

STAR TREK IX

CURRENT STORY STATUS, BROAD STROKES

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The movie begins in the past with a colorful and funny flashback to Picard's Academy days and establishes a platonic, but affectionate relationship between young Jean-Luc and fellow cadet, ELEANOR DUFFY. Visiting the home of the Academy's groundskeeper, Boothby (played by Ray Walston), Picard and Duffy look over his remarkable collection of objets d'junk as he plays a vinyl recording of Stardust on an old victrola. Boothby sees the potential for more in the relationship than either Picard or Duffy do. But they're too smart to let romance complicate their friendship.

We move into the present day as we see a Federation ship attacked by a small vessel piloted, incredibly, by Data. This segues into a video record of the attack being shown to Picard by two highranking, elderly members of the Federation Council and a senior admiral. We learn that a small Starfleet crew that included Data and Eleanor plus two aliens from a race known as the Son'i went on a routine anthropological mission six months ago to do a duckblind study of a newly-discovered culture. The planet was located in a remote and unexplored region of Federation space known as The Briar Patch. Data was on loan to pilot the ship through the navigational nightmare using his advanced android skills. For reasons unknown, Data has apparently gone berserk and is firing on the ships Starfleet has sent in to find him. Picard is ordered to go in, bring him back and rescue the others if they're still alive. It's clear to Picard as he leaves that if he has no other alternative, he is expected to terminate Data.

The Enterprise sets out, taking along two highranking officers of the Son'i. These mysterious aliens are all extraordinarily old, so ancient in fact, that they hide their faces in perpetual shadow. As a race they have accumulated great wealth which they protect with a huge arsenal of the most advanced weaponry. Their ships are some of the most formidable we have ever seen on Star Trek. And yet the leader of these intimidating aliens, whom we will call RU'AFO, is well-spoken, approachable, almost gentle... but there is the inescapable cold look in his eyes that suggest a tortured soul.

Picard studies the last visual transmissions from Data's ship and sees his android friend acting normally, just as he remembers him.

Next to him, Eleanor Duffy, now fifty, is cool and professional. There is no sign of whatever trouble was to come.

To help find the way into the Briar Patch, Picard seeks out the help of a rag-tag band of civilian mariners. He hears from them about an ancient legend of a fountain of youth somewhere in The Patch. They laugh, wondering if that's why he's going in. He assures them it's not. With their advice and using information from Data's mission, Picard plots a course and pilots one of the Enterprise's new scout ships carrying the Away Team. Suddenly, Data attacks, ignoring all hails. Picard is forced to crash land his ship on the only nearby planet.

On the surface, Geordi has a strange malfunction with his artificial eyes. Then in short order, the Away Team is surrounded and captured by a group of aliens that look to be no more than twelve years old. There is no sign of any adults.

The Away Team is led to a stockade where Picard finds Data's crew and his old friend Eleanor, but is shocked to see that she looks almost as young as she looked when they graduated from the Academy. She greets him warmly telling him that they discovered vast amounts of an unusual ore along the coastline which seems to be making them feel and appear younger. It might also explain Geordi's malfunction. As for Data's behavior, she has no explanations. She can only report that shortly after arriving on the planet, Data went berserk and destroyed the duck-blind, revealing their presence to the inhabitants.

The natives of this planet prove not to be children at all, but a race, known as the Ba'ku, who have stayed young in physical appearance, while retaining all the knowledge and wisdom that comes with hundreds of years of life. They are guarded, taciturn and, although they have a superior technology, prefer a simple existence. They clearly don't trust outsiders and yet they will ultimately prove to be generous hosts.

They take Picard to Data, who sits on a floor in a shadowy alien dwelling, rocking back and forth in some sort of strange meditation. He does not recognize Picard. Data's speech patterns are halting; his attention seems to wander, in a way, you might say he's almost slow-witted. For some reason, that even he cannot explain to Picard, he has adopted the role, almost on a subconscious level, as the protector of the Ba'ku.

As the Enterprise approaches looking for the away team, Data boards his scout ship with Picard as hostage and goes to attack the Enterprise. The battle is interrupted when Picard finds a way to disable him.

Geordi and Beverly go to work repairing Data as Picard begins to unravel the mystery of what's happened here. The first sign that things aren't what they seem comes from the initial examination of Data. Beverly and Geordi report there are signs in his positronic brain of a blast from an alien weapon that damaged his memory engrams, causing an android form of amnesia. Picard is able to determine the blast came from a Son'i weapon. Ru'afo coolly listens to the accusation, promises Picard he will interrogate his officers to attempt to find out what transpired.

As the investigation proceeds, word reaches the Enterprise crew of the regenerative qualities of the planet's surface and they petition the Captain for shore leave, but Picard, who has no tolerance for any of this foolishness about a "fountain of youth," declares it off limits. Troi finally coaxes him into allowing them to go for the morale of the crew. There's nothing wrong with feeling young from time to time, Captain, she says. He grumbles but accedes.

