

Tales of the USS Bluefin Right Place, Wrong Time

By The Lone Redshirt

Sometime in mid-2377
Star Stallion 01
Molari Badlands

“Inertial dampeners failing!” shouted Chief Deryx over the din of the howling impulse engines. The raging ion storm battered the star stallion, threatening to overload its shields and overstress its hull.

“Compensating,” replied Commander Inga Strauss, her voice tight. It was all she could do to punch in the commands on the console as the small-craft pitched violently.

In the rear of the stallion, four civilians huddled in terror. Only ten minutes earlier, they had been plucked from their damaged Corvallen freighter by Deryx and Strauss. Their initial relief over being rescued evaporated quickly as the monstrous ion storm exploded with pent-up force, erupting into a force-9 tempest.

Now the stallion was desperately clawing its way back to the *Bluefin*, which still lay nearly a half-hour distant at full impulse. What had begun as a rather routine rescue mission was now a struggle for survival – a struggle that Deryx and Strauss now wondered if they would win.

“Stallion oh-one to *Bluefin*, come in please.” Inga’s voice was controlled, masking the genuine fear that lurked on the periphery of her consciousness. Her attempt at communication was met with a burst of static.

“Try emergency power,” suggested the Denobulan CPO as he struggled with the helm controls. The stallion pitched and yawed dangerously, but Deryx managed to keep it under control – barely.

“If I boost the gain much more I’ll blow the sub-space transceiver,” she replied. A sudden jounce caused her to bite her tongue painfully and she

tasted the sharp tang of blood. She spat a wad of bloody saliva on the deck and turned her attention back to her console.

“Stallion oh-one to *Bluefin* – Mayday! Mayday! We are caught in the ion storm – shields and dampeners are failing, please respond.”

Finally, through the static she heard the familiar, welcome voice of Lt. Nigel Bane.

“... *oh-one, this is Bluefin. We ... your mayday and ... moving to rendezvous with you. What ... your status?*” The concern in Bane’s voice was apparent, despite the weak signal.

Hearing Nigel’s voice gave Strauss a tendril of hope. “*Bluefin, we are uninjured but shields are down to 25% and radiation levels are rising. Inertial dampeners are fluctuating and structural integrity fields are beginning to fail. We’re running at full impulse, trying to get ahead of the storm.*”

Streaks of purple and red energy flashed across the viewport, momentarily dazzling Strauss as the stallion shook ominously.

“*Acknowledged, oh-one. Adjust ... to one-one-three mark fourteen ... should get you clear of ... leading edge in ten minutes. We ... en route.*”

Deryx punched in the course change and the small craft veered slightly to port. Strauss noticed several warning indicators flashing on the helm console – indicative of engine over-heating as she replied to Bane.

“Understood, *Bluefin*. We have adjusted course to one-one-three mark fourteen. Be advised our engines are over-heating. . . I’m not sure how much longer we can maintain full impulse.”

Bane’s reply was drowned out in a raucous screech of static as a gravimetric wave slammed into the star stallion. The lights on the tiny vessel dimmed and one of the civilians screamed. The stallion skewed dangerously to starboard before Deryx could bring it back under control. He glanced at Strauss, a sheen of perspiration on his face.

“Nearly lost it that time,” he muttered.

Strauss nodded, her eyes wide. “Yeah.” She took a shuddering breath. “Let’s hope we don’t hit any more waves like that one.”

The Denobulan chuffed out a breath. "No argument there, Commander."

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USS *Bluefin*
Molari Badlands

"Stallion oh-one, come in please!"

Bane turned in his chair and shook his head helplessly. "No reply, Captain." The young Aussie officer wore an expression of dread on his face.

Captain Joseph Akinola nodded, his own face impassive. He was also worried about Strauss, Deryx and the civilians, but he kept his feelings in check.

"Keep trying Mr. Bane. It's no surprise that storm is playing hell with the comm-system. Mr. Bralus - time to intercept?"

The Bolian helm officer spared a quick glance at his console as he continued to guide the border cutter into the approaching ion storm.

"Twelve minutes, sir, assuming they can maintain course and speed."

Senior Chief Solly Brin was seated at the aft auxiliary station. The red Orion non-com glowered at the viewscreen.

"I've never seen a storm intensify this quickly before," Brin muttered.

"Me neither, Senior Chief," replied Akinola. A mere half-hour ago, the ion storm appeared to be holding at force 3 – rough, certainly, for civilian ships, but nothing too difficult for the cutter or even the stallions to handle.

Now it was a force 9 monster, with enough power to mangle a border cutter.

Or shred a star stallion.

"Delta, stand by on tractor beams. I want to grab them and haul tail out of here as fast as possible."

The auburn-haired second officer tapped instructions into the engineering console. "Aye sir. Tractors are on-line and standing by."

The cutter rocked slightly and the deck trembled under their feet.

“Gravimetric wave,” announced Bane, solemnly. “We’ve crossed the leading edge of the storm.”

“Damn,” murmured Akinola under his breath. The recovery of the stallion had become exponentially more difficult.

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Star Stallion 01 Molari Badlands

“Radiation levels increasing,” remarked Strauss. Her voice was remarkably calm, as if she were merely commenting on the weather.

“Say, Commander? If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not know that kind of stuff,” replied Chief Deryx. He grunted as the stallion lurched while plowing through a dense field of concentrated ion particles.

Strauss forced a smile. “Sorry. I tend to talk more when I’m nervous.”

“Nervous? What’s there to be nervous about? This is a walk in the . . .”

A klaxon sounded and the computer voice interrupted.

“Warning – radiation levels are now at dangerous levels. Decontamination protocols should be followed. Please report to the nearest medical facility as soon as possible.”

“Frakkin’ know-it-all computer,” growled Deryx. He spared a quick glance toward Strauss. “How much time does that give us?”

“I thought you didn’t want to know.”

“I changed my mind.”

Strauss frowned in thought. “Probably ten minutes before radiation levels reach the lethal zone. Assuming the shields don’t fail. If they do . . .”

The mottled colors on the Chief's face took on a paler cast. "I see. Guess we better rendezvous with the ship before then."

"Sounds like a plan, Chief."

* * *

USS Bluefin **Molari Badlands**

The cutter smashed through gravimetric waves and eddies of coalesced energy as it plowed doggedly toward the wounded star stallion. Already, they were facing force 6 ion levels.

Akinola rocked slightly in the command chair as the cutter slammed through heavier levels of ionic bombardment.

"Status, Mr. Bane," he queried.

"Shields still holding at 85% and structural integrity fields operating at maximum, but the storm is moving directly our way." He shook his head in frustration. "We'll be in the thick of it when we reach the stallion."

The Captain nodded. "Very well. Let me know when you have a firm fix on them."

"Captain?" Lt. Commander Simms spoke with a note of distress. "We may have a problem."

"Please elaborate, Commander,"

"It's the tractor beams, sir. The increased ionic bombardment degrades the graviton beams we can produce." She shook her head, "I'm not sure we'll be able to get a lock on the stallion."

Akinola grimaced. "Then we need another option. We rendezvous in five minutes and I want our people on board this ship – got it?"

Delta swallowed. "Yes sir, I'm on it."

"Get Gralt on it too. I know he's busy with the engines, but recovering our people is priority one."

* * *

"I've got the ship on sensors!" Straus voice was animated. "We'll rendezvous in two minutes."

Deryx shook his head. "We aren't out-running the storm, Commander. We've got serious problems."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't land in the hangar deck. And If they drop shields for us, it will tear *Bluefin* apart."

"True – but can't they tow us out?"

"That's the problem." He gestured out the viewport at the swirling kaleidoscope of energy. "I'm not sure the tractor beams can hold a lock on us in this mess. Hells, they might not work at all."

Strauss was silent for a moment. "I'm sure they've worked out a contingency plan."

"Let's hope so."

The Commander tapped the transmit control. "Stallion oh-one to *Bluefin*. Do you read us?"

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USS *Bluefin*
Molari Badlands

"Stallion oh-one to Bluefin, do you . . . us?"

Bane's hand flew to the communications console.

"Bluefin here – we read you, oh-one. How are you holding up?"

