

Aldelmara

by

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Prologue

"Doctor Delvin! Please respond!" Kira Nerys drummed her fingers on the runabout's communications console. She had been sitting in orbit, trying every hailing frequency, her hopes of receiving a signal from the planet below fading. She was not going to wait any longer. She beamed what little information she had back to the station, then stepped into the transporter.

Starbase 621

His mind was one among many, a teardrop in a tsunami. He was helpless to do anything but go where the tide took him. Resistance was futile. And so, he simply stood in the Borg cube and watched as it fired its weapons again, and again, and again, using the knowledge of Starfleet systems and tactics from his brain to efficiently carve all of the attacking vessels to pieces, leaving the crews to meet their ends in the emptiness of space...

Captain Jean-Luc Picard grit his teeth and killed the memory. Even though it had been years since his rescue and recovery from the Borg, images from that time still popped unbidden into his mind from time to time. Counselor Troi had told him that they would likely remain with him for the rest of his life.

He often wondered if the memories were instigated by the bits of Borg nanotechnology that had become fused to his nervous system, far too integrated to safely remove. Doctor Crusher had told him that they posed no threat; that they seemed to enhance and protect certain aspects of his physiology. And yet, she had also told him that she didn't fully understand them, and that they might have unexpected effects. He assumed that it was this nanotechnology that gave him the ability - whenever he was close enough - to hear the Borg collective communicating.

Doctor Crusher had offered to search for ways to block the Borg technology, and Counselor Troi had offered to teach him techniques to lessen the effect of the memories, or perhaps even to stop them entirely. He had refused. Those remnants of that time gave him an added focus and determination to make certain that the Borg did not succeed in assimilating the Federation. *I wonder if the Counselor knows that there's still one memory that I've never divulged,* he mused.

He took a sip of his tea and frowned. *The replicators on this station need adjusting. The Bergamot is much too strong.*

The viewport of the executive lounge was positioned so he could see just a small part of the *Enterprise* as it sat docked with the station. It would take several more hours to complete engine maintenance and to finish loading supplies. He had decided to take the opportunity to renew his acquaintance with Commodore Tully. *I wonder what's keeping him.*

The door slid open and an ensign walked in. "Captain Picard?" She walked over to his table. "Commodore Tully requests that you meet him in conference room one."

Picard stood. "Very well, ensign." He followed her to a turbolift, up several levels, and down a busy corridor to the conference room door. When they entered, Picard observed Commodore Tully seated at a long table, staring at a monitor on the far wall that showed a Starfleet office with a panoramic view of San Francisco bay. Someone was standing in that office, back to the monitor, talking to others out of visual range.

The ensign announced him: "Commodore Tully, Captain Picard." She then turned and left.

It had been over three years since Picard had been in the same room as Dayquan Tully, but the Commodore's large presence had not changed. "Jean-Luc!" he boomed, standing and walking over to shake the captain's hand. "It's good to see you again!" He motioned to the table. "Have a seat. Would you like some tea? We have the best Earl Grey in the quadrant - I had the engineers dial up the Bergamot to give it an extra citrus punch."

"No, thank you," replied the captain as he selected a chair.

Tully returned to his seat, saying "We'll get right to it, then. Computer, inform Admiral Hartha that Captain Picard has arrived."

A few seconds later the person on the monitor turned around and stared out at Picard and Tully. Picard recognized her immediately: Admiral Briel Hartha, current head of Starfleet Science. "Just a moment," she said, then turned back, looking at someone out of visual range. "Inform them that I will contact them in a few minutes. Dismissed." She turned back and formally acknowledged the men in the conference room. "Commodore, Captain."

"Admiral," they replied without added conversation, taking the cue from her that this was not a time for pleasantries.

"Captain Picard," she began without preamble, "what do you know about the Aldelmarans?"

"The Aldelmarans?" It took him a second to dredge the name up from his memory. "They were a humanoid people of the Lytherian period, approximately 24,000 years ago."

"Is that everything?" she pressed.

"No sir," he replied, as his readings started coming back to him. "The Aldelmarans were a scattered people. Their artifacts have been found on several hundred planets to date, and indicate that no more than a dozen or so Aldelmarans lived on any of them. There are three theories about this: one, that the Aldelmarans purposely scattered themselves throughout the galaxy to better

ensure survival of the species; two, that they were simply a nomadic people who ran out of room on their home planet and expanded their wanderings; or three, that they were fleeing a threat to their entire population." He paused to dredge up more information. "According to recovered texts of the time by the Galasians and others, after scattering themselves for centuries, all of the Aldelmarans returned to their homeworld, and then disappeared - one of the great mysteries of archaeology."

"And the artifacts you mentioned. What do you know of them?"

"Most of them are items of everyday living, along with some data crystals, tools, and a few objects that are not wholly understood. I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to examine some Aldelmaran artifacts in Doctor Galen's class at Starfleet, and I have viewed others at various museums throughout the quadrant." He then added, "But if you need more information, you should contact Doctor Roderick Delvin. He is the foremost expert on Aldelmara."

"Ah," she said, leaning back. "Before I address that, let me ask you another question." She paused. "Captain, what if the Aldelmarans weren't nomads or refugees? What if they were conquerors?"

Picard raised an eyebrow at the thought. *Conquerors? What type of technology would let a handful of people take over an entire planet? And repeat that on hundreds, or more likely thousands, of worlds?* "That is...a fascinating theory," he replied. "Is there any evidence of this?"

"There is," she answered. "Doctor Delvin has discovered what he believes to be strong evidence of a planet-conquering weapon. Shortly after that discovery, he was able to trace the Aldelmarans back to what he thinks was their home planet. I sent him there to continue his research. And now he and a Bajoran liaison officer are missing on that planet." She leaned forward. "Captain, I want someone with knowledge of the Aldelmarans on the rescue team. I am currently tracking down and contacting Starfleet archaeologists, but so far I have not been able to find any who can tell me much more about the Aldelmarans than you just did. I have no more time, and you are closest to the situation. Report to Deep Space Nine immediately."

Deep Space Nine. Picard's mind travelled back to the initial Starfleet deployment on the former Cardassian station, when he had assigned a young commander to take charge. *Benjamin Sisko. Has he forgiven me for the death of his wife?* Picard quickly brought his focus back to the admiral and said, "The *Enterprise's* engines are undergoing maintenance. I will have everything put back into working order as quickly as possible."

