sharpened the young
man's sense of urgency, but over the past
few
days he had found no way to change the
course of the
events surrounding him.

Would Surak have waited passively for
opportunity, or would the ancient Vulcan
have
made his own opportunities? Vedoc
longed
to ask his teacher this question, but the
catacombs of
Romulus were light-years away.
"Commander Taris." He assumed the
manner of

an eager pup desperate to please its master.

"Give me more to do than stand by your side. Let

me take even a small part in this kill."

She snorted under her breath, but managed to contain any more blatant expression of

her amusement at this offer.

With fear lodged at the base of his throat, he

pushed harder. "I'm newly posted to this warbird,

but I have served with distinction on other ships. If

nothing else, let me assist at the auxiliary weapons station."

"Oh, very well," said Taris. "But if Etrajan has any cause for complaint, you will return to the bridge."

"It shall be as you order, Commander!" he

proclaimed with a flourishing salute.

This archaic

and melodramatic response wrung an explosion of laughter from the normally impassive

crew. As if mortally embarrassed by their disdain,

Vedoc fled the bridge.

His boots rang loudly on the metal decks as he raced through the main corridor of the ship's

spine. The auxiliary bay next to engineering remained unmanned until battle was imminent; if he stayed far enough ahead of Etrajan, Vedoc would have a few minutes of unsupervised time in which to act. Despite lungs that were still sore from the launch, Vedoc pushed himself to keep running. He swallowed the bitter taste of blood, yet still he did not slow his pace. An extra second could mean the difference between success and

failure.

By the time the subcommander skidded into the empty alcove, he had selected his target. With a quick look to make sure he was not observed and that no stray engineering operative was in the vicinity, Vedoc grabbed a sonic wrench from a recessed shelf, then fell to his knees by the side of a forward shield generator. A quick inspection confirmed his suspicion that Taris had implemented a number of unorthodox

modifications to the deflector system as well;
but for every gain there was an equivalent loss, so some other aspect of the ship's performance must have been sacrificed for this advantage. What basic crew comfort had she deemed an expendable luxury?

Disabling the diagnostic sensors in the unit was a straightforward exercise in sabotage. As an easily bored ensign, he had repeatedly assembled and disassembled similar components while

his ship patrolled the borders of the Neutral Zone. Perhaps it was those same long duty shifts that had given him time to reflect on history and philosophy.

The next step was even less complicated, but far more decisive. The power coupling leading to any shield generator was a weak link that was rarely broken; it lay too far inside the warbird's hull to be vulnerable to enemy attack. Setting the proper frequency on the wrench, he

loosened
the electron-bonded connections on the
cable's
casing.

All he had to do now was pull.

Is this the right path?

He had not followed the teachings of
Spock long
enough to know if this scheme was true
to the philosophy
of Surak, but Vedoc did not have years
in which
to master the dictates of logic. He had
only
a matter of minutes in which to act.
His hand hovered over the conduit.
Assuming that he had the courage to
forfeit his own

life for his beliefs, could logic grant him the right to kill his unwilling shipmates with the same gesture? Surak had urged peace and an end to killing, yet if Vedoc assumed a strict pacifist stand, the Haakona would obtain the means to subjugate the Federation, and millions of people on both sides of the conflict would die. In the end, he chose according to the dictates of his own conscience, however flawed. This is best for all my people.

Vedoc jerked on the conduit, pulling it out just far enough to loosen the connection without actually severing the current. Repeated power surges to the activated forward shield would eventually blow the two sections apart.

Springing to his feet, Vedoc reshelved the wrench. Then, with three long strides he covered the distance to the photon torpedo console. That was where Etrajan found him a few moments later.

"Don't touch anything," said the crewman

with a
dour scowl.

"I am yours to command," replied Vedoc
with a
sweeping bow that hid the sweat
beading on his face.

As he took his place by Etrajan's side,
Vedoc allowed himself to briefly reflect
over
what he had just done.

The Ko N'ya would remain with the
Enterprise.

From what he had read of the blood-
drenched lore
of the stone, the Federation would have
little cause to thank
him for that bequest.

Keyda Chandat searched the night sky for a glimpse of the starship that circled high above his planet. Starfleet might consider the Miranda-class USS Sullivan to be little more than a scoutship, but the warp-powered saucer was far more impressive than any spacecraft known to the inhabitants of Dynasia.

"There, Warden," said the Federation ambassador, pointing a finger to direct him.

"Yes, I see it." But that was a lie; all Chandat could see were stars. He pulled

his gaze
back to the ground before one of his
aides returned and
caught him with his face upturned like a
foolish child
dreaming of the lost grandeurs of Iconia.
As they continued their stroll through the
garden, he
stared fixedly at the plants bordering the
path they
followed. Perhaps the beauty of the
flowering aurelia
would ward off the temptation of another
glance
upward. "Like all my people, I was
expected
to master some aspect of the ancient
texts. My

specialty was Flight Engineering, and I
yearned
to someday touch the wonders my
Iconian
ancestors had designed. When I finally
faced
the impossibility of that desire, the
schematics
of their starships flattened into mere
lines on a
page ... and I decided to become a
bureaucrat instead of a scientist." His
fingers
brushed against the metallic disk
dangling from a
thick-linked gold chain around his neck.
"Of

course, I never expected the yoke of this office would become so heavy as it has this year."

"If the Dynasian Faculty chooses to pursue admission, your children will walk the decks of our starships. They may even command them."

Ambassador Tommas was quite adept at promoting the Federation agenda.

"A more likely scenario is that my children will die in civil war first," said Chandat. His legs were cramped after hours of sitting in council, and though

he was tired, it felt good to finally move freely. "Regardless of what decision the Faculty government reaches, there will be an opposing faction enraged by the outcome. If conservative forces prevail, we must resort to mass executions to repress the native insurgents; if the admission factions win, our central authority will disintegrate and anarchy will reign in its place. You have unleashed a storm that will tear my world to pieces, yet you will not commit

military forces--"

"Warden, our Prime Directive--"

"Yes, I know all about your Prime Directive of noninterference," he said bitterly. "Having shattered our political unity, you will step back and watch us writhe in our death throes."

"That is unfair." A dark color flooded over the ambassador's pale cheeks; Chandat wondered what Human emotion that signified.

"Dean Shagret's request for admission to the Federation constituted a formal invitation to open

negotiations."

"He did not have the authority to issue that request!"

"Just the means," sighed Tommas. "You can hardly blame us for his duplicity."

"No, Ambassador, I do not. My weariness is speaking louder than my reason."

In truth, Shagret's treason had been cleverly executed. A lifetime of exemplary administrative service had gained the man the coveted post of Dean of Communications and thus the

means to send a message directly to the Federation Council. Who would have suspected that a highly placed conservative professor harbored radical insurgent sympathies? Chandat twirled around, alarmed by the sound of someone running up behind them. In the last week, native partisans had gained access to halls and libraries, areas once thought beyond their reach, but surely not to the Faculty garden as well? To his relief, the boy who approached was a

trusted aide. Or could anyone be trusted in these dark times?

"Warden," called out the boy. "The Faculty

Council is ready to resume the debate."

Having delivered this message, he darted

back down the path. So, fear of terrorist attacks had spread to the students as well.

"May I meet with you again after this session?" the

ambassador asked as they strolled back toward

the flying buttresses of the Athenaeum.

"No," said Chandat, though he longed to

say
otherwise. "Not until the Faculty has
reached
a consensus." He had enjoyed these
audiences with
Tommas too much; his longing to touch
lost wonders
was resurfacing, clouding his judgment
and his
objectivity.
Or am I gaining new perspectives?
The warden mused upon this conflict of
interests as
he pushed his way through the crowd of
professors and
students that were milling by the
entrance to the
council chamber.

Inside, he found that the debate had resumed without him.

"Traitors! Admission to the Federation will completely undermine our authority and our financial base on this planet."

The last of the straggling Faculty members rushed into the room to hear the Dean of Architecture berate her opponents. As warden, Chandat was responsible for maintaining order, but he decided the attempt to exercise control would only inflame tempers

further. He
would let Thorina rave a while longer.
"All that the Dynasian natives possess,
we have given them. They were
scrabbling in the dirt
when we arrived, and they would be
scrabbling there still if
not for our superior technological
knowledge."

"That "scrabbling" populace has taken
care of us for a millennia," retorted
Shagret
with the smug demeanor of a self-
righteous zealot.

His forehead bore the intricate ridges of
a noble
family, but he affected the accent of a
native.

"They have grown our food, built our libraries, even bathed our very bodies; in return, we have doled out scraps of technology to them like sweet favors to an obedient child. Then we execute those who would use it without tithing our coffers."

Thorina dismissed this defense with a contemptuous wave. "Unfettered development would have destroyed their culture."

"We have strangled any true development

centuries ago," said Shagret. The warden noticed with some unease that several more professors had grouped around him to show support. "We play games of the mind in soaring towers but have forgotten how to turn thought into action. The master plan of the Ancients has fallen into disuse because it called for the eventual participation of the planet's natives; the ideals of our Iconian ancestors have been corrupted into self-serving exploitation."

"Admission is inevitable," cried out a

junior Faculty member in Physics and the leader of a growing Pragmatist faction. "If we vote in favor of joining the Federation, we can then control the population's access to new sources of knowledge."

"Your na@ivet`e is stunning," sniped Thorina. "And very dangerous." The one native professor on the Faculty, little more than a token until now, stood up to speak. Oomalo's scales glistened with the iridescence of anger. "If you

deny us this
opportunity for advancement, my people
have vowed
to return to "scrabbling in the dirt," only
this time you will have to scrabble along
with us for your living.

Without our labor, your fine libraries
will rot and
your stomachs will go empty."

The hall erupted into chaos. Chandat's
calls

for order were drowned out as the cries
of outrage from
those who feared the natives mixed with
the cries of
indignation from those who championed
their cause.

What warden in the history of the

Dynasians could
forge a consensus from such divergent
convictions? He
fell silent rather than add his own voice
to the
tumult.

As the uproar continued unabated, a
hand fell
on his shoulder, and Chandat looked up
to find his
secretary bending down to whisper in
his ear.

"Warden," said the man as he pushed a
document
into Chandat's hand. "I bring an urgent
memo from
Professor Manja."

"Manja? By the Three Gates, not now!" scolded Chandat. Under the circumstances, the doddering scholar's plaintive requests for increased funding were especially ill-timed; Iconian Literature was not a priority for this Faculty at the best of times. "Read it, Warden!" said Ganin with an urgency that startled Chandat into compliance. He read the message. Then he read it again. As a man of science, the warden had never

believed in miracles, but the words before him were like the answers to a prayer. There was no time to confirm the veracity of such an outrageous claim, but true or not, it would serve his immediate purpose.

Rising from his seat, the warden waved for silence.

When he finally had gained the unruly Faculty's attention, he read them a judiciously edited version of Manja's report.

It was met with stunned silence. For once, the assembly of professors had nothing to

say.

Chandat took shameless advantage of their confusion.

"This Ko N'ya is the very Gem which Kanda

Jiak used to operate the Gateway from Iconia

to our world--we must act now to seize it from those who

do not suspect its powers. With the Gem in

our possession once again, we can regain the

heights scaled by our Iconian forebearers; the

planets of the Federation will come begging to us for a

superior technology beyond their understanding; and all the people of Dynasia will share in wealth beyond imagining."

Every face in the hall was turned toward him with eyes that burned with patriotic fervor. Warden Chandat rejoiced. He had restored unity to his world after all.

END OF VOLUME II

THE DEVIL'S HEART

by
Carmen Carter

Volume III of Three Volumes

Pages i-ii and 345-515

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THE DEVIL'S HEART

CHAPTER 23

"T'Sara."

No ... do not wake me anymore ... I
am so tired.

"T'Sara."

She opened her eyes, but the man who
had
called her out of the healing trance was

not Sorren. Of course he was not Sorren; Sorren was dead.

And I am dying even now.

The cool air of the Collector's chamber made her shiver for the first time. She rubbed her hands together for warmth, then stopped suddenly and looked down at her palms.

Her hands were empty.

"I have it now," said the stranger kneeling before her, and she saw that the stone was sheltered in his large, muscular hands.

"If I no longer hold the Ko N'ya," said T'Sara, "then this must be your

dream, young
man."

He had the lean, sharp look of a Vulcan until he smiled at her words. "It has been many years since I've been called a young man."

"Your hair may have turned white, but you will never grow so old as I am now," she said

simply, and he met her statement with a gentle nod of acceptance. Humans were short-lived

compared to her own people, but this one seemed to have made more

of his brief moment than others of his race. "Why do you call me?"

"I am trying to unravel the path of the Ko N'ya, T'Sara. It began at the Guardian of Forever, but I don't know how it left there or where it is going. Or even why it travels."

"Greedy Human," she sighed. "Not even I could live long enough to answer all of those questions ...

but I almost touched the truth of Where."
"Almost?"

"In one of my last visions I saw the next step in its journey; not the end of its

quest, but possibly the end of its dealings with our affairs."

"Tell me, T'Sara!" he pleaded with an urgency that saddened her.

She pointed to the wizened body of the Collector, who crouched above them.

"Halaylah learned the ways of the stone better

than anyone, but when she saw that same vision, she walled herself up alive rather than let

the Ko N'ya fulfill its destiny."

"I am not the Collector; I wish to find a way to continue what you--"

"No!" she cried out. Her waning strength was not

sufficient to suppress her anguish. "Do

not
lay the burden of your actions on me. I
have too
much to answer for already."
""I will not give it to any living being,""
he
recited slowly. "I remember, those were
your
words."
"And Surak's. As a child he was far
wiser
than I could ever hope to be. He
released the
stone before it could tempt him beyond
the limits of
self-control; I thought I could do the
same, but

I waited too long. You have waited too long as well."

The man shook his head as if angered by what he heard. "It is not evil, T'Sara."

"No, not evil. Just dangerous." There was not much time left to her, she realized. On the other side of this dream, death was waiting.

"The Ko N'ya is not of our world; its powers were meant for other purposes. It constantly struggles to free itself from the tangle of our grasping

hands."

Overcome by weakness, her head fell
back
against the wall. Must the knot untie so
soon?

"No, T'Sara!" he cried. "I need to know
where!"

She extended an arm up toward his head,
her
fingers searching for the contact points
on his temple.

The man stiffened but did not resist her;
he had
mind-melded before.

She reached inward.

When their thoughts were one, she
showed him the place
the constellation of stars and the

speeding messenger that
waited for the Ko N'ya.

There!

Her arm dropped down, breaking the
link. The

fingers of her hand flexed, then clenched
like steel

clamps around the cloth of his shirt.

With the last of

her strength, she pulled him so close he
could

feel her dry breath on his face as she
whispered, "Remember this about the
Ko N'ya ...

the blood never stops flowing."

Picard stumbled out of the shadows of
the

Collector's chamber into the ruined
plaza
surrounding the fallen tower.
Staring up into the night sky, he tried to
make
sense of the stars. They were all wrong,
and it was so very
important that they be right. He reached
out his hands
to move them into their proper positions,
to arrange
them according to the image T'Sara had
revealed to him

...

... but his fingers hit against the
transparent
barrier of an angled ceiling window.
He was standing in the middle of his

cabin.

Despite this abrupt awakening, his sense of

urgency remained somehow he must fix the stars in

their place. Stepping over to his desk, Picard

snatched up a data padd and stylus and began

to sketch a series of small circles. Even as

the meaning of what he drew faded out of his understanding,

he fought to preserve the image that lingered in his

mind's eye.

His hand finally stopped, but he knew he

was not quite finished. There was still something missing, an element that had given this scene a distinctive configuration.

Not another star ...

... a comet.

He drew a flurry of lines to mark the comet's streaming tail, and the sketch was complete.

With the padd gripped tightly in one hand,

Picard walked back to the threshold of his

bedroom. If the Heart had come to life during the

night, he had missed its shimmering display. He

could barely make out its rounded silhouette on a low table by his bed.

Picard whispered into the shadows, "If I am to take you to this place, I must know why."

CHAPTER 24

The bridge was always quiet during the night shift.

Too quiet, as far as Riker was concerned.

Although a full crew complement was posted at all the duty stations, the men and women

talked in low
voices and went about their work with a
more subdued
manner than their day-shift counterparts.
The hushed
atmosphere made Riker feel
uncomfortably
self-conscious. He was a large man who
was
accustomed to moving freely and taking
up space;
any attempt to rein in his body robbed
him of
composure.
During the day, Riker would have
sprawled in the
captain's chair and called out for any
information he

wanted, and he would have conducted discussions across the length of the bridge. During the night, however, he felt constrained by the lull around him and chose to walk from station to station to gather reports. The first officer even shortened his stride as he walked up a side ramp to the tactical station on the aft deck, but his boots still thumped too heavily. "Status, Lieutenant?" Riker asked in a voice that was too loud.

"Shields raised; energy reserves holding steady at ninety-five percent," said Worf.

His voice was deeper than Riker's, yet it seemed to travel less far. "Sensor scans do

not reveal pursuit by any kind of vessel."

"So the captain's decoy plan doesn't appear to be working. That's assuming someone really did attack Starbase 193."

To Riker's consternation, Worf's eyes narrowed

to baleful slits. By nature, Klingons were

fiercely loyal to their commanding officer, but Worf

was especially sensitive to any implied criticism of Captain Picard. "Do not forget the report of Romulan incursion into Federation space."

"An unconfirmed sighting of a warbird, with no indication of where it might be headed ..." The first officer shrugged. "Well, I suppose it's possible."

"We must remain vigilant."

"Absolutely," said Riker. Fortunately, this display of enthusiasm seemed to appease Worf

sufficiently to ease the belligerent expression off his face. "Carry on, Lieutenant." Riker had just turned away to continue his tour around the bridge when he heard the telltale trill of an incoming message registering on the communications console. He waited for the security chief's explanation before taking another step. "Commander, we are receiving a scrambled transmission ..." Worf scanned the signal packet information, "... from Commander

Miyakawa,
currently aboard the Portsmouth."
"Well it's about time!" All across the
bridge, heads snapped around at the
sound of

Riker's cry, but he no longer cared
whether he
was conspicuous or not.

"Unscrambling in progress."

Moving to Worf's side, Riker eagerly
read the text as it scrolled across a small
window.

Even before he had finished reading all
of

Miyakawa's account, the first officer
reached for his
comm link. "Captain Picard to the
bridge."

Then Riker turned to the security chief
and,
taking a deep breath, said, "Raise
shields
... and go to yellow alert."

The tranquillity of the night shift was
shattered
as amber panels of light throbbed on and
off and
sirens whooped to life. Complacent
crewmembers
jumped to attention or scurried to secure
their
stations, and Riker knew that a thousand
sleeping people
throughout the decks of the starship had
just been rudely

awakened.

We have become a magnet for trouble.
The captain's ominous words echoed in
Riker's
mind. With hands gripping the aft deck
rail, he
leaned forward to stare at the main
viewscreen.

One cubic meter of space looked very
much like
another, but somewhere in that tenuous
soup of interstellar
gases was a cloaked Romulan warbird,
an
invisible raptor in search of an all too
visible prey.

Deanna Troi struggled to stifle a yawn,

but fortunately the ensign sitting across from her was too absorbed in his own misery to notice her momentary lapse of attention. He was hunched forward on the edge of the sofa, staring down at the carpet as he spilled out the details of a failed romance.

"How can I continue living when I've lost the one person that gave my existence meaning?"

His roommate had been sufficiently alarmed

by this sentiment to roust the empath out of her bed in the middle of the night for a counseling session. However, Troi had quickly sensed that Asadourian was not truly suicidal, merely histrionic. Perhaps she would pass his name on to Beverly Crusher so he could indulge his flair for melodrama on the stage of the ship's theater. Certain that the ensign had unburdened himself of the worst of his grievances against his former true love, the counselor gently urged him to return

to his
cabin.

"You'll feel better in the morning," she
assured him as they walked out of her
office. She
could tell that he didn't believe her, but
then
lovesick young men never did.