As the story continues, we will spend considerable time with various members of the crew as they're affected by this remarkable planet in unexpected ways. In addition to seeing subtle physical changes that appear to take years off their age, we'll discover what they were like when they were younger. We'll explore the emotional, intellectual and sexual benefits of being young. For example, Riker's libido will get more active and Troi will feel jealous as she sees him soaking buck-naked in a mud bath with two female ensigns. Later, she turns the tables when he sees her soaking in the same mud bath buck-naked with five male ensigns. Worf will get in touch with his wild Klingon inner child. Beverly will have to cope with one of the Ba'ku "children" who takes a rather intense liking to her... she can't get past his physical appearance even though she knows that he's two hundred years old. We'll see other members of the crew become impatient and impulsive, forgoing the common sense that comes with maturity. We'll see them behave bolder with the exaggerated self-confidence of youth. And, finally, we'll see ship operations suffer as the crew "misbehaves."

Picard, resisting it as he might, finds himself being affected as well... in very subtle physical ways, and also on an emotional level. There's a definite swagger as he finds himself being drawn to Eleanor, feeling the affections a young man might feel in spring.

There's no question that under normal circumstances these two mature adults would be able to control their feelings, but the magical influence of this planet seems to be stripping away their inhibitions.

Data is quickly repaired and fills in some of the missing pieces of the mystery. He tells Picard he became suspicious of the Son'i's behavior after their arrival and began to realize that they had a separate agenda for the mission. One day he followed them to see them taking ore samples. Unfortunately, the Son'i caught him observing and shot him. His memory engrams were damaged, but his ethical subroutines remained functional and they guided him to protect the Ba'ku because he felt their planet was in danger.

Meanwhile, a dangerous new threat appears as a flotilla of Son'i ships follow the course that Picard charted and move into orbit around the planet. When Picard asks to question the two Son'i officers, Ru'afo tells him that they have already been punished for their crime and are dead. Picard knows a cover-up when he sees one.

As Data works with Picard and Eleanor to find out the Son'i's true motives, he observes the behavior of the rest of the crew and begins to explore the human obsession with youth, trying to find some way to apply this to his own life. A conversation between Data and Picard: "Did you enjoy your childhood, sir?" "No, I hated my childhood," says Picard, "A lot of people had miserable childhoods." And Data asks, "If childhood was so bad, why do people want to be young again?"

Their investigation reveals that the Son'i mining process will make the entire region unliveable. It is further revealed that their mining operation has been approved by the very same Federation officers who sent Data, and later Picard, on this mission.

Picard learns that the Federation plans to move the Ba'ku to a new planet and that Data's mission was in fact designed to determine the most efficient and safe method to accomplish that. Obviously it was kept secret from Data and the crew because it is a clear violation of the Prime Directive. But one member of the crew did know, as Picard is sad to discover, and that was Eleanor.

In an emotional scene, he confronts her and she tries to argue the case for the other side, although we might sense she's feeling rather guilty about the deception by now. The Son'i had approached the members of the Federation Council, she tells Picard, with the promise of sharing the secrets of this remarkable substance. We saw the potential for a new

era of medicine based on the regenerative properties of this ore. Life spans would be doubled, tripled. It would be a quantum leap forward for every Federation culture. To the Son'i, it was a matter of survival, life and death. Without it, they would become extinct as their race quickly died of old age. They had combed the galaxy looking for the substance after their supply had run out and this is virtually the only place they could find any more of it.

Picard understands the rest. The only stumbling block was a small group of non-spacefaring people who just happened to live on top of this ore. Eleanor acknowledges, saying everyone felt it was reasonable to quietly move a few thousand people for the sake of the greater good. Picard understands that the Federation officers involved were willing to turn a blind eye to the interests of a tiny, far away culture in order to serve our own. And isn't it a coincidence he notes dryly, that the men approached by the Son'i happened to be among the oldest in the Federation government.

Eleanor is clearly uncomfortable with the ethical challenge Picard has raised. Picard tells her that Dr. Crusher's examination of one Ba'ku who had to be beamed aboard the ship strongly suggests that once removed from this planet's surface, these people begin to age. If they were moved, their entire culture would be undermined.