Admiral Hartha shook her head. "We don't need the *Enterprise* on this mission. Just you. Commodore Tully?"

"The *Swift* is ready for launch," he said. "I can have the captain on his way in three minutes."

"Good," she replied. "Captain Picard, the rescue mission is Captain Sisko's. Your mission is to seek out Aldelmaran artifacts and confiscate them for Starfleet. I don't need to remind you that if the Aldelmarans did have planet-conquering weapons, it is imperative that we get to them before the Dominion. Hartha out." The screen went blank.

Tully stood. "This way, captain."

As Picard followed the Commodore, Tully said, "The Admiral contacted me just minutes ago and told me to get my fastest ship ready, and then she had me summon you to the conference room. I had no idea she was going to send you on a hunt for ancient weapons. Is there anything you need before you leave?"

"Just one thing," the captain said as he tapped his communicator. "Picard to Riker."

"Riker here," came the immediate reply.

"Will, I've just been given a mission."

"How soon do we leave?"

"I leave immediately," Picard answered, picturing his first officer's raised eyebrows at that statement. "Download everything we have on an ancient race called the Aldelmarans and beam it to me on a science tricorder. When the *Enterprise* completes maintenance, proceed to Deep Space Nine. I will contact you there."

There was only the slightest hesitation before Riker responded. "Understood."

"Picard out." He and Commodore Tully finished making their way to the shuttlebay, where Tully led Picard toward a modified scout ship that, Picard observed, had been outfitted with a class 7 warp drive. A lieutenant stood at the entryway into the ship; he came to attention as the captain and commodore approached.

"This is Lieutenant Phinean," said Tully. "He will be your pilot to Deep Space Nine."

"Lieutenant," Picard said in greeting.

"Captain," acknowledged the lieutenant before turning and heading into the ship.

Picard turned to the commodore. "I hope to have more time to visit when I next get a chance to stop here."

"It's the best starbase in Starfleet," answered Tully. "If you stay awhile you won't want to leave." He held out his hand. "Good luck, Jean-Luc."

Picard shook the commodore's hand and entered the cruiser. He glanced around, then decided to sit at the navigation station. *Although there's not much navigation needed*, he thought, *with Deep Space Nine just a quick hop away at maximum warp*.

"Whenever you're ready, sir," said the Lieutenant.

Before Picard could answer, his communicator chirped. "Data here, captain. I have the information you requested. Beaming it to you now." A second later, a tricorder appeared on the navigation console.

"Thank you, Mr. Data," he replied. He turned to the pilot. "Take us out, Lieutenant."

Deep Space Nine

Personal log, stardate 50138.4. So much has happened since I came to this station, and I am not the man I was. I have - slowly - come to terms with the death of Jennifer at Wolf 359. I have not yet, however, fully come to terms with the Starfleet captain who was instrumental in her death. I do not believe that I will feel as hostile toward Jean-Luc Picard as I did when he last came aboard this station, but I will never truly be able to forgive him until I understand more fully why he could not do something - anything! - to resist the Borg.

Captain Benjamin Sisko arrived at the docking bay to find Commander Worf already there and staring through the duraglass of the airlock doors. "Looking forward to seeing your old captain?" he asked.

"Captain Picard is the..." Worf began, then stopped and looked at Captain Sisko. "...is *one* of the finest humans I know."

The outer airlock door began to open. "I hope he's worth the delay," said Sisko. "We could have been underway two hours ago."

The inner door rolled open, and Captain Picard stepped into the station. "Welcome aboard, captain," Sisko said formally.

"Thank you, captain," replied Picard. "It's good to see you again, Worf."

"And you, sir" said the Klingon.

"Now that you're here," Sisko began before realizing how frustrated he sounded, and toning his voice down, "we should get underway immediately. I have the *Defiant* standing by."

"Yes, by all means," agreed Picard. "Lead the way."

It was a short walk to where the *Defiant* was docked and ready to go, and Sisko took the time to start filling Picard in on the situation. "Yesterday, Admiral Hartha contacted me to tell me that a Doctor Roderick Delvin was arriving at the station, and he was to be dropped off at coordinates he would provide. She gave me no other information.

"When the doctor arrived, he gave me coordinates in the gamma quadrant." Sisko frowned. "I never like it when Starfleet holds back information. But, as ordered, I had Major Kira take the doctor to the coordinates, even with all of the issues we've been having with the Dominion. She left him on the only inhabitable planet in a system at the edge of Dominion space.

"We agreed that he would make contact with Deep Space Nine every eight hours. Then, early today, we lost contact. Kira volunteered to return and investigate. Four hours ago we received a message telling us that she hadn't heard from the doctor, she couldn't locate him from orbit, and she was beaming down. And then we lost contact with her."

They reached the airlock. "Three hours ago, I began assembling a rescue team. When I informed Starfleet of what was going on, Admiral Hartha contacted me and told me to wait for an archaeologist. She contacted me again two hours ago and told me you were the archaeologist."

"A matter of coincidence," said Picard, as they walked onto the *Defiant*. "Apparently, I was the closest member of Starfleet with the required knowledge."

They reached the bridge, where Worf seated himself at Tactical. Sisko turned to Picard while gesturing to a seat left of the command chair. "Tactical Two is available."

"Very well," said Picard. He moved next to the seat and glanced around. Forward and to the right, a Trill female sat at the science station, with Worf next to her at tactical; in front of the captain's chair a Ferengi cadet manned the helm; and forward from his position was a familiar face, which was smiling at him.

"Welcome aboard, sir," greeted Miles O'Brien from the engineering console.

"Thank you, Chief," he replied as he sat.

"Mr. Nog," said Captain Sisko. "Take us out." Picard watched the viewscreen as the *Defiant* pivoted away from the station and accelerated.

"Take us through the wormhole," ordered Sisko. Picard watched the viewscreen as the wormhole blazed into existence and the *Defiant* headed in.

As soon as they exited into the gamma quadrant, Sisko asked, "Anything on the scanners?"

"Nothing, sir," answered Nog. Proceeding on course."

Good, thought Sisko. *Hopefully we can avoid any encounters with the Jem'Hadar*. He tapped his communicator. "Doctor Bashir, Crewman Dyer, please report to the bridge." It was time to introduce Captain Picard to the crew that would make up the rescue party.