As Troi strolled down the quiet
corridors of the ship, she admitted to a
slightly wistful envy of Asadourian's
passion; it was incredibly disruptive, yet
so much
fun, to fall madly in love. Many years
ago,
she herself had experienced a
considerable amount of
emotional turmoil in connection with a

certain

tall, dark Starfleet officer.

"And stay out of trouble until that heals!"

Picking up her pace at the sound of the familiar voice, Troi turned a corner in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of red and blue

as Beverly Crusher ducked back into sickbay.

Ensign Brengle, the recipient of the doctor's

commandment, was limping away down the corridor.

On the spur of the moment, Troi decided to take a short detour. After all, as long as

she was awake, she could attend to

certain frictions
between the captain and his chief
medical officer.

The outer ward of sickbay was empty of
patients, but several nurses were
clearing the area
of used medical supplies, and Crusher
was standing
in the middle of the room frowning at the
data padd
in her hand.

"Busy night?" asked Troi.

"You could say that," said Crusher, with
a weary
sigh. "No major emergencies, just a
steady
stream of minor injuries from freak
accidents. For

instance, did you know there's a holodeck scenario for riding dinosaurs?"

"That sounds like one of Wesley's ideas."

"Probably," said the doctor.

"But surely he wouldn't construct a dangerous program?"

With a shake of her head, Crusher said,

"Oh, not even Marte blamed the computer for her accident.

The fail-safe parameters can protect you from being trampled on by an allosaurus, but they can't

stop you from tripping over a Jurassic vine and twisting your ankle."

"Interesting setting, but I think I'll stick to more modern sports." Troi assumed her best

pretense of nonchalance to ask, "When is your shift over?"

Crusher scratched a quick note on the tablet, then handed it to one of the departing nurses. "Right now."

They were finally alone, which gave Troi the opportunity to ask her next question. "So

are you
going to have breakfast with the captain
this morning?"

"No," said Crusher emphatically. "In
fact, I have no intention of meeting the
captain for any meal whatsoever in the
foreseeable
future."

"I see," said Troi. "He hasn't
apologized for your broken dinner
engagement."

"He hasn't even remembered that we
made
plans."

"Even so, I wish you would make a point
to meet with him soon." Troi held up a
hand
to forestall an indignant protest. "He

doesn't seem to be sleeping well lately."

"Maybe he has a guilty conscience."

"Actually, Beverly," said the counselor,
"I'm getting a little worried about him,
and so is

W. The captain's interest in the Heart has
become so intense that I'm inclined to
term it an
obsession."

"Are you serious?" Crusher folded her
arms

over her chest in an unconscious gesture
of
distrust.

"I am very serious." Fortunately, she
was able

to say this with complete sincerity. "I'm

not ready
to request a formal medical exam, but I'd
like
your professional opinion on his
condition."

"Off the record?"

"Yes."

"All right, Deanna." Crusher unlocked
her arms and shoved her hands deep into
her coat
pockets. "You win. I'll stop by the
captain's
cabin this--"

Her last words were drowned out by the
intrusive

wail of yellow alert sirens.

So much for that clever plan, thought
Deanna

ruefully. And so much for any more rest that night.

The fact that Data did not sleep was well-known throughout the ship, so it was not unusual for the android to have visitors at any time of day or night. Both Geordi La Forge and Miles O'Brien were in the habit of stopping by Data's cabin if they had worked late and were in the mood for company. Captain Picard, however, was not known for making impromptu visits; yet, there he stood in the

hall just outside the android's quarters,
fingers
rapping impatiently on the back of a data
padd.

"Come in, sir," said Data, stepping back
from the threshold to let his commanding
officer enter.

Picard advanced a few feet into the
room, just

enough to allow the doors to close
behind his

back. "I need your assistance, Data."

"Certainly, Captain. I--" The android
stopped in mid-sentence to peer down at
the tablet that

Picard had thrust into his hands. After a
brief

study of the crude graphic on the screen,

Data ventured a hypothesis. "These circles represent stars?"

"Yes, of course they're stars. This is a map of a particular location that ... well, that is important for me to identify. So, I need you

to ascertain the coordinates of this site."

Data slowly rotated the padd. "A two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional spatial arrangements is

insufficient for this task. I will need a reference point of some kind."

"There isn't one," said the captain with

an
impatient shake of his head. "Except for
the
comet."

"Captain, comets are extremely common.
To date, the Federation registry lists
approximately--"

"I'm well aware of the difficulties, Mr.
Data. However, it is imperative that you
establish just where this spot," Picard
tapped
emphatically in the center of the map,
"can be found."

"I will do my best." The placement of
the
circles formed a distinctive pattern. Data
blinked in an involuntary reaction to the
activation

of his neural subprocessors and confirmed that the arrangement of stars was not a constellation that he could immediately match with any images stored in his memory. "But this could take a very long time. On the order of several weeks, if not months."

Picard frowned his disapproval of the estimate.

Snatching the padd out of Data's grasp, the captain stared down at the sketch. "If only I could remember ..." His eyes closed.

His
fingers traced over the figures he had
drawn.

Data waited patiently.

"We were with the Collector ... the
vision was
given to her ..." Picard's eyes flew open.
"Presume that this is a constellation that
can be seen from
the surface of Atropos if you were
standing in the
plaza where you found T'Sara's body."

"Thank you," said Data. "That
specification
should provide adequate information to
narrow my
search parameters."

"Fine, fine, just let me know as soon--"

"Captain Picard to the bridge."

Before Picard could answer Riker's hail, yellow alert sirens signaled a significant change in the ship's status.

"Our adversary has surfaced," said Picard, and Data noted the look of triumph that lit his face, if only for a moment.

Flinging aside the data padd that had absorbed his attention until now, Picard spun on his heel and marched out of the cabin.

Data advanced through the doorway in the

captain's wake, then came to a sudden halt just in time to avoid a collision. Picard had stopped in the middle of the corridor; he was poised for movement, yet hesitated as if unsure of which direction he should take.

"Captain?"

"I left something in my cabin ..." said Picard, looking back over his shoulder. The flashing alert lights seemed to highlight the hollows beneath his eyes. "... but it will have to wait

until later. There really isn't time."
Despite the declarative form, Data sensed
an implied question in the captain's
statement.

"No, it does not appear that there is any
margin
for delay."

Picard bolted into motion again. "Then
what are
you waiting for?" he called out as he
raced down the
corridor.

Data scrambled to catch up.

Mission briefings were usually held in
the
sequestered comfort of the observation

lounge, but
by unspoken agreement, Riker conducted
this session
in the command center of the bridge.
Tonight, the time
to move from one room of the ship to
another was a
luxury they could not afford.
The first officer leaned forward, hands
planted on
his knees, as he related his knowledge of
the approaching
danger to the captain and Data; Worf
loomed
above the seated group from his aerie on
the aft
deck.

"According to Commander Miyakawa's

account," said

Riker, "the warbird was still circling
Starbase

193 when we broadcast the distress
message

to the Portsmouth. The Romulans
cloaked

moments later, and presumably departed
the area

on an intercept course with the
Enterprise."

Data canted his head to one side as his
positronic brain incorporated time and
distance into his calculations. "If that is
the

case, I estimate that the warbird could
approach

firing range of the Enterprise within seventeen minutes."

"That's too close for comfort," said Riker with an involuntary glance at the main viewscreen.

"Bear in mind, Commander, that this conjecture is based on a theoretical performance rate of one hundred percent. Depending on the degree of efficiency of the ship and its crew, actual values will fall short of that figure."

"For safety's sake," said Picard, "let

us presume they are very efficient. Helm, increase speed to warp nine."

"Aye, sir." The android swiveled his console chair back into a forward position as he implemented the captain's directive.

Somewhere down in engineering, Geordi had anticipated this demand because the warp engines immediately purred into high speed.

Picard called up to the aft deck next. "Lieutenant Worf, reduce power expenditures throughout the ship and channel all available energy to the deflector

shields."

Pitching his voice low, so only the captain could hear him, Riker asked, "Do you think we can outrun them, sir?"

"Probably not," said Picard. "They have too great a lead already. However, cloaking devices are a heavy drain on a warbird's resources, so we can make them pay a high price for this pursuit. If they stay invisible, they will drain their weaponry system."

"And if they drop the cloaking field, we

have
a target we can see."

"Exactly, Number One." Picard rubbed
a hand over his face, as if to wipe away
fatigue, then fixed his gaze on the
viewscreen. "The rest is a waiting
game."

At close quarters, Riker could hear a
faint rasp in the captain's voice. Picard's
eyes were rimmed with red, another sign
that he
hadn't gotten much rest tonight; but then,
if he had
been asleep in his cabin when yellow
alert
sounded, his arrival to the bridge would
have been

delayed by at least a few more minutes.

No,

Riker suspected the captain had already been

awake when he received the call to duty.

"Captain," rumbled Worf. "Long-range sensors detect an approaching vessel ... intercept in fifteen seconds."

"Go to red alert, Lieutenant," said Picard grimly, and in an instant the bridge was bathed in red light.

Riker shook his head in disbelief. "If it's the Romulans, they're well ahead of schedule."

"It appears I was in error," said Data, looking back over his shoulder. Riker

hadn't intended to slight his estimate, but the android evidently felt the need to justify his miscalculation. "Apparently they have sacrificed the stealth afforded by a cloaking device for speed and strength of arms."

"Closing at five hundred thousand kilometers ..." warned Worf.

Riker saw Picard nod to himself, a sign he had chosen his strategy for the coming conflict.

"On my signal," said the captain, "go to quarter-impulse speed. With luck, they'll

overshoot us by a decade."

"Four hundred thousand kilometers ...
three

hundred thousand ..."

"Now!" said Picard.

The Enterprise's sudden drop out of high
warp drive sent a shudder rippling
through the saucer

hull. On the main viewscreen, Riker
could

see the warbird flashing past, but too
slowly for

warp speed. "Dammit! They've
second-guessed us."

"But at full-impulse speed, they still
overshot," said Picard. They watched
the

Romulan ship as it circled back to confront them. "It gives us a few extra seconds." "Phasers locking on target," announced Worf. "Fire at will, Lieutenant." Riker gripped the arms of his command chair in anticipation of the coming assault. The Klingon unleashed a barrage from the phasers, but the warbird charged straight through the curtain of fire. Then, as the ships closed, the space between them burned with a dazzling crisscross

of energy beams. The bridge rocked as the starship's shields absorbed a series of blows.

"Evasive maneuvers," ordered Picard. The Enterprise responded with quicksilver

movements under the helm's control, yet the

Romulan pilot was equally adept. The two

ships twirled through space, paired like dancers who never pulled too far apart.

Warbirds were not known for their grace, but this ship was different, realized Riker, and the difference could be

deadly.

"Deflector power down to fifty-seven percent," called out Ensign Taylor from the aft deck.

Again and again, Riker was tossed and shaken as the

Romulan phasers pounded against the starship's

shields. Worf scored as many hits on the warbird, but only a scattered few actually

touched the warbird's hull.

"Minor damage to their starboard wing," said the

Klingon.

However, his announcement was quickly

followed
by another damage report from the
ensign.

"Shield failure imminent in Engineering,
Sector 52."

"Auxiliary power supplies are almost
depleted." Geordi's intercom voice
barely cut through the battle's thunder.

"We
can't increase shield strength without
compromising
life support."

"Shields gone on Primary Hull,
Sector 36."

As the damage reports flooded in from
all

decks, Riker saw a pattern emerge. The
ship was being attacked in noncritical

areas where
the deflector shielding was most
vulnerable to strong
blows.

"What are they doing?" cried Riker.

"Taking
us apart bolt by bolt?"

"They're trying to cripple us," said
Picard,

"so they can recover the Heart intact."

The Enterprise was rocked by yet
another

hit. Worf's counter charge hit the attacker
broadside, but its main shields were still
holding.

Although warbirds were the most
formidable vessels of

their class, built solely for combat, the Enterprise should have proved to be a strong

opponent. However, this particular Romulan ship was tougher than most.

"Hull breach on Deck 38!"

"Shield failure imminent in Engineering, Sector 59."

"We could use a miracle right about now," said

Riker through gritted teeth.

"If we cannot win this battle," said Picard,

"then we must lose it completely; the Romulans

must never be allowed to gain

possession of the
Heart." Drawing a deep breath, he said,
"Number One, prepare for initiation of a
self-destruct--"

"Captain," called out Data. "Sensors
detect a gap in their defectors ... a
forward shield has collapsed."

Riker jumped to his feet. "Worf! Aim
for that--"

But the Klingon needed no urging. With
the swift
instincts of a born warrior, he had
already seized
the advantage.

A single arrow of phaser fire flew
straight
through the chink in the Romulan ship's
defenses and

drilled a white hot hole through its hull
to the
center of the warp drive engines.
"Got them!" exclaimed the security chief
with
an intimidating display of pointed teeth.
The warbird shuddered, then bucked, as
a chain
reaction of internal explosions ripped
through the
length of its frame. A spidery web of
cracks radiated across its hull and
licking
flames laced with roiling black smoke
streamed
from the breaches.
"You were saying, Captain?" asked

Riker.

"I can't recall." Picard rose to stand beside his first officer. As they stared at the ruined carcass of their defeated enemy, he said, "You're the one who asked for a miracle, Number One." "I'll just have to remember to ask sooner, next time." And yet Riker couldn't help wondering if any of the dead soldiers that once walked the decks of the warbird had also prayed, in vain, for a miracle.

CHAPTER 25

Beverly Crusher was the last of the senior officers to slip into place around the conference table but the first to be fixed with Picard's intense questioning gaze.

"Doctor?"

Although she had brought a medical padd with her, the report it contained was still fresh in her mind.

She recited the statistics to a somber audience.

"Reports of minor injuries are still filtering

in from all decks, but the current count of notable casualties is thirty-five. Intensive care has two crewmen who are in critical condition and another five in serious condition; twelve patients are in the general sickbay ward; the rest have been released after treatment."

Fighting against a feeling of defeat, she finished with, "There were three fatalities." This last statement keyed the tension in the captain's shoulders even tighter, but he made

no comment beyond a curt nod of acknowledgment.

Picard turned to Geordi La Forge next.

"Maintenance teams have repaired the hull

breach," said the engineer, "and Deck 38 is already

repressurized, but we've uncovered serious

damage to several starboard deflector shield

amplifiers and at least two gravity field generators."

Crusher half-listened to Geordi's unfolding

report, but her attention was focused mainly on

Picard. Troi's concern had been well-founded;
it was difficult to assess the captain's condition
from across the length of the conference table, but what she could see from here was disturbing.
At first glance, even as she had entered the room, Crusher had been struck by the haggard
look of his face. Picard was a lean man at the
best of times, but now the bones of his skull were far
too prominent, and the skin that covered them was pale

and stretched taut. From previous experience, the doctor knew that prolonged stress had a tendency to melt flesh off his frame, but she had never seen him develop a nervous tic before.

Yet she noted that Picard's hands were in constant subtle motion, with fingers twitching or tracing patterns on the surface of the table. Crusher waited until the round of reports had concluded and the other officers were filing out of the room before she approached the captain. Picard was

still sitting at the head of the table,
fingers drumming a
repetitive rhythm, but he had turned to
face
the window. His eyes were flitting from
side to side
as he scanned the vista of stars. She
wondered
what he was looking for.
"Captain."
His head jerked up, as if pulled against
his will.
"Yes, Doctor?" His query was clipped
with
impatience.
One look at the stubborn set of his jaw,
and

Crusher realized that gentle persuasion would only waste her breath. "You look like death warmed over.

My medical recommendation is that you get some rest, immediately."

As she expected, he shook his head. "In light of Mr. La Forge's damage reports, Doctor, I don't have the luxury of abandoning my duties to satisfy your whims.

Please direct your excess medical passion to the patients in intensive care."

Crusher drew a sharp breath, stung by the

cutting remark. Yet she also recognized that

Picard's bristling anger was probably just

another symptom of his exhaustion.

Before she could

frame a tactful reply, the doctor felt someone brush against her arm; Riker had stepped

back from the doorway to stand beside her.

"Captain," said the first officer with an affable

grin. "I don't think a quick nap could be construed

as abandoning your duties. In fact, this would be a

good opportunity to take a break so
you'll be
refreshed by the time Geordi has a new
status
report."

Crusher rushed in before Picard could
debate this
point. "And if you've been having
trouble
sleeping, I can prescribe appropriate
medication." This was the obvious
recommendation under the
circumstances, yet she knew that Picard
would
perceive this suggestion as a veiled
threat.

The captain shifted his glance from her

over
to Riker, then back again to her. Rising
from his
chair, Picard said, "No drugs will be
necessary,
Doctor. I will go to my cabin without
further
protest."

"Very sensible," she said, with what she
hoped was a
lighter tone, but Picard's stoic reserve
did
not soften. He stalked from the room
without uttering
another word.

Crusher turned to the first officer. The
grin on
his face had faded away. "How long has

he
been this way, Will?"
"He's grown noticeably worse in the last
day," said Riker. "But I think the trouble
started
when he took possession of the Heart."
Crusher sighed. "I was afraid you'd say
that.
Unfortunately, this is one condition I
don't
know how to treat."

Picard stripped off his uniform jacket
and
tossed it aside. This would be his one
concession
to comfort for tonight. Doctor Crusher
could order him

to his cabin, but now that he was in the
privacy of his
own quarters, he had no intention of
following her
instructions any further.
Sleep was out of the question. Even
closing his eyes
was asking too much when reminders of
disaster
continued to mock him at every turn.
After leaving the
conference room, he had walked through
smoke-filled
corridors and listened to the crackling
exchanges
of repair crews on the intercom; the deck
had
lurched several times as a gravity

stabilizer
weakened, then failed; and now, Picard
could see the
blackened hulk of the Romulan warbird
drifting
in space just outside his cabin window.
Perhaps Counselor Troi would argue
that it was
symbolic of his success in defeating an
enemy.
She would remind him that not all
conflicts could be
resolved peacefully and that sometimes
even the right
decisions could not lead to triumph
against overwhelming
odds. To him, however, the wreckage

was a reminder
of his failure to protect his own ship.
The Enterprise was crippled, stranded
far
outside Federation territory, and he
alone was
responsible for this situation.
His glance dropped down to the Heart, a
crude
centerpiece for the elegant glass-topped
table that
held it.
What if this quest for the Heart's
destination was a
fantasy created within his own mind? If
that was the
case, the entire starship crew would pay
the

price for his self-delusion. On the other hand,

what if the Heart could help pull the Enterprise out of this predicament?

You have waited too long ...

T'Sara had advised him to give up the stone,

or at least to stop making use of its powers.

Yet, so far he had only taken part in the dreams. Surely there was no harm in that? And perhaps the dreams could show him the way to safety.

He stooped to pick up the Heart, his hands

eagerly closing around its familiar

shape. If
there was even a chance of that being
true, he must take
the risk.

With measured steps and grim
determination,
Picard carried the stone into his
bedroom. He
placed it at the head of his bed, then
slipped beneath
the covers without bothering to undress.
Closing his eyes, he waited impatiently
for
that night's dream to claim him ...

The morning sun was still low in the
Delula sky,
but he could feel sweat beading on the

back of his
neck. He shivered, chilled by a cool
breeze
brushing over damp skin, and rubbed his
hands dry
on the front of his thin shirt. There was
nothing he
could do to quell the fluttering emptiness
in
his stomach. He told himself the ache
was hunger, but
the very thought of food brought a rush of
bile up his
throat. He swallowed it down and fought
against the
impulse to gag.
"Nervous, Picard?" Chiang's inquiry
sounded sympathetic, but his mouth

curled ever so slightly at one corner. His body was solid, thicker than Picard's wiry form; his blue shorts and shirt were crisp and dry. "No, I'm not nervous." The hoarseness of his reply betrayed the raw burn in the back of his throat.

"No, of course not. After all, you're going to win this race." Chiang's smile deepened into a sneer as he tossed a white towel into the air.

"Here, before you flood the field."

Picard lunged forward to catch the towel before it could fall to the ground, a certain offense for a lowly first-year cadet. By the time he straightened up again, Chiang was walking back to a tight knot of upperclassmen gathered by the field house.

