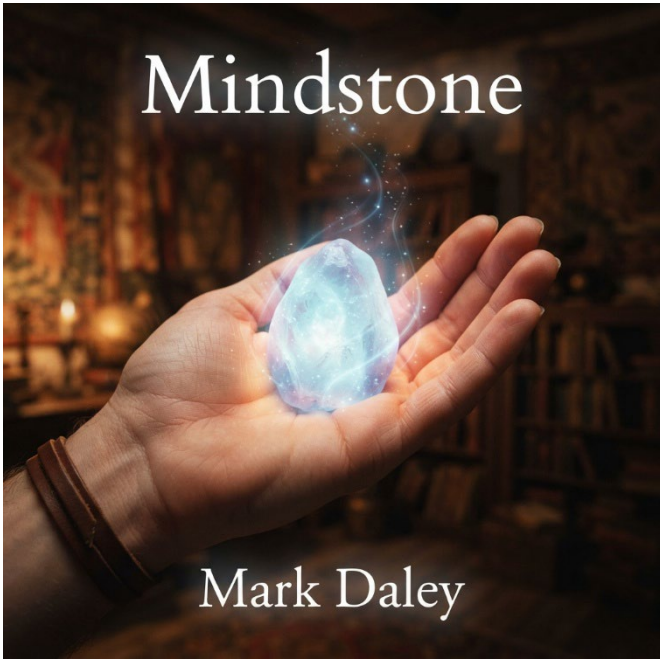

Mindstone
Mark Daley

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By Mark Daley 2021©

Rem was excitedly waiting his turn on the transporter pad for beaming down to the planet for some much-needed rest and recreation. There was excited chatter all around him; the crew was very much looking forward to some shore leave. He was passing the time by reading the glossy brochure regarding the facilities he was to visit.

The facilities were top of the range. There were casinos, bars, theaters, and shows of every description and from every corner of Federation space. The facilities hugged the shoreline and curved along and off into the forests and mountains of the uplands. Water sports, climbing, hiking, it was all here. He noticed the place was also filled with beings from every corner of the galaxy, which suited the Baatixan grandly. He could blend in nicely.

Rem had three days on the surface, and he intended to make the most of it. The holosuites on this world were the best around. He had already booked several hour's worth in advance. He was mindful of his previous experience with holodecks and would not repeat his mistakes. No more illicit programs; he was going to do this properly.

He stepped onto the transporter pad and almost instantly materialized on the hospitality plaza in the resort. He went over to the map display to get his bearings; he found out where his billet was and headed over there, swinging his bag nonchalantly.

His room was small, yet comfortable. There was a standard but minimal food replicator. There was also a computer terminal with access to the facility's AI system. Pretty standard stuff for a short layover. The bunk had seen better days as there was a dip in the middle. How many people had slept in that bed over the years?

He peeled off his uniform and got changed. After a quick freshen-up, he was keen to get over to the main entertainments section. He thought a few drinks would be a good idea and wandered over to one of the bars he had seen from across the plaza. He found himself in front of a pub called 'The Wild Geese.' Rem knew what a pub was but had never been inside one before.

The loud hubbub of voices hit him as he went in. He hopped onto a spare seat at the bar and tried to ignore the din.

A bartender poured a dark fluid with a frothy top for a customer but kept stopping to allow the foam to settle. It looked intriguing and a little weird, but he asked for one of the drinks when the other bartender approached him to ask what he wanted.

With his drink in hand, he took a sip, always difficult when he had no lips as such, and looked around. The beverage was a little bitter but palatable; he liked it. He was amused to notice a large white mustache of foam on his face in the mirror behind the bar.

The crowd in this pub was a mixed bunch of primarily Humans with a handful of other species. He noticed Vulcans and Andorians in the group. There was even a Trill over in the corner. Rem was delighted it wasn't the insufferable bore off his ship. The last thing Rem wanted was to make eye contact with him; it would be enough for him to come over and launch into yet long-winded implausible story about his time on the *USS ENTERPRISE*.

Rem finished his drink and ordered another.