Once everyone was assembled, Sisko introduced Picard to those who didn't already know him.

"Captain," acknowledged security crewman Dyer. "Welcome aboard, sir," said Cadet Nog, attempting to be as formal as possible. "It's wonderful to finally meet you," said Lieutenant Commander Dax. "A real pleasure," said Doctor Bashir, shaking the captain's hand. "I understand that Beverly Crusher is the Enterprise's Chief Medical Officer. Her paper on Trill anatomy was excellent - do you think there might be an opportunity for me to meet with her sometime to discuss it?"

"The Enterprise will be waiting at Deep Space Nine when we return," said Picard. "I'm sure she'd be delighted."

Doctor Bashir opened his mouth to continue, but Sisko quickly said, "Now that introductions have been made, Captain Picard, would you join me in the briefing room?" He turned and walked off the bridge. Picard followed.

Chief O'Brien watched both captains exit, then suddenly looked crestfallen. "Oh, no," he said.

"What it is, Chief?" asked Dax.

"Captain Picard. I forgot to adjust the replicators to make tea the way he likes it."

"Tea?" Nog asked.

"Yes, tea," said O'Brien. The captain likes his Earl Grey just so. Geordi and I tweaked the replicators on the *Enterprise* for a good three months before we got the flavor profile just right." He turned to his console. "Maybe I still have time."

In the briefing room, Captain Picard took a sip of his tea, grimaced, and set the cup down. "If what Admiral Hartha said is true, the Aldelmarans had a device that would let just a few of them take command of an entire planet." He glanced out the viewport, watching the stars streak by. "Even ignoring the historical value of such an artifact, it would be wise to keep it out of the hands of the Dominion - and others."

"Will you be able to identify one of these weapons if we come across it?"

Picard shook his head slightly. "I don't know. Doctor Delvin presumably did so, but studying the Aldelmarans has been his primary focus for at least fifty years."

Sisko took a sip of his raktajino. "How do you plan to conduct your mission?"

"I will start where Doctor Delvin beamed down." Picard rubbed his chin. "Since the doctor was on the same quest I've been given, it seems logical that if we find him, we'll be on the right track to find any artifacts. That is, assuming he hasn't found them already." He paused. "It seems that the Admiral is assuming the worst, sending me on this mission. If Doctor Delvin is still alive and on the planet, he is far more qualified than I to recognize Aldelmaran weapons."

"She's an admiral," observed Sisko. "She's covering her bases. At least in your case she told you what was going on." He stood and began pacing. A few moments later, he turned to Picard and said "Captain, I brought you to this room for more than a mission update. May I ask a personal question?"

Picard had been expecting this. *You can ask*, he thought as he answered "Yes," *but I still don't know exactly what I'm going to say. Although no one deserves an answer more than you - the man who lost his wife.*

Sisko stopped pacing. Now that he was alone with Picard, the question he wanted to ask became a great deal more difficult. "I...why...what did the Borg do to you? I've seen your report and the recordings of Wolf 359. But they don't explain everything. Was there nothing you could have done?"

Picard briefly considered how to begin. "When the Borg inject you with their nanoprobes," he said slowly, "you are immediately incapacitated. In my case, I woke up some time later on an operating table with the Borg neural transceiver already implanted and fully operational." *Sisko already knows this from my reports, but it's a necessary prequel to what he wants to hear.* "Once the transceiver is working, you become part of the Borg collective consciousness. This link is strongest with a local group and then expands to larger and larger aggregations of Borg, all the way to the entire collective."

Now he was getting to the crux of Sisko's question. "In almost every instance, once you are part of the collective, you are completely subsumed. But in my case, they wanted me to be the intermediary between the Borg and humanity. So although they transformed me into Locutus, they left just enough of Picard that I could see and understand what was happening."

The memory appeared once again, and he was moving through the Borg cube, his every action directed and controlled by the united power of the collective. "But although I realized what was happening, I could not act. I was abhorred, but they siphoned my knowledge into the collective as easily as watching a holonovel.

"I fought. With the sliver of individuality I had left, I fought. With all my strength, I tried to resist their directives, I tried to close my mind to them, I tried to feed them false information."

He let Sisko see the anguish he had felt. "Nothing worked."

Now, he thought. Now I need to tell him the one secret I've kept from that time. "I could see only one last option to cut them off from my mind. I tried with every fiber of my being to activate the self-destruct mechanism they put in every Borg. But they denied me even that - they easily prevented me from turning my thought into action."

His head dropped. "It wasn't until the Enterprise rescued me and severed most of my link to the collective that I could act on my own again." He looked back up at Sisko. "And I will do anything to stop them."

"Thank you, captain," said Sisko, quietly. "I needed to hear that."

Aldelmara (1)

Captain's log, stardate 50138.6. We are approaching Aldelmara. Fortune has been on our side, as we have not been detected by any Jem'Hadar ships. Hopefully we can beam down, find Kira and the doctor, and return to Deep Space Nine without drawing any Dominion attention.

"Dropping out of warp," announced Nog. The stars on the viewscreen stopped moving. "We will reach Aldelmara in three minutes."

"Anything on the scanners?" asked Sisko.

Nog checked his readings. "The runabout is in a geostationary orbit. I'm detecting no other vessels."

Dax reviewed the readings coming in to the science station. "Type K star. Two outer planets, one a gas giant and the other ice and rock. A gap of almost 700 million kilometers before reaching two inner planets, one barely in the habitable zone and the other just 49 million kilometers from the sun." She turned her attention fully to the second planet as the *Defiant* moved toward it.

"Magnify the planet," said Sisko, and immediately it filled the viewscreen. "Dax, what are you reading from the surface?"

"No signs of humanoid life. If they're down there, they're shielded from our sensors."

"Put us in orbit next to the runabout," Sisko ordered. "Sisko to Kira. Sisko to Doctor Delvin. Please respond. Dax, can you determine if their communicators are active?"

"I'm not reading any sign of communicators, active or not," she replied as she tried narrowing the sensor focus to the area where Delvin and Kira had beamed down. "There's just...nothing."