"Damn you," Picard muttered softly under his breath, but he took no pleasure in the curse.

He cast a furtive glance at the cadets around him, wondering how many had noticed

the exchange and understood its significance. They seemed intent on their own business Drager and T'Soron were on the grass, arms and legs waving gracefully back and forth as they stretched hamstrings and triceps; Miyakawa was knotting her hair into an intricate braid that would keep her long black tresses out of her face; and Gareth was fastening and refastening his shoes for the perfect fit that always eluded him.

"Too tight this time?"

The young Andorian looked up from his task.

"Too loose," he corrected and cast his gaze

quickly downward again. It was the shortest conversation

they had ever had; usually Gareth was tediously

chatty.

Picard felt himself flush with shame, and the wave

of warmth drove more beads of sweat out of his skin.

So, Gareth had heard.

Everyone at the Academy had probably heard.

He mopped his face and neck with

Chiang's
towel and raked back a wayward curl of
hair.

Well, there was no help for it now. The
boast had

been made and was beyond recall.

He heard the crunching tread of
boots on grass coming up behind him,
and his

muscles tensed and tightened,

counteracting the

effects of his recent warm-up.

"Jean-Luc."

"Oh, hello, Walker." He continued to dry
himself off, rubbing first at one arm then
another,

careful not to turn and look his friend in
the face.

Walker Keel lacked flair, some cadets even implied he lacked the fire necessary for command, but at this moment Picard would gladly trade all of his own brash bravado for just an ounce of Walker's quiet dignity.

"We'll be waiting for you at the finish line."

His hands clenched and twisted the soft cloth into a knot. "Jack's here, too?"

He caught Walker's nod out of the corner of his eye. "The crowd is already pretty thick, so

we're taking turns holding our space."
"Actually, I'd rather ... it would be
easier
..." Picard couldn't finish, couldn't find
the
words to tell them both to go away.
Neither of them had
reproached him for his arrogance, for the
absolute
lunacy of his drunken outburst, yet facing
them
at the end of this race would be as great
a trial as
suffering the scorn of the entire Academy
for the
remainder of the term. "You know
something, Walker?

I talk too much."

"Yes, I've noticed that," said Walker with a slow smile. He thumped Picard's back with an open hand, a gesture of both exasperation and affection, then strolled away, melting into the stream of spectators rushing to take their places along the path.

"Starters up!"

Blue-clad figures all across the field froze in mid-motion at the announcement, then responded to the call with a leisurely

approach
to the broad white line that marked the
beginning of the
40k marathon. Picard mimicked their
nonchalance, but his gait felt stiff and
unnatural. He longed for another
stretching
session, but there was no time left.
As fifty-three pairs of feet stepped up
to the starting line, he had one last
stabbing thought
What if Boothby had heard?
The sharp crack of the starting gun
caught him
unprepared. He pushed off last, almost
immediately
trailing behind the throng of runners who
jostled for

position and pace. He was a front-runner--

he'd always been a front-runner--but his concentration had flagged during that critical instant

when reflexes triggered muscles into a first burst

of speed. Faced with an unexpected wall of

pumping legs and flailing arms, he faltered again,

then braced himself for a collision with any runners

moving up behind him. He risked a darting

backward glance.

There were no other runners. He was

last.

No freshman has ever won the Academy Marathon ... until now!

Those echoing words--his own foolish words--set

fire to his lagging feet. Enough of this self-pitying

indulgence; he had a long race to run.

Shoving

aside despair, he narrowed his mind to the demands

of the moment. The track surface beneath his thin-soled

shoes was firm with a slight texture that provided

traction without gripping for too long.

He barely

registered the towering forest trees that

lined the first
portion of the winding path, but he
welcomed their
cool shade as exertion warmed his body.
For the first two kilometers he worked at
loosening his tight muscles and setting a
rhythm
to his breathing. In the process, he
passed six
runners out of the fifty-three, counting
them off one
by one. By the fifth kilometer he was
sufficiently
centered to ignore such petty distractions
and his
weaving progress around slower runners
was

unconscious, the automatic avoidance of obstacles.

When he broke out of the forest into bright sunlight and baking heat, he spied the quarter-marker of the Delula course. The air was filled with the sounds of cheers from the waiting crowds, and he had only to reach out his arm to have a cup of cool water eagerly thrust into his hand. He drank greedily of the first offering and reached out again for some more. A fresh burst of cheers, then another, signaled

the appearance of more runners from the forest track.

At least I'm not last.

The memory of his late start propelled him

ahead even faster, but his breathing remained steady.

Another cup was thrust into his hand, and he poured

its contents over his head before he succumbed to the

temptation to drink too much.

He began to run for the sheer joy of it.

By the time Picard reached the halfway marker,

he had finally passed Gareth and seen Miyakawa

crumple to the ground with a cramp in her calf.

All the other freshmen cadets were running behind him on the course.

At the three-quarter mark, he approached a

tight knot of five upperclassmen that blocked

his way. He could hear the sound of their breathing,

ragged with the effort of keeping pace with each other.

They were all pushing themselves a little too hard and a little

too fast by their determination to break free from the

pack. Picard swung left and drove himself forward through a narrow gap on the edge of the path. He caught a glimpse of faces twisted with annoyance at the sudden increase in congestion. An elbow knocked against his side as one of the less generous runners moved to keep him back in place. The unwarranted jostling fueled his next burst of speed. He was running alone now. The level path gave way to the rise and

swell of gentle hills. In his training runs he had fought to keep a steady pace as he worked the slopes, but now he used the pull of gravity to gather another sliver of speed as he sped downward, then pushed to maintain the new pace on his climb up the next rise. Sweat poured off him, stinging his eyes with its salty flavor; the soft cloth of his clothes chafed against damp skin. The slight tingle in his thigh and calf muscles

would turn to a tremble if he misjudged
his
endurance and pushed too hard. He
tossed his
head, slinging back the hair plastered to
his
forehead, and then threw off the intrusion
of
physical discomfort with an equivalent
mental
shrug. It was important to feel his body
at

work, and that included the pain, but that knowledge must not distract him from the run.

He crested another hill and spotted a string of four runners just ahead. Chiang was leading them,

but even as Picard watched, the others were challenging his position. Telegar, the fastest of the Andorians, must be the woman in second place.

The other two cadets were probably Dorgath and Stemon, both favored to win the race and both pushing the front-runners to exhaust

themselves on the
final stretch.

As he sped steadily onward, driving one foot after the next, his breath heaving in and out of his chest, a dull background roar sorted itself into the sound of a cheering crowd, and he realized that there were throngs of people lining the path up the next slope.

No, not just the next slope. He was approaching Mount Bonnell, the last hill of the marathon.

No freshman has ever won the Academy Marathon ... until now!

Perhaps it hadn't been such an empty

boast after
all. Reaching deep inside himself for the
last of his
reserves, Picard propelled himself faster
down
the slope. The ground leveled beneath
his pumping
feet. He passed Dorgath just as the
ground
began to rise again. Chiang was ahead,
having
fallen back to third place.
Momentum carried him up the first few
meters
of the hill without effort. When the
weight of the climb
finally hit him, he expected to slow

down, but he
was locked into a rhythm and grace of
movement that
remained steady and controlled.
Then the terror struck.
It happens here, soon.
It was as if his mind were detaching
from his body,
pulling back to observe and comment on
the scene.
I've done this before. This run, this
dream.
Chiang had been flagging for the past
few
minutes. He was easily overtaken.
Oh, god, it's a very bad dream.
Telegar and Stemon remained ahead. As
Picard pulled even with the Andorian,

the dread
deepened and clarified.
I stumble. Any step now, I stumble.
He willed himself to wake up, to stop
from
reliving the humiliation of that one false
step. The
last few minutes of the race stretched out
before him
like a rack. How many times had he
tortured himself
with these memories?
All the false sympathy, all the pity.
But they were relieved to see me fail. I
came
too close to winning.
Now only Stemon remained. He had a

Vulcan's superior muscular strength and stamina, but the humidity of the Delula atmosphere clogged his lungs and reduced their efficiency. If his keen hearing picked up the sound of Picard's approach, he was still unable to summon more speed. The gap between them narrowed. Now? Two steps from now? Picard tried to brace himself for the sharp jolt that would signal his loss of footing, but he could no longer control his body, could hardly even feel

it, and thus he could not avert the disaster about to happen.

The scenario varied. Sometimes the jarring fall landed him at Chiang's feet, at other times he actually took the lead before dropping to the ground, breath knocked out of his air-starved lungs, as the four upperclassmen thundered past him. The countless variations had plagued his sleep so many times and for so many years that he couldn't

remember when the real fall had actually taken place. Doubtless any number of his classmates at the Academy would remember the true accounting of events. Even fifth place would have been a cause for celebration ... if not for my boast. That was the true misstep. Perhaps his subconscious had searched for a metaphor to frame his arrogance. Certainly this was no less plausible an explanation for tripping on a smooth path than the imaginary pebble

he had
conjured afterward to explain his sudden
failure.

His body passed Stemon.

Now. It must come now. I've never gone
beyond
this point.

But he crested over the hill and began
the

descent at a breakneck speed that would
have

tangled his feet if this hadn't been a
dream.

Physical sensation returned, and the rush
of air

against his outstretched arms felt like the
lift of wind

on the wings of a hawk flying through the

sky.

The cheering that had sent him up Mount
Bonnell

to overtake the other runners was nothing
compared to what

met him on this side. He was buffeted by
the

clamoring sound of massed voices.

The white ribbon over the finish line
rippled

and waved a greeting to him, waiting for
his

embrace.

He closed his eyes, too sick with dread
to watch any longer.

No. This is more than I can bear. To lose
when I'm this close ...

Then the ribbon cut across his chest.

Picard woke screaming in the dark. He threw himself forward to a sitting position, his chest heaving.

His undershirt and pants were drenched with sweat, as were the sheets wrapped around him like the torn tails of the ribbon at the finish line.

I won.

He gulped for breath and mopped his face with the sleeve of his tunic. Sweat was still trickling down into his eyes; he rubbed his hand over the

smooth scalp of his head.

Of course I won. I only lose the race in my dreams ... or is it the other way around?

The two memories battled for predominance in his mind, shimmering back and forth from one reality to the other, each remembered with a clarity that was unsettling.

"Computer ..."

His hoarse whisper was too garbled to activate the system. Picard cleared his throat and tried again. "Computer, who won the Starfleet

Academy marathon at Delula II in the year 2324?"

The whirl of access links was followed by the answer.

"The Academy Marathon of Delula II was won by Freshman Cadet Jean-Luc Picard."

Yes. Of course. Had he actually doubted it?

Throwing back the damp covers, Picard scrambled out of bed to search for some clean, dry clothing. His walk through the cabin brought back another flood of memories. He had collapsed two steps beyond the finish

line, only
to be lifted high into the air by Jack
Crusher and
Walker Keel and seemingly every other
cadet in the
freshman class. Even Commander
Hansen had
been in the crowd that day, taking note,
though it would
be years later before the newly
promoted
Admiral Hansen would reveal that fact
to his
protégé.
In under two hours, a freshman's
arrogant
boast had been miraculously transformed
into a

confident prediction, adding another achievement to his growing reputation as a cadet to be reckoned with.

Picard opened the top drawer of his dresser and plunged his hands deep inside, but instead of pulling out clothes, he removed a small, flat case. He hadn't opened it in years, hadn't felt the need. A flick of his thumb triggered the lid.

The medal was shinier than he had remembered, and

smaller. His fingers traced over the etched words.

It was cold, too.

Yes, of course I won.

Yet he had never taken any pleasure in this

prize, only relief. The close escape from public humiliation had sharpened his recognition

of the easy arrogance that courted such disasters. He

had always been grateful that this lesson in

humility had remained a private one. The empty boast wouldn't haunt him for four solid

years, tucked into the sly sneers and

whispered
insults of fellow cadets. Chiang had
turned
the remainder of that term into a living
hell ...

Stop it! I won. The rest was only a
nightmare.

The false memories that followed that
fall were

surprisingly sharp. He took a deep
shuddering

breath, and they began to fade.

His fingers closed tightly over the metal
disk, its thin edges cutting into his skin.

The

medal was real. It was proof.

I won. I must have won. The Heart had
nothing to do with this.

CHAPTER 26

Keyda Chandat was robbed of breath as he contemplated the beauty of Dynasia as seen from space. Roiling white clouds ran like liquid glaze over the polished emerald gem that was his planet. He had been awed by images of Iconia in the ancient texts, but he had never dreamed that this new world was Iconia's equal in splendor.

"Do you ever grow tired of this sight,

Captain

Mycelli?" the warden asked. "Is it now so

commonplace that your people are not moved by such wonders?"

"No," said the dapper Federation officer. His

eyes were fixed on the bridge's viewscreen as

well. "And I shall resign my commission if it

ever fails to thrill me."

Ambassador Tommas was too clever a diplomat to miss an opening. "Perhaps continued

visits to this starship will demonstrate some of the

benefits of Federation membership to the Faculty."

"And I would be delighted to personally conduct a

tour of the USS Sullivan before the council

convenes," said Mycelli, graciously following her lead.

The warden accepted the offer with a bow. "If

anything can melt the stony hearts of our conservatives, Captain, it would be your vessel." The sentiment Chandat had just uttered was

sincere, and therefore doubly disarming. They suspected

nothing.

"Captain," said First Officer Dier, approaching the trio that stood on the elevated aft deck. "The Dynasian delegation reports it is ready for transport."

"If you will excuse me, Warden," said Mycelli. "I must go greet our other guests."

As soon as the captain and his first officer had departed for the transporter room, Chandat wrenched his attention away from the viewscreen and turned to face Tommas. He could not afford to

let his
attention wander away from the demands
of the unfolding
conspiracy.

"Ambassador, I very much appreciate
the

use of this starship's conference
facilities. The

entire Faculty recognizes the need for
neutral territory, not to mention that the
safety of

these accommodations will ease any
tensions raised

by the specter of insurgent attacks."

"So, you are making some progress."

"Of a sort," sighed Chandat. "There is
still no

movement toward an agreement over the

issue of
admission to the Federation, but I have
managed
to reduce the size of the quarrel. By
restricting
each Faculty faction to one deputy, the
noise
level of our debates has been
substantially
reduced."

The ambassador laughed in recognition
of the
value of even this small achievement,
and Chandat
regretted that their flowering friendship
would soon come
to an abrupt end. They continued to chat

about less
weighty matters, and if Tommas noticed
the
warden's mounting apprehension, she
must have
attributed it to the pressures of an
impending
council session.

A parting of doors announced the arrival
of the
Faculty deputies. As Mycelli escorted
one troupe of Dynasians onto the aft
deck
of the Sullivan, a turbolift at the forward
end of the bridge discharged Dier and
her charges
onto the command deck.

Chandat waited patiently for his

colleagues
to finish gaping at the sight on the main
viewscreen; if nothing else, this
reminder of their
common origins would reinforce a spirit
of unity.

Then, one by one as they recovered their
composure,
each of the professors surreptitiously
moved
into place next to a member of the bridge
crew.

Spreading wide his arms in a gesture of
welcome, Chandat said, "Now!"

To his relief, the Dynasians actually
obeyed.

Oomalo and Shagret, the most muscular

of the academics, had been chosen to subdue the captain and his first officer. Given her Starfleet training, Dier was more than a match for the dean, but she stopped fighting him the instant she saw the native Dynasian professor put a choke-hold on Mycelli and lift him off his feet. Oomalo's thick reptilian body was impervious to his kicking boots. The ambassador easily threw off Dean Thorina's fumbling grasp, but ever the diplomat, Tommas called out, "Don't fight them!"

Fortunately for everyone involved, the Federation crew obeyed her order, and Oomalo lowered the choking, red-faced captain back down to the deck.

"I appreciate your cooperation, Ambassador," said Chandat. "It is not our wish to hurt anyone."

"Then what is the purpose of this assault?"

Anger at his betrayal of trust had wiped away all traces of her former amiability.

"We have need of the Sullivan."

"Are you mad?" demanded the first

officer. Her captain was still gasping and incapable of speech.

"How long do you think your people can retain control of this starship?"

"Long enough for our purposes, Commander Dier.

You see, certain rare Iconian artifacts in our possession are still in working order." Chandat reached for the medallion at the end of his chain of office. "This one, for instance."

Pressing his finger against a depression in the center of the disk, he waited to see what would

happen.

The effect of the sonic waveform generator was dramatic and instantaneous. The ship's first officer crumpled to the deck too quickly to even groan, as did the ambassador and all the other Humans.

I got it right! Chandat was astounded that his estimate of the proper stun frequency for this alien race had been correct. Perhaps he had missed his calling as a scientist after all.

"It worked," cried Shagret, equally startled by their success. A foolish smile spread across the dean's face as he surveyed the sea of fallen bodies. Then he stooped down to check on Dier. "She's still breathing." "But of course," said Chandat, although privately he had feared the high-frequency sonic wave might be fatal. "And they will all remain unconscious for hours, long enough for us to immobilize them." This was another prediction based on ancient lore, but he was

suddenly
confident that the technology of his
Iconian
ancestors could be trusted to perform as
described.

"But what about the others?" demanded
Oomalo,
with the pragmatic attitude of a native.
Chandat stepped over Tommas's prone
form in
order to move down to the command
deck.

"Fortunately, the crew complement of a
Miranda-class starship is small, so the
remainder of the crew will be conquered
with even greater
ease."

Some leaders might have chosen to sit in

the
captain's chair, but Warden Chandat
walked
eagerly to the helm of the Sullivan. As
he
settled down behind the controls of the
starship, he
called out for Diat Manja.
The old man had lingered on the
periphery of the
bridge, taking no part in the action. Upon
hearing
his name, however, he shuffled forward.
He clutched
a parchment scroll close to his sunken
chest.
"But Warden," said Manja in a

bewildered
voice. "How can all this violence help
forward
T'Sara's cause?"
"Please, Professor, do not worry
yourself
with the petty details of interplanetary
diplomacy; that is my job." Chandat
studied the
flight control console with growing
delight. He
would gladly forfeit his life for these
next few
days of space travel. "Now, if you will,
the
coordinates for this Appointed Place you
mentioned."
With a heavy sigh, Manja unrolled the

parchment
scroll to display an ancient star map.

Asao Matasu had just closed his eyes
when the
trill of an intercom hail shattered the
serene
silence in his cabin.

"My apologies for interrupting your
meditation, Admiral," said his aide's
voice

a second later, "but Lieutenant
Commander

Kiley-Smith said it was urgent;
something about a
starship that has dropped out of sight and
is not
responding to any subspace radio hails."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he replied, unfolding his lanky body from the lotus position. "Please meet me at Communications."

The commander of Starbase 75 walked with a slightly bowed head through the halls of the station. He appeared to be in constant meditation, but the posture was more practical than philosophical; Matasu was a very tall man whose head would brush the ceiling otherwise.

Lieutenant Abell was already waiting for him outside the entrance to the

communications complex. She smiled a greeting, and said, "This way, Admiral," then turned so as to trigger the doors to open.

Matasu ducked his head to follow her over the threshold. His last aide had given up even the pretense of eye contact and had addressed all his comments to the admiral's stomach.

Matasu appreciated Abell's greater show of courtesy, but hoped she did not suffer unduly from the effort.

Perhaps he would recommend yoga exercises to keep her neck muscles supple, just as he did to counteract the constant strain of looking down.

Once inside, however, the admiral was able to straighten up to his full height. The control room of the communications center was a spacious dome whose curving walls were alight with colorful data displays. Dozens of maps, charts, and graphs tracked the streams of

information that moved in
and out of Starbase 75 from every point
in the sector
and many places beyond.

"Still no word from the Enterprise?"
asked
Matasu.

"No, sir," said Kiley-Smith as he
stepped away from the base-to-ship
tracking
console. "But now we've lost contact
with the
Plath, a Klingon bird-of-prey, crew
complement of twelve."