"I've had better days," replied Strauss, *"but I think Chief Deryx is enjoying himself. Any ideas about getting us on board?"*

Captain Akinola moved beside Bane and leaned over the Operations Officer toward the comm. panel. “Inga, this is the Captain. Commander Simms and Gralt have a plan, but it’s risky . . .”

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Stallion 01 Molari Badlands

Inga’s eyes grew wide as she listened to Captain Akinola. She cleared her throat.

“Ah, sir? Has anyone ever tried that before?”

“No,” admitted Akinola, *“but it’s the only option we have left. Try to maneuver directly under the engineering hull until your shields contact ours. It will be rough, so Deryx will have to move slowly. Once our shields have engaged, we’ll open a small window between the ship and the stallion. That will allow you to beam over – but you’ll have to do it one at a time. Even with enhanced pattern buffers on both ends, we could lose you if we tried to beam everyone at once.”*

Strauss’ mouth was dry. No one had ever attempted a transport in the middle of a high-intensity ion storm. The idea was madness. Still, a slim chance was better than no chance.

“Understood, Captain. We’re ready to go on our end.”

Deryx’s expression indicated he was anything but ready, but he took a deep breath and adjusted himself in the pilot’s seat. “I’m taking us in.”

* * *

Despite the hammer blows of concentrated energy, Deryx skillfully guided the stallion beneath the cutter, slowly moving the small craft toward the looming ship until the shields made contact.

Once more, lights dimmed and a shower of sparks erupted from the environmental panel. Deryx gamely held the stallion in place until the feedback from the shields subsided.

“*Bluefin*, we’ve made contact,” announced Strauss.

"Acknowledged, Commander. Stand-by for beam out."

The XO stood from her seat and made her way to the aft cabin. "Let's go, people – we're beaming you to our ship, but we don't have much time."

Four pale and drawn faces regarded Strauss with puzzlement. They were frozen in fear.

"I said, MOVE!"

Strauss' shout broke the civilians out of their stupor. They scrambled to their feet and Strauss herded them to the tiny transporter arch aft of the flight deck.

"One at a time, but step quickly. You there – you go first." She gestured to a young Arkellian who nodded and stepped under the transporter arch.

Strauss tapped her combadge. "The first one is ready for beam out."

Almost immediately, the woman was engulfed in the transporter wave. Her body shimmered, faded and vanished.

Brusquely, Strauss grabbed the next freighter crewman and maneuvered him under the arch. She repeated the process twice more until the civilians were safely on *Bluefin*.

"Okay, Chief – you're next," she called.

"You go ahead, sir – I'm going to hold her steady for you."

"NOW, Chief! Move your ass, and no arguments."

Grumbling, Deryx set the controls to automatic and moved nimbly to the arch. Strauss smiled thinly.

"The Captain is the last off the ship, remember?" she asked.

"Stupid tradition," muttered Chief Deryx.

Strauss tapped her combadge. "Energize."

The Denobulan disappeared, just as another gravimetric wave slammed into the stallion and the cutter. Strauss could hear the master warning klaxon blare and the computer began speaking in its maddeningly calm voice, "*Warning - Shield failure imminent. Structural failure imminent.*"

The XO cursed as she stepped under the arch. "*Bluefin, the shields are failing, energize!*"

As the familiar tingle of the transporter enveloped her, she heard a loud screeching and watched with horrified fascination as the hull of the stallion began to split. A loud roar of rushing wind assaulted her ears as the stallion began to depressurize.

She opened her mouth to scream but no sound came forth. A tunnel of bright light appeared before her eyes, then . . .

. . . she was standing on the transporter dais on the *Bluefin*. She staggered a moment, dizzy and near to fainting.

Before her stood Chief Deryx, except . . .

Her head was muzzy. *How did Deryx manage to change uniforms?*

Before she could speak, Deryx slapped his combadge.

"Intruder alert, transporter room one!"

Still dizzy, she forced herself erect. "What the hell? Deryx – what are you doing? And why are you wearing . . ."

The door to the transporter room slid open and Lt. Nigel Bane and a security crewman strode in. Inga's sudden sense of relief was stemmed by the phaser in crewman's hand. And why was Nigel wearing that older-style uniform?

Bane's eyes narrowed at the sight of Strauss. He did not move to help her, but regarded her warily.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" he demanded. "And how did you get on this ship?"

"Nigel! For God's sake, quit screwing around. Did everyone else beam over alright?"

The Australian Lieutenant looked genuinely baffled. Before Bane could respond, the door slid open again. Strauss stared at the new arrival and her breath caught in her throat.

The tall man with the thick mustache wore commander's pips on the collar of his burgundy tunic. Though Strauss had never met him, she recognized the man immediately. After all, she had seen his holo-pic many times in T'Ser's old cabin on *Bluefin*.

Dale McBride, XO of the USS *Bluefin*, regarded Inga Strauss with suspicion.

"Lady, I don't know who you are or how you got here, but you better have some damn good answers."

Inga, for her part, finally allowed unconsciousness to claim her and she fell limply to the deck.

* * *

Sometime in 2373
USS *Bluefin*
Molari Badlands

Inga slowly returned to consciousness. She was vaguely aware that she was lying down and that she was not alone. Strauss struggled to open her eyes. She still felt dizzy and slightly nauseous.

When she saw the face peering down at her, the shock nearly caused her to pass out again.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry my dear! I hope I didn't startle you. I'm Calvin Baxter – Chief Medical Officer of the *Bluefin*."

Inga merely gaped at the white-haired physician. This couldn't be possible – Dr. Baxter was dead! And so was Commander Dale McBride. *I must be dreaming*, she thought.

The familiar voice she heard next was too real for a dream.

"How is she, Doc?"

“Well enough, Captain, though there are a few odd anomalies in her brain scan that I can’t yet explain. She’s also been exposed to ionic radiation, but I put her on a regimen of Hyronalin, so that shouldn’t be a concern.”

Inga turned her head to see the familiar face of Captain Joseph Akinola. Familiar, except . . .

There was not quite so much gray in his hair. And like Bane and McBride, he was wearing the older burgundy tunic that had been discontinued (even by the Border Service) about the time that the Dominion War began.

Akinola’s gaze fell on Strauss. There was no warmth in his eyes.

“I’m Captain Joseph Akinola, in command of the Border Cutter, *Bluefin*. Care to explain how you happened to appear on my ship in the middle of the badlands?” His tone was conversational, but there was an unmistakable edge to this voice.

Did I end up in some mirror universe? Strauss wondered. She decided to proceed with caution.

“My name is Inga Strauss. I was on a star stallion caught in an ion storm attempting to beam on . . . a cutter, when I appeared here.”

Akinola smirked. “Nice try. There isn’t an active ion storm within several light years, nor any sign of a stallion in the vicinity. Not to mention that no one would be crazy enough to use a transporter in the midst of a storm. Care to try again?”

Inga glanced at Dr. Baxter before replying. “Captain, I would rather speak to you privately.”

“Certainly. We have a nice private room in our brig awaiting you.”

Baxter interrupted. “Joseph, I think it best she remain in sickbay for the time being. Whatever happened to her, she’s had a nasty shock to her system. I’d like to run a few more tests.”

Akinola frowned but did not argue. “Okay, Doc. But I want her in restraints and I’m posting a guard outside sickbay.”

Baxter shook his head. "I don't think restraints are necessary, Captain. I'll keep an eye on her."

The Captain appeared ready to push the matter, but as he looked at Baxter, he relented.

"Alright, Calvin, we'll do it your way." He turned back to Strauss. "One more question. Explain the uniform you're wearing. You've got commander's pips and a Border Service issue combadge, but that jumpsuit isn't used by any service I know of."

She hesitated before answering. "It's . . . that is, the uniform . . . is a new prototype." It was a lame answer, but it was the best she could do at the moment.

Akinola's expression remained dubious. "Easy enough to check. Doc? She's all yours . . . for now."

* * *

Captain Akinola stepped out of the turbo-lift onto the *Bluefin's* bridge. Commander McBride rose from the command chair, allowing Akinola to sit.

"Did you learn anything?" asked McBride.