Sisko stood. "Captain Picard, Worf, Dax, with me. Nog, Mr. O'Brien, stay here and inform me immediately if you detect any Jem'Hadar in the area." He touched his communicator. "Doctor Bashir, Crewman Dyer, please join us on the transporter pad." He turned to the helm. "Cadet Nog, if Jem'Hadar prevent you from contacting me, cloak the *Defiant* and get out of here. Take the runabout with you, if you can. Chief, if we're down there for an extended time we will make contact at least once an hour. If you don't hear from us, call DS9 for help." He headed to the transporter, and a minute later the landing party stood in a small valley. There was a slight wind blowing, but not strong enough to cause much movement in the sparse, low vegetation that clung to the sides of the surrounding hills. "Spread out and begin looking for any sign of Kira and Doctor Delvin," said Sisko. "Captain Picard, you are of course free to pursue your assignment as you wish. Crewman Dyer, please accompany the captain, but keep your tricorder set to search for the missing crewmembers."

"Aye, sir," said Dyer.

Picard began scanning the area, but immediate results were negative. *I should get to high ground*, he thought, heading for the nearest hill.

"Over here," yelled the voice of Commander Worf. Picard decided to change direction and see what Worf had discovered. He headed that way, Dyer following.

When he reached Worf's position, he saw a large opening into a hill, which both Worf and Doctor Bashir were scanning. "I cannot tell how deep it runs," Worf was telling Sisko. "The cave walls are full of topline ore."

"A human touched this cave entrance," announced Bashir. "No more than two days ago."

Delvin, thought Picard.

Sisko touched his communicator. "Sisko to *Defiant*."

"*Defiant* here," came O'Brien's voice.

"Chief, we've found a cave, and it's loaded with topline ore. It's possible that Delvin and the major went in, which would explain why we can't detect them. We're going in, but I'm leaving crewman Dyer at the entrance. Contact him if anything needs our attention and he'll find us."

"Aye, sir," O'Brien answered.

Sisko turned to the assembled group. "It looks like we'll only have line-of-sight scanning and communications in there. Stay close." He headed in, followed by Worf, Dax, Bashir, and Picard.

As they moved deeper into the cave, the sunlight from the entrance faded with each step. But the cave did not become dark. "Bioluminescent fungi," Bashir muttered while scanning the walls. He

was so intent on his scanning that he almost walked into a part of the wall that jutted out into the tunnel. "Captain," he said as he scanned that section.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Someone touched the wall here, no more than ten hours ago. A Bajoran."

Kira, thought Sisko. "Are you picking up any other signs?"

The doctor continued scanning as he walked forward. "Yes, sir, they definitely came this way."

"This cave was excavated," Dax added as she studied her tricorder readings. "The density of the rock precludes it forming by natural processes."

"How old?" asked Sisko.

"Initial readings are twenty to thirty thousand years," answered Dax.

Consistent with the timeframe of the Aldelmarans, thought Picard.

Farther on, the tunnel narrowed, and they were forced to walk single file for perhaps two hundred meters. Then the passageway opened into a large, roughly circular cavern with other tunnels branching off in various directions. A huge pillar dominated the center of the cavern. It was approximately five meters tall and at least that in diameter, it had the appearance of being carved from rock, and it was covered in faded symbols. The archaeologist in Picard felt a rush of excitement as he immediately moved toward it, tricorder held forward. "The symbols are Aldelmaran," he announced.

As Picard scanned the pillar, Sisko turned to the rest of the group. "Everyone pick a tunnel and follow it for as long as you can while still remaining in line of sight with this cavern," he ordered. "Then return." He headed for one of the tunnels as a chorus of "Aye, sir" reached him.

The tunnel he had chosen angled slightly downward. He moved down it slowly, scanning the floor, walls, and ceiling, finding no sign that Delvin or Kira came this way.

He was so intent on his scanning that many minutes later, when he finally thought to look back, he was out of sight of the cavern. *Well, I guess one of the privileges of being captain is that you can ignore your own orders.* He turned and walked back, where he found that Doctor Bashir had returned ahead of him and was looking around the cavern in all directions. "Captain Sisko!" Bashir exclaimed. "Where's Captain Picard?"

The Defiant (1)

Once the landing party had beamed down, O'Brien took the captain's chair while additional crew filled the bridge stations. Then he turned his attention to the situation at hand.

"Alright Nog," he said. "Time for a lesson. What did I tell you was the first rule of being a Starfleet engineer?"

"Be prepared for anything," the cadet responded.

"That's right. And that rule applies in other circumstances as well. What are you doing while we wait on the captain?"

"I'm maintaining open communications with Crewman Dyer," answered the Cadet. "And I'm scanning for any signs of the Jem'Hadar."

"Good," nodded O'Brien, "but while we have time, we should make contingency plans. What if we lose communications with Crewman Dyer? What if the captain and the others disappear like Major Kira and the doctor? What if the Jem'Hadar show up? We need to be as prepared as possible."

Nog thought back to his studies. "If we lose contact with Crewman Dyer, we should wait to see if the landing party reestablishes contact."

"And?" prompted O'Brien.

Nog scrunched his face in thought, then answered "I don't know."

"The captain said they would make contact every hour. But we should be able to contact Dyer at any time. If communication is cut off for more than a few minutes I would be inclined to beam over to the runabout and take it down to the surface. Maybe its scanners will find something a tricorder can't."

Nog smiled. "I like that plan."

"Good," said O'Brien. "Now, what if we maintain communications with Crewman Dyer, but there's no word from the others?"

"We call for help like the captain said," answered Nog.

"And then what?" asked the chief.

"And then...we take the runabout down to the surface."

"You're learning, cadet." O'Brien moved on to the next scenario. "We have orders to run if we detect Jem'Hadar heading this way, but what if we aren't able to get away?"

"We fight!"

"Ah, the enthusiasm of a cadet," smiled O'Brien. "But you're probably right. Jem'Hadar typically don't stop to give you a 'how do you do,' especially if they don't have a Vorta with them. So how do we maximize our chances in battle?"

This was something Nog had studied well at Starfleet Academy. "The Jem'Hadar are not subtle in their tactics. They will attempt to destroy us in direct confrontation, using all weapons at their disposal including their ships themselves. The *Defiant's* shields and maneuverability are the keys. If we can keep dodging their attacks while putting ourselves in position to fire at their weak points, we can defeat multiple Jem'Hadar fighters."

"Easier said than done," said O'Brien. "But correct. But one ship or a squadron, they'll jam our communications. So how do we get a message back to the station?"