The console operator continued the
specifics
of the briefing. "The starship's navigator
transmitted a coordinate check just after

the
Enterprise reported the destruction of
Starbase 193. Captain Duregh
volunteered
to assist the Portsmouth with the rescue
effort, but
then the Plath never arrived."
Starbase 193 had covered an area that
was far
beyond the reach of Matasu's current
resources,
and the loss of the station blinded him as
to what was
happening in that sector; he needed eyes
to see
through the darkness. "Are there any
other

starships in the area that could investigate this matter?"

Kiley-Smith shook his head. "The Portsmouth and the Clarke are still docked at Luxor IV, but currently both are committed to other missions."

"I shall see to uncommitting one of them," said Matasu firmly, but he knew that the diversion would take time to arrange and that even the fastest vessel would require considerable time to cover the

distances involved. "Meanwhile, issue an alert to all Starfleet facilities in this quadrant; tell them to be on the lookout for both the Enterprise and the Plath ... and their attackers. I will prepare a report for Starfleet Command advising them of the situation."

"Aye, sir."

As the admiral headed toward his office, head

bowed once again to facilitate his passage through the corridors, Lieutenant Abell echoed his own worried thoughts.

"What's going on out there, Admiral?"

Exploding starbases, missing starships
... Could
the Romulans be planning a new
offensive for the
Empire?"

He shook his head. "A warbird is
powerful,
but I don't think it could take down two
Federation starships in a row."

Abell accepted the admiral's assessment
with a puzzled frown. "Then what
could?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant," said
Matasu, "but I hope whoever, or
whatever, is
responsible stays the hell away from my
starbase."

And may the gods help Jean-Luc Picard, wherever he may be.

Kanda Jiak shivered when he stepped into the cold air of the detention cell. He longed for the thick knit sweater tucked into his backpack, a farewell present from First Officer Conrad, but all his belongings had been confiscated when he entered the security complex. Turning to his armed escort, Jiak protested one last time. "But I'm not a Dynasian!" "Right," said the guard with a weary

sigh. "You just happen to look like one." Her finger tapped out a rapid sequence on a wall panel. The young man jumped back as the high humming sound of a force field snapped into place along the frame of the portal. The immigration official of Hayhurst Junction had described this detention as a bureaucratic formality, so Jiak had expected to spend a few hours in a passenger lounge; instead, he had been taken to a security chamber for interrogation. The

references
to ambassadors and starships and
insurgents had
been completely bewildering, but there
was no
mistaking the consternation of the
Starfleet officers.
Somehow, the Dynasians had angered
the Federation
even more thoroughly than the Di Wahns.
Jiak gingerly approached the entrance of
his
cell. Careful not to touch the field itself,
he
craned his neck to look up and down the
outside
corridor. The guard was gone.

I'm a political prisoner.
That realization was almost as comical
as it was
frightening. In either event, it was a
reality that could not
be wished away or cried away, so he
blinked
back tears and turned to greet his
companion in
confinement.
Jiak had caught only a brief impression
of a robed figure huddled on one of the
narrow
cots. Upon a closer look, however, the
young
Iconian made out the features shadowed
by the

heavy cowl. The man's forehead was
ridged in a
fan-shaped pattern that arched over his
purple
eyes, and his skin was a delicate shade
of
violet. This was no mirror image of
Jiak's
own face, but they both clearly bore the
stamp
of a shared genetic heritage.
When he could breathe again, Jiak
stammered,
"Are you ... a Dynasian?"
"That is what my identity papers
maintain,"
said the man. His lips curled into a sly

smile.

"I've never seen another Iconian before

...

at least, not since I was a small child."

Jiak

struggled for composure, restrained by his

cellmate's apparent indifference to this statement.

"My name is Kanda Jiak."

"The Gem-Bearer's namesake!" The Dynasian's richly colored eyes took on a gleam of excitement. "How did you come by such an illustrious name?"

Buoyed by this welcome, Jiak settled cross-legged on the floor by the man's feet and

spilled out the story of the last days of Ikkabar and his own flight from Redifer. "Before I reached Hayhurst Junction, I tried to visit DiWahn, but--" "DiWahn!" The man darted forward and grabbed a fistful of Jiak's shirt. "What do you know of the planet DiWahn?" "Nothing ... all travel to the system was suspended." The intensity of the man's demand was unnerving. "Conrad said the trouble had something to do with an armada and the threat of armed

aggression against the Federation."

"Ah, so the fleet of the Faithful was launched!" Releasing his hold on Jiak, the man fell back against the cell wall. He gazed into the distance, as if witnessing a vision shimmering in the air. "After generations of waiting, our time to enter the Dreaming has arrived."

T'Sara's writings on the diaspora had recorded the beliefs of the DiWahn they were obsessed with the dreams of the Gem-Bearers. "But you said you were a Dynasian!"

"I have said many things in my life." The Iconian uttered a throaty chuckle. "The consulate is checking my identity papers, just as they are checking yours. Who knows what they will find in their search? If they find the truth, I will remain in this cell, or one very much like it, for the rest of my life."

"I'm sorry," said Jiak, yet he wondered uneasily what crime the fugitive DiWahn had committed. Life imprisonment was usually reserved for murder.

"Save your pity for yourself. I have fulfilled my life's quest, whereas you have just begun yours."

"What was your quest?"

The DiWahn was still staring into space with a rapt expression. "Like you, I spent my childhood among the races of the Federation. I have never even set foot on my homeworld, but my father showed me the path of the Faithful. My sworn duty was to follow after T'Sara."

"You know T'Sara?" cried Jiak. Hearing

her name was like meeting a friend in an unfamiliar place. "Please, tell me about her." The DiWahn was too absorbed in his own memories to attend to the interruption. "My only regret is that I could not return home in time to join the armada. In order to elude capture by unbelievers, I bought forged papers listing me as a Dynasian. That choice was my undoing." He shrugged his resignation. "Imprisonment is

a small price to pay for recovering the Gem."

"The Gem?" Jiak's eyes widened at the mention of the powerful icon. "You mean the Dream

Gem is not just a legend?"

The DiWahn hesitated, his reply forestalled by the distant sound of doors parting, followed by the tread of boots echoing down the corridor.

"No, not a myth, Kanda Jiak, Gem-Bearer," he whispered. "See for yourself.

Join our order and hear the Telling."

"But how can I find--"

"Ask a woman named Camenae on
Starbase

193. If you're willing to meet her price,
she will answer all your questions. Find
the Gem, and
you will find the Faithful."

The footsteps stopped outside the cell.

"Hey, I don't have all day," said a
voice edged with irritation.

Jiak looked up to see that the force field
had

been deactivated. The guard standing by
the entrance was

holding his backpack in her hands.

She beckoned him with a jerk of her
head. "The

Federation consulate has confirmed your

residency
on Redifer III. You're permitted to leave
the
Junction so long as you stay away from
Dynasia."

"Go!" urged the DiWahn softly.

Jiak scrambled to his feet, his mind still
reeling from the man's revelations.

Thousands of years ago, the Dream Gem
had
opened the Three Gates that saved the
Iconian
people from annihilation. If the first
Kanda Jiak had
walked through the Gate to Ikkabar, the
powers of his
Gem could have tamed the planet.
Without his

assistance, the third branch of the Iconian race had withered away. However, if Kanda Jiak's namesake gained possession of the Gem, perhaps that tragic history could be revised.

Grabbing his pack from the guard, the last survivor of Ikkabar raced down the corridor. He was headed toward freedom and a new destination.

CHAPTER 27

Main engineering was rarely quiet. Most

often
the rumble that permeated the area came
from the steady
pulse of the matter-antimatter reaction
chamber. Today, however, the warp
propulsion system
was shut down and the ship's engines
were cold; instead,
the noisy bustle of Humans filled the air
as
a constant stream of engineering
personnel moved from
one work station to another, then dashed
away.
Yet there was an island of stability in
this
whirlwind of motion. The master
situation monitor

covered most of the forward wall section in engineering, and for the past five hours Geordi La Forge had returned again and again to the cutaway schematic of the Enterprise that was on display. When he had first assessed the damage to the starship, broad sections of the diagram had been highlighted in red. Now, as the chief engineer continued to track the progress of repairs, yet another of the system indicators blinked from red to green.

After checking the value of a number on the board, Geordi turned to face the ship's first officer. "Well, the good news is that the deflector shields are working again." "So what's the bad news?" asked Riker dutifully. "They're only at about forty-six percent efficiency, and they're going to stay at that level until we replace at least five conformal transmission grids on the primary hull and then realign the entire array." "Let's do it." With a warning shake of his head,

Geordi said,
"Yeah, but to work on the grids we have
to take the
graviton polarity source generators off-
line,
which leaves us without any deflector
shields for
over four hours. Usually that's a
procedure
performed only in spacedock, because if
we
disassociate our shield generators in
space
..."

"The Enterprise would be a sitting
duck,"
finished Riker. "Anybody with a
peashooter could

take us on."

"Exactly," said the chief engineer. "Not only that, without operational deflector shields, we couldn't travel above impulse speed without turning to Swiss cheese. Even full impulse for a sustained length of time would risk serious micro-meteoroid degradation of the hull's duranium substrate."

"You haven't left us with many options, Geordi."

La Forge shrugged. "I thought miracles were

your department, Commander."

"It looks like I've used up my quota for now." The first officer glanced over at the

schematic and frowned. "Captain Picard will have

to make this decision. I'll get back to you after

we've had a chance to talk it over."

"No problem, Commander," said Geordi with an

amiable grin. "I'll be right here."

The engineer turned back to the master display just

as another red light turned green. Slowly but

surely, piece by piece, the ship was

returning
to normal.

The broad, curving windows of Ten-Forward provided the best view of space on the Enterprise, and it was a view that Deanna Troi usually enjoyed. Today, however, she found the scene outside the lounge to be a disquieting reminder of their present danger. The damaged starship was adrift in the midst of desolate space with the skeletal remains of a warbird as

its only companion. Perhaps others among the crew were filled with dread at the sight, because only a few of the tables in the room were occupied, and the people sitting there were all facing away from the windows.

The counselor settled herself at the bar and tried to think of something to order. Out of the corner of one eye, she watched Guinan set two glasses in front of a couple at the far end of the counter, then drift back in her direction. "What can I get for you?" asked the

hostess.

She was dressed in an embroidered robe
of forest

green; a wide square-brimmed hat of the
same

color, only darker in shade, covered her
head.

"I haven't made up my mind," said
Troi. "What would you suggest?"

"Well, that depends. Are you more in an
eating
or a drinking mood?"

"I'm not really hungry," Troi decided.
She wasn't really thirsty either, but she
would feel
less awkward about her visit to Ten-
Forward if
she adopted some token excuse for her

presence.

Guinan picked up a conical glass. "A drink it is. What about a Venusian fruit cider?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm in the mood for." Troi's enthusiasm sounded forced to her own

ear, and it must have appeared equally insincere

to Guinan, because she made no move to fill the glass.

"I get the feeling there's something troubling you, Deanna."

Troi sighed, and with a guilty smile, said, "I'm supposed to be the counselor around here,

remember."

Guinan chuckled with a throaty voice that almost purred. "Even counselors need a sympathetic listener now and then." She turned to pour the drink, giving Troi time to collect her thoughts. The cider was delicious, and somehow talking seemed easier after a few sips of its delicate flavor. "Will Riker is worried about the captain's fascination with the Devil's Heart. He fears that it has become an obsession ... and so do I."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, the course change which brought us out here," Troi inclined her head in the direction of the windows, "was very troublesome. Captain Picard says it was to draw our pursuers away from vulnerable Federation colonies, but I can't help wondering if there was another motivation at work, if he wasn't actually searching for an excuse to delay giving up the Heart." The hostess dipped her head for a moment, and the

flat rim of her hat obscured her expression.

When she looked up again, the concern she had tried to erase from her face could still be found in her dark eyes, yet she said, "I don't believe Picard would let his command judgment be seriously compromised by the Heart."

"You sound very sure of that. Why?"

"Because," said Guinan, "all the stories I've heard speak of temptation rather than

coercion. The Heart can turn your own desires

against you, but it can't make you do

anything against your true nature."

"And Captain Picard would never choose to hurt the Enterprise or the people on it."

Guinan nodded, and Deanna toyed with letting the whole matter end on this comforting note, yet she knew Riker would not be so easily reassured.

"Could I have another one of these drinks?"

"I'm glad you liked it." Guinan whisked away the empty glass, and plucked up a clean one from beneath the counter.

"Guinan, the captain trusts you more than any other person on board the Enterprise. If you could persuade him to give the Heart to you for safe--"

The glass the hostess had been holding slipped from her fingers and crashed to the floor.

"What's wrong?" Troi was surprised that her request could rattle the imperturbable Guinan.

"Are you afraid that he won't hand it over to you?"

"No, Counselor, I'm afraid that he might."

"But it would be for only a short time," said

Troi, "long enough to carry the Heart to a storage

vault where Will could secure it for the remainder of our journey."

Guinan shook her head back and forth as Troi

talked, then said, "One of the advantages of

growing old is learning your own limitations, and this

is definitely a risk I'm not qualified to take. I trust Jean-Luc Picard with the

Heart far more than I trust myself."

"But why?" Troi's alarm concerning the stone's

powers returned in full force.

"Among my people the Heart was known as the Master

of All Stories, and for a race of Listeners, that

can result in a fatal enchantment."

"Enchantment? You make it sound like a fairy

tale, and the captain is the unlucky prince who

has fallen under an evil spell." Troi laughed at the analogy, but then she asked,

"Guinan, do you think the Heart is evil?"

"Only living things have the capacity for good or evil. So, do you think the Heart is alive?"

"I sense nothing from it ... yet more and more the captain speaks of it as a sentient being."

The empath thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I just don't know."

"Neither do I, Counselor," said Guinan softly. "Neither do I."

As the doors to the ready room opened, Data regarded the interior scene with dispassion. The

android was an impartial observer, and as such the presence of the Heart on Picard's desk did not arouse any emotion in him. However, the stone did trigger a complex set of associations with recent disruptive events. On purely intellectual grounds, therefore, Data would have preferred that the Heart had never been brought aboard the Enterprise.

"Did you enjoy your rest, Captain?" asked Data as he walked across the room.

"What?" Picard looked up from his desk

viewer. "Oh, my rest. Yes, I did, thank you."

Data had often observed that Humans used

certain phrases for their iconic value in expressing a sense of connection with community

members, rather than in a literal sense of providing accurate information. He concluded that this

must be one of those occasions because the captain's

physical condition did not appear to have

substantially improved since the conference in the observation lounge.

Picard glanced back at the computer, then over at the padd in Data's hands. "Didn't I just receive your Ops report?"

"This is not a status update," said Data. "Rather, I have identified the pertinent coordinates of the location in which you were interested."

"Let me see." Leaning forward over his desk, Picard reached out eagerly for the padd, then sighed with relief at the sight of the Federation star map that had matched his sketch. "Yes, that's the place exactly! But it certainly took you

long
enough to find it."
"My apologies for the delay," said Data.
"However, my search was complicated
by a rather curious
aspect of the scene you drew. That
particular
juxtaposition of the comet against the
designated
constellation of stars has not occurred
yet; in
fact, it will not occur for at least forty-
eight
hours."

"In the future ..." murmured Picard.
His brow furrowed with the intensity of
his thoughts, and one
of his hands dropped down onto the

Heart. "Yes

... yes, of course. That means there is still time to act."

"Intriguing. What particular action does this call for?"

"Thank you for your help, Mr. Data."

The captain did not remove his gaze from the map.

"That will be all for now."

Data's positronic brain forged a new connection, one between the star map and the Devil's

Heart. As he left the ready room, the android

began to calculate the probability that another catastrophic event would occur soon.

Troi felt unusually conspicuous walking onto the Enterprise bridge, and the empath quickly determined the focus for that unease

Lieutenant Worf was tracking her progress from the aft turbolift to the command center.

She sensed in him the usual uneasiness that always seemed to underlie their interactions, especially those involving Worf's son, Alexander; but

this was
overshadowed by a new set of emotions
that were more
difficult to untangle. For some reason
she could
not fathom, the Klingon was wary of her.
Riker and Picard were engaged in a
somber
discussion involving shield repairs, so
she
quietly slipped into place beside the
captain.

"... no question that we must improve our
shield
strength," continued Picard. "This
mission isn't
over yet, and we dare not continue
without maximum

protection."

"Agreed," said Riker, although Troi could easily sense his apprehension about this decision.

She could also read the question in his eyes when he stole a quick glance in her direction. A subtle shake of her head was all it took to indicate that

Guinan could not help them, but Worf must have seen the gesture from his perch above because the Klingon's suspicions broadened to include the first officer.

The captain cast his voice upward to engage the intercom system. "Picard to La Forge. Let's proceed with the deflector shield repairs before we attract any more company out here."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

While the captain and the chief engineer exchanged technical information about the repair procedure, Troi surreptitiously evaluated Picard's physical and emotional condition. His fatigue was even more pronounced than before; he seemed to hoard

his strength by moving only when absolutely necessary.

On the other hand, the growing mental agitation she had sensed in the conference room was gone now. The counselor wondered if Picard's composure had been restored by the Heart, which was tucked securely into the crook of his arm.

"Conformal grids on the primary hull have been deactivated," continued Geordi.

"Graviton generators are going off-line ... now."

Troi shivered in response to the feeling

of
vulnerability that suddenly radiated from
the entire
bridge crew. She strengthened her
empathic
shields to block against the projected
emotions,
yet she was still left with her own
feelings of
helplessness.

As the first few minutes of the repair
project
dragged by, the thought of four hours
stretched into an eternity ...
... that was shattered by yellow alert.
"Captain," called out Data. "Sensors
detect an object two hundred thousand
kilometers dead ahead."

"There!" Riker pointed to the main
viewscreen,
and Troi looked up to see that the placid
vista
of distant stars had begun to shimmer
and ripple with
distortion waves. A ship was uncloaking
before them.
"Phasers locking on target," announced
Worf tersely.
"Hold fire until my signal,
Lieutenant," said Picard as he rose to his
feet.
Troi could sense that the captain was
straining against
the desire to shoot first without waiting
to see the

face of their enemy, but Picard's
Starfleet
training repressed the urge to provoke a
battle they could not hope to win. Even a
lightly
shielded vessel would withstand a phase
r attack
long enough to retaliate against the
unshielded
Enterprise.

The phantom form took solid shape.
Angled wings stretched wide on either
side of a
narrow-necked forward hull.
"It's a bird-of-prey," said Riker, his
chest heaving with a sigh of relief.
"Captain." There was a hint of elation in

Worf's voice when he said, "We are being hailed by Captain Duregh of the Plath." "On screen, Lieutenant." Picard appeared too drained by the sudden emergency to share in the general rejoicing. Stars gave way to a close shot of Duregh's face. Troi thought him young to be commanding his own warship, but Duregh had the lean, feral look of an ambitious Klingon warrior. "Greetings, Captain Picard." The dim red lighting of the Plath's command pit washed down

over the furrows of Duregh's brow; his deep-set eyes were lost in shadow. "We heard

of your plight from the Portsmouth and have followed

your trail in hopes of joining in combat against the

Romulans. Obviously, we have arrived too

late to share that honor."

"Not so, Captain," said Picard. "We welcome your assistance while we effect certain repairs to our ship."

"Ah, yes. My weapons officer informed me

you are without shields." Despite his

smile, Duregh's facial muscles were stiff with repressed tension. The empath thinned her emotional barriers to read him more fully. "So our journey was not in vain." Something is wrong. Troi leapt up from her chair. "Captain, wait, I sense--" Her warning came too late. The Klingon ship discharged its phasers and seconds later an explosion somewhere in the primary hull rocked the bridge, throwing the counselor off-balance. As she grabbed at

a
bridge railing for support, the Klingon
warship
fired a second time on the Enterprise,
scoring a hit to the engineering hull. Red
alert
sirens overlapped the babble of damage
reports
from all decks.
Picard had managed to keep his footing
on the
deck without releasing his grip on the
Heart.
"Fire phasers!"
"Phasers inoperative," replied Worf.
Duregh laughed loudly at the result of his
treachery. "Our next assault will destroy
your

ship, Captain Picard."

"Why are you doing this?"