Akinola shook his head. "Not much. She claims to be a Border Service commander named Inga Strauss. And she's human according to Doc's tests, so at least we didn't pick up a Dominion shape-shifter." He sighed. "She doesn't appear to be a threat. Hell, she seems more confused than we are."

"Skipper?" Bane stood from his station at Ops.

"Yes, Mr. Bane?"

"When I arrive in the transporter room, that woman . . . well, she seemed to know me. She actually called me by name. Deryx said the same thing."

The Captain frowned. "Our crew manifests are hardly classified, Nigel. It wouldn't take much to learn the names of our personnel."

"Yes sir, I get that. But she actually seemed to *know* me, Skipper. And she seemed surprised that Deryx and I didn't know her."

“Maybe she’s loco,” suggested McBride, spinning a finger around his ear. “or maybe your memory is foggy, Lieutenant. Maybe you have met her before and just don’t remember.”

A rueful smile formed on Bane’s lips. “I’d be the crazy one to forget a gorgeous face like that, Mr. McBride.”

Akinola snorted. “Crazy or not, beautiful or not, I want to know how that young lady managed to beam onto our ship in the middle of the badlands without another ship within scanner range!” He glanced back at Bane.

“Nigel, check Starfleet’s database for a Commander Inga Strauss. She claims to be Border Service, but I’ve never heard the name before. Seems kind of young for a full commander, anyway.”

“Hey! I represent that remark.” said McBride with a mock-hurt expression.

“Get over it, old man,” replied Akinola with a smile. “Mr. Fralk, lay in a course for Star Station Echo. If we don’t have this figured out by the time we arrive, we’ll pass Ms. Strauss along to Security and let them handle it.”

“Aye, sir.”

A few minutes passed before Bane reported. “Captain? I’ve found the personnel file on Inga Strauss.”

Akinola walked over to the Ops station and peered over Bane’s shoulder. On the display he saw the image of the woman now in sickbay, though the woman portrayed on the screen had somewhat shorter hair and she was wearing a typical Starfleet uniform.

“Lieutenant Commander Inga Strauss, currently serving as Tactical Officer on USS *Thunderchild* . . .” Akinola frowned at the newly discovered information and straightened. “Is she listed as AWOL?”

“No sir, I checked. *Thunderchild* is currently in sector 85882 – all hands accounted for, including Lt. Commander Strauss. And, as you can see – she has an exemplary record.”

“So,” began McBride, “if Inga Strauss is on the *Thunderchild*, then who do we have down in sickbay?”

* * *

Inga was beginning to feel better, physically, but she was still confused. If this is a mirror universe, it sure seems a lot like my own, just a little out of date, she thought.

“Out of date,” she murmured. The thought resonated, and not in a comforting way. She lifted up on her elbows and looked around. Dr. Baxter was in his cubicle, dictating medical notes. Corpsman Rice was in an adjacent room, tending to another patient.

“Computer,” she whispered, “what is today’s Stardate?”

“The current Stardate is 50672.74.”

Once more, Strauss felt a wave of dizziness pass over her. 50672.74 – a little after 1300 hours on September 3, 2373.

Almost 4 years in the past.

And you just told the Captain who you are! She realized, aghast. Anything I do or say could change the time-line forever!

She had already said too much. But if she remained too long in the past (present?), she might do irreparable harm to the future (present?).

She closed her eyes to think. She couldn’t do this on her own – she needed help if she were to return to her own time. But if she said or did the wrong thing...

“Feeling better?”

Her eyes flew open. The gentle gaze of Dr. Calvin Baxter regarded her with compassionate interest. Seeing him again was bitter-sweet. His death was still an all-too-fresh memory. Inga forced a smile.

“Yes, thank you. Just a bit muddled.”

“Probably the side-effects of the Hyronalin. It should pass.” He pulled up a stool and perched upon it, folding his arms.

“Does your tongue feel better?”

“My tongue?” She recalled how she had bitten it during the wild ride on the star stallion. It had throbbed painfully, though the intensity of the situation had put those thoughts aside. She realized it no longer hurt.

She gingerly moved her tongue around her mouth and pressed her cheek. No pain. “Yes, it’s much better now.”

“That was a pretty nasty abrasion you had. Did you bite your tongue?”

“I suppose so,” she in a guarded tone.

Baxter cocked his head. “What happened to you, young lady?”

“Honestly? I’m not entirely sure.”

The door to sick bay slid open. Baxter and Strauss both turned their attention to the new arrival. Nigel Bane stood at a respectful distance from the bio-bed.

“Ah, I see you have a visitor!” remarked Baxter. “Perhaps that will cheer you up. I still have some charts to update. Come closer, Mister Bane – I assure you, she’s not dangerous.”

Bane smiled awkwardly and approached the bio-bed. He appeared much as he did in her normal time, though his hair was at regulation length for once. He still wore the rank of a junior lieutenant – his promotion some months off.

He cleared his throat. “I, uh, thought I’d see how you were doing,” he began, awkwardly.

She nodded. It hurt her heart to be a stranger to him. “Thanks. I’m okay, I guess.”

“Well . . . that’s good then.” He glanced around nervously, spotted the stool and pulled it up.

He knit his brow, gathering his thoughts. “A while ago, when you first . . . showed up. You called me by name. How do you know me?”

She swallowed and stared up at the ceiling. *Careful, Inga*, she thought. Cautiously, she replied, "Lieutenant, I really don't think I should be talking to you."

"Oh. Alright then." He rose from the stool. There was an awkward silence before he said, "It's just that, well, somehow I feel like I should know you."

Bane gazed at her for a beat longer. Strauss kept her eyes fixed firmly on the ceiling, unwilling to meet his gaze and not trusting herself to speak. Finally, he turned and left sickbay.

She let out a sigh of despair. "Oh, Nigel," she whispered. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

* * *

Commander McBride grabbed a mug from the ward room side table and filled it with coffee from the servitor. He eased his long frame into a chair across the table from Lt. T'Ser. The Vulcan officer regarded him with a quizzical expression.

"I hear we have a passenger," she said.

"You hear correctly," he agreed, taking a careful sip of coffee. "Damned if I know how she got here, though."

"Did she beam on board?"

"She ended up in the transporter room," he admitted, "but there wasn't a ship anywhere in range of a transporter – at least not with known technology." He leaned the chair back and laced his fingers behind his head. "Maybe she's a spy for the Dominion."

"Right – the Dominion developed a transporter capable of beaming someone over countless light years, and so they send a delirious woman to a border cutter in the middle of nowhere. There's a plan." Her smile assuaged the sarcasm. A little.

McBride looked glum. "Okay, I s'pose I deserved that - it was a dumb idea. Do you have a better one?" he challenged.

"It is always a mistake to theorize without sufficient data," she said, taking a sip of tea.

"What? Is that some sort of Vulcan idiom?"

"Sherlock Holmes, actually."

He snorted. "Well, Sherlock Holmes we ain't got."

Akinola stepped into the wardroom, a bowl of ice cream in hand. "Don't have," he said.

"Huh?" McBride was confused.

"You said, 'ain't got.' You should have said, 'don't have.'"

"He's just speaking in his west Texas dialect, Captain," said T'Ser.

"Is this 'bust the XO's chops' day?" groused McBride.

"Everyday," smiled the Captain as he spooned a mouthful of cherry vanilla ice cream. He waved the spoon toward T'Ser. "We may not have Sherlock Holmes, but we do have a genuine Vulcan on board."

T'Ser frowned at the unexpected turn of the conversation. "Um, what?"

"Maybe if our stowaway were convinced that our resident Vulcan can get the truth from her, she would open up."

T'Ser arched an eyebrow. "Captain, I know as much about Vulcan mental disciplines as Dale," she pointed out. McBride rolled his eyes.

"I know that and you know that, but Ms. Strauss or whoever she is doesn't know that."

"Good cop, bad cop?" asked McBride, grinning.

"Something like that," agreed Akinola.

T'Ser smiled. "Okay, I'm in."

* * *

So what do I do know? wondered Inga. *On the one hand, anything I say could have dire consequences for the future timeline. Yet, I can't get back on my own and the longer I stay here, the greater the chances the timeline gets screwed up. It's a lose-lose proposition.*

She pondered all of the scenarios she could imagine. None were particularly heartening.