He quite liked this place even though it was noisy and had that funky human smell. So he stayed for a while, drinking his beer and indulging in his favorite pastime, crowd watching. Then, finally, he finished his third beer and hopped off his stool to leave. It was then he noticed the shiny object lying on the floor. It was shining with reflected light, all colors of the rainbow. Rem picked it up; it was surprisingly heavy in his hand. It was an elongated sphere about 2 centimeters in diameter. It looked a little like a polished stone.

He looked around to see if anyone had noticed him pick it up.

Rem moved the stone around slowly in his hand. The odd thing was that he was getting a very faint, almost sensual

buzz from handling it. Was it the effects of the drinks he had just finished, or was it this thing he had just picked up?

Rem snapped out of his daydream; he looked around briefly and absentmindedly tucked the object into his vest pocket. Then, he thought no more of it as he made his way out of the pub and back onto the plaza.

Rem awoke slowly; it was like surfacing for air when swimming. Lazy leg strokes propelling the swimmer upwards towards the light and air.

It took him a moment to realize he wasn't in his bunk aboard the ship.

The warm morning sun was streaming through his window, which helped him a little in coming around. He had had the most bizarre dream. Hundreds of independent voices all talking at once. Just background voices he had struggled to hear correctly. There was no theme or message, just voices.

He turned over in bed and noticed the curious shiny stone he had picked up two nights before; it was lying on his nightstand.

He picked it up and rubbed his thumb over it; he immediately got a slight warm sensual feeling. Just handling the stone uplifted his mood. It made him feel confident and self-assured. That worried him a little. He put it down; he didn't want to handle it again. He reached down to the floor and retrieved a sock. He put the stone in it and put the wadded-up sock in the nightstand drawer.

Rem had packed his bag and had beamed up to the ship, he would miss the planet, but it was the end of his trip. The *USS CANTERBURY* was preparing to leave orbit. It would be an hour under impulse to a safe distance where the ship would go to warp.

The next destination would be the Tantalus system, where a crew rotation would occur at the penal colony on Tantalus V.

Rem had done all of his holosuite programs and seen all the shows he wanted to see. It had been a great break for him away from his duties on the ship. He was snapped back into his routines now he was back aboard. There was just one thing wrong, though, since his return.

Niggling at the back of his mind was this damned stone or whatever it was. He knew that it was affecting him as crazy as that might seem; he was determined to get to the bottom of it. He had put it into a small metal box in his cabin. When it was in the box, all of its influence went away. He could handle the box with no slight fuzzy feelings he had when he dealt with the stone directly.

The dreams he had had on the planet were bizarre, just voices and more voices. Whenever he was near the artifact, he would get these voices in his head. Rem had thought to go and see Doctor Pascal, the ship's doctor, but he felt a bit foolish. Would she take him seriously?

Rem found himself outside Lieutenant Parker's office on deck four. He had made an appointment to see him. Although Rem was a civilian, there was a clear military hierarchy.

As Lieutenant Parker oversaw the civilian aspects of the crew, including the barbershop that Rem worked in, he thought it was better to go and see Lieutenant Parker first rather than the doctor. But, of course, it was over the top of his supervisor's head, but Sweeney was unapproachable even on the rare occasion he was in a less than his everyday foul mood. Rem doubted that any conversation with him about a shiny object that could affect mood and gave you funny dreams would be warmly received.

Rem buzzed for entrance. "Come in," said a voice behind the door.

Rem stepped into the office. Officer Parker said, "Take a seat, Mr. Rem; what can I do for you"? His eyes were still scanning his computer screen as he said it.

"Sir, It's this; I found it on the planet's surface a day or two ago," said Rem.

Lieutenant Parker looked up from his computer readout to look Rem in the eye and said, "Something you picked up on the planet?."

Rem obligingly removed the stone from its box and tipped the stone onto the desk.

"What do you have there?" the officer muttered, reaching out for it.

He picked up the stone to study it, his grey eyes twinkling in the light the stone was reflecting.

Rem noticed a dreamy quality come over the officer's face, Parker's eyes lost focus, and he appeared to be in a world of his own.