Eyes drawn to the stone in the captain's hands,

Duregh said, "Because the Pagrahtak is mine.

Transport Kessec's jewel over to me, and

I will spare your life."

"No!" cried Picard. "Such an action will only perpetuate the chaos which has surrounded this

relic. I will not give it up to you or to anyone

who would abuse its powers for violent ends."

"Then prepare to die. I can rake the

Pagrashtak from out of the rubble of your
blasted ship

and the corpses of your dead crew."

"Traitor!" stormed Worf from the aft
deck. "You have no honor!"

"Fool," said the Klingon commander
with a snarl.

"You speak of matters that are beyond
your understanding. I

do this to recover my honor. I am a
direct

descendant of Durall, son of Kessec.

The

Pagrashtak was stolen from him, and
thus stolen from

me; it is my birthright."

The captain shook his head. "No, you are

wrong. Emperor Kessec willingly gave
up
the Heart ..."

"Silence!"

"... to a slave," declared Picard, "not to
his
sons."

"And for that disgrace he died by their
hands!"

screamed Kessec's descendant, his face
contorted by rage. "You have only a few
seconds

of life remaining, Captain Picard, and I
no

longer care whether you surrender or
not."

He stretched out an arm to signal his

crew.

"Duregh!" Raising the Heart before him like a shield, Picard shouted, "I'll see you burn in hell for this!"

The arm dropped. "Fire!"

A phaser beam lanced out from the underside of the Plath ...

... then suddenly blossomed into a fireball that burned back along its own path until it enveloped the bird-of-prey.

With a cry of pain, Troi threw up her hands to ward off the blinding light of the explosion that stabbed

her eyes. When she finally dared look again, the blazing remains of the Plath still crackled and flickered on the viewscreen.

"Captain?"

Picard stood transfixed in the center of the bridge; he was staring down in horror at the Heart clutched in his hands.

CHAPTER 28

A constant cold wind droned through the abandoned city, lifting clouds of fine-grained dust into the

air. Dusky blue light, stripped of heat, fought its way down through the haze to illuminate the ground on which Picard walked. He could still make out faint traces of a pathway, but most of the paved surface had been scoured away. The weight of eons had tumbled all the buildings down and chipped away at their foundations. At first he had thought he was on Atropos, then he realized that this place was much older. Age frosted the entire planet, but the

pulsing
glow of the Heart warmed his hands.
Whenever his foot
strayed off the path, the stone shifted in
his palms,
gently pushing him to one side or the
other until
he recovered his way. Picard let the
Heart
guide him over the pitted terrain until
they
reached a line of broken columns. There
he
stopped to gaze in wonder at the
sculpted form just
ahead.

The thick slab of rock was set on edge.
Its original shape may have been oval,

but now
its outer rim was broken and irregular;
the opening in its center appeared to be
part of the
ancient design, but it was eroded as
well.

Picard was buffeted by waves of an
invisible but
palpable force emanating from the
structure. Or was
it a being?

"The Guardian of Forever," he
whispered in
awe.

At the sound of his voice, the crystalline
stone
of its ring-shaped body flickered and

glowed from within,
suffused with the same quality of light
that fired the
Heart.

The reaction was a reply of sorts, and
Picard wondered if he could
communicate with the
being. There were so many questions he
wanted answered, but
one above all others.

Picard held up the Heart. "Guardian,
what is this stone I carry?"

"It is a seed," said a deep thrumming
voice. The light flickered in rhythm with
its

words. "One meant to grow in a better
soil than
this dead planet."

"How did it become enmeshed in our history?"

"Those who created me, created the seed; but the Architects were mortal, and after their passing there was no one to guide it on its true path. The seed went astray."

Mist pooled in the center of the slab, then cleared away to reveal a stream of images framed inside the stone border. Picard moved closer, mesmerized by the clarity of the visions. He saw the Heart fall like

a
blazing meteor through a purple sky, then
plunge deep into a grassy plain. Alien
hands
scrabbled through the dirt of the crater
until they
uncovered the stone. To Picard's horror,
he
saw the simple hunting culture of a race
known
as the T'Kon erupt outward into a far-
flung
stellar empire, then wither away and die.
New hands seized the stone, starting yet
another
undulating wave of murder and war.
Fiefdoms
burst into imperial splendor, then

toppled as
greed-driven betrayals weakened their
foundations.

He caught a brief flash of Garamond and
Kessec in the timeslip, but the rest who
had held
the Heart went by in a blur.

As Time flowed on, the ripples of
disruption
spread wider and wider, all part of an
unceasing
pattern of struggle for possession of the
Heart.

"Guardian, can this damage be undone?"

"Yes," said the voice, "but if you
take back the seed early in the affairs of
these

beings, you also unravel all the greatness
built with
its powers. The universe you know will
be torn from its
roots, and the river will flow through
different
channels."

Picard shook his head; this was no
solution. The
consequences of the Heart's presence
had gathered
too much weight to be dislodged from
the past. "I
must remove the Heart from my own
time before it
causes any more upheaval. Show me
how

to return it to the path you spoke of."
The mist gathered again, then cleared to reveal a
new scene the blackness of deep space,
a
scattering of stars and a comet with its
tail stretched
out behind it like a banner.
"I know this place," said Picard. "It was
in
the vision given to me by T'Sara."
"Planting time draws near again," said
the
Guardian. "The seed must be sown
here."
As if called by those words, the Heart
stirred in

Picard's hands. He edged to the very lip of the portal and gazed raptly at the image of the comet. The seed's yearning to continue its journey almost drove him to step through the opening. His fingers closed tightly on the rough texture of the stone's surface. He knew what it wanted, but letting go was difficult. Taking a deep breath, he loosened his grip and steeled himself to toss the stone into the well.

"No!" A spidery hand pawed at the captain's arm before he could move. "Do not be so hasty."

Picard twirled around to face the gaunt figure of the Collector. The spare flesh of her body had not dried yet, but her ravaged face was that of a being near death. On the other side of her own dream, Halaylah was sealed in her chamber.

"Let go of me," he said, shuddering away from her bony fingers. The sight of her filled

him with
revulsion. "You died trying to keep the
Heart
to yourself, but it has passed on to me.
I'll
decide its fate now."
Her shriveled lips contorted into a leer.
"You
do not comprehend what you are about
to throw away. In
order to act wisely, you must fully
understand its
powers, Captain ..."

"... Captain." He could feel the touch of
a
hand on the sleeve of his uniform.
"Captain?"

Picard opened his eyes and found himself slumped over his desk, head cradled in his arms, with the Heart resting by his elbow. There was a stranger, oddly familiar, leaning over him. As the dream-induced confusion began to clear, Picard belatedly recognized his first officer. Struggling to pull himself free of the vapors that clouded his mind, the captain sat up in his chair. "What is it, Number One?" "We have company." The first officer

pulled
away from the desk and assumed a more
formal stance
while delivering his report. "A long-
range
sensor scan has detected the presence of
a
fleet of warp-driven craft at the
periphery of
our detection range. The total number of
vessels is still difficult to determine at
this
distance, but Data confirmed there are at
least
twenty ships."
Picard longed for solitude in which to
recall the
details of his dreaming, but he forced

himself to attend
to Jack's words. "Do you have any idea
who they
are?"

"All we have so far is a name," said
Crusher.

"According to some stray bits of their
ship-to-ship
communications, the fleet belongs to a
race who
call themselves the unDiWahn."

"The unDiWahn!"

"You know them?"

"Yes, I was warned about them by ..."
Picard reached out for a name, but it
wasn't in
place. There was a gap in his memory

where a
person belonged.
"Warned by a dream?" asked Crusher.
There was
a bitter edge to the question. His
resentment of the
Heart's influence over his captain was
growing
stronger each day.
"Jack ..." It was a signal between them,
worked
out over the years, that Picard needed to
talk to him
as a friend, rather than as a commanding
officer.
Nodding his understanding, the first
officer pulled a
chair up to the desk and sat down across

from
Picard. In the decades since they had left
Starfleet Academy, Jack Crusher's
boyish face and lanky frame had filled
out and
grown more rugged; gray had roughened
the texture of
his hair, and adversity had hardened the
look in his
eyes; but his smile was still as
welcoming now as it
had been when they were fellow cadets.
"I'm worried about you, Jean-Luc.
So is Beverly, both as a doctor and as a
friend."
"The Heart is not a danger to me," said
Picard. It was so difficult to explain

with
fatigue dragging him back toward sleep
and the
intoxication of more dreams. He reached
out to touch the
stone, drawing strength from its warmth.
"It is
sentient, Jack, a being in trouble that
needs our
help, and I intend to hold fast until the
Heart has reached its destination."
He had been so close to understanding
before the
Collector interfered. Perhaps the
Guardian could
complete the instructions in his next
dream.
Crusher dropped his head down, burying

his
face in his hands. When he looked up
again, his
brow was furrowed as if in pain.
"Jean-Luc, if you look out the window
behind you,
you'll see the charred wreckage of two
warships.
We haven't even finished patching the
Enterprise back together again from our
battle with the
Plath, yet if we so much as sneeze we
could
suddenly be facing an entire fleet of
these
unDiWahn. The longer we stay out here,
the

less chance there is that we'll ever make it back home alive."

"I intend to do everything in my power to succeed without that sacrifice. However," said Picard with a fervor solidified by his dream of the Heart's origins, "I believe that this mission is of overwhelming importance, and that its completion is so crucial that it demands our continued efforts no matter what the risk."

Crusher was silent for a long while. At last

he said, "What you ask is difficult,
Jean-Luc, but I've trusted you with my
life,
and with the life of my wife and children,
for over twenty
years now. So I guess I'm not about to
stop now
... Captain."

Captain ... That last word echoed in the
air,
only the second overlapping voice
Picard
heard was not Jack's, and it was muffled
as if
by fog and the distance of many years.
"No," whispered Picard, fighting back a
sudden panic born of some terrible

knowledge that lurked in
the shadows of his mind. "I won't let this
be
taken from me."

"What's wrong, Jean-Luc?" Alarm
jerked
Crusher back onto his feet.

"Nothing, Jack. I'm just tired." Picard
felt the touch of a ghostly hand on his
shoulder. Its fingers gripped him with a
disconcerting
solidity.

No! Don't do this!

"Captain?"

Picard opened his eyes to find that he
was
slumped over his desk once again. He
looked

up. The man who had called him out of the dream was taller than Jack, and he sported a closely cropped dark beard.

Will Riker ... my first officer is Will Riker.

Grief churned through Picard's stomach, and he swallowed down an upsurge of bile.

This was reality; the other scene had been nothing but a dream. He was awake now.

Awake, yet still tantalized by the fading memories of a past spent with other people and other endings to the stories of his life. If he

had
finished his dream without interruption,
could he have
continued walking along that alternate
path or would
it have faded away? Surely, if he had
wanted
that reality strongly enough, the Heart
could have kept
Commander Jack Crusher alive.
I did want it, Jack. You must believe
that!
Then Picard realized that the dream had
been
directed by the Collector. His only
failing was
in matching her control over the Heart. If
Jack's resurrection was truly within the

scope
of its powers, then Picard could also
learn how
to conduct such miracles. It would take
time, but
eventually he could change the
circumstances that had
led to his friend's death, and the alternate
reality could
be recovered.

However, if he gave up the stone, Jack
Crusher would be lost to him forever;
Beverly would
remain a widow; and their other children
would remain
unborn.

"Captain?"

"Yes, what is it Number One?" asked Picard, automatically walking through the lines of his role as this man's captain. Riker stepped back from the desk to deliver his report. "Lieutenant Worf has just intercepted some subspace radio transmissions coming from the periphery of our sensor range. Some race called--" "--called the unDiWahn," said Picard as one last lingering tendril of his dream coiled tightly around his chest.

CHAPTER 29

The engineering schematic of the Enterprise was covered with red highlights once again. These tags were deceptively neat and orderly, but Riker could envision the messy damage they symbolized a starship becalmed in space with its hull scorched and pitted. This haunting image darkened his thoughts as he and Data listened to Geordi's updated status report.

"Repairs to the weapons system should be finished

within two hours," said the chief engineer, pointing to a forward section of the saucer where the first barrage from the Plath had drilled straight through the dorsal phaser array.

"So much for our offense," sighed Riker. "What about defense?"

Geordi's hand shifted to another area of the situation monitor that was still livid with contrasting colors; the second blow from the Plath had landed in the engineering hull. "We've almost completed the

original repairs to navigational shields--
"

The ones that got us into this mess in the
first

place. The decision to proceed with
repairs had

seemed like a sound one at the time, but
it was

difficult for the first officer to remember
that as he

stared straight at the consequences of
that action.

"However," continued La Forge, "the
new

damage to the deflector shields has
compromised tactical defense. There's a
limit to the repairs we can conduct out of

spacedock, but I should know what percentage of our performance capacity has been restored in about four hours."

Riker would have found the information reassuring if not for the recent sighting of the unDiWahn. "Geordi, a rather large space fleet just wandered through this area. They appear to be gone for now, but there's always the possibility they could circle back and find us. Without weapons and without defensive shields, our only recourse is

to tuck tail and hope we can outrun them."

"Fortunately," said Data, "our sensor scans indicate the fleet is moving slowly.

The unDiWahn may lack the capacity for high warp speeds."

"At the moment, so do we." La Forge waved

at the diagram of patchwork repairs in progress. "The warp reactor core has been off-line for the last hour while we

replaced the starboard nacelle generator coils. As a result, we'll have to ease into warp drive as we align the

matterstantimatter injectors."

"Swell," said Riker. "At the first sign of trouble, we'll limp out of here."

"Yeah, but if we'd taken one more hit from the

Plath, we wouldn't be able to crawl out of here,

so I'd say we're pretty lucky."

The engineer's comment brought a puzzled frown

to Data's face. "Geordi, I am most curious about the Plath's destruction."

Riker had no way to cut off the discussion without

drawing undue attention to the subject; instead,

he listened as La Forge answered the

android's
question.

"I can't explain it, Data. There's an outside chance it was some freak weapons malfunction, but I just can't imagine what could make a warship's phasers detonate like that."

Geordi glanced back toward the schematic.

"And frankly, I haven't got time to worry about the Plath right now."

"Then we'll leave you to carry on more important work," said Riker, relieved that the engineer had dismissed the matter so quickly.

A few minutes later, when he and the android were walking down an empty passageway, Riker broached the subject himself. "Data, I would prefer an end to any more speculation about the explosion on the Plath. If anyone asks, we can attribute it to a faulty detonation control."

"You wish me to lie?"

"Well, as a matter of fact ..." Then Riker sighed, and said, "Let's just say that I'd rather not concentrate too much attention on the

incident."

"Because it would corroborate certain powers attributed to the Heart?"

The first officer shook his head. "I can't answer that." The only person who had the authorization, or the knowledge, to deal with that question was the captain; and Riker wasn't entirely sure that he wanted to hear Picard's explanation. Data was still silently pondering the implication of Riker's evasion, when an intercom hail echoed through the corridor.

"Crusher to Commander Riker."

"Riker here."

"I'm ready to make that house call we discussed."

"Proceed, Doctor," said the first officer, coming to a sudden stop. "I'll wait for you in Counselor Troi's office."

He turned to walk in a new direction, then

realized that Data had overheard the entire

exchange and might refer to it at some inopportune moment. Riker tried to think of a

plausible excuse for this covert arrangement with the

chief medical officer, but the strain of a last-minute invention must have showed because Data took the initiative.

"Commander," said the android. "Would you prefer that I did not concentrate too much attention on this event as well?"

"Yes, Data," said Riker with a sigh of relief. "Your inattention would be most appreciated."

For now, at least. However, if Beverly Crusher's effort was not successful, then the circle of involved officers would have to widen

to include Data.

The lights of the ready room were dimmed to their lowest level. Taking a cautious step over the threshold, Crusher peered toward the star window.

There was no one sitting at the desk, yet she had heard Picard call out permission for her to enter.

The doors shut behind her, cutting the doctor off from the bridge and throwing the room into even greater darkness. "Captain?"

"Have you come to order me to my

cabin,
Doctor?" His words were faintly slurred
with
fatigue.

"No," said Crusher, turning in the
direction
of Picard's voice. She could barely make
out
a shadowy form hunched on the sofa.

"After all, it
doesn't seem to have done much good
last time."

"Sleep doesn't refresh me ... too many
dreams ... I was on the verge of a dream
when you
came in."

The doctor noted that Picard's response
time was significantly slower than usual,

as
if he was still working his way back to
consciousness.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"No, don't apologize," he said. "I'm
not sure I want to dream again."

As her eyes grew more accustomed to
the

dark, Crusher could see that the captain
was bent

over the Heart. For a moment, a trick of
the

subdued lighting made her think the stone
in his hands

was glowing, but when she stepped
closer the doctor

realized its surface was the same dull

gray

she had seen before. "I'd like to run a few tests on you."

"What?" Irritation roused Picard out of his lethargy. "Go to sickbay? I haven't time for that now."

"I knew you'd say that." Crusher patted the medical tricorder hanging by her side. "So I came prepared to do a scan right here in your office."

"Very well," he said, slumping back over the

Heart. "Do as you like."

Moving quickly, before Picard could change his mind, she pulled the peripheral scanner off the tricorder. After a few passes of the whirring instrument, she had a preliminary result that confirmed the exhaustion she had already observed and also indicated some minor evidence of general neglect. "According to my readings, you're somewhat anemic and your blood sugar levels are depressed. When was the last time you

ate a decent meal?"

But Picard was lost in his own thoughts and didn't

hear her. "If I had understood its powers better, I could have saved the Enterprise without

killing the crew of the Plath."

A flick of Crusher's thumb abruptly ended the scan; his mental state was of more interest

to her after that statement. "Captain, do you really

believe the Heart was responsible for the

explosion?"

"I've tried to find some other explanation, but

there is none. I regret ..." He shook his head as if to dislodge the memory of the Klingon ship engulfed in flames. "The Heart obeyed my anger rather than my reason, yet over time I could learn how to wield its powers more directly."

"Learn? How?"

"It speaks to me, Beverly," whispered Picard, and she knelt down by his side to hear him more clearly. "In dreams I see wonders you can hardly imagine unseen vistas of the

cosmos, times long past and yet just
within reach. The
Heart is as old as the stars and has
powers beyond
imagining. Why, the destruction of the
Plath was
mere child's play. I could--"
"Jean-Luc! What if you're not the one in
control?"
"You don't understand," he said. "The
Heart
doesn't compel action, it merely offers
the means
to gain one's ends. With this small stone
in my
possession, the Enterprise could be
proof against

all enemies and their betrayals, free to explore the entire universe without danger ...

I could never fail."

"Failure is human," said Crusher. "We learn from our mistakes."

"Some mistakes serve no purpose; some defeats only bring pain and humiliation."

He looked into her face, meeting her gaze directly for the first time. "If I were the only one involved, Beverly, perhaps I could accept my mistakes; but the consequences of my actions have affected so many other people. I've even

hurt you and Wesley, and if it is in my power to make amends ..."

"No, don't torture yourself with those memories." Crusher laid a hand on his arm, trying to reach through the sorrow that clouded his eyes.

She had made her peace with Jack's death, but evidently Picard had not. "You can't change the past, Jean-Luc."

"But what if I could?" He leaned so close that she could feel his breath on her cheeks; his voice took on a deeper, more ominous

tone.

"Given the opportunity for study, I suspect I could learn to hold the flow of time itself in my hands. Do I have the right to refuse those powers? Would you, as a doctor, throw away the ability to restore health, save lives, or even ... raise the dead?"

Mesmerized by Picard's words, Crusher saw the Heart as if for the first time. How could she have missed the aura of strangeness that surrounded its rough form?

She reached out to touch the stone.
The captain pulled away with a
possessive
gesture. Mine! he seemed to say as he
clutched the Heart to his chest. "Are you
finished
with your medical exam, Doctor?"
"Yes, Captain." Crusher rose to her
feet and backed away. Just those few
steps
broke the Heart's uncanny spell. Once
more, the captain was holding just a
rock.
Picard leaned back against the cushions
of the
sofa and crossed one leg over the other.
In an amiable, conversational tone, he

said, "I
promise to take better care of myself
from now
on."