Perhaps if I only tell the Captain? . . . No – he can't help me by himself. But if I do tell them . . .

She wished she had paid more attention to the lecture about temporal paradoxes at the Academy. Not that it would have helped much – it was mostly a lot of blather about quantum mechanics. Bottom line – time travel was not to be trifled with.

Too late to bemoan that now, she mused. The whisper of the sickbay doors opening caused her head to turn.

Captain Akinola entered, followed by Commander McBride and T'Ser.

This is turning into a regular family reunion, she thought, dryly.

Akinola looked stern. "Alright, Commander Strauss, or should I say, Lieutenant Commander? Time to cut through the bull and tell us what you are doing here and why you are not on the *Thunderchild*?"

The thought jolted Strauss. *I guess I am on the Thunderchild,* she mused.

"Don't think you can pull one over on us," drawled McBride. "Lt. T'Ser is a Vulcan adept. She can spot a lie a parsec off!"

That was too much for Strauss. She started to giggle. Perhaps it was accumulated stress or the effect of the medication, but the idea of her old friend, T'Ser, as an adept was just too much.

Obviously, this was not the response they expected. Both of T'Ser's eyebrows shot up. Akinola frowned and McBride looked puzzled.

"You don't seem to be taking this very seriously," admonished Akinola.

Strauss placed a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, she decided. “S – sorry,” she said, enjoying the expression on T’Ser’s face, “but that is the funniest thing I’ve heard all day.”

“Indeed?” asked T’Ser in her best Vulcan intonation. She couldn’t quite hide the fact that she was somewhat offended.

Inga wiped her eyes. “Oh, get over yourself T’Ser. You’ve always had a terrible poker face. How are your Mom and Dad in Seattle?”

The Vulcan Lieutenant looked stunned. “How did you . . .”

This was too much for the Captain. “That’s enough! I’m going to ask you some direct questions, Ms. Strauss, or whoever you are, and I better get some straight answers or you will spend the rest of the voyage in the brig.”

“Yes sir,” replied Strauss, abashed. “I apologize – this is weird for me too. Weirder, perhaps.” The seriousness of her situation suddenly fell upon her. She looked at the three officers with a plaintive expression.

“I am seriously in need of your help. I know you well enough to trust you, but I’m not sure you will believe me.”

Akinola regarded her quietly for a moment. It was obvious this woman was in distress. “You seem to know quite a bit about us, yet we really know nothing about you. Your DNA profile matches that of an officer currently aboard the USS *Thunderchild*, yet here you are – halfway across the quadrant from that ship. We’ve ruled out you being a shape-shifter, but that leaves the question: who – are- you?”

Inga nodded, the stress evident on her face. “The Inga Strauss on *Thunderchild* is me. . . was me. Four years ago.”

The room was quiet for a moment as this statement sunk in.

“Are you saying,” began Akinola quietly, “that you are from the future?”

She swallowed. “Yes sir. I am.”

“Now hold on!” protested McBride. “That’s a pretty far-fetched claim.”

“She’s telling the truth.”

They turned to see Dr. Baxter walking from his cubicle, holding up a medical data PADD.

“It took me a while to figure out the reason for the anomaly I discovered on her brain scan.” The white-haired physician smiled at Inga. “Forgive me for eavesdropping, my dear, but you are still my patient.” He returned his gaze to Akinola. “Her DNA is a match for the Inga Strauss in the Starfleet database, but her bio-signature was off slightly. That is because our bio-signature changes over time. The anomaly I discovered can be explained by her aging approximately four years.”

Akinola returned his gaze to Strauss, who looked miserable and more than a little afraid.

“So what do we do with you now?” he asked, softly.

* * *

“Captain, might I have a word with you?” asked Baxter. It was a request, but there was a note of practiced authority in the former Admiral’s voice.

Akinola glanced at the CMO. “Certainly, Doctor. Mr. McBride, T’Ser – let’s reconvene in 15 minutes in the ward room and allow Ms. Strauss a bit more time to recover.”

McBride and T’Ser exchanged glances, then departed sickbay. The Captain paused to look at Strauss.

“If you know us as well as you say, you know this time displacement stuff is not something we’ve faced. I don’t know yet how we can correct this . . . or if we can at all.”

Inga swallowed and nodded. “I understand, sir.”

He regarded Strauss for a moment. She seemed so young to be a full commander. *How alone she must feel, and how helpless.* “We’ll talk more – very soon.”

The Captain followed Dr. Baxter into his cubicle. The CMO closed the door to give them privacy.

“Joseph, what are your intentions?”

Akinola spread his hands in a helpless gesture. “Intentions? Hell, Calvin – I have no idea what to do. My first inclination is to turn her over to Starfleet. Maybe someone who has dealt with time travel could help her.”

Baxter shook his head. “No. You’re not going to do that.”

The Captain stared at Baxter. “No? Why the hell not?”

Baxter folded his arms. There was a flinty gleam of steel in his eye. “I never told you much about what I did before I retired as Director of Star Fleet Medical and signing on with the Border Service.”

“No - I suppose not, but I recall that you served as CMO on several ships of the line. What does that have to do with Inga Strauss?”

“Let’s just say that as an admiral, I was privy to things going on behind the scenes of Starfleet. Dark and shameful things. I can’t say too much, but I will tell you this, Joseph: there are elements within Starfleet, who if they got their hands on Ms. Strauss, would bleed her dry to obtain her knowledge of the future.”

Akinola frowned. “Well, it’s not too surprising that Fleet Intel would like to know what the Dominion might do in the next few years.”

“Joseph – setting aside the major problems with that statement – I’m not speaking of a polite debriefing by Fleet Intelligence and finding a place for Ms. Strauss. I would wager that she would disappear – and I don’t mean back to her proper time-line. There are factions within Starfleet that operate in the shadows that lack any scruples and would not hesitate to harm Ms. Strauss or even risk our very future if they could further their agenda.”

The Captain eyed Baxter with skepticism. “Forgive me, Doctor, but that sounds like institutional paranoia to me. Strauss could be a valuable asset – she knows what’s going to happen in the next four years – whether or not we go to war, and what decisions are made that should be changed. She could save thousands of lives.”

“And perhaps caused the deaths of millions more!” Baxter retorted, sharply.

Akinola actually drew back. He had never seen the normally mild-mannered surgeon so animated. “Care to explain that statement, Doc?” he asked, evenly.

Dr. Baxter ran a hand through a shock of unruly, white hair. “Sorry, Joseph – I didn’t mean to get so worked up.” He sat heavily in his chair. “And I can’t say much more, except this. I have dealt with a similar situation in the past. No – don’t ask, because it’s classified code-black. Officially, it never happened. If certain people knew I said this much, you would never see me again.”

“Doc . . .”

“Captain, please . . . trust me on this. We only have two real options. One, we figure out how to get Ms. Strauss back to her own time, without revealing this to Starfleet command. There are a few people I trust enough to contact for help.”

“And the other option?”

“She must vanish.”

Akinola was incredulous. “What? You want to kill her?”

Baxter snorted with derision. “Of course not, Joseph. What do you take me for? I want to help the young lady, not harm her.” It was apparent by his tone that he was deeply hurt by the insinuation.

Abashed, Akinola softened his voice. “Well, what do you mean by ‘vanish?’”

Baxter sighed. “A poor choice of words. Sorry – this has me on edge. I simply mean, if we cannot return her to the future, she will need a new identity and go someplace where no one would know Inga Strauss. It’s a lousy option, but for all our sakes, it must be done if we cannot return her home.”

Home. The word struck a chord with Akinola. “It would seem she *is* home. Here on *Bluefin*, in a few years, I mean.”

Baxter eyed Akinola with a worried expression. “Joseph, I caution you not to go there. We must all be careful not to ask too much of her, or even ponder certain things. By knowing too much, we could potentially do as much damage to the time line as she could.”

The Captain rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Okay, Doc. We'll try it your way. Contact whoever you trust for help. I'm going to talk with the XO and T'Ser. Might as well get Deryx and Gralt in too."

Baxter nodded. "Yes, but I caution you to limit word of our guest. This is strictly need-to-know, Captain. We're all walking a razor edge – I cannot stress the point enough."