"Sir?" said Rem.

Officer Parker seemed to snap back into reality.

"Oh, Mr. Rem. Thank you for showing me this. What did you want me to do with it, though? Did you mention finding this to anyone planetside?"

"I didn't, Sir, no; I thought it was a polished stone at first. Maybe a child dropped it, or it was just a natural artifact of some sort.

There is something a little strange about it. I think it is affecting my mind in some way. Whenever I have physical contact with it, I get weird feelings, and if I keep it near me, I get voices all talking over each other. So I really would not touch it at all, Sir," said Rem.

"Voices, you say? In what way strange feelings?" said Parker, a faint smile creeping over his face. "It's only a shiny stone of some sort; I could have someone in science look at it perhaps." That faraway dreamy look came over the officer's face again.

"Sir?" said Rem.

Parker snapped back into the present.

"That will be all, Mr. Rem; I will look into it. I think it's a fanciful notion to believe this stone affects you somehow, but I

would like you to drop by the medical center and get checked out. Hearing voices is something that you should go and get medical help with."

Lieutenant Parker rose from his chair, tucking the stone into his pants pocket as he did so.

"Aye, aye, Sir," said Rem rising and turning for the door.

Outside in the corridor, Rem thought about what had just happened. The handling of the stone had affected Officer Parker profoundly, much more so than Rem had experienced. Then, with a worried frown, he set off to the medical center. He may as well get the physical checks out of the way.

Ship life continued as usual. The crew was happy after shore leave. Things were getting back to normal, or so Rem thought. He had been down to the medical center and had a neurological scan as suggested by officer Parker. The results had been perfectly normal, almost identical to his last results. Rem had played down hearing voices as he knew that would be a red flag on his file. He had explained that he was overworked and tired and on a strange ship with unknown species he had not seen before. The medic had given him some advice on getting better sleep with relaxation techniques and sent him on his way.

A little over two days after Rem had returned to the ship, he began to pick up snippets of gossip from his clients in the hair salon. Just a fragment here and there.

Rem picked up one snippet when Ensign Nuvek was waiting for his haircut. He was talking to ensign Spar. He heard, "That little spat between Officer Parker and Lieutenant Nuegar in ten forward was a beauty; I thought Parker was going to hit him!"

Rem motioned Ensign Nuvek for his turn in the chair, and the conversation ended.

Hours later, Rem picked up a conversation fragment between Ensign Pearl and her friend from engineering, Ensign Teal. Pearl explained to her friend how Lieutenant Parker had changed from a mild-mannered man to a snappy, irritable monster. It was the talk of the ship.

Rem had a sinking feeling in his stomach. Putting everything together from what he knew and what he had overheard, he knew why Officer Parker behaved strangely. He knew he shouldn't have handed that thing over; he should have thrown it away. What next?

Lieutenant Parker wasn't feeling himself. The last two days, he had had the most frighteningly lucid experience. Voices, thousands of them all talking at once. Sleep was impossible; he had tried staying awake using stimulants. His work was suffering, and he was irritable and snappy all of the time. The pleasant and friendly persona was gone.

It started as hundreds of subtle, barely heard voices, but now there were thousands of them all striving for his attention.

He was having less and less control of what he was doing. The voices in his head would be playing out in his head constantly. More and more voices that he couldn't shut off.

Parker screamed in terror as he woke from his drug-induced sleep. The drug he had taken should have knocked him out for at least six hours. Instead, he was awake in just an hour after taking it.

His heart was pounding hard, and he felt as though it would burst from his chest. He struggled for breath; his head was spinning, and he was groggy from the drugs. His mind was not his own; all rationale lost. He couldn't think; his head was full of pulsating pain. He needed to stop the voices NOW!

He fumbled into his tunic and pants and left his quarters. He never noticed the blood on his pillow or the blood caked around his nose and ears. He even forgot to put on socks or boots.

He lurched from his cabin and almost fell as his legs were weak and shaking. His progress was slow along the corridor. Bloody handprints marked the way he had gone. Staggering like a drunk leaving a party, he hugged the corridor wall as he went, stopping to steady himself or to clutch at his head, groaning. There was one thing he knew he needed, a weapon! It was the only thing that would end this. Taking his own life was the only option.