Nog stared at the viewscreen, at the planet hanging below the *Defiant* and the runabout, and had an inspiration. "We could send the runabout toward the wormhole at warp. Once it got outside of their jamming range, it could relay the message."

"Good, cadet, we'll make an officer out of you yet." O'Brien stood, walked over to a console, and began entering commands. *We'll have to keep the Jem'Hadar engaged long enough for the runabout to get out of jamming range*, he thought. *But what if we can't?* He thought for a minute, then decided to try a trick that Ray Boone had taught him back when they served on the *Rutledge*. He stood and said "I'll be in Engineering for a few minutes."

Aldelmara (2)

Captain Picard was barely aware of the others heading down the various tunnels as he scanned the pillar. Many of the symbols were faded beyond the ability of his tricorder to pick up. *We'll need to come back with more specialized scanners*. There were large characters at the top of the pillar that remained decipherable, however, and translated to "Those Who Remained". So, thought Picard, *perhaps not all Aldelmarans headed out into the galaxy. Some stayed home*.

Although he didn't have the bioscanning capability of Doctor Bashir's medical tricorder, there was no doubt that he was detecting several recent touches on the pillar. *I'm sure Doctor Delvin examined it thoroughly, if he had the time*.

He continued scanning, top to bottom, step by step, around the pillar, reveling in the sense of history. *These people were extinct for ten millennia before humans formed their first civilization, and yet this reminder of who they were survives to this day*.

Halfway into his scanning he saw a rectangle at head height, slightly larger than his hand, made of a different material than the rest of the pillar. Was it...metal? The tricorder was giving him some odd readings, but... *that's extraordinary. A still-functioning power source, after all this time?* He reached out and touched it.

And instantly, the pillar was gone.

He was standing in what looked like -- a village square? Buildings of various heights surrounded him, and although they were mostly intact, there were obvious signs of decay. The ground was covered in - grass? No, it looked to be some kind of lichen. His immediate area was a large open space with benches, some broken sculpture, and...someone in a Bajoran uniform.

She was looking at him curiously, then asked bluntly, "Who are you? Please tell me you know how to get out of here."

"You must be Major Kira Nerys," he said. She nodded, and he continued, "Where are we?"

"Well, we seem to still be on the same planet -- the gravity is the same as on the surface. But other than that, I don't know. The topline ore is preventing me from getting a fix on our location." She gestured around them. "This cavern is more than two kilometers in diameter. Doctor Delvin has identified these ruins as Aldelmaran."

"Doctor Delvin? He's ok?"

Kira touched her communicator. "Kira to Doctor Delvin. We have a visitor."

"Really? Are we rescued?" a voice responded.

Kira looked at Picard. "Well? Are we?"

"I'm afraid not yet," he answered. "However, your fellow officers from Deep Space Nine are in the cave. Once they realize I'm gone I have every confidence they'll find us."

"No, doctor, we're not rescued yet," said Kira.

"In that case," came the reply, "I will continue my research. Out."

"You never answered my question," said Kira. "Who are you?"

"I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise," he answered. "And I see that Bajoran women are still as direct as I remember."

Kira sighed. "I'm sorry, captain. I'm just angry with myself for getting trapped here. I know better than to touch strange controls without understanding them first."

Picard smiled wryly. "You weren't the last to make that mistake."

Kira continued. "Doctor Delvin insists on exploring these ruins until someone rescues us. I've been looking for a way out. There are no tunnels, and so far the only transporter mechanism I've found is this one." She stepped to the side and behind her Picard saw a cylindrical stand, approximately a meter and a half high, with a metallic pad on the top that looked identical to the one on the pillar. A panel on the stand was open, exposing the components inside. "I've been trying to make it work but haven't had much luck. The technology is completely foreign to me."

Picard walked over to the stand and touched the pad. "What else have you discovered?" he asked. *Perhaps she's seen the weapon.*

Kira answered, "Have you noticed that it's easier to breathe in here? This chamber is somehow maintaining a Class M atmosphere, maybe because of all the lichen. And there's technology all through these buildings, although I haven't yet found any that's functioning."

"What type of technology?" asked the captain.

"Computer interfaces, replicators, a couple of hovercarts...but I can't find any power sources. I don't know what they were using to run everything."

"Interesting," said Picard. "And yet the transporter that brought us here was still functioning."

"Backup power supply maybe?" Kira speculated. "Whatever it's using, its power source is not going to help us get out of here."

Probably not, thought Picard, *and until someone finds a way out, I need to pursue my assignment.* "I wish to see Doctor Delvin," he said.

Kira waved off to the left. "He's over there somewhere. He said something about a library." She turned back to the transporter console.

Picard moved into the ruins, using his tricorder to pinpoint Delvin's location. A few minutes later he found the doctor in a side room of a large, low building. The room was lined with cabinets, and Delvin was standing at one, scanning its contents. "Doctor Delvin?" he asked as he approached.

"Just a minute, just a minute," the doctor said as he continued scanning. A few moments later he turned, and Picard observed a thin, hawk-nosed man with gray hair and piercing eyes. "Yes?"

"Doctor, I'm Jean-Luc Picard of the..."

"Picard?" The doctor interrupted. "The Picard who wrote that fascinating paper about the Ressikans?"

"Um, yes. But we can discuss that at a later time. Starfleet sent me to help you find the weapon. Have you made any progress?"

Delvin blinked. "Starfleet. Sent you. To help me find the weapon."

"Yes," said Picard. "What is the status of your search?"

Delvin didn't answer. Instead, he asked "Who in Starfleet sent you?"

"I am here on orders of Admiral Hartha."

"Hartha? Oh. Oh yes. I see. No, Picard. I have not found the weapon." He gestured at the cabinets. "I have, however, found a large data repository. There are far more Aldelmaran data crystals in this room than I've found in fifty years of searching on other planets. As you might expect, most of the data has deteriorated." He pointed to a cabinet on the wall opposite of where he had been scanning. "You can help me retrieve what's still here. Start at that cabinet."

"Doctor!" Picard said in his best command voice. "I was sent here because the Aldelmarans have a planet-conquering weapon, a weapon that you discovered. My orders are to find it. I require your assistance."

"And I will not give it!" Delvin snapped back. "This data is more important, and I'm going to recover what I can." He then continued in a quieter tone, "It could be a very long time before any archaeologist has another chance to come back here, and this planet is the culmination of my life's work. I must gather as much information as I can. Go searching for weapons, Picard, but don't drag me with you."