"That's all I ask," said Crusher with a
smile that was stretched thin over her
apprehension.

She left the captain sitting alone in the
shadows of the ready room.

Troi had suggested her counseling room
as the
most comfortable and convenient
meeting place, but the
unspoken understanding among the three
senior officers
was that it also offered more privacy
than the CMO'S

office. Unfortunately, this need for privacy imbued their actions with an unpleasantly furtive nature, and the empath could sense a general discomfiture when they gathered. Although the cushioned furniture was designed to encourage relaxation, Will was perched on the edge of his chair, and Beverly was pacing back and forth as she described her encounter with the captain.

"There was no opportunity to take the

Heart from
him"--Crusher shuddered at some
unpleasant
aspect of the memory--"and I'm just as
glad I
didn't even touch it."
"Why not?" asked Troi curiously.
Beverly shrugged away the question as if
not really
sure herself. "One moment he seemed
himself, then the
next he was like a man possessed."
"Are you qualified to perform an
exorcism,
Doctor?" asked Riker. The grim
expression
on his face robbed the question of any
humor.

"I don't believe an outside agent is the problem, Commander," said Troi. After her talk with Guinan, the counselor had reached a new understanding of the captain's behavior. "Even if the Heart is sentient, I don't sense that it has taken control of Captain Picard. It acts more like an amplifier of all his emotions, and it has transformed his fascination with the stone's legend into an obsession."

"There's more to it than that, Deanna," said Crusher. "It's no secret that our captain

strives for perfection, that he dislikes making mistakes or losing. And after his abduction by the Borg ..."

"Ah, yes," said the counselor, pleased by the additional insight Beverly provided.

"After his abduction he felt very vulnerable. So now he has what he believes to be the key to preventing failure of any sort."

Riker frowned at the exchange. "You mean the Heart has made him an offer he can't

refuse?"

"Yes," said Troi. "Yes, perhaps it has."

"Engineering to Captain Picard."

Picard woke with a start to find he was still sitting

upright on the ready room sofa, and he wondered

if he had been pulled out of sleep or into a

dream.

"Engineering to Captain Picard," repeated

La Forge patiently.

"Picard here."

"The engine core is back on-line, Captain. We'll have warp speed in ten minutes."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant."

Geordi's voice was familiar, and there was no

sense of the disorientation that had accompanied Jack

Crusher's presence, so Picard decided he was

truly awake.

Tapping his comm insignia, he said, "Picard

to Riker. Prepare for an immediate departure from this sector."

"Aye, Captain!" came the first officer's enthusiastic response. Riker was obviously

eager for a return to Federation territory;

the
demand for yet another diversion would
be difficult
for him to accept.

Tucking the Heart securely into the
crook of
his arm, Picard whispered, "You have
shown me where you
need to go, but I still don't know what to
do when we
get there."

If only there had been time for one more
dream

... but despite his need for further
guidance,

Picard had fought against sleep. The
encounter with

Jack Crusher had shaken him too deeply

to slip willingly into unconsciousness.
So now,
even though the past history of the Heart
had been
illuminated in exquisite detail, the future
remained cloaked in mystery.

Unfortunately, the stakes were too high to delay action. He would have to proceed anyway, blindly trusting that the Heart would eventually reveal the last of its secrets.

The bridge was alive with the sound and movement of a ship restored to good health. Every console was fully powered and brightly lit; crew members marched briskly back and forth across the deck from one duty station to another; and minute by minute, the air Riker breathed was growing sweeter

and warmer.

"All systems are operational," called out La Forge from the aft deck engineering station. From his post at tactical, Worf echoed the engineer's words; and Data looked over his shoulder and nodded to confirm the helm's ready status. To Riker's mind, however, the return to normalcy would not be complete until the vacant captain's chair was filled. Picard's absences from the bridge were growing noticeably longer. The first officer was not given to undue flights of

fancy, yet he imagined that the Heart
could sense
the crew's antagonism to its presence,
and like an
animal under siege, it constantly urged a
return to the safety of its den.
Rising to his feet at the sound of parting
doors, Riker studied Picard as he
emerged from
the shadowed recesses of the ready
room. The bright,
even lighting of the bridge emphasized
the
captain's drawn face and pale
complexion; the
impression of a live animal crouched on
his arm

was strengthened by his protective embrace of the Heart.

While the captain walked toward the command center, Riker continued with the routine preparations for the ship's departure. "Mr. Data, lay in a course for Starbase 75."

"Belay that order, Mr. Data," said Picard. "Set a new course heading." The string of destination coordinates the captain called out next meant nothing to Riker, but he was appalled by the direction Picard had chosen. This

sense of shock was universal; the entire bridge crew had frozen, arrested in mid-motion by the unexpected command.

"Captain," said Riker. "That course is on a direct line away from Federation territory."

"I'm aware of that, Number One," said Picard. "Helm?"

Data's hands immediately blurred into motion to make up for his momentary hesitation. "Course laid in, sir."

"Warp one." The captain stabbed his hand in the

air as if to point the way through space.
"Engage."

On the viewscreen, pinpoint stars transformed into streaks of light as the Enterprise slipped into warp speed. Heavy vibrations shuddered through the primary hull as La Forge adjusted the injection settings, but within seconds the trembling eased away. Working in tandem with the chief engineer, Picard ordered incremental increases in speed until the starship was cruising smoothly at warp

four.

"The bridge is yours, Number One,"
announced Picard without warning. He
turned
sharply on his heel and strode back to
his ready
room.

Riker was the first to speak in the wake
of the
captain's abrupt departure. "Data, where
are
we going?"

"I can find no significant aspect to the
designated location," said the android.

"However,
the coordinates for the site came from a
star map the

captain has in his possession."

"A star map? Where did he get this map?"

"That I cannot say, but I suspect it is somehow involved with the Heart."

The association was not surprising, but it was

definitely alarming. "Data, we've got to get that ... thing away from the captain."

The android adopted a dubious expression.

"He has been most reluctant to release it from his possession."

"Enough!" said Worf.

Riker looked up in surprise to find the

Klingon leaning over the deck rail, his face
glowering with suspicion.

"The Pagrahtak is best left in the hands
of

Captain Picard. As his security chief, I
will not allow it to be taken by force."

"No, of course not, Lieutenant," said the
first officer, compelled into a hasty
retraction by this

unexpected opposition. "It's entirely the
captain's decision when to give up the
Heart."

Yet Riker seriously questioned whether
Picard

would ever reach that decision on his
own.

And just what am I going to do about that? he wondered as they all sped farther and farther toward nowhere.

CHAPTER 30

"Come," called out Picard, and waited to see who would enter the ready room. He had known there would be repercussions from his last set of orders. His involvement with the Heart was gathering momentum, and he was pulling his crew faster and faster along with him toward a

murky climax that was beyond their understanding. It was beyond his, as well, or he would have tried harder to explain his actions. Their loyalty to him ran deep, but for how long could he take advantage of that faith?

"Do you ever put it down, Captain?" Picard glanced up from his contemplation of the Heart to find that Counselor Troi had fixed him with a speculative look. It was a familiar expression, and one he had learned to

distrust in the
past.

"What are you talking about?" asked
Picard,
although he knew quite well what she
meant.

Troi only smiled at his clumsy evasion.
"Its very presence seems to comfort you,
physically as
well as emotionally."

Her observation was uncomfortably
perceptive.

His ready room must have cooled by at
least five
degrees when life support services were
reduced to conserve power, but Picard
had barely
felt the cold as long as he was in contact

with the
stone; and its weight, cupped in his
hands or
tucked in the crook of his arm, was a
constant
reminder of the protection it offered.
"So," Troi persisted, "I couldn't help
wondering if setting the Heart aside
distresses
you. How long can you go without it?"
"Counselor," said Picard with a forced
smile,
"you make it sound like an addiction."
"Do I? That's very interesting."
"Oh, no," he said with a shake of his
head.
"I have no intention of getting drawn into

a
discussion about addiction and
obsession. I can end this
matter right here and now."

Rising up from the sofa, the captain
walked over
to the far side of his office and tucked
the stone on
a high shelf. Stepping away from the
wall unit,
he said, "There, Counselor. Are you
satisfied?"
"This is not something you must do to
please me," said
the empath. Her dark eyes flitted up and
down,
measuring the distance from the floor to
the shelf, a

height that was well beyond her reach. "I only ask you to reflect on how the stone has affected you.

How do you feel about putting it away?"

"I feel nothing other than the desire to get a good night's sleep."

"Yes, you seem to spend much of your time alone these days."

Really, there was no pleasing the woman.

"Would you prefer that I drop by Ten-Forward instead?"

"It's not my preferences that are the issue,

Captain. You should do what you wish."
He uttered a mock groan. "And
regardless
of what I do, you'll take notes and look
pensive."

"Probably," said Troi with a good-
natured
laugh. "Good-night, Captain."

The counselor walked out of the ready
room, but
her challenge concerning the Heart
remained behind,
taunting him. Even worse, the exchange
with
Troi revived memories of another
warning.

It is not too late for me, T'Sara. I

can still maintain control.
Picard shivered in the cool air and
without thinking
reached out for the Heart's warmth.
He stopped himself before his fingers
touched the rough
surface of the stone, but the arrested
motion seemed
to rob him of an alternate purpose and
direction. His original intention had
been
to resume his wait for a new dream to
guide his
next steps, but now the ready room
seemed a
bleak and uninviting place to sleep. Yet
the

thought of walking out onto the bridge
filled him
with a vague anxiety.
What should I do now?

Guinan looked out from under the broad
brim of a
burgundy bonnet. "Tea?" she asked of
her
new customer.

Picard nodded. "Tea."

"One Earl Grey coming up."

"No," he said on impulse. "Not Earl
Grey. I'll have Srjula instead."

"Srjula? An Andorian tea?" The
hostess turned to a tidy row of canisters
on a
shelf behind her. Common teas could be

requested from the
food replicators, but the molecular
patterns
of the more exotic brands were rarely
available, and the
drink had to be made from real leaves.
Guinan
pried open the lid of one of the jars and
peered at the
contents. "We don't get much call for this
on the
Enterprise."
"I'm in the mood for something
different."
"Srjula is certainly different," she said,
setting a clear teacup and saucer on the
bar. The
crumpled leaves that she sprinkled into

the cup were
orange, but when hot water was poured
over them,
they turned bright yellow, then
dissolved.
She sniffed experimentally at the pungent
aroma,
then grimaced. "I've never actually
tasted it,
myself."
Picard picked up the saucer and took a
tentative sip from the cup. His mouth
pursed
involuntarily. He took another sip.
"Yes, that's perfect."
"It is?" said Guinan.
He nodded emphatically. Srjula. The

memory of its tart, bitter taste was borrowed from a dream, yet he knew that it was just as it should be.

Guinan shrugged and moved on to her next customer, yet Picard felt her gaze following him as he walked across the deck. He wound his way to a table where Beverly Crusher was finishing off a slice of pie. She hastily licked a smear of whipped cream off her upper lip. "You came alone tonight, Captain." "Alone?" he said as he sat down across from

her. A backdrop of deep space framed her body.

Crusher pointed to his hands, which were wrapped tightly around his teacup. "No rock." "Oh, that." Picard loosened his grip; the warm, round shape between the palms of his hands had been familiar and reassuring. "I left it in my cabin. It's not as if I can't do without it."

"No, of course not." She made a token effort to hide her amusement by eating the last bite of her dessert, but he detected the ends of her

smile curling up around the spoon.

"Let's not talk about the Heart," he said.

"That's an excellent idea." She shoved aside the empty plate and leaned forward. Her

voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Instead, why don't we--" She stopped.

Her

nose wrinkled ever so slightly. "What on earth

is that smell?"

"Tea," said Picard, lifting the cup up to his lips.

"You're drinking that?"

"Yes, of course." He took a sip, but had to fight an impulse to spit out the

liquid.

His craving for the astringent brew had faded. He

swallowed anyway. "It's delicious."

As he set down the cup, he caught a flash of movement outside the Ten-Forward window.

"If you say so." Crusher pulled back slightly and began again. "As I was saying, why

don't we--" She stopped again, obviously alarmed by the sudden change in his

expression and the silence that had fallen over the

entire room. "Captain? What's wrong, Jean-Luc?"

He tried to answer, but his throat had

closed
too tightly to let the words escape.
They're back.
The doctor checked back over her
shoulder;
she was the last to see it. A simple cubic
shape hung in space, its baroque metallic
structures gleaming softly in reflected
starlight.
"Oh my god," she cried. "It's the
Borg."
As her words echoed through the room,
flashing red
lights began their staccato pulse and
alert
sirens sprang to life. Picard scrambled
to his feet, overturning the table and

chair in his
haste, knowing only that he must get
away quickly.
"Captain to the bridge! Captain to--"
Riker's intercom voice was drowned out
by the
high whine of a Borg transporter beam.
Picard froze in his tracks; the sound
brought forth
a memory of pain, a pain so fierce that
he would
do anything to escape it again.
Five Borg materialized in the center of
the
room, back-to-back in a tight formation
like a
satanic pentagram. Each took a step
forward

and began to fire straight ahead.
No! Not again. Please not again.
Another step, another round of fire.
Screams. People were screaming;
people were falling to the
deck; people were dying.
I should do something. I must do
something. I'm the
captain. But the terror that gripped him
was so
strong that he couldn't move. If he
moved, they
would see him.
He watched instead.
He watched as Guinan pulled a phaser
out from
behind the counter. She was hit before

she could even pull
the trigger. Her body went up in flames.
The Borg took another step and five
more people
crumpled to the floor. A few writhed
and
groaned, the others lay still.
He watched as Beverly Crusher brushed
past
him, rushing to the aid of one of the
dying crewmen. A
sweep of a Borg arm sent her flying
through the
air. Her body landed at Picard's feet, her
back oddly twisted and her face slack
and
wooden.
One last step. A Borg was standing right

in
front of him.

Picard watched as it raised an arm and
extruded a whirring metal rotor from the
tip.

The twirling blades shredded the cloth
of his
uniform, the skin beneath, and then bored
a hole
straight through to his heart ...

Picard woke with a burning sensation
deep in his
chest; there were other pains, needle-
sharp and throbbing,
embedded in his muscles and bones.
Two years
after their removal, his body still

remembered
exactly where the Borg implants had
been
placed. He clutched the front of his
uniform and
nearly retched at the feel of the damp,
sticky
cloth.
It's only sweat.
He took a deep, shuddering breath. Not
so
bad. After all, this nightmare hadn't
wrenched
tears and screams from him. He was
beyond the need
to drag Deanna Troi out of her bed to
hear him
babble about terror and cowardice and

loss of
control. This was just a predictable
reaction to the
presence of a captured Borg on board
the
Enterprise last month; Picard's brief
impersonation of Locutus had triggered
uncomfortable memories ...
... or the dream was a warning.
No, dammit, this has nothing to do with
the
Heart.
His fingers curled, cold and stiff, as if
they
yearned to wrap themselves around the
stone's fire. His
chest was still aching. Had he

experienced a routine
nightmare or another vision? If the Heart
could
show him the past, could it also show
him the future?

"Picard to bridge," he called out as he
swung his legs over the edge of the
couch.

"Data here, Captain."

He rose and moved across the room to
his

bookshelves. "Lieutenant, increase
speed

to warp six and initiate evasive
maneuvers."

"Sir?"

"You heard me. Maintain our previous
destination coordinates, just get us there

a different
way than originally planned."

"Yes, sir."

The captain reached up to the shelf and
closed his

hands around the Heart. Its warmth
flooded through

him, washing away the tension in his
muscles.

The pain in his chest began to fade.

CHAPTER 31

Warden Chandat was accustomed to
spending long
hours sitting in place while maintaining
an air
of dignity and supreme authority over

tedious
proceedings. He had developed this skill
presiding over countless Faculty
meetings, but
he was somewhat disillusioned to
discover that the demands
on a starship commander were not so
very different from his own
administrative duties. The bridge chair
was
more comfortable than the one in the
council chamber,
Chandat conceded, but the view was
less interesting.
Over the last two days, the novelty of
staring
forward at nothing but stars on a flat
screen had

worn off.

"Estimated time of arrival is one hour and five minutes," announced Dean Shagret from the helm. He, unlike the warden, could constantly entertain himself by scanning the console readouts and playing with the controls.

"Maintain course and speed." The phrase felt less foreign on Chandat's tongue after several repetitions. Without such squelching directives, the dean had an annoying

tendency
to practice new flight maneuvers that
sent the
ship careening in unexpected directions.
"Initiating long-range sensor scans,"
announced Thorina. This would be her
third scan
within the last hour, but whenever
Shagret issued one
of his status reports, she was spurred
to activate her console again.
Their rivalry had started soon after the
Sullivan's departure from Dynasia when
the
two deans began squabbling over who
among the
Faculty had sufficient seniority to sit in
the

command area. Recognizing the importance of this symbolic center of authority, Chandat had reluctantly given up his place at navigation to secure his position as leader of the expedition. Then his first official act as the ship's commander had been to order the two deans to posts at opposite ends of the bridge. A muffled sound drew Chandat's attention to the old man seated by his side. The professor

had remained silent until now.

"So near ..." whispered Manja. His voice was husky with sorrow. "If only T'Sara could have lived long enough to share this moment with me."

Chandat would have preferred to keep the

historian out of sight; Diat was a constant

reminder that the basis for this venture was taken from a hoary myth in the Dream literature.

However, banishing the professor from the bridge would have been

too cruel. Manja thought this mission had been mounted on his behalf, as a champion of T'Sara, and he would have been hurt by any attempt at exclusion. As it was, the old man would be hurt eventually, but Chandat tried not to cast his thoughts that far ahead. Fortunately, the demands of operating a starship had fully occupied the attention of the other professors and prevented them from asking too many questions about their destination. However, the Sullivan

would arrive at the Appointed Place soon, and then the folly of this quixotic search for the Gem would be all too apparent to all the Dynasians.

"Chandat!" Thorina's cry of alarm jerked the warden out of his reverie. "I've got something on the scanners!"

"Could you be more specific?" asked Chandat.

Since she had issued several false alarms during the voyage, he had quickly learned not

to attach too much significance to such outbursts.

"There's a Federation starship dead ahead,
registry number NCC-1701D."

The warden started up out of his chair and twirled around to face the dean. "Are you sure?" "Confirmed," said Oomalo, peering down over the dean's shoulder at the tactical screen. "Their trajectory matches ours. It appears that we will not be the first to arrive at the Appointed Place."

This news was most unsettling; the

warden had
never thought to factor another starship
into any of his
contingency plans. Chandat wracked his
memory for
an appropriate command response.

"Open
hailing frequencies."

"Do what?" asked Thorina, who was
still flustered
by the unexpected success of her scan.

"Oh,
yes, the radio."

With a dubious frown, she jabbed her
finger at the
midsection of the communications
console. A
high-pitched squeal of static burst over

the
bridge speakers. Thorina jabbed again
and the noise
turned into a stream of chattering voices.
As Chandat listened to the oddly
familiar, yet
incomprehensible language, Shagret
called out
with disdain, "That's not Federation
Standard."
"The incoming transmission is not from
the
starship," said Oomalo. The native
professor edged in beside Dean Thorina,
and with a
refreshing display of competence,
rapidly tapped

a sequence over the console surface.
"Activating the universal translator."
"I would have done that next," snapped
Thorina,
but she moved aside to give Oomalo
better
access to the controls.
The abstract sounds suddenly turned into
words.
"... must rely on sheer numbers to
maintain
our advantage. The Federation's
weapons
technology is superior to that of any one
of our
vessels."
Oomalo glanced over at the tactical

monitor. "We appear to have intercepted
intership
communications from a group of vessels
just entering the
sector. They also are headed for the
Appointed
Place."

An answering transmission crackled
over the
subspace radio channel. "The
unDiWahn captains are united as one
mighty
fist, Admiral. We shall crush the
Enterprise
and reclaim the Gem."

"DiWahn?" cried out Manja. "Did they
really say DiWahn?"

"By the Three Gates," said Chandat in amazement. "I heard it, too."