His feet led him to the aft security section; he let himself in and staggered over to the computer console. He

glanced at the readout; it was 03.35 ship time. There would be few people around at this hour. He didn't have a lot of time. Pain pulsed in his head, and blood dripped from his nose down his tunic.

The officer accessed the locker and removed a phaser checking the charge was at 100%; he stood there swaying back and forth, battling the urge to press the phaser to his temple. His head was splitting; pain pulsed in waves through his head and neck. He moaned and clutched his head with his free hand, rocking on his heels. He needed to end this, to stop the voices and the pain.

Security specialist O'Neill was on duty in the central security section when he heard the door open from the corridor. He wasn't expecting his relief for another three hours, so he moved off to see who it was. He entered the smaller section just off the corridor and saw Lieutenant Parker standing there with a phaser in his hand. "Sir, can I help you? Are you ok?"

Parker was startled and jumped a little; he unconsciously raised the phaser and pressed the trigger. Unfortunately, the phaser blast caught O'Neill full in the face vaporizing him instantly.

The ship's klaxon suddenly went off when the computer detected phaser fire. Within minutes there would be armed guards swarming the area.

Lieutenant Parker clutched at his head. The pain, the pain! He slumped to his knees, his eyes were streaming, and there was now his voice screaming at him; a man was dead! Nothing else mattered now! He got to his feet, struggling with the effort. He pressed the phaser to his neck and tried to squeeze the trigger; self-preservation wouldn't let him do it. His hand fell to his side.

He whirled around, almost tripping, and stumbled towards the door only to meet a security guard with a raised phaser. Parker had no time to react. The guard fired a short burst on heavy stun.

Parker fell to the decking, unconscious.

Commander Hogg was the chief security officer. He was giving his assessment of recent events to the first officer, Ta-Vin. Unfortunately, his briefing for the first officer made for horrifying news. Lieutenant Parker had made his way to the security section, taken a phaser, and killed a crew member, security specialist O'Neill. There was no discernible reason for it. Officer Parker had been acting strangely, yes, but there was no reason to think he would snap as he had. The previous psychiatric report had shown nothing untoward at all. The officer had been competent and in control.

When he came around after being stunned, Parker had screamed and thrashed around on the floor. He had to be restrained and given dangerous amounts of Propofol just to

stop him from hurting himself. The balance of his mind was gone; there was nothing but shouted gibberish and obscenities when not heavily sedated. The doctor did not have a diagnosis for why he had suddenly flipped. Initial brain scan readings were off the chart. Secondary to that, there was significant brain damage with some swelling which had cause blood vessel ruptures in the nose and ears. She had not seen anything like it. He had acted strangely before this incident; His commanding officer planned to intervene and get him down to sickbay on the morning of the incident, but he was too late.

There was one more thing; he had something in his pocket when searched—just a shiny rock or stone. Commander Hogg scooped the stone out of his pocket with a gloved hand and plopped it into the hand of the first officer.

The first officer peered at it in his palm, one eyebrow raised as if in question.

Rem was shocked to hear that a man was dead and Lieutenant Parker had been the killer! He had only seen the officer a few days previously. The ship had now increased speed and was heading to Earth to get assistance for the man.

Rem knew that no one would take him seriously about the stone. He was a lowly crewmember, but he had to do something as a man had died and another was in sickbay. The big problem was that he didn't know the whereabouts of the stone. Officer Parker had taken it, but where was it now? He

needed to warn people. He couldn't speak to anyone in medical so soon after being checked out for hearing voices. It was up to Rem to sort out this mess.

The first officer, commander Ta-Vin, was a no-nonsense career Starfleet officer. A graduate of the Vulcan Science Academy.

Discipline and ability had propelled him through the academy to finish in the top 5% of his class. He had achieved Kolinahr and believed that he was devoid of all emotion. While he could not hope to be the youngest starship captain to command a ship, he hoped to be close to it. He was just 36 standard years old.