This doesn't seem right, thought Picard. I understand the appeal of recovering Aldelmaran data, but the weapon must come first. Delvin knows that. Admiral Hartha must have suspected that the doctor might get sidetracked when confronted with all of the archaeological discoveries to be made on the Aldelmaran homeworld. So, it was up to him. "Very well," Picard said. He turned and left, planning his search pattern in his head.

He had barely exited the building when his communicator chirped. "Kira to Captain Picard and Doctor Delvin. Please return. We're rescued."

When Picard reached the square, he found Major Kira with Captain Sisko and Jadzia Dax. "It's good to see you, Captain, Commander," he said. "How did you find us?"

"Doctor Bashir discovered you had disappeared," Sisko began, "and Jadzia found the transporter mechanism on the pillar. She said it was similar to something Tobin had worked on once."

"Tobin?"

"One of my former hosts," Jadzia answered. "I was able to connect to the interface and determine that the transporter was programmed with a single destination. The others know where we are, and if need be they can tunnel to us. But I don't think that will be necessary. I've used the power unit from my phaser to activate the transporter here, and tested it; we can return to the cave at any time."

"I am going to need more time to complete my mission," said Picard, looking at Sisko. "And I am certain Doctor Delvin will appreciate the opportunity to remain here and continue to gather additional data on this place." He looked around. "It appears that the doctor is ignoring the request to return to this spot."

"Very well," said Sisko. "We'll be waiting on the *Defiant*."

The Defiant (2)

"Shields up, charge all weapons! Mr. Nog, attack pattern omicron 3 on my command!" *Where had the Jem'Hadar come from?* wondered O'Brien as he hit a control that raised the shields over on the runabout. *They don't have cloaking devices - do they? - but somehow they managed to come up on the other side of the planet without us noticing and then approach from four directions.* He hadn't had time to contact the landing party or DS9 before communications were jammed. He hadn't even had time to cloak the ship, but that was still an option if he needed it.

"Shields up!" confirmed the cadet. "Runabout sent!"

What? "Nog, I didn't order you to send the runabout!" On the viewscreen, one of the Jem'Hadar fighters immediately gave chase. *The runabout hasn't had time to get out of range,* thought O'Brien, *and now they'll keep jamming its signals until they blow it up.* He hoped that the contingency plan he had made would work.

"I'm sorry sir!" exclaimed the cadet. "I thought I was supposed to send the runabout if Jem'Hadar appeared!"

"After we distracted them," answered O'Brien. *Why haven't they fired? Or hailed us?*

But the fighters did not attack. They took positions around the *Defiant*, and moments later the forth one returned and joined them. They just sat there, silent.

Aldelmara (3)

Once they materialized back in the cave, Jadzia immediately began scanning the transporter on the pillar. "Something wrong, old man?" he asked her.

"Not really", she said slowly, before looking up at him. "Getting the transporter to work was easy. Figuring out how it works through all the topline ore around here, that's more difficult."

"Well, if you want to stay here and puzzle it out, it's up to you. The rest of us are going to go back to the *Defiant* and wait on Captain Picard and Doctor Delvin. Worf, Kira, Doctor Bashir, let's go."

He got halfway to the exit tunnel when an unknown voice said, "I'm afraid that won't be possible." A Vorta walked into the cave, and at the same time a dozen Jem'Hadar soldiers unshrouded all around the area.

Worf reached for his phaser, and Sisko shouted "Worf! No!" Worf stopped, then held himself in check - with difficulty - as he and the others were disarmed and gathered into a group near the Vorta.

Once all the phasers were in the hands of the Jem'Hadar, the Vorta walked up to the captain. "Captain Benjamin Sisko," he said. "I am Knovan. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"It would be more of a pleasure," answered Sisko, "if you weren't pointing weapons at us." *Where is Crewman Dyer? Was he able to hide from the Jem'Hadar? And was the Defiant able to get away?*

"Merely a precaution, I assure you," said Knovan.

Sisko was familiar with Vorta - with their devious and ingratiating personalities, a result of the genetic engineering of the Founders. He attempted to bypass conversation and get directly to the point. "What do you want?"

The Vorta sighed. "Such directness. You Starfleet types never seem to have time for pleasantries. Ah, well. Tell me, why are you here?"

"I don't see that we need to explain that. Our business is our own."

The Vorta stared at Sisko for a moment, as if he was taking time to process that answer, then said "You wound me. We are all friends here." He turned to the Jem'Hadar standing next to him. "First, kill the Klingon."

The Jem'Hadar pointed his weapon. "Wait!" exclaimed Sisko.

The Vorta raised his hand, and the Jem'Hadar froze. "Yes?"

"We are here for an archaeological survey."

"How interesting! Tell me more."

"Do you see the symbols on this pillar? They belong to an ancient race called the Aldelmarans."

"Really?" The Vorta took a minute to circle the pillar, studying the markings. "Fascinating," he said as he returned to the group of Starfleet officers. "But tell me, why would Starfleet send a captain and his officers on an archaeological survey?"

"We all have scientific training," Sisko dissembled. "We are perfectly capable of an initial survey. If we find anything, the Federation will send in the archaeologists."

The Vorta laughed before pointing out the obvious flaw in Sisko's argument. "Because, of course, Starfleet officers have time for archaeological exploration while archaeologists do not." He looked around the cave, then said, "You know what makes more sense to me? That you are performing a survey - a survey of potential locations for military bases in the gamma quadrant."

Sisko stiffened and looked Knovan directly in the eyes. "I can assure you that that is not true."

The Vorta smiled a predatory smile, one that reminded Sisko of a Kryonian tiger toying with its prey. "Captain," he said, "I believe you. No. Really, I do. This planet is a horrible location for a base. And so I just have one more question."

At that moment, on the far side of the pillar, Jean-Luc Picard materialized. After assessing the task ahead, he had decided to ask Captain Sisko for volunteers to speed up the search. He appeared just in time to hear Knovan ask, "Where is Doctor Roderick Delvin?"

Picard carefully peeked around the pillar and saw the Vorta and Jem'Hadar. He quickly considered his options and then reached out and touched the transporter control.

"I'm sorry. Who?" asked Captain Sisko.