"Ancient history is coming alive, Warden!"

Excitement at the discovery wiped away the old

man's grief. He was a Dynasian after all, and knowledge was the first love of all their race.

Chandat's respect for T'Sara's scholarship

overwhelmed his own concerns for just a moment. Thanks

to the Vulcan, two branches of the scattered

Iconian peoples were finally reunited on the

other side of the Gate.

Oomalo, unmoved by legends that were alien to her

own people, was more practical in her reaction to the

revelation. "We had better make a friendly

overture to these DiWahns before they mistake us

for a Federation faction. If we offer to combine

forces, then the starship will be easily overpowered."

"How very inconvenient," muttered Chandat

to himself. Fortunately, his heretical comment was

drowned out by the ragged victory
cheers of the
Faculty.

The ancient engineers of Iconia had
obviously respected the need for
introspection.

On each of their starships they had
reserved space for a small niche that
would shelter
a body in meditation. After boarding the
flagship
of the unDiWahn fleet, Master
Kierad@an
had retreated inside just such a niche and
spent the
duration of the journey through space in
consultation with

himself.

Traditionally, the reciting of the Dream Lore

was done in a circle of the Faithful, but Kierad@an was conducting a private Telling.

In the circle of his own mind, he was both

dream-teller and listener as he reviewed the

accumulated knowledge of his order and searched for new

insights. The men and women of the Faithful had

spent their lives exploring the lessons laced in

the dreams of the Gem-Bearers, and now

Kierad@an

had five short days in which to judge this wisdom
for the last time.

"Master."

The unDiWahn was pulled out of his thoughts by a
low voice from outside the enclosure.

Admiral

Jakat would not have interrupted this meditation without good
cause, but Kierad@an resented the intrusion

anyway. He had so little time left.

Drawing aside the curtain that closed off the
niche from the outer room, he said, "Yes,

Daramad@an?"

The admiral stepped closer to the high shelf where Kierad@an sat. He moved with an unusually stiff gait. "We have established communications with a lone starship of Federation registry; however, the crew claims to be Iconian. Warden Chandat of Dynasia asserts that they, too, are on course for the Appointed Place." This news explained the tension locked in the muscles of the admiral's body. Kierad@an

felt his own frame stiffen in reaction to this unexpected company.

"So, the Dynasians have survived on the other side of their Gate."

This was no cause for rejoicing. Another contingent of Iconians could complicate his plans for the Gem.

Despite this risk, Kierad@an decided he would allow the strangers to continue ... for now. After all, they might have a place in the Dreaming, too.

"Propose an alliance to the Dynasians,"

said Kierad@an, "but make it clear that they must follow our lead and let me negotiate for the Gem. If they agree to these terms, let them live."

"As you wish, Master." The admiral withdrew without asking for further instruction. He was a capable leader in his own right and required little direction.

Closing the curtain, Kierad@an resumed his meditation on the future of the Dream Gem.

Over the past century, those who held the title of master had reached a consensus of opinion as to the role of the Faithful in the Gem's affairs. Upon his investment as leader of the order, Kierad@an had pledged to honor that agreement when he reached the Appointed Place, yet the autonomy of his position encompassed the authority to change his mind. It was that freedom that troubled him now. His sworn duty had seemed much easier to contemplate on DiWahn than it

did
here in space, drawing ever nearer to the
Gem. With
each hour that slipped away, he
discovered new
arguments with which to counter the
decision of his elders.
Even if he affirmed the conclusion
reached by his
predecessors, Master Kierad@an
wondered if
he had the strength of will to keep his
feet on the
true path they had outlined. The title he
bore
was for mastery over oneself, not over
others, but he was
the first of the unDiWahn to actually face

the Gem
and test his convictions.
Kanda Jiak, the last Iconian to be called
master, had failed. He had paid for that
failure
with his life.

CHAPTER 32

Like a gull skimming the still surface of
an
ocean, the USS Enterprise dropped out
of
warp speed and coasted into a leisurely
orbit
around a cooling star.
The white dwarf had no name, just a
number

assigned by astronomers as they charted the desolate reaches of space beyond the Federation. The star had burned in isolation for nearly five thousand years; but now, at the end of that long wait, the dwarf's single companion was drawing near again. The heat of their meeting had transformed the speeding ball of rock and ice into a streak of luminous vapor; thus, for a few short months along the course of its elliptical orbit,

the
comet flared into prominence. Later,
once it
passed perihelion and fell farther and
farther
away into cold fringes of the system, the
tail would fade, and the comet would
continue in
anonymous invisibility for another five
thousand
years.

Riker knew that comets were nothing
more than stray
pebbles adrift in space, kicked into
motion
by tidal waves of gravity. Over the years
of his

Starfleet service, he had seen wonders
of far
greater beauty and mystery than this
lonely traveler
in its brief flash of glory, but perhaps it
was
precisely that ephemeral quality that
moved him
with a mixture of sadness and joy.
When he entered the ready room, Riker
found the
captain staring out his window at the
same bleak
tableau of the white dwarf and its
consort. With a
softly uttered sigh of irritation, Picard
turned away from the scene to hear his

first officer's
status report.

"Engineering has managed to restore our
deflector shield capacity to fifty-seven
percent," said Riker, "and Geordi
expects
another ten percent improvement in the
next few
hours, but for now we're extremely
vulnerable."

Picard's gaze kept flicking away from
his
first officer; he seemed to constantly
fight against the
impulse to look over his shoulder. His
hands were
equally restless, reaching for the Heart,
then darting

back to the data tablet on his desk. "Do the best you can with what we have, Number One."

One role that Riker often played with the captain was devil's advocate; Picard had always encouraged him to present any opposing arguments that would offer a different perspective to critical issues. Rarely, however, had Riker felt that the stakes were so high as now. "The best we can do, Captain, is to leave this area before we're

attacked."

This statement secured Picard's
undivided

attention and sharpened his voice. "Are
you questioning my
present command decisions?"

"No, sir, I'm not, but our orders--"

"My orders," said Picard with icy
reserve,

"were to keep the Heart out of the hands
of the enemies
of the Federation. I intend to do just
that."

Riker's intuition led him toward a
disturbing
corollary. "But you're not going to take it
back

into Federation space, are you?"

"No." Picard lifted the stone up off the desk as if to include the Heart in the discussion of

its fate. "Self-determination is one of the basic tenets of Starfleet's philosophy; as a sentient being, this entity must be accorded control over its own destiny.

Just as important, in my judgment the interests of the Federation are best served by removing the Heart from our affairs. Captain Duregh's betrayal convinced me that its continuing presence would eventually

destabilize our current political alliances."

"Can you tell me how you plan to remove it?"

asked Riker. He had hoped for just such an opening to discuss the captain's plans for the Heart.

"This place is essential. We must stay here

until ..." As he groped for words, Picard unwittingly revealed the depth of his uncertainty.

"... until the Heart's mission has completely unfolded."

"The longer we remain here, the greater the chance that

the unDiWahn--"

"The unDiWahn are not a danger,

Number

One." With the Heart still clutched in his hands like a

talisman warding off evil, Picard said,

"You've seen what it can do with your own eyes. As

long as I hold the Heart, they can't even touch

us."

Even before his return to the bridge,

Troi could

sense the rising intensity of Riker's emotions.

When he finally stepped out of the ready room,

however, she was relieved to see that Riker had successfully masked his frustration and anxiety behind an expression of vague geniality. She watched as the first officer sauntered across the command deck. His carefree air would convince anyone but an empath that he had just enjoyed a casual exchange with the captain. A quick sidelong glance toward the aft deck nearly gave Riker away, but Lieutenant Worf was

too absorbed with his tactical sensor readings
to catch the telltale sign of wariness.
Once Riker settled down beside her,
however,
he shook his head. No success.
"Now what?" asked Troi in a low voice.
He shrugged. "Your turn again."
"No, I can feel his emotional reserve
heighten whenever I approach him. If he
won't even listen to me, he certainly
won't
relinquish the Heart to my care."
"Well, then ..."
In perfect accord, she and Riker
both turned and fixed a speculative look
on

the android working quietly at the helm.

Since Picard appeared entranced by the view

outside his window, Data stood patiently in

front of the ready room desk, waiting for the

captain to break out of his reverie.

While he

waited, the android considered how he might best

attempt to fulfill Riker's directive.

Persuading Captain Picard to give up the Heart would prove an interesting challenge in

interpersonal dynamics, but it was an area in which

Data judged himself to be somewhat inadequate.

Considering the strong emotions that were involved,

Data doubted that he would be able to succeed where

Doctor Crusher and Counselor Troi had failed.

Then, catching sight of one of the books on the

office desk, he was reminded of the captain's

deep respect for T'Sara and Ambassador Sarek. Vulcans did not appeal to emotions,

yet Picard was often persuaded by these writings.

Perhaps logic could provide a more promising approach.

Under his breath, Picard muttered, "How long must I wait for an answer?"

Data determined the captain was addressing the

Heart resting in his hands. Apparently he received

no response from the stone, because Picard then

swiveled his chair around to face the android.

"What is it, Mr. Data? Am I to be subjected to a visit by each of my senior officers in turn? How can I think straight

with
these continual interruptions?"
Without any preamble to soften his
intent, Data
said, "We are concerned about the extent
to which your
actions are being governed by the
Heart."
"Then you need worry yourself no
longer. I am
acting of my own volition." Evidently
Picard
regretted the overly curt nature of this
response, because he stopped to take a
deep
breath and then said, "Data, there is
something the
Heart needs, a place it must reach, for

reasons

I don't entirely understand, that I may be incapable of understanding, yet its urgency is unmistakable."

"Does this mean you will relinquish the stone so that it can reach that destination, Captain?"

"Yes ... of course." Picard's eyes widened ever so slightly as he contemplated that scenario. "But not until the time is right."

"Intriguing. When exactly will that time occur?"

"Not yet," said the captain. "I'll know when

the time comes."

"I admire your certainty. However, my analysis of the Heart's history indicates that

if you delay too long, the stone will ensure its

own release by leaving us vulnerable to attack."

"No! The Heart offers us protection."

"Does it?" asked Data. "On this journey you speak of, the Heart has left a trail of death and devastation in its wake. This is not legend

or myth, but fact. We have seen the evidence

ourselves in the destruction of the Orions and the

Ferengi."

"The Heart is not to blame for those deaths," said

Picard with a vehement shake of his head. "The

Orions died due to their own greed, as did the

Ferengi; they courted their own downfall."

"And what of the Vulcans? Did T'Sara deserve her fate?"

A spasm of grief, akin to pain, creased the

captain's face. This time he shook his head more

gently.

"From what I have observed," said Data,

"the
protection it offers has a tendency to fail
if
the Heart can secure a more useful host.
When will
it tire of your custody?"
Picard fell silent for a moment as his
thoughts
turned inward. "You aren't the first one
to warn me that
I've held on too long." In a voice tinged
with a Vulcan accent, he recited, "It
constantly struggles to free itself from
the tangle of
our grasping hands."
Encouraged by this admission of doubt,
the android
pressed his argument even harder. "In

the years that
we have served together, you have
stressed how much you
value my unique perspective. Captain,
trust to my objectivity, to my lack of
emotion,
when I tell you that the Heart is more of
a danger
to us than any alien fleet. Give it up now,
while you still can. If you rely on its
powers
to shield us from harm, we will be
destroyed."

He held out his hands, palms upturned,
to accept the stone.

"Data," said Picard, "neither Surak or
T'Sara would lay this burden on another

living
being. I don't have that right either."
"Remember that I have held the stone
before with complete immunity. As an
android, I
cannot be seduced by its powers."
Picard's hands trembled when he lifted
up the
Heart, as if this slight effort required a
concentration of all of his strength and
will. "Then
take--"
"Bridge to Captain Picard," boomed
Worf's voice over the intercom. "The
unDiWahn fleet has reentered the
perimeter
of our sensorfield ... the ships have been
dispersed

in a surround pattern and are drawing in toward us."

"Surrounded ..." Picard froze in mid-gesture. "Data, I won't leave the Enterprise vulnerable to attack!"

This was as much a plea for help as it was a

declaration of defiance. Data urged the obvious

solution. "Then we must leave this place while

there is still time to break through their formation. At our

fastest warp speed we can outpace the entire

unDiWahn fleet."

"Leave?" Despite his reluctance to accept this suggestion, the captain was unable to marshal a counter argument. "Yes ... I suppose we must."

Data reached out to take hold of the Heart.

"Captain," said Worf again. "Sensors have detected a Federation starship approaching the sector."

The android's finger brushed against air. Picard had pulled the stone back a few inches. "The cavalry has reached us just in time, Data."

"The registry number is that of the Miranda-class USS Sullivan," continued the security chief. "However, they are not answering our hails, and Starfleet records indicate the vessel was last assigned to diplomatic duty in another quadrant." "Yet another betrayal," said Data, quick to underscore their growing danger. "All the more reason for us to depart this sector." "On the contrary," said Picard unexpectedly. "This proves the futility of retreat. Enemies follow in our wake wherever we go. Even if we escape these forces,

new
enemies and new betrayals will be
waiting for us at
every port. We carry violence with us
like a
plague. The chase must end here."
A calmness seemed to settle over the
captain, smoothing away the furrows of
confusion and
doubt that had etched themselves into his
face.
Cradling the stone to his chest, Picard
said, "I
will need the Heart for just a while
longer."

CHAPTER 33

"Make it so."

The huddle of officers around the captain flew apart. Like players aiming for their marks on a stage, they all moved briskly to their bridge stations.

Picard took a step forward to center himself in the command area, and Riker planted himself by the captain's side; Worf assumed his background role at the tactical console; and in the foreground, Data took the helm. Transporter

Chief O'Brien, the one foreign element in this familiar tableau, marched through the turbolift's opening doors and disappeared.

"Status report, Mr. Worf?"

"Sensors show the unDiWahn fleet is still

closing at six hundred thousand kilometers

..."

Images began to form on the viewscreen.

From

a distance, the unDiWahn ships appeared

surprisingly delicate. Their colorful hulls

were curled in spirals and waves, like
autumn
leaves twisting in the wind. The thick
saucer
section of the lone Miranda-class
starship was stiff
and ungainly in the midst of these
undulating
shapes.

"... five hundred thousand ... four
hundred
thousand kilometers."

A hush fell over the bridge as the alien
ships drifted closer and closer until their
fluting edges nearly touched. The
assembled
fleet formed the thin shell of a sphere

with the
Enterprise captured in the hollow center.
For
all its beauty, the pattern was also an
overwhelming display of military
strength.

"Captain," said Worf in a low voice.
"We are being hailed by the unDiWahn
flagship."

"Establish visual communications,
Lieutenant."
Squaring his shoulders, Picard mentally
prepared
himself for the raising of the curtain that
would reveal him
to an audience. His hands tightened their
hold on the
Heart, the key element in the unfolding

drama.

The chase would end now; the last blood to be spilled would be here, on the bridge of the Enterprise.

To the uninitiated, the gray rock was an unremarkable object, but Kierad@an knew that its plain cover masked a crystalline structure that sparkled in the dark. What could not be seen, what could only be felt, was the heat that radiated from it. If only he could warm his hands on the Dream Gem for just a few

moments ...

With the greatest of difficulty, the master raised

his eyes to meet the Gem-Bearer's gaze.

"I

am Kierad@an, leader of the Faithful."

"I am Jean-Luc Picard, captain of the Enterprise." While the captain

introduced his

senior officers, Kierad@an noted that fatigue

had left its marks on Picard's face,

bleaching his skin of color and

sharpening the planes of

his skull. His fingers were rigid with tension,

gripping the Gem in a vise of bone and muscle.

As soon as the tedious formalities were concluded, Kierad@an spoke. "Captain, I

request that you return the Gem to the keeping of the unDiWahn. We are its Guardians and have charge of its future."

Picard shook his head. "With all due respect, Kierad@an, I don't recognize your claim of ownership. The Gem remains with me."

"Brave words for the commander of a starship far from the safety of Federation space."

Picard's first officer strutted forward,

filling
more of the oval viewscreen. "Our
safety is of
less importance than the security of the
Federation.
This crew has pledged to destroy the
stone rather than
let it fall into the wrong hands."
"I do not believe you," said Kierad@an.
"No bearer would willingly give up
possession
of the Gem."
"We're going to prove you wrong."
Riker then
looked back to Picard as if expecting the
older
man to echo this challenge. When the
Gem-Bearer was

silent, Riker prompted him by saying,
"Captain, we agreed we must put an end
to--"

"No," said Picard, sidling away from the
first

officer. "No, I've changed my mind. Such
an extreme measure won't be necessary
after all."

Riker's arrogance gave way to dismay.

"Captain!"

"Number One, with the Heart in my
possession

I can defeat anyone who tries to take it
away

from me." Picard's threat was directed at
his first

officer, rather than the unDiWahn.

"As you can see," said Kierad@an to the young officer, "this matter is between myself and your captain."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," said Riker.

He slapped at a metal insignia on his chest. "Now!"

All the doors to the bridge snapped open at

once. As security guards stormed through the

portals, the officer at the helm slid out from behind

his console and lunged toward the captain.

"Data, no!" cried out Picard.
The pale-skinned helmsman had
wrapped his
hands around the Gem in an attempt to
displace
Picard's hold. The Klingon on the aft
deck
tried to rush to the captain's aid, but
armed guards
immediately dragged him away from the
bridge railing.
It took five of them to keep the warrior's
arms
pinned behind his back.
Kierad@an had expected trouble; it was
an
inevitable companion to the Gem's

travels.

"Daramad@an," the master whispered,
"prepare
to fire at my next command."

In the frame of the viewscreen, the two
men were
still grappling for dominance. The Gem-
Bearer's
face was contorted by a fierce
possessive rage
that would have intimidated most
assailants.

However, with a display of unusual
strength, Data
wrenched the stone out of the captain's
grasp.

While two guards wrestled Picard
facedown onto the deck, Data raised the

stone

up into the air like the head of a
vanquished enemy.

"The Gem is mine!"

Kierad@an's clenched fist held the
admiral

at his side in check. Negotiation was
still in

everyone's best interests. "You have
only weakened

your position, Enterprise. It takes time
to learn how to use those powers."

"I do not need any time at all," said
Data, "because I plan to destroy the Gem
now."

Alarmed by the man's resoluteness,
Kierad@an opened his fist and said,

"Daramad@an, fire!"

The Enterprise bridge rocked and swayed as the Iconian weapons salvo collided against its defense shields. This sudden

assault threw the crew off-balance.

Cries and

shouts rang out as they confronted the deadly

consequences of their resistance. From his vantage

point as a spectator, Kierad@an also saw

Picard take clever advantage of this widespread distraction.

"Worf!" screamed the captain as he twisted

out of his guard's choke-hold. "Stop Data!"

With a mighty heave, the Klingon threw off the

men holding him. One swipe of his muscular arm

ripped a phaser from a guard's belt.

Roaring like

a wounded animal, he took aim at the android

and fired.

A narrow red beam lanced out across the bridge.

With reflexes faster than Kierad@an would have

believed possible, Data spun around and blocked

the force of the phaser blast with the Gem itself.

The stone absorbed the energy like a sponge. For a moment, the master thought it would survive the blast, but then the soft glow at its crystal center ignited.

The Gem and its new bearer disappeared in a fiery bloom of light.

"Don't move!"

The security guard planted his knee in the small of Picard's back and shoved the captain flat against the deck. The air was

knocked out of his lungs by the impact, and a raw scrape on his cheek burned hotly as his face was ground into the short fibers of the carpet. Picard battled for breath against the crushing weight of the body pinning him down.

"The unDiWahn have severed the communication link ..." Riker's voice came from a direction behind and above where Picard lay, so the first officer must have taken over the tactical console. "... and the

fleet appears to be retreating."

Pinpoints of colored light were forming on the captain's retinas when Riker finally said, "We did it!"

The guard released his hold.

With a soft groan of relief, Picard rolled over onto his back and sucked in a lungful of

air. When the dancing spots had faded away,

he made a weak attempt to sit up and discovered

that his ribs were painfully bruised. Two security guards grabbed hold of his arms and pulled him up to a standing

position.