Picard calls Starfleet, advising the senior admiral that moving the Ba'ku would expose them to the aging process and eventually lead to their deaths. The admiral explains to Picard that the Ba'ku will die a lot faster if we don't move them. The Son'i have made it clear they will do whatever it takes to get that ore. Picard: So, as an alternative, we're allowing them to steal a planet from its inhabitants within Federation space? How do we justify such a thing? The admiral gets angry: It was the best we could do. Was it?, challenges Picard. Or did the Son'i make us an offer we simply couldn't resist. Have we truly explored all other options? The admiral: here's the other option, Captain -- their weapons are superior to ours. If they really wanted to kill the people on this planet, frankly, we couldn't stop them. So, I suggest you get on with the inevitable task of moving them. Picard responds that it is not our decision to make. It's theirs. I will not move the Ba'ku without their consent. The admiral orders him to withdraw, saying that other Starfleet ships will be sent to do the job and signs off.

Picard goes to the leader of the Ba'ku, a "boy" he has come to know and respect during the past several days and explains the circumstances.

The Ba'ku leader speaks for his people when he says with passion that they will not move from their homeland; their lives are connected to the land, it defines who they are. Although they're a non-violent people, they would rather fight the Son'i to the death than to leave. Picard is impressed by their courage and conviction and knows in his heart that he cannot abandon them. Quietly, he removes his pips, his uniform and says good-bye to his ship as he leaves to help the Ba'ku fight for their lives.

Data chooses to join Picard in this fight and Picard is further pleased when Eleanor changes sides and joins him as well. His arguments and her love for him have touched her conscience. She cannot bring herself to fight against him or his ideals. As they begin to prepare for battle, Picard and Eleanor finally let their passion get the better of them and enjoy the hell out of it. It turns out that old Boothby really did know what he was talking about.

The "children" have neither the aptitude nor appetite for the weapons of war and Picard is unwilling to force them to participate in the violence they have shunned as a society. But he finds them to be resourceful tacticians and agile, clever colleagues as he leads Data and Eleanor on missions to sabotage the Son'i mining operations (some of which occur in space).

Ru'afu knows his people are literally running out of time. Many have already died. The approaching Starfleet vessels are five days away. He orders his forces to begin an all-out assault. If Federation people helping the Ba'ku are killed, it's their own fault.

The admiral orders Riker to get a search party together to find Picard and arrest him before the Son'i kill him. They succeed, but instead of arresting him, the crew chooses to stay with Picard even though the odds of victory seem impossible. Picard orders Riker to take the remaining crew and their families on board the Enterprise to safety. It won't be long before the Son'i turn against the Enterprise in retaliation for his actions. Riker agrees to take the Enterprise out of The Briar Patch but promises to return with help. Picard says there'll be no help from the Federation.

The Son'i launch devastating attacks that destroy the village and defoliate the jungle... it is a huge battle, Son'i fighters coming in over the ocean, strafing the beach... ultimately forcing Picard and his overmatched army into a defensive position. As the Son'i continue their assault, it may remind us of the Alamo. As their defenses are worn down, Picard and his officers know their time is almost up... they cannot survive another attack.

On the night before what they know will be the final battle, they share some personal memories, some smiles, even laughs... personal things you only say at the end. But the next morning, a new glimpse of hope as Riker returns with the rag-tag fleet of mariners who have come to help Picard fight the good fight. Their arrival gives Picard an idea...

Picard plans a daring attempt to capture the Son'i leader, Ru'afo. Using a mariner's junkyard ship, he manages to sneak through the Son'i defenses and board their lead ship. As the crew on the surface struggle to survive a few hours more, Picard fights his way past several Son'i guards and reaches Ru'afo's quarters where he lies close to death... Picard is shocked to see Ru'afo's face clearly for the first time. It reveals physical characteristics that match the Ba'ku. He soon realizes that the Son'i and the Ba'ku are in fact the same race. He convinces Ru'afo to call off the attack.

It is quickly revealed that the Son'i are actually a group of Ba'ku who were banished hundreds of years ago for refusing to respect the society's oaths of simplicity and isolationism. They had no respect for the traditional ways. They wanted more material goods, an opportunity to explore the universe. So they were sent away from the planet on mariner ships, their passage paid for with small quantities of the magic ore thus creating the legend of the fountain of youth. Now they have come home to collect the ore which will insure their survival... and only agreed to relocate their brethren so those who banished them could feel the slow torture of the aging process.

Picard ultimately forces the leaders of both groups to confront one another and brokers a difficult peace. They are after all in Federation space and, as it turns out, they are a warp-capable society and thus responsible to follow the protocols of the Federation. Humanity will have to do without a magic elixir of youth, because the ore is going to stay on this planet as the Prime Directive demands.

Picard makes the Ba'ku see that there is a time to let old wounds heal. Now that the word is out about the fountain of youth, and a passage through The Briar Patch has been charted, it will be necessary to defend themselves against those who would come to exploit it (like the Ferengi). They could find the weaponry and resources that their Son'i brothers have acquired to be very valuable in the near future. In the end, he leaves the two sides in a hopeful ceasefire.

The last stirring scene TBD will see Picard back in his uniform, with his crew in a triumphant moment that will leave people cheering in the aisles...