Today, Ta-Vin was anything but measured and calm.

It had started when he picked up the stone the security officer had placed in his hand. When studying it, he had the strangest notion. It was almost like the stirrings of physical attraction, quite sensual. To a Vulcan, this was unsettling; only during Pon-Far should he experience these 'feelings.' He was intrigued and perturbed in equal measure.

Vulcans are touch telepaths; if the link with the stone was a real one, something inside the stone could connect with the mind of whoever held it. As a Vulcan, he knew that someone's Katra or essence could be stored. Usually, this was within another consciousness. Could it be stored in an object? Is this artifact Vulcan? He was fascinated.

He decided that he needed to study this object further before making up his mind about proceeding further. His scientific training and curiosity got the better of him.

Ta-Vin next did something that a highly trained officer and a graduate of the Vulcan science academy should never have done. In the seclusion of his quarters, he decided to link with the stone telepathically. Perhaps it was the stone's influence that made him do it. We will never know.

Ta-Vin placed his fingers on the stone and put his mind to probing its hidden inner depths.

There was a blast of psychic force so powerful through Ta-Vin's mind that he shrieked and fell back. An all-consuming wave of voices were all trying to get his attention all at once. Millions of people were screaming at him!

None of his training could stop the energy ripping through his mind; the defense was useless against the onslaught.

Ta-Vin shrieked again as all his inner restraint was rendered useless. Finally, he was left curled up in a ball, a ball of suffering.

Ta-Vin uncurled himself through great effort and shakily stood up.

There was one all-consuming purpose and one purpose only to stop the voices. Ta-Vin's mind was no longer his own; control was impossible.

He bent down and picked up the stone, cold and heavy in his hand. He slipped it into his tunic pocket. He then went to

his locker and took out his ceremonial knife. He was unaware of the big drops of green blood on his tunic.

Rem was walking along the corridor towards the bridge as the most direct route to his quarters. He heard a commotion up ahead around the curve of the passage. Suddenly a junior crew member came running at full pelt around the corner; she shouted, "Run, he's got a knife."

Rem broke into a run around the curve of the corridor. It was almost an instinct to run towards danger and not from it.

It wasn't long before he saw who had the knife. It was the First Officer, Ta-Vin staggering towards the door to the bridge.

It was a frightening sight. Ta-Vin, the Vulcan First Officer, was babbling to himself. The look on his face was a picture of madness, wild bulging eyes with spittle flying from his mouth as his jaw worked up and down. The front of the Vulcans tunic was dotted and streaked with green blood, as was his face and neck. It looked like he had been cutting at his neck with the knife.

The knife in his hand was weaving around.

Rem had to stop him; he had seconds to act before Ta-Vin gained access to the bridge.

Waiting a few seconds for his moment, Rem sprang into action. He ran and leaped at the Vulcan. He planted a two-

footed kick into the small of the Vulcans back. Ta-Vin pitched headfirst into the door, his knife spinning from his hand.

Rem was on his feet and ready. Just as the Vulcan rolled over onto his back, Rem bought his right heel down on the Vulcan's forehead. Ta-Vin collapsed, unconscious. As the Vulcan sprawled out on the decking, Rem was shocked to see the stone fall from the officer's tunic pocket; he had the stone with him!

Rem had no time to spare; he scooped up the stone!

Stone in hand, he leaped lightly over the Vulcan's body to retrieve the knife. Just in time to hear the door to the bridge swish open.

The chief security officer, Commander Hogg, was coming through the door; seeing the prostrate bloodied Vulcan and Rem with a knife in his hand, he made a split-second decision. With a practiced motion, he pulled his phaser from his belt and shot Rem on stun.

Rem saw the stone drop from his hand and roll away as his knees buckled. Then, finally, his strength ran out of him.

Strong hands grabbed him and forced him onto the decking. But, unfortunately, he just caught a glimpse of the captain stooping down to pick up the stone as he exited the bridge!

"No! don't touch that," Rem shouted, the words a little slurred. He struggled against the bridge officers holding him down, his great strength no use in his weakened state. But it was to no avail, a hypospray was against his neck, and he passed out.