"I hear you, Doc. Loud and clear. Give us a few minutes so I can bring them up to speed, then bring our guest to the wardroom. Maybe she can provide us some pieces to the puzzle." He paused. "Calvin . . . are you sure she's from the future? I don't want to make a mistake here."

Baxter nodded. "Yes, quite sure. And Joseph?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

* * *

Through the transparent aluminum walls, Strauss could not hear the conversation between the Captain and Dr. Baxter, but she could see their expressions and gestures. It was apparent they were arguing.

Arguing about me, she supposed. She let out a breath of frustration. God, what a mess. Who knows what harm I may be doing to the future. Strauss thought about her estranged mother, about her younger brother serving in the Marines, of all her friends and comrades in the service.

The longer I'm here, the greater the danger I am to them, she thought. I can't be the cause of ruining their lives . . . their future.

Glancing at a stand near her bed, she noticed a programmable hypo-spray. She turned back towards the CMO's office. Akinola and Baxter were no longer arguing, but their attention was still away from her.

Slowly, Inga reached out, grasped the hypo-spray, and slipped it up the sleeve of her jumpsuit.

Always have a contingency plan, she thought, dryly.

Captain Akinola exited Baxter's cubicle and approached Strauss. "Ms. Strauss, we're going to do our best to get you back home. I think you understand that we're navigating uncharted space, so we must be careful."

Inga swallowed and smiled. "Yes sir, I agree."

Akinola appeared ready to say more, hesitated, and cleared his throat. "Good. Dr. Baxter will bring you up to the ward room shortly. I'm going to gather some of the senior staff so we can address the problem and come up with a solution." He paused, "Obviously, you will have to consider carefully what you tell us. Too little information and you may be stuck in this time period. Too much and, well . . ."

He left the rest unsaid. Inga knew all too well the fine line she must walk. The problem was she could not be sure exactly where the line fell. "Yes sir. I get the picture."

The Captain nodded. "Good." He began to step away, paused, and regarded her with a faint smile.

"One quick question that I doubt will affect the fate of the universe . . ."

"Sir?"

"Is that really the uniform we'll wear in a few years?"

She smiled. " 'Fraid so, sir."

"Kind of dreary looking if you ask me. I've always been partial to burgundy. Oh well." He shook his head ruefully. "See you shortly, Commander."

As Akinola left sickbay, a sudden feeling – not quiet relief, but close, came over her. For the first time since appearing in this time period, the Captain had called her by her rank.

Somehow, that simple acknowledgement made her feel less alone.

* * *

"What's so glurking important?" grouched Galt as he trudged into the ward room. "I'm trying to get the thrice-damned number two intercooler flushed."

“Have a seat, Galt,” enjoined Akinola. “Where’s Lt. Bane?”

“Here, sir,” replied Bane as he slipped in the door. Akinola spared the young officer a stern look before settling back in his chair and gazing around the ward room.

“What we discuss in this room stays in this room. If I hear that any of you utter one word out of school, I will personally launch you out a torpedo tube. Are we all clear on that?”

There were nods and murmured “yes sirs” all around the table. Even Galt managed to refrain from a typically sarcastic reply.

“Most of you are aware that a short time ago, we picked up an unexpected passenger while transiting the badlands. Her name is Inga Strauss. She is a commander in the Border Service, or at least she will be in about four years. All evidence thus far indicates she is from our future.”

Bane’s eyes widened in surprise. Galt snorted derisively.

“Sounds like a pile of Yarliq crap to me, Captain,” the engineer grouched. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“As I said, the evidence indicates she is telling the truth,” continued Akinola. “We are going to figure out a way to get her home to her proper time.”

“What? You can’t be serious!” thundered the Tellarite. McBride and Deryx also looked surprised. T’Ser frowned in thought while Bane merely looked pensive.

“Mr. Galt, I am very serious,” replied the Captain in a terse manner. “So let’s have less histrionics and more focus on the problem at hand. Understood?”

Galt glowered but wisely held his tongue. The others remained quiet, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“That’s more like it,” continued Akinola. “Commander Strauss and Dr. Baxter will join us shortly. Before they do, I need to establish some ground-rules.”

McBride frowned. “Skipper, with respect, what the hell do any of us know about temporal whatsis? Speaking for myself, I haven’t got a clue.”

“Point well taken, XO. This is new for all of us, but Doc has some contacts that might provide some help, and Commander Strauss can at least tell us what happened on her end that got us here. Let’s don’t quit before we get started, okay?”

McBride’s face reddened at the mild rebuke, but he nodded. T’Ser looked troubled but remained silent.

“Back to the ground-rules. I think you all realize the longer Ms. Strauss is in our present, the greater potential damage exists to the future time-line. So rule one: Do not ask about your future selves or specifics about the Federation, this ship, etc. We need to focus on the circumstances that brought her back in time. From that, we will determine if we can duplicate the same set of circumstances and send her back.”

“Captain,” T’Ser spoke carefully, “I doubt I know more than anyone else about time travel, but even if we discover what brought Strauss here and can duplicate it, how will we know if we’re successful? We could do more harm than good.”

Akinola nodded. “That’s true, Lieutenant. That’s why we’re taking this a step at a time. Let’s hear Ms. Strauss’ story – analyze it, and discuss the possibilities. We’ll also lean on Dr. Baxter for insight.”

“Baxter?” Galt shook his head in disbelief. “What would that old *Froont* know about this?”

“More than any of us, apparently. That also does not leave this room.” Akinola looked around the room. He was met with looks of skepticism. He sighed.

“Look, there are no guarantees here. Are we in over our heads? Hell, yes. But I have good reasons not to turn her over to Starfleet . . . and no, I’m not going into them.”

He stood and placed his knuckles on the table, leaning forward for emphasis. “But hear this – Commander Strauss is a Border Dog. She is one of our own. We are going to do all we can and more to see her home. That’s our job.”

That struck home. McBride looked chastened. “You’re right Skipper.” He glanced around at the others. “It is our job, dammit! We’ve got to step up.”

The door slid open. Doctor Baxter stepped in followed by Inga Strauss, looking none the worse for wear. She offered a tentative smile.

“Hi – I’m Inga Strauss. I guess you all know that by now.”

Dale McBride stepped forward, towering over the petite Strauss. He extended his hand. “Sorry for the rude greetin’ earlier. I’m Dale McBride – welcome aboard the *Bluefin*, Commander.”

* * *

Commander Strauss gratefully accepted the chair offered by Lt. Bane. She looked around the ward room, smiling shyly. How bizarre to be a stranger in a room filled with her closest friends.

“I’ll second the XO’s greetings, Commander Strauss. Welcome aboard *Bluefin*. I’m sure you can understand our initial response to your arrival,” said the Captain.

“Yes sir, completely. I appreciate the care I received from Dr. Baxter and for you hearing me out.” She paused. “I regret the trouble my appearance has caused.”

“Trouble is an understatement,” replied Akinola, mildly, “but what’s done is done. Let’s focus on a solution. Commander Strauss – these officers and Chief Deryx are the only ones on board that will be involved in this discussion. As best you can, describe to us what happened to you that caused you to travel back to this point in time. I needn’t remind you that must be careful not to provide too many details of the future.”

“Yes sir, I’ve considered that.” Strauss cleared her throat and clasped her hands on the table. A cup of water appeared before her, courtesy of Lt. T’Ser. Inga smiled and glanced at the Vulcan Ops officer.

“Could I trouble you for coffee instead?”

T’Ser smiled. “Sure.” She poured a mug for Inga and returned to her own chair at the table.

“Thank you,” said Strauss. She took a sip of the familiar brew and pursed her lips in thought. The room was quiet, save for the slight hum of the environmental system.

“Alright,” she began, “I was on a SAR mission in the badlands aboard a star stallion. The . . . cutter was wrapping up another SAR effort, so we took the stallion to pick up the crew of a Corvallen freighter that suffered engine failure and drifted into an ion storm. The storm was holding at force 3, so we figured we had ample time to pick up the crew and return to the, um, ship before things got too bad. We were wrong.”

Gralt interrupted. “Which cutter?” he asked, curtly. Strauss blinked in surprise.

Akinola frowned. “Is that important?”