"Captain, captain," the Vorta scolded. "The Doctor Delvin you just said minutes ago that you would be waiting for. Along with, I believe you said, Captain Picard? Would that be Jean-Luc Picard of the *Enterprise*?"

Sisko was out of options. "Why are you looking for Doctor Delvin? What interest does the Dominion have in a Federation archaeologist?"

"You're stalling, captain. I simply wish to ask Doctor Delvin a few questions - nothing more. We have an interest in what he's doing here. Tell us where he is and we can all be on our way."

Sisko glanced over at the others. Doctor Bashir was looking uncomfortable, but Kira and Worf looked ready to fight. Dax gave him a slight nod. *The best crew in Starfleet*, he thought. But there were just too many Jem'Hadar to attempt to overpower them. *Today is not a good day to die*. "He is studying an Aldelmaran city," Sisko said, "in another cavern."

"There, now," said Knovan. "You can be reasonable. Where is this other cavern?" Knovan turned and looked at Dax. "Could it possibly be on the other end of the transporter that this lovely young woman spoke of? Should I bother asking you where the control is? Perhaps it's that pad I saw on the other side of the pillar?" He turned to the Jem'Hadar. "First, I need a volunteer."

The First surveyed his men, then said "Seventh. Assist the Vorta."

Aldelmara (4)

Picard quickly made his way back to the room with the memory crystals, and found Doctor Delvin still scanning. "Doctor!" he exclaimed. "We have a problem."

Delvin glanced over while continuing to scan. "What kind of problem, Picard?"

"Jem'Hadar have landed on this planet. It's only a matter of time until they find their way here. It seems they are looking for you."

Delvin stopped scanning and furrowed his brow in thought. "Damn," he finally said, looking resigned. "Ah, well, it had to happen someday."

Picard was confused. "What had to happen?"

Delvin didn't answer the question. Instead, he started entering commands into his tricorder. Then he turned to the captain. "Picard, no matter what else I am, I am an archaeologist." He ejected a chip from the tricorder and handed it over. "Whatever happens to me, my research on the Aldelmarans must be published. Come. Let us go meet the Jem'Hadar." He strode out of the building with a thoroughly puzzled Jean-Luc Picard following.

As they walked, Delvin touched a control on his tricorder and tossed it aside. They turned a corner, and Picard saw two Jem'Hadar and a Vorta in the square. The Jem'Hadar immediately raised their weapons, but the Vorta, after assessing the situation, told them to hold. "Doctor Roderick Delvin! It's so good to meet you at last," he said as the two men walked up.

"Unfortunately, I can't say the same," Delvin replied.

"Doctor, we are all friends here," said the Vorta. "But tell me - where is your tricorder? Surely a man on a scientific mission would be carrying the tool of his trade."

Delvin smiled. "I seem to have dropped it on the way here."

The Vorta sent a Jem'Hadar retrieve it. The soldier returned with a melted hunk of slag.

The Vorta's look hardened. "What are you hiding, Doctor Delvin? Well, I'm sure we can convince you to tell us."

Delvin's expression turned inscrutable. He looked around the cavern for a moment and quietly said, "I'm sure you could." He then pressed a spot on his arm with great force, and moments later collapsed onto the lichen-covered ground.

Stunned, Picard quickly knelt and felt for a pulse. *What was going on?* "He's dead."

The Vorta stared at the body for a moment, and then dispassionately said "What a shame." He shrugged. "Well, they'll be no answers from him." He turned to the Jem'Hadar. "Bring them."

One Jem'Hadar picked up Delvin's body while the other took position next to Picard. On the Vorta's command, they all used the transporter to return to the cave.

When they appeared, Dax saw Doctor Delvin in the Jem'Hadar's arms and gasped, sharing a look of horror with Kira. Bashir started toward Delvin, and was held back by a Jem'Hadar. But even from several steps away, Bashir could see that there was no movement, no respiration, no life.

"It seems you got what you came for," said Captain Sisko.

"Hardly," answered Knovan. He looked over the group of Starfleet officers. "I think it would be best if you all came with me for debriefing. I assure you that once we are done you'll be free to go."

"Thank you for your offer," answered Captain Picard, "but we decline."

"Oh, but I must insist," said the Vorta. "First, take them..." He stopped as another Jem'Hadar rushed into the cave and spoke in low tones to the First and the Vorta. "Ah," said Knovan. He turned to the two Starfleet captains. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "It is unlikely that any of you are involved in the game Doctor Delvin was playing. Perhaps it would be better if you returned to the alpha quadrant. Good day." He turned toward the tunnel. "First, bring your men. Leave Doctor Delvin here." The Jem'Hadar carrying Delvin's body dropped it, and they all filed out.

Sisko turned to Picard as Bashir rushed over to Delvin. "I wonder what caused that."

"Let's go find out," responded Picard.

When the two captains reached the tunnel entrance, they found crewman Dyer lying on the ground unconscious. Sisko tapped his communicator. "Sisko to *Defiant*."

"*Defiant* here," answered Chief O'Brien.

"Chief, what's your status?"

"The Dominion ships have just left," said O'Brien. "It's just us and some old friends up here now."

"Old friends?"

Just then Picard's communicator chirped. "Riker to Picard. Come in, Captain."

"Picard here. How did you wind up here, Will?"

"We were at Deep Space Nine when a distress signal arrived with these coordinates. We answered the call. We got most of the way here when we found a Federation class three probe hiding in the wreckage of a runabout, sending the signal. When we arrived, we found the *Defiant* surrounded by four Jem'Hadar fighters." Riker paused. "It seems the Jem'Hadar somehow got the impression that they should leave, or they might come to harm."

"The Jem'Hadar would have fought no matter the odds," stated Sisko. "But the Vorta knew he was outmatched. We should leave before they return with warships." As he said that, Worf walked out of the tunnel carrying the body of Doctor Delvin, followed by Dax, Kira, and Bashir. Bashir immediately knelt down next to crewman Dyer and began reviving him, while Worf set Delvin's body on the ground.

Sisko turned to Picard and stuck out his hand. "Captain, it was good to see you again."

"Likewise," replied Picard, completing the handshake. "I will take Doctor Delvin's body to Starbase 621. And perhaps I can find some answers as to why the Dominion was looking for him."

"Good luck," said Sisko. "If you need any assistance, you know where to find me." He tapped his communicator. "Sisko to Defiant. Six to beam up."