Rem opened his eyes; he was in the sickbay with Doctor Pascal standing over him. "Welcome back," she said. Commander Hogg was standing next to her, looking a little nervous.

Her green eyes twinkled as she smiled at him. Her long red hair was framing her face.

Rem struggled to get upright, brain still foggy. He had expected restraints, but there were none. Doctor Pascal allowed him to get up to sit on the edge of the bed. He could not help noticing the two guards by the door.

She tried to put him at ease. "Relax, Mr. Rem, you are in sickbay; it's just a precaution after the earlier incident."

Rem said, "What happened to the first officer? Does the captain have the stone at all?"

Commander Hogg interjected. "Mr. Rem, the first officer, is receiving treatment after his 'episode,' but what do you know of this artifact or stone you mentioned? I recall giving it to the first officer, but I would not have thought it could have influenced him to the extent where he would lose his grip on reality. I did not experience any effect from it. However, I was wearing gloves during my investigation into Lieutenant Commander Parker's incident and was wearing them when I handed it over. You think the Captain has this now?"

Rem replied, "Yes, I saw the Captain pick it up just after you shot me."

Commander Hogg's face went a little red at this remark.

"I saw an unconscious senior officer covered in blood with you were standing nearby with a knife in your hand. I had no choice."

Rem answered, "Sir, I would have done the same. My only concern is that the Captain now has this artifact. My mind was affected only slightly. I am not Vulcan or human; it may affect their minds differently. I tried to warn Lieutenant Parker when I first became concerned at what this artifact was capable of. I left that thing with him, not knowing of the much greater effect it would have on him."

Commander Hogg, with growing concern spreading across his face, replied, "We indeed have no full explanation for the events of the last few days; we are still looking into what happened. I will, however, speak to the Captain regarding this item or stone you speak of." He continued. "I would prefer it, Mr. Rem, if you were to go to your quarters and keep this to yourself for now, please. I don't want to upset the crew any more than they have been. Get some rest. I will locate the object that you say the captain now has. I will, however, alert the science section; they can deal with this artifact or stone once it's found ."

The doctor gave the commander a weak smile as he turned to leave. She turned to Rem and said, "I will give you something to help you sleep; after the trauma of the stun you had, you may need it."

Rem hopped off the bed. "Thank you, doctor; I will return to my quarters." The Doctor quickly pressed a prepared

hypospray to his neck and said, "This will help you sleep; I will see you tomorrow." Rem gave her one of his shark's tooth grins out of habit, if nothing else, and exited sickbay past the two guards.

Captain Cole was lying on his side. The bedclothes smeared and streaked with blood. There were open wounds to both wrists and also the neck and torso. The swollen hands revealed damage to the knuckles, evident signs of 'boxers fracture' caused by striking the fists into a hard object. The hard thing in question being the mirror over the washbasin, which was broken and strewn about the carpet. Evidence of cuts to the captain's feet was evident by the bloody footprints here and there.

Glass objects are not usually allowed on board starships for apparent reasons, but the captain liked some things from history in his quarters. Antique mirrors being one of them.

The general state of the quarters was in violent disarray; everything had been upended and broken. It was a terrible scene to behold, the most terrible of which had been the handle of the ornamental knife sticking out of the captains' chest. The blade had been driven clear through the chest with both hands. Difficult and painful with the fractures in the fingers.

The evidence pointed to suicide. All data still needed to be looked at, and it was being collated for review later in the

day, but it certainly looked like suicide. Both the First Officer and Lieutenant Commander Parker had had psychotic episodes. Parker had killed a man, and Rem had subdued the First Officer before he could take a life. There was a clear link. The civilian barber, Rem, had bought the object onboard. It was unwittingly setting the chain of events in motion. Rem was blameless; half the crew had bought trinkets and items from their recent shore leave aboard the ship. All items went through the transporter system, and nothing in the transporter logs had picked up anything undue.

Hogg could not get the image of his commanding officer's face out of his mind. The look on the dead man's face was challenging to look at; it was a picture of pure blood-streaked madness.