"Sorry, sir," said a third guard as she hastily brushed off the front of the captain's

tunic. "I guess we got a little carried away."

Picard mustered a wan smile to allay their

anxiety, but his first words were directed to the ship's

intercom. "Bridge to transporter room.

Good

job, Chief."

"Thank you, Captain," replied

O'Brien. A flash of white light exploded in front of the helm for a second time. "I enjoy a spot of fancy work now and then."

The entire crew erupted into laughter, shattering the tension that had gripped them all during the confrontation with the unDiWahn. Picard led a round of appreciative applause, but even after the clapping ended, high spirits persisted. Worf sauntered back to his tactical station, the security squads jostled their way off the bridge, and Riker vaulted over the aft deck railing to land with a heavy thud in front of the captain.

"Your bluff worked!" exulted Riker.

"They
really believe Worf destroyed Data and
the
Heart."

Picard tugged at his rumpled tunic.

"Yes, Number One, it seems that--"

"Captain," cut in Worf. "The
unDiWahn fleet has halted its retreat.

All vessels are holding position at five
hundred thousand kilometers, just
outside of
phaser range."

This statement hit Picard with greater
force than
any physical blow. Robbed of speech by
bitter
disappointment, the captain whirled
around to stare at

the viewscreen. The unDiWahn ships
sparkled
like metallic sequins scattered through
space.

"At least we've bought some time,
Captain,"
said Riker in a subdued whisper.
But time to do what? wondered Picard.
Only
minutes had passed since the Heart had
been
taken from him, yet he could already feel
his empty
hands aching to hold the stone again.
What if I must destroy it after all?

Master Kierad@an stared out the port
window of

his cabin, studying the Appointed Place. He had no interest in the star, just its single orbiting satellite. The comet was a cosmic hourglass, and the length of its tail indicated that valuable time had been lost.

"Do they take us for fools, Master?" The sound of Daramad@an's heavy tread traced the admiral's progress back and forth from one end of the room to the other. "That was a trick, a show of lights meant to dazzle and confuse the simpleminded. The Gem has not been destroyed!"

"No," said Kierad@an softly. "I don't sense that it has left the Dreaming in that manner."

Yet he wondered if this conviction was based on

hope rather than on truth. His mind was spinning from the

attempt to make sense of the scene he had just

witnessed. Picard was the last of the Gem-Bearers

to appear in the Dreaming; yet even though he had just

given up the stone to another being, his action had not

affected the Telling.

"Let us attack and take--"

"No!" The temptation to agree with Daramad@an was strong, but there was so little time left in which to act. Recovering the Gem by force might take too long, and the consequences of such a miscalculation would reverberate for five thousand years. "There is something different about the one they call Data. He holds the Gem without being touched by it."

Could I do the same? Do I dare take the place of someone who has already passed that test.

Kierad@an looked deep inside himself
and did not
like what he saw.

Forsaking intellect, trusting to his
instincts,
the master said, "Do not attack, Admiral.
Instead, your fleet must remain in
position
to ensure that the Enterprise does not
leave before the
Appointed Time."

"But I thought our mission was to take
possession
of the Gem!"

I thought so, too. "We must trust that
Picard will aid the Gem to fulfill its
destiny." If the captain failed in his task,

the
Gem would have to wait yet again to
complete its
journey.

"You speak in riddles, Master."

Kierad@an gestured to the port window.

"Watch. You will understand soon
enough."

When Picard stepped inside his ready
room,

his gaze was drawn unerringly to the
Heart. His

fears that it might have been damaged by
the

intraship transport were eased by the
sight of the

stone nestled in the crook of Data's arm.

"We're at a stalemate with the unDiWahn," explained Picard when Data looked up from his examination of the wall aquarium. Evidently the android considered the Heart an object of less interest than a fish swimming idly in place. "However, visual communications have been severed, so it's safe for you to return to the bridge."

Data acknowledged the news with an impassive nod. "Thank you, Captain."

I chose to give it up.
That knowledge did not lessen Picard's
sharp pangs
of jealousy as he watched Data carry the
Heart
across the room. Each step brought the
two of them
closer and closer. When the android
passed near enough
to touch, Picard lashed out with one arm.
The fingers of
his hand wrapped around Data's wrist,
just inches
away from the Heart.
Picard worked to keep his voice steady.
"I still
haven't discovered the reason for the

Heart 's
journey to this place. If only I could
dream
one more time ..."

"Captain, we agreed that it would be
best if
I retain possession of the Heart. I do not
think
we should change that arrangement."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Picard
forced himself to release his hold on the
android's arm
and walk away.

Heedless of direction, the captain ended
up at
the ready room window. Picard studied
the scene
outside the starship to distract himself

from regrets.

According to Worf's calculations, the comet was

approaching perihelion, its closest distance to the

white dwarf, and thus the height of brilliance for

its gaseous tail.

Catching a glimpse of the Heart's reflection

in the window, Picard's thoughts rocketed back

to the events of the last hour. On the bridge, when

the time came to actually let go of the stone, he had

tried to fend off Data. Only the android's

superior strength had ensured that the staged event was resolved according to plan.

"Data, you'd better leave--"

"Bridge to Captain Picard," called out Riker. "Sensors have detected an ion disturbance off the port bow."

Somewhere beyond the comet, Picard spotted a pinprick of gleaming light. It was surrounded by a shimmering aura of radiant energy.

"Indications are that a wormhole is forming out there."

"A wormhole?" whispered Picard to himself.

A split second later, the pinprick expanded into a glowing sphere, then exploded outward. He found himself staring into the gaping maw of a tunnel that had bored its way through light-years of space.

"Data, that's it!" Picard marveled at the ingenuity of those who had built the Guardian of Forever. "The comet is merely a herald for the wormhole's appearance. If the Heart passes through that cosmic gate, it will be sown in some far

distant galaxy."

"That is an interesting hypothesis, Captain."

"No, Data, this is more than just a theory; it is the fulfillment of a dream." Tapping his comm insignia, the captain said, "Picard to transporter chief. Mr. O'Brien, I have one last miracle for you to perform." Moments later, Picard listened to the high whine of the transporter beam at his back. Without looking, he knew, he could feel in his very bones, that Data's hands were now empty.

Pressing his palms flat against the
window's
cold surface, the captain searched in
vain for
some glimpse of the Heart's
reappearance. The
stone was too small and too dark for him
to trace
its passage through the vast tunnel.
As the comet passed perihelion and
began its
long fall toward night, the ring of the
wormhole
rippled and quavered, then collapsed.
This
fleeting channel into another galaxy was
gone, and

it would not return for another five thousand years.

With the shuddering breath of a man waking from a long sleep, Picard pulled away from the window.

"Our part in this story has ended now, Data."

CHAPTER 34

"We are being hailed by the unDiWahn," said

Worf.

Picard nodded and turned toward the main
viewscreen.

With one word, Kierad@an could order

his forces
to advance and destroy the Enterprise in
a storm
of fire. Picard had accepted his own
death as the
price for the Heart's escape, but the loss
of his
ship and crew filled him with bitter
regret.

The master appeared. His face bore a
serene
smile.

"Good-bye, Gem-Bearer," said
Kierad@an.

"Our guardianship is over, so it is time
for us
to leave this place."
Before the captain could reply, the

leader of the
Faithful had faded off the bridge
viewscreen,
displaced by an image of deep space.
"Do you think he means it?" asked Riker.
"Are they really leaving?"
The captain nodded. Somehow the
unDiWahn
had sensed the stone's passage through
the wormhole.
He would have expected knowledge of
its loss to trigger a
violent retaliation against the Enterprise,
yet
Kierad@an had addressed him with
respect.
Gem-Bearer. It seemed a hollow title

to Picard now that the Heart was gone.
A patch of color flashed across the
screen,
then another. One by one, the unDiWahn
ships were
breaking away from their spherical
formation to gather
around their flagship. When the last
vessel had
reached the tail end of the swarm, they
all took
flight. Soon distance worked its magic,
and the
deadly fleet was transformed into a
cloud of
butterflies fluttering away on a summer
breeze.

In their wake, however, the Faithful had left

behind a lumbering stepchild.

"We are being hailed by the USS Sullivan," announced Worf.

"On screen, Lieutenant."

The view shifted once again, this time to the

bridge of a starship. Picard winced when he

took a close look at the man sitting in the captain's chair. He had a greenish-purple bruise on his forehead and a jagged scratch down

one cheek. "You look like hell, Richard."

"Oh, these are old wounds, Jean-Luc,"

said

Captain Mycelli, shrugging off his injuries.

"As soon as the unDiWahn fleet cut loose, the Dynasians surrendered peacefully.

I'm back in command of the Sullivan."

"Do you need additional security?" asked

Riker.

"No, the ringleader is in custody, and ..."

Mycelli was rendered speechless by the sight of

Data returning to his place at the helm.

He stared at the android for several seconds, then

looked back to Picard. "I look

forward to reading your mission report,

Captain."

"I'm sure you're not the only one, Captain," said Picard with a wry smile. To his relief, however, Mycelli did not ask

for details, and the exchange of further amenities was brief.

"Number One," said Picard when contact with the Sullivan had ended, "it's time for us to leave as well."

Lowering himself into the captain's chair, Picard let his first officer arrange the details of their

departure. Orders and confirmations
echoed across the
bridge until Data said, "Course laid in
for Vulcan."

The crew fell silent.

Picard had tested their loyalty to the
limit

on this mission, so he could hardly
resent their

anxiety as they waited for him to utter
one

crucial word.

"Engage."

Anger was not a useful emotion for a
diplomat,

reflected Ambassador Tommas as she
entered

the security complex of the Sullivan.
Allowing
such a simplistic emotion to overwhelm
her thoughts
would only hinder her analysis of the
Dynasian
situation.

Damn him!

The hijacking of the starship was
essentially a
political act, yet she had been personally
betrayed by Warden Chandat's actions.

Trust was
an integral component of forging ties
between the
member planets of the Federation, and
that link began

between individuals. How could she reconcile her deep respect for Keyda Chandat with the unpleasant fact that he had taken advantage of her overtures of friendship? Steeling herself for the coming confrontation, Tommas stepped up to the portal of a security cell.

On the other side of the glowing frame, the warden was seated on a narrow cot. Some prisoners might slump or lounge in captivity, but he held himself erect, as if overseeing an invisible

council. Even in detention the man appeared to be in complete control of his surroundings; however, his followers were not so self-assured. After Chandat's surrender, any effective resistance from the other academics had collapsed entirely. "Good evening, Ambassador," said Chandat with a gracious nod of his head. Tommas could not bring herself to echo the warden's civility. "For the Faculty's crime against Starfleet, our Council has ruled that Dynasia will be barred from admission

to the Federation
for at least a century."

"A century?" He appeared curiously
unruffled by this lengthy sentence of
punishment. If
anything, the corners of his mouth turned
upward with
smug satisfaction.

"Warden, I don't believe you
comprehend the
severity of your offenses."

"Of course, I do, Ambassador."

Uttering a sigh of exasperation, the
Dynasian
leaned forward and spoke in the didactic
tone of a
professor instructing an especially dim
student. "A century of grace will ease

the pressures that have splintered the Faculty into warring factions. With time, when the conservative members have all died off, a new generation of Dynasians may choose to reapply for admission to the Federation ... and deserve it."

For the first time, Tommas realized how seriously she had underestimated the warden's commitment to his people. "You planned this outcome from the beginning."

Chandat's smile broadened. "My scheme

was
nearly undone by the appearance of the
unDiWahn,
but fortunately Captain Picard's clever
ruse
convinced them to retreat, and it gave me
an
excuse to surrender the Sullivan.
Historians may record this foiled grab
for the
Gem as my greatest failure, yet the stone
has
granted me my heart's desire I have
restored peace to my planet."

As a counterpoint to inner reflection, the
ancient Iconian engineers had also
designed

an observation chamber for looking outward. The room was missing any flight controls, so the curving transparent walls served no functional purpose beyond fostering contemplation of the universe.

Kierad@an was deeply grateful for the change of scenery after the prolonged examination of his own soul.

Over the days of their return journey to DiWahn, he would have the freedom to enjoy this expansive vista of stars.

The admiral of the fleet was less

inclined
to philosophical musings. After a
cursory
glance to check the formation of the
armada trailing behind the
flagship, Daramad@an continued his
argument against
their retreat. "But Master, the powers of
the
Gem could have carried our people back
to the grandeur of
our Iconian ancestors."
"We fell from that height because Jiak
held on
to the Gem too long. Our duty as
Guardians
was to make atonement for his
misjudgment, not to repeat

past mistakes."

This had been the consensus of a long line of masters, and Kierad@an had adhered to the spirit, if not the letter, of their directive. He had forsaken the honor of personally sending the Gem on its way through the wormhole, but then he had also avoided the temptation to keep it for another five thousand years.

A heavy sigh from Daramad@an signaled an acceptance, if not an understanding, of

his leader's
wisdom. "Having left this battlefield
empty-handed, must the Order of the
Faithful disband?"

"No, Admiral, there is a great deal of
work
still to be done. A new era has begun for
the
descendants of dead Iconia. You and I
will
return to a country that is at peace with
its
neighbors for the first time in centuries;
your fleet
will serve the needs of our planet, not a
war-mongering king. Our store of
knowledge will be shared with
all who seek it."

Iconia's scattered children had spent too many centuries resisting their fate. With some sadness, but even greater pride, Master Kierad@an announced, "The unDiWahn are now the DiWahn."

Ten-Forward provided one of the best scenic views aboard the Enterprise, but tonight Picard had been unsettled by a sense of vulnerability when he entered the lounge. Halfway through dinner, he angled his chair to avoid looking out

the
spacious windows. After that, his sense
of dread
gradually dissipated.

"Earl Grey?" asked Guinan as she
passed
by the table.

"Yes, please," said Picard. "Most
definitely Earl Grey."

For some reason the mention of tea
touched off the
memory of a sharp, bitter taste. The
basis of
this odd association hovered just out of
reach.

"Jean-Luc?"

He blinked, then realized that he had
been staring

at his dinner companion without truly seeing her.

At least Beverly was smiling at his distraction.

It was a generous reaction considering he

had invited the doctor to join him, then proceeded

to lapse into longer and longer silences.

"Jean-Luc, why don't we--"

"Here you are." Guinan set a steaming cup of

tea down in front of the captain, then rushed

away before he could thank her. She had been

especially attentive this evening, which

was her way of
expressing affection.
Picard wrapped his hands around the
warm, round
cup. "You were saying?"
"Hmm? I don't remember."
"Why don't we ..." he prompted.
"Oh, yes. Why don't we call it a
night. You're obviously exhausted."
He fought against the sudden urge to
yawn, but
lost. When his mouth had stopped its
convulsive
gaping, he said, "I suppose you're right. I
have
quite a bit of sleep to catch up on."
This admission of weariness seemed to
sap away

the last of his strength. He tried to sip his tea,
but the weight of the cup was too much for him to lift more than a few inches off the table.

"Come on, Captain," said Beverly, rising from her chair. "I'll see you to your cabin."

"According to ancient etiquette," muttered Picard, "that's supposed to be my line."

Despite this half-hearted protest, he let the doctor take hold of his arm and guide him out of Ten-Forward.

By the time they had threaded their way

through the ship's
corridors to the door of his cabin, Picard
could
barely lift his feet. Beverly propelled
him
through the open threshold with a gentle
push, and he
stumbled to the bedroom with his eyes
already
half-closed in anticipation of sleep.
He threw himself down on the bed
without bothering
to undress, but even though his body was
spent, his
mind clung tenaciously to consciousness.
For the first time since he had touched
the Heart,
he was alone in the darkened cabin.

No more dreams ...

After its long fight to reach the
wormhole, the
seed was working its way toward
another world. Someday
it would land on alien soil, and a new
Guardian
would grow to maturity, crystal by
crystal.

Picard's hands clenched, then relaxed.

The
aching hunger to touch the Heart's rough
surface was
fading away.

His sharply etched memories of other
hands that
had cupped its weight--of Kessec and

Halaylah, of a dying Andorian healer
and an
exultant Romulan queen--all these were
dimming
as well. He could recall the shriveled
face
of the Collector in her chamber, but he
had lost
the image of her in life; and there had
been a young
Vulcan scrambling through a field of
fallen
soldiers, but Picard no longer
remembered where
the boy was going or why.
Ko N'ya. One bearer lingered long
enough in his

mind to whisper its name for the last time.

"It's gone, T'Sara," said Picard softly. "The blood has finally stopped flowing."

Then he fell into a dreamless sleep.

Epilogue

Camenae snapped the towel into the air to shake off any dust, then plucked a tumbler out of the shipping carton and wiped away the packing foam. When the glass sparkled once again, she tucked it into a low shelf beneath the bar. Guinan had donated the glassware to the new venture; Anlew-Is had imported the counter from Orion in payment of his past debts; and the two tables and five chairs in the middle of the lounge were

on temporary loan from the Starfleet office.

Miyakawa had cheerfully acknowledged that she

wouldn't have time to sit down for at least the next two years.

Camenae snapped the towel again, then picked

up a long-stemmed wineglass. Although the commander was

driving the base reconstruction effort with a manic

zeal that probably would win her a promotion

to commodore before the year was out, a few amenities

were still lacking. Sonic dishwashers, for instance.

The doors to the room slid open, and a young man

peered inside. He hesitated for a moment, taken

aback by the sparsely furnished interior, then

evidently took courage from the presence of other

customers and crossed the threshold.

The Do or Die was not officially open for

business, but a few people had already drifted inside

this morning, content just to sit and talk.

There was

only one familiar face in the group of
Rigelians who had settled at one table.
Some
of the old customers had been killed
when
Smelter's Hold was destroyed; others,
like the
bartender, had left during the evacuation
and never
bothered to come back. Camenae could
have used some
extra help with setting up the new
establishment,
but unfortunately Miyakawa paid better
wages.
The newcomer sidled up to the bar. At
close

quarters, he looked even younger than she had first thought. Beneath the furrows of his brow, his round face wore the anxious, earnest look of a child trying to act like an adult. He tossed a credit chip onto the counter with an awkward imitation of nonchalance. Camenae glanced down at the payment, then smiled. "My drinks aren't that expensive." "I didn't come here for a drink. I heard you could give me some information." He

shoved the credit
chip closer to her.

"What kind of information do you want?"
she
asked.

"I'm trying to find a Vulcan named
T'Sara."

With a sigh, Camenae said, "I can't take
your
money for that information. Everyone on
this starbase has
heard of T'Sara's death."

The boy's violet skin flushed a deep
indigo, and he bowed his head as if in
sorrow.

"I'm sorry," she said, with a frown of
discomfort at his reaction. "I didn't
realize

you knew her."

"I didn't." Yet when he lifted his head, his eyes were filled with pain. "I read that she

once visited my homeworld, and I had hoped

to talk to her about her trip."

Camenae expected the boy to take back the

credit chip and leave, but he swallowed hard and

dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"So tell me about the Dream Gem instead. I

need to know where it is."

Camenae finished polishing the

wineglass, then
she slid the chip back across the counter.
"You're
in luck. Someone else has already paid
that bill,
and she gave me permission to answer
your question free
of charge."

His eyes brightened with anticipation.
"The Gem is gone," said Camenae.

"Gone
beyond the reach of any being in this
galaxy."

He shook his head angrily, refusing
to believe. She shrugged and picked up
yet
another glass to clean.

"You don't understand--I must find it!"

said the
young man.

"And if you don't?"

"I must! The Gem is a part of my
heritage. It once belonged to my people,
and I would
give my life for the chance to get it
back."

"You're too late to make that sacrifice."
Camenae stopped in mid-motion. "Why
does this
mean so much to you?"

At first it seemed the boy would not
answer, but
at last he said, "T'Sara would have
understood ...

I'm the last of the Ikkabar and ..." Some

strong
emotion choked off his next words.
"No, don't stop now," said Camenae
softly. "Tell me more. Perhaps I can
help."

She set aside the glass, leaned her
elbows
on the bar counter, and began to listen.
THE END