Picard watched them go, then looked back at the tunnel entrance. How much time did he have before the Jem'Hadar returned? He had barely begun to look for the weapon, and even with the resources of the *Enterprise* it would take some time to complete a search of the cavern. He continued weighing the odds as he knelt next to the body of Doctor Delvin, tapped his communicator, and said "Picard to Enterprise. Two to beam up."

The *Enterprise*

Once back on his ship, Picard turned care of Doctor Delvin's body over to Beverly Crusher and headed for the bridge, where he greeted his first officer. "Maintain orbit for now," he ordered. "Scan for approaching ships and let me know if you detect any. I'll be in my ready room." He walked past the question on Riker's face and through the doorway. *First things first*, he thought as he headed directly to the replicator and ordered "Tea. Earl Grey. Hot." He carried the cup carefully to his desk, where he sat, took a sip, and smiled.

He turned part of his attention to the issue of the weapon. *How much time before Dominion forces return? How much searching can be done?* At the same time, he pulled out the chip Doctor Delvin had given him and reverently placed it in the input slot on his desk. *Everything the doctor ever discovered about the Aldelmarans. His legacy.* Picard hoped he would have time to study the records over the next weeks and months.

Although it only took an instant for the first page of data to appear, by the time it did Picard was no longer paying attention to the screen. The moment he had inserted the disk, he knew what had been done - and why the Vorta had been looking for Doctor Delvin.

He rushed to the transporter room and beamed back down. It only took a few minutes find what he was looking for. He reached for it, then stopped. *What if I left it? From what we know of the Dominion, they might be able to....* The arguments raced through his mind, but there was really only one choice.

He tapped his communicator. "Picard to *Enterprise*. One to beam up."

Once back in his ready room, he called Admiral Hartha.

"Captain Picard," she greeted. "I just received notice from Captain Sisko that Doctor Delvin is dead."

"Admiral," Picard asked, "just what is going on?"

She tilted her head. "What do you mean, Jean-Luc?"

"I mean," said Picard, showing her the item he had retrieved, "that Doctor Delvin planted a Borg interplexing beacon on Aldelmara. It was activated the moment I accessed a computer chip he gave me. I...heard it.

"I can think of only one reason he would do this - to summon the Borg to the gamma quadrant and start a Borg/Dominion war." She looked shocked as he continued, "I can't begin to estimate the innocent lives that would be lost or assimilated if this had come to pass. The Federation is better than this."

Her expression hardened. "Captain, I assure you I had no knowledge of this, but it does explain certain things. Several days ago, Starfleet Intelligence approached me and explained Doctor Delvin's theory of an Aldelmaran weapon. They convinced me that it was urgent to send him to the gamma quadrant, but the orders needed to come from the Science division. They said it could put him in danger if our enemies discovered that Intelligence had sent him."

Picard answered, "So it seems the weapon was a ruse to get you to send Delvin to Aldelmara to plant this beacon. Admiral, we need to discover who devised this plan."

"Agreed," she replied. "And we also need to discover how the Dominion learned of it. I will begin making inquiries. Hartha out."

Picard stared at the blank screen for a moment, then tapped his communicator. "Picard to LaForge."

"LaForge here," came the voice of his Chief Engineer.

"Geordi, please report to my ready room." Picard shoved the Borg beacon to the side of his desk and transferred the Aldelmaran material from Doctor Delvin's chip to a padd. *Let's start with the scans from the cavern*, Picard thought as he called up the material. Moments later, the door chimed.

"Come," he said, and LaForge entered. "You wanted to see me, Captain?"

"Yes, Geordi," Picard said, setting the padd down on his desk. "This is a Borg interplexing beacon. We'll be dropping it off at Starbase 621, but in the meantime feel free to examine it."

Geordi walked up to the desk and picked up the beacon. "I'd like Commander Data's assistance."

"Of course," said Picard. "Dismissed."

LaForge turned to leave and caught sight of the captain's padd. He stopped and stared at the graph displayed on the screen for a second, then said "I didn't know you studied obscure engineering theories, captain."

Picard looked up at him. "You know this graph?"

LaForge reached for the padd. "May I?" he asked, and Picard handed it over. "Yep," said LaForge, "it's a Solvan curve."

Picard racked his brain and came up empty. "What's a Solvan curve?"

"Solvan was a Vulcan scientist. About three hundred years ago, when Trellium X was discovered, it was found that it generates power from intense gravitational fields -- power that is the inverse of the field."

"Why haven't I heard of it?" wondered Picard.

"Probably because it's incredibly rare. And it can't be produced artificially. You would have to search thousands of worlds to get any significant amount. And since it's only found near planetary cores, it's incredibly difficult to mine. As far as I know, only a few grams have ever been collected."

"And Solvan?"

"As an academic exercise, Solvan calculated how a sufficient amount of Trellium X could be used to counteract the gravitation of a black hole. In theory, you could take anything - a ship, a moon, even a planet - into a black hole and survive. But it's never been tested. And even if it was, there would be no way to know if it worked."

Picard's mind reeled. "Thank you, Mr. LaForge. Dismissed." LaForge left with the Borg beacon, and Picard sat at his desk, completely lost to the thoughts that had started forming. *You would have to search thousands of worlds to get any significant amount of Trellium X. And the Aldelmarans had spread out over thousands of worlds. You could take anything - a ship, a moon, even a planet - into a black hole and survive.* There was a gap in the Aldelmaran system where a class M planet could have been. And a class M cavern on a class K world, with a monument dedicated to **Those Who Remained**. "Doctor Delvin, your legacy might be far greater than you realized," he muttered.

Epilogue

In an anonymous room in an anonymous building on a minor planet, a man reviewed a report and sighed. The loss of Doctor Delvin was unfortunate. However, the Doctor had always split his loyalty between his work for the Federation and his work as an archaeologist, and it had finally cost him.

It was a good plan, the man thought. When Delvin told us he had traced the Aldelmarans to the gamma quadrant, it was too good of an opportunity to pass up. The Borg and the Dominion would have been at each other's throats for centuries. We could have closed the wormhole and the alpha quadrant would be left alone.

But, plans failed sometimes, and he didn't spend any time worrying about it. There were always more plans, and Section 31 would make sure that enough of them succeeded to ensure the safety of the Federation.