Commander Hogg nodded to the waiting medical team for them to remove the body. The two women carefully placed the body into a bag before placing it onto the waiting gurney. The antigrav was activated, and the gurney rose to waist height. The two-woman team maneuvered it out of the room. It was the doctor's unenvious task to perform an autopsy to give some closure to what had happened.

The Yeoman that had found the body was in considerable distress. She was getting treatment for shock in sickbay. She had tried raising the Captain as had Hogg; he had not responded. The Yeoman had used her code and overrode door security to get into the cabin and had seen the horror. Something she was never likely to forget.

Commander Hogg finished his scene assessment, although medical and security specialists were still doing their assessments. Then, he set about searching for the alien artifact. It wasn't in the captain's clothing, and it was not on the nightstand or desk. He carefully checked through the bedding and then got on his knees to look under the bed.

There! It was shining with the reflected light from his flashlight. He carefully removed it with gloved fingers and placed it in a small lead-lined box brought along for the purpose. He straightened, adjusting his tunic as he did so. He turned to address one of the security specialists. "Gomez, I want you to take this directly to professor Xing in the science lab; he will be expecting you."

"Aye aye, Sir, "said specialist Gomez, holding out his hand for the box. Then, he turned on his heel and left the room.

Rem was jerked awake. His room computer terminal was beeping with a received message.

He got out of his bunk and sat in his chair to look at his message with sleepy eyes. In one hour, Dr. Pascal wanted him in the Science department; he noted that the chief of security, now an acting captain, would meet him there. The message stated that the Captain was dead and that initial speculation was that he had taken his own life. Rem reeled with shock, the Captain dead? He rubbed both hands through the bristles on his head; what had he done bringing that thing aboard?

Rem had to submit to identification checks to the two guards outside the science section. Enhanced security was something Rem was pleased about after recent events. Not many ships lose three senior officers without engaging in armed conflict or suffering a ship-wide emergency. Losing the Captain alone was a massive blow, made all the worse by a psychotic episode and taking his own life.

Doctor Pascal and acting Captain Hogg were waiting for Rem when he entered.

"Mr. Rem, glad you could make it," said acting Captain Hogg standing and holding out his hand. Rem shook his hand briefly and shuddered at the touch. Rem was more than jittery. Senior officers had succumbed to psychotic episodes, and the Captain was now dead; he was still trying to get his head around all of this.

Doctor Pascal gave Rem a subdued smile; even Rem, in his emotional state, noticed that she was upset. Her eyes were puffy and red from what Rem understood as 'crying,' something his species was incapable of. He felt sorry for the doctor; the Captain had been a friend.

Rem took a deep breath to compose himself; he usually didn't take part in briefings with senior officers. The only briefings he had participated in were team meetings organized by Lieutenant Parker for the whole civilian staff.

At that point, Professor Xing from Xeno Archeology approached. He was a wizened older man with close-cropped white hair.

The Professor briefly introduced himself and launched into his findings without much preamble.

"The artifact you found is a Talosian mind stone; Its prime purpose is as a child's learning aid to enable children to practice telepathic blocking. Talosian children are born with an innate telepathic ability and have to be raised in strict isolation until they learn to manage their blocking ability. If exposed to many thousands of minds at once without an ability to block them, the effect would be crippling, and insanity would follow.

“The stone mimics low-level background telepathic noise to acclimatize the child to what it would face in public. Then, it's slowly increased until the child can block the telepathic environment entirely and join the wider society.

“Bear in mind that Talosian children were encouraged to push the boundaries of their abilities. A healthy child would easily have many hundreds of times the telepathic power of a Betazoid.”

He went on to say, "Material gained after the 2254 Captain Pike encounter with the Talosians hinted at the existence of the mind stone. We got more information after the 2257 encounter, but nothing in the last hundred years or so. Most of our knowledge has been from other species interactions with the Talosians."

Rem said, "A child's educational aid did this?"

"Yes, the effects on non-Talosians with some small telepathic gift would be catastrophic, as the First Officer found

out. It seems the Captain and Lieutenant Parker must have had some telepathic ability also. Thirty percent of humans have a small telepathic ability." said the Professor.