“Might be. If we’ve any chance of sending her back, we’ll need to know the variables involved – types of ships, tonnage, power output, hells – probably a hundred more variables that I can’t imagine. But if we *jrelli* foot around all this, we’re just left with a story and no important details.”

Strauss glanced at Akinola for guidance. The Captain looked at Baxter.

“Doc? What do you think?”

Baxter shrugged. “It’s a risk, but I think Gralt’s right. We probably need to know those things.” He looked at Strauss. “Just try to avoid much in the way of detail regarding the crew.”

“We need to know who else was on the Stallion,” pointed out Gralt. “At least get an idea of their body mass. Like I said, there’s a *Buurluk* load of data we need.”

Okaaay, thought Inga, *you asked for it*. “The cutter was the *Bluefin*. This very ship. I was on Stallion oh-one with Chief Deryx.”

Deryx appeared startled at this revelation. For the most part, the others looked intrigued, though T’Ser appeared troubled.

“I think we all suspected as much,” said Akinola. “Now that we have that out in the open, please continue.”

Strauss did so, describing the fairly routine rescue of the four crew members of the freighter, the sudden and frightening build-up of the ion storm, and their race to rendezvous with *Bluefin*.

“I never saw a storm build so quickly,” continued Strauss. The others were listening with rapt attention. “The Captain ordered *Bluefin* to head our way, but the storm kept expanding. It engulfed the stallion – Chief Deryx did a masterful job of piloting us, but it was rough. That’s when I bit my tongue, Doctor. Our shields were failing, the impulse engines were red-lined and time was running out. To make matters worse, the ionic radiation precluded using the tractor beams to tow us out. We only had one option left.”

“You’re not saying we beamed out?” blurted Deryx, forgetting she was speaking of his future self.

Inga smiled. “Yes, Chief – that’s exactly what I’m saying. You guided us under the engineering hull and brought the stallion’s shields in contact with the *Bluefin*’s shields. That enabled us to open a small shield window, so we could beam one person over at a time.”

Galt was taking notes on his PADD. “Did you use pattern enhancers?”

“Yes – at both ends. We got the freighter crew off okay. Chief, you gave me some grief over being last off, so I pulled rank. You beamed over, and then it was my turn.” She took a breath, recalling those intense, terrifying moments.

“I was about to initiate transport when the shields on the stallion failed. I remember hearing the warning from the computer, and I felt the pull of the transporter beam just as the stallion broke up. There was this odd, white light . . . I got real dizzy, which doesn’t usually happen to me during transport . . . next thing I know, I’m on the *Bluefin*. Only . . . not when I should be.”

Inga looked around and shrugged. “That’s all I know to tell you.”

“What was the storm intensity when the stallion broke up?” queried Galt.

She frowned. “It was force 9 at one point. When we finally reached *Bluefin* it was nearly at that level – borderline force 8 to force 9.”

The engineer shook his head. “Whose crazy idea was it to use the transporter in a force 9 storm?”

Yours, Inga almost said, but decided that was not “need-to-know.” Instead she said, “It worked, didn’t it?”

Gralt looked up from his PADD and grunted. "I suppose," he muttered.

They spent the next hour discussing theories, counter-theories and hare-brained schemes, but no solid plan of action resulted from the meeting. Akinola stood, signaling an end to the gathering.

"I think we've hammered this enough for now. We're beginning to talk in circles. Doc? Can you get in touch with those 'reliable contacts' you mentioned?"

Baxter nodded. "Right away."

"Good. Let's take a break. Remember – do not discuss this with *anyone* else on board. If any of you has a sudden brilliant flash of insight, let me know ASAP. For now, resume your normal duties. Dale? Let's get the ship turned around and headed back toward the badlands. I have a feeling whatever happens will take place there. T'Ser – please escort Commander Strauss to guest quarters – discreetly."

"Of course. Commander? This way please."

Inga followed T'Ser into the familiar corridor outside the ward room. Very little had changed in four years, she observed. The carpets were the same and the turbolift had the same shimmy between deck four and three.

T'Ser led her around the curved corridor of deck three, opposite where her (McBride's, in this time period) quarters were located.

The Vulcan Lieutenant stopped in front of a cabin door and entered a code, unlocking the room. Strauss was suddenly awash in a feeling of *deja vous*. This was so much like their first encounter when Inga joined the crew of the Bluefin in 2376.

"Here you are, Commander. It's somewhat Spartan, but you can rest and freshen up. I guess you already know there are no replicators."

Strauss smiled. "Yes, I know."

T'Ser hesitated. It was obvious that something was troubling her.

"Is something wrong?" asked Strauss.

“Um. No . . . Yes.” She sighed. “I can’t ask what I need to ask and it’s driving me crazy.”

Inga’s throat tightened. *I know exactly what you want to ask*, she thought. *You want to know why there will be a Commander Strauss on Bluefin and what will become of Commander McBride.* Outwardly, she remained silent.

T’Ser uttered a mirthless laugh and brushed away a tear. “This is crazy. I don’t even know you. And there are so many possible simple answers to my question, but . . .”

“T’Ser, I can’t . . .”

“I know, I know,” the Vulcan replied quickly. She wiped at her face for any stray tears and forced a smile. “This has to suck for you, too.”

Strauss laughed. The tension in the air that had rapidly built dissipated with equal speed. “Yeah – that’s putting it mildly.”

“From what you said down in sick bay . . . it’s pretty obvious you know me.” She paused. “Are we friends?”

Strauss did not hesitate. “Yes, T’Ser. We’re very good friends.”

The beautiful Vulcan nodded. “I’m glad,” she said, softly. T’Ser straightened. “I better get to the bridge – my duty shift starts in a few minutes. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

Inga nodded. “I will. Thanks.”

T’Ser flashed a quick smile before retreating down the corridor.

Inga stepped inside the empty cabin and waited for the door to slide shut before she leaned heavily against the wall. She took a deep, calming breath and stepped inside the compact head to splash water on her face. The cool water, though soothing, did little to ease the apprehension in her heart.

* * *

Dr. Baxter hummed absently to himself, waiting for his comm-signal to be routed. He thought about the young woman and her conundrum. And, he thought about the look on her face when she awoke to see him.

You were shocked to see me, weren't you? he mused. *That wasn't a look of mere surprise – you looked like you had just seen a ghost.*

His terminal chimed and the image of T'Ser appeared on the screen. *"I have an open channel to Dr. Beverly Crusher on Enterprise. She's standing by, Doctor."*

Baxter set aside thoughts of his own future and mortality and forced a smile on his face. "Thank you, T'Ser. I'm ready."

The image shifted. Beverly Crusher, CMO of the USS *Enterprise* appeared. Wavy red hair framed a lovely, smiling face. Her eyes sparkled at seeing her old friend and colleague.

"Calvin! My gosh, it's been so long. It's wonderful to see you. You look great!"

"And you, Beverly, are a lovely and gracious liar, but I thank you for saying so."

She laughed. *"Retirement didn't suit you, I suppose?"*

"It didn't take too many rounds of golf for me to get bored. Starfleet wouldn't take me back, but the Border Service seems glad to have my services. I now live the life of a humble border cutter CMO."

"Good for you! So – what's the occasion for the call? Not that I'm not glad to hear from you."

Baxter's expression became more serious. "I need a favor, Beverly – a big one."

"You only need to ask."

The old CMO tapped a control on his terminal. "Bev, I've encrypted the signal from this end. I would ask you to do the same."

A slender eyebrow arched upward. *"Okaaay – done. Why the cloak and dagger stuff?"*

He fixed her with an intense gaze. "Somonak," he said, simply.

She closed her eyes briefly. *"I had nearly forgotten about that."* She reopened her eyes, which were now troubled. *"I'm not sure I can help, Calvin. I no longer have those files."*

That would have been too much to hope, he thought. "I figured as much. What I really need is the young engineer who figured everything out. Forgive me, but my memory isn't what it once was – what was his name?"

She smiled. *"Barclay. Lt. Reginald Barclay. But he's not on Enterprise any more. He recently returned to Jupiter Station."*

Baxter brightened. "That would put him closer to us than you are. I think he may be the answer to our problem."

Crusher looked pensive. *"Calvin, no offense – but shouldn't you let someone else handle this? I mean, you're on a border cutter for Pete's sake."*

"Never underestimate a Border Dog, Beverly. And don't forget what happened to Somonak's twin – you know we can't trust those people. That's why I'm taking the back-channel route with people I can trust."

She winced. *"Point taken. God, what a tragedy! Calvin – please let me know if I can help further. I'm sorry I couldn't provide those files."*

"You've helped immensely, my dear. I wish I could chat, but time, as they say, is of the essence."

Crusher chuckled. *"Bad pun, Calvin, but appropriate. I wish you the best of luck. Take care. Crusher, out."*

Beverly Crusher's image had barely faded before Baxter was again contacting Lt. T'Ser.

"T'Ser? Dr. Baxter again. Please open a priority channel to Jupiter Station, Sol Sector, direct to Admiral Owen Paris. I'll be standing by."

* * *

Dr. Baxter stepped off the turbo-lift onto the bridge, pausing for a moment to look around. He had only been on the bridge perhaps three or four times since joining up with *Bluefin*. It struck him how small the operating center of a

cutter was in comparison to the Excelsior, Ambassador and Galaxy-class ships on which he had served as a CMO.

“Hey Doc - are you lost?” teased Commander McBride. He was seated in the command chair, now swiveled to face aft.

Baxter returned the smile. “I am a bit off the beaten track, aren’t I? Actually, I need to speak with the Captain. Is he in the inner sanctum?”

McBride jerked his head toward the ready room. “Yep, he’s there. Go ahead, Doc. I imagine he’s been waitin’ on you.”

“Thank you.”

Baxter moved toward the ready room door as McBride swiveled forward. He noticed T’Ser watching him before she quickly turned back to the Ops station.

Frowning, McBride stood and moved toward T’Ser. He glanced at Ensign Bralus but the Bolian helm officer was still intent on his controls.

T’Ser did not react as McBride approached, keeping her gaze focused deeply into the sensor hood.

“T’Ser? Is somethin’ bothering you? You’ve been as nervous as a steer at a steakhouse ever since Strauss showed up.”

“No - I’m fine,” she replied.

He reached over and tapped a control pad. “It works better if you turn it on.”

She straightened, a slight olive flush coloring her cheeks. T’Ser crossed her arms and regarded him with large, dark eyes.

“Okay, Dale,” she whispered, “I am ‘bothered’ as you put it. Aren’t you?”

McBride looked genuinely puzzled. “ ‘Bout what?”

Her eyes widened in disbelief. “Dale!” she hissed. “You mean you haven’t even considered the ramifications of Inga’s appearance?”

He glanced back at Bralus before replying. “Of course I have!” he whispered tightly. “But worrying about what might happen doesn’t help. Hell - for all we

know the time line is already screwed up by her appearance. Her 'future' may not exist anymore."

She lowered her eyes. "Perhaps you're right." But she did not sound convinced.

He lifted her chin. "T'Ser - don't drive yourself crazy over things you can't control. Hell, maybe in four years I'll be the captain and the Skipper will be sippin' Whiskey Sours on Risa with half-naked sweet young thangs rubbin' oil on his back."

This elicited a giggle from T'Ser. She pressed her fingers over her mouth quickly and glanced toward the helm. Bralus was still dutifully guiding the cutter toward the badlands.

She looked back at McBride. "Thanks - I needed to hear that." In a spontaneous movement, she planted a kiss at the corner of his mouth, before settling back at her station.

Surprised, McBride touched where T'Ser kissed him. "Uh, you're welcome." Somewhat dazed, he moved back to the command chair. It was the first time she had kissed him.

At the helm, Bralus rolled his eyes. *For Bharania's sake, get a room*, he thought.

* * *

"Come in, Doc," said Captain Akinola. He gestured to one of the guest chairs. "Have a seat."

Baxter did so, taking in the detailed wood carvings of ships that adorned the room. "Such exquisite workmanship, Captain; you have a gift."

"It helps pass the time when I can't sleep," he replied, modestly, though it was apparent the compliment pleased him. "Any luck with your 'contacts?'"

The CMO nodded. "Yes, though I think I've used up all my chips with Admiral Owen Paris. Being intentionally vague and evasive didn't help, but in the end he agreed to my request."

"Care to elaborate?"

“Just to say Admiral Paris has reluctantly agreed to let us borrow the services of Lt. Reginald Barclay – a rather gifted if eccentric young engineer. He served as assistant engineer on *Enterprise* before Admiral Owens pulled rank and had Barclay transferred to Jupiter Station.”

“This Barclay – does he have any experience with our kind of situation?”

Baxter nodded. “The lad has a talent for coming up with creative, if unorthodox solutions to brain-benders.”

Akinola snorted. “This certainly qualifies as a ‘brain-bender.’” His gaze became somber.

“Doc, there’s another factor to this that we’ve not discussed.”

The CMO smiled. “Just one? Sorry – go ahead.”

“If we should manage to figure out how to send Commander Strauss forward in time, what about us? What of our memories of these events? Won’t that screw up the time-line?”

“I’ve already considered that Joseph. I can put together a mild dose of anesthazine for injection. By adding in two other harmless drugs, I can induce short-term amnesia. But there is one other consideration, Joseph.”

“What’s that?”

This time, Baxter wore the somber expression. “One of us needs to remember this four years from now if we really expect to save this young woman.”

Akinola was silent for a moment. “You’re saying, someone needs to be on the receiving end with all the right information.”

Baxter nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid so. There are too many things that could go wrong on that end, even if we do everything right here.”

“You’ve given me something else to chew on. Thanks, Doc. By the way, when is Lt. Barclay due to arrive?”

“Admiral Paris was going to send him by fast courier – the *USS Mercury*. He should be here in about two days.”

The Captain grimaced. "The longer she's in this time period, the greater the odds we screw it up."

Baxter shrugged. "It can't be helped, Joseph. I wish I could guarantee success, but at least Lt. Barclay will raise our odds considerably."

* * *

Strauss lay on the bunk in the guest cabin, staring at the darkened ceiling. Her initial fear was being overtaken by creeping boredom.

She had already done calisthenics and stretching exercises. She had worked out a new crew rotation in her head when (if?) she returned to her normal time. She thought of Nigel Bane (her Nigel, four years from now) and wondered what he was doing. And she had even prayed, though it had been many years since she last conversed with the God of her family's Lutheran church. She tried to remember the last conversation with her mother, but decided she did not need to go there. Too depressing.

She could feel the cold, hard cylinder inside the sleeve of her uniform. "Plan B" as she had come to think of it.

"Lights," she called out and the ship's computer dutifully complied. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bunk. With a little wriggling, she was able to extract the hypo-spray from her sleeve.

It was a modern programmable model, capable of providing a spectrum of medications based on the species, gender and size of the patient. Designed to be "idiot-proof," the tiny scanner in the head of the unit prevented administering the wrong dosage for the wrong circumstances.

Strauss knew that scanners could be fooled. Part of her command training involved adapting various technological devices for survival and defensive measures. She had learned how to make a PADD overload and explode, how to use a combadge to find water . . .

And how to turn a hypo-spray into a weapon. Starfleet Medical had howled over such an abuse, but the Borg and the Dominion threat had trumped those protests.

"Computer, activate privacy lock on door."

With a brief chirp, the computer complied. Inga began to disassemble the hypo-spray. She was determined that if she could not return to her normal time, she would not live long enough to undo the future of those she knew and loved.

I suppose I'll just be listed as the victim of a tragic transporter accident. Or perhaps, they will assume I was killed when the stallion broke apart. I sure hope they use the holo-pic from last year. The one the year before made my cheeks look chubby.

She frowned at herself over these maudlin thoughts. *God, you give up easy, don't you Inga? Give these folks a chance before you commit hypo-spray Seppuku.*

The chime of the door enunciator startled her. She hurriedly gathered up the bits of the hypo-spray and shoved them under the pillow. Straightening the bed covers, she glanced in the mirror and ran her fingers through her hair before she spoke.

"Come in."

The computer unlocked the door and it slid open. Lt. (j.g.) Nigel Bane stood there with a tray of food.

"I hope I'm not troubling you, but I figured you might be hungry . . .?"

She smiled, warmed by the simple but thoughtful gesture. "Thank you, Lieutenant. I am a bit peckish. Come in."

Bane did so and placed the tray on the desk. He stood awkwardly, not sure what to say now that he had completed his mission.

Strauss felt badly for Nigel. In her time they had developed an easy, comfortable banter – though not without some bumpy points along the way. This Nigel lacked some of the brash confidence of his older self.

"Is there anything else, Lieutenant? . . ." She herself felt awkward, treating the man she (would) love in such a distant, formal manner.

A mischievous smirk formed on his face, causing her heart to jump a bit. That was the Nigel she knew!

“Crikey, my head’s full of questions I’m not supposed to ask. But . . . oh, hell – what’s the worst thing that could happen, a court martial?”

Inga looked puzzled, not following Bane’s convoluted ramblings. “I beg your pardon?”

“Bollocks!” he suddenly exclaimed in exasperation. “Sorry – I’m making a hash of this. I uh . . . oh, bloody hell!”

Strauss began to smile. She felt badly for his discomfiture, but she found it funny all the same. “Look . . . Nigel . . . take a breath and ask your questions. If I can answer I will. If not, no harm done. Okay?”

He nodded, “Okay. Right.” He cleared his throat. “I uh, well, I can’t help feeling I ought to know you . . . which shouldn’t be possible, of course, but . . . I uh, just want to say that I hope I know you. In your time, I mean.”

Bane had an endearingly helpless look on his face that nearly made Strauss laugh. At the same time, her heart ached. She sighed and shook her head.

“Nigel . . . yes, I know you and you know me. That should be apparent since I knew your name when I first arrived here, right?”

“Oh yeah, right.” He grinned sheepishly. “That does make sense, now that you mention it.”

“Mm Hmm,” replied Strauss, still struggling not to smile.

His face broke out in the brash grin she knew so well and loved. “So then,” he continued. “Were we . . . that is, will we be mates? Friends, y’know?”

God, does everyone on this ship have insecurity issues? She wondered. “That depends on what you mean by friends, Mister Bane,” she responded, coyly.

“Heh. Right. That’s what I thought.” He winked. “Best be going, then. Enjoy your dinner, ma’am.” He touched his fingers jauntily to his brow and exited the room. Strauss could hear him whistling down the corridor.

She chuckled softly to herself as she shook her head. Turning to the desk, she lifted the lid from the dinner plate.

It was Cookie's Chicken Tetrazzini.

Her favorite.

Well, I suppose preparations for Plan B can wait until after dinner.

* * *

Sometime in 2373

USS Mercury

En route to the Molari Badlands, Warp 9.9

Lieutenant Reginald Barclay placed his PADD on the adjacent seat and sighed. For the past 18 hours, he had been traveling at maximum warp aboard the *Mercury* to rendezvous with a Border Service cutter near the Molari Badlands.

And he had no idea why.

Admiral Paris had seemed none too pleased to dispatch him on this mission. When Barclay had inquired as to its nature, Paris had brusquely replied, "You'll find out when you get there. And whatever it is – get it done and get back here, ASAP."

Barclay had wracked his brain for a reason. He could not think of anyone he knew personally in the Border Service, nor could he fathom why they might need his services.

He stood and made his way to the rear of the courier vessel – basically an over-sized, high-speed runabout usually reserved for admirals and VIPs – and stepped into the head.

He glanced in the mirror. Was his face flushed? He felt his head for any signs of a fever. His forehead did seem a bit warm. Pulling down the skin below each eye, he inspected his sclera for discoloring. There seemed to be a tiny bit of yellowing – nothing over which to be alarmed. Yet. But it could be a sign he was coming down with something.

Barclay splashed water on his face and washed his hands thoroughly (you never knew where some super-germ might lurk) and exited the head. He considered getting a snack from the galley, but his stomach was already in a knot. Best not to tempt fate (and his delicate digestive tract). Instead, he moved forward toward the flight deck.

Lt. Treleya Postinveko sat in the left-hand seat while Lt. (j.g.) Muhetz graced the right, her tail swishing languidly over the edge of the chair.

“Um, excuse me,” began Barclay. “I, uh, was just wondering . . . ?”

“An hour less than the last time you asked, Lieutenant,” replied Postinveko with strained patience. “I promise you, you will be the first to know when we reach the *Bluefin*.”

“Yes . . . about that,” pressed Barclay, “based on our course, won’t we be dangerously close to the Molari Badlands?”

The two flight officers exchanged glances. Muhetz turned and fixed Barclay with emerald green, feline eyes. “Actually, we will be in the Badlands when we rendezvous with the cutter,” she purred.

Barclay blanched. “But . . . there are high levels of ionic radiation in there . . . isn’t that, ah, dangerous?”

Postinveko shrugged. “Meh - not particularly. You weren’t planning on fathering children any time soon, were you Mr. Barclay?”

Barclay coughed and mumbled something unintelligible before retreating to the passenger cabin.

“That was cruel, Treleya,” remarked Muhetz.

Postinveko smiled. “Yes it was.”

They both began to laugh.

* * *

Sometime in 2373

USS *Bluefin*

Molari Badlands

“We’re being hailed by the *Mercury*, Skipper. They’re requesting landing clearance.”

“Very good, Mr. Bane. Notify the hangar crew to prepare to receive the *Mercury*, then contact Dr. Baxter and ask him to meet me on the hangar deck.”

“Aye, sir.”

* * *

USS *Mercury*
Molari Badlands

Barclay hovered nervously behind Postinveko and Muhetz and peered through the forward viewscreen.

“That’s the *Bluefin*? It seems awfully small,” he noted.

“Those cutters are compact but tough, Mr. Barclay. That little ship can weather an ion storm that would leave *Enterprise* in space dock for a month.”

The jibe did not register with the skittish engineer. He was looking at the opening to the flight deck. The doors were open and a welcoming light spilled forth, surrounded by a faint blue halo from the atmospheric shields.

“Um. Can we fit in there?”

“Relax, Mr. Bane – we’ll have at least a meter of clearance to spare. Easy as pie.”

“Cake,” he mumbled absently, his mouth dry but his palms sweaty. As the *Bluefin* loomed before them, Barclay – possibly for the first time in his life – wished that he could just use the transporter.

* * *

USS *Bluefin*
Molari Badlands

Akinola and Baxter watched as Lt. Postenveko expertly guided the courier ship into the tight confines of the hangar bay. With a fading whine, the *Mercury* softly kissed the hangar deck as the impulse engines spooled down. Momentarily, the ship’s hatch opened.

A figure appeared and grasped the frame tightly. Akinola frowned at the sight of the pale, slender officer who seemed to be swaying slightly. The man looked to be in a state of shock.

“Is that Barclay?” whispered Akinola, a note of skepticism apparent in his voice.

“Yes. Don’t let appearances deceive you, Joseph. He’s a brilliant engineer,” assured Baxter.

“If you say so.” The Captain did not sound convinced.

* * *

Barclay tried to slow his breathing. It would not do well to hyper-ventilate just now. He suddenly realized that two officers were standing a few meters away, watching him.

He did not recognize the tall, dark-skinned captain, but the other face was quite familiar. The surprise made him forget about his anxiety.

“Admiral Baxter?”

The white-haired CMO smiled warmly and stepped forward, his hand extended in welcome. “Not anymore, Reginald. I retired from Starfleet and joined up with the Border Service as CMO of *Bluefin*.”

Barclay was aware that the Captain was observing him carefully. He turned and cleared his dry throat.

“Permission to come aboard?”

The C.O. nodded, his features softening. Akinola extended a hand. “Granted. Welcome aboard, Lieutenant – I’m Joseph Akinola, Captain of the *Bluefin*.”

“Lieutenant Reginald Barclay, reporting as ordered, Sir. Though I must admit, I have no idea why I’m here.”

“We have a ‘situation’ Mr. Barclay, a rather serious one. Dr. Baxter believes you can help us out. I hope to God you can.” He glanced toward the two flight officers stepping out of the courier ship. “Let me speak to the flight crew and thank them for bringing you our way. Doc? Why don’t you show the

Lieutenant to guest quarters and then bring him to the ward room. We might as well get on with this.”

Barclay watched Akinola