"Can its effects on the brain be undone, do you think. So the physical effects can be treated but not the underlying effects of the artifact?" said the doctor.

"I really can't answer that question; there is too much we don't know. We have the object in secure storage on the shuttle deck. Once we can study it more, we can formulate our next steps." said the Professor shrugging his shoulders.

The doctor pushed her hair back off her ears and replied, "The effects on the First Officer and Lieutenant Parker are serious and long-lasting. Both will need expert help. I still have to perform the autopsy on the Captain. Still, piecing together the evidence, it's a preliminary conclusion that the Captain took his own life while in the grip of a psychotic episode – the same sort of psychotic episode that affected officers Parker and Ta-Vin." She turned to face Acting Captain Hogg, her green eyes brimming with unshed tears, her lips quivering slightly with emotion.

Acting Captain Hogg smiled warmly and returned her gaze. He put his hand on her arm to comfort her.

Rem steeled himself for what he had to say. "Commander Hogg, Dr. Pascal. I feel somewhat responsible for bringing this thing aboard. I can only apologize for that." He looked down at his boots as he finished. He did feel some

shame and despair; he only wished that he had not bought the thing onto the ship.

Before the commander or the doctor could say anything, the Professor interjected. "Mr. Rem, the object went through the transporter system without raising any concern. You did not know what it was. When you did find out what it was, you flagged it appropriately to a superior officer. This artifact affects the mind; it wants to be close until the child can counter its effects. I don't think you could have acted differently".

Commander Hogg turned to face Rem. "You did everything in your power to limit the effects of this artifact once you suspected what was going on. But, unfortunately, you did not know that the impact on others not of your species would be devastatingly more severe. Half the crew bring aboard items from shore leave; you are no exception.

“You took decisive action at significant personal risk when dealing with officer Ta-Vin. For that alone, I will be recommending an evaluation to join the security team and, therefore, Starfleet if you wish. You have shown some promise.”

Rem was stunned into silence. Now was not the time to celebrate. It was still too raw an emotional time for everyone.

Only time would heal the wounds.

Rem gave one of his shark's teeth smiles out of embarrassment. "Thank you all. I still need some time to come

to terms with what has happened. So if I may, Sir, I will take my leave?"

"Very well," said Commander Hogg. "There will be extensive debriefings once we get to Earth; you will need to prepare for that. One of my officers will be contacting you at 07:00 hours to take a detailed statement".

With that, he turned back to the doctor, his hand once again on her arm in comfort. Rem rose from his chair.

"Thank you, Sir," he said.

He nodded to the Professor and left; he shot a glance back to the group as he did so. The Professor was collecting his papers and getting ready to get going, and the doctor now had her head buried in commander Hogg's shoulder. She was now sobbing freely.

Rem was at a loose end; he didn't want to go back to his quarters just yet, he needed a distraction. Moreover, he didn't have to be on duty until the next day, so he thought he would spend some time in the social area of the ship – he wouldn't be bothered so early, hopefully. The doors swished open, and he looked anxiously around; no Trill!

Thank the gods, he thought and strode over to the bar area. He needed to calm his nerves with a drink, a non-synthahol one! There was a human bartender on duty. Spotting Rem, the human put down the synthetic glass he was polishing and came over. "What can I get you?"

Rem thought for a moment, "What's that dark frothy drink that takes ages to pour called?"

The human beamed, showing his small, puny teeth. "That's a Guinness. Regrettably, I don't have it on draught, but I do have some bottles if you would like one. Unfortunately, I can only serve it if you are not on duty for the next ten hours, though, as it's not synthahol. Is that ok"?

Rem nodded and said, "Line up three, please." The barman shot him a glance but got the bottles out of his fridge.

Rem was much looking forward to this. He watched intently as the dark fluid flowed into the glass. He found himself drooling at the prospect of savoring this.

He was so absorbed in watching the barman pouring that he didn't hear the doors swish open.

Rem flinched when a hand fell on his shoulder, he turned his head quickly and came face to face with the Trill!

"Mind if I join you?" he said…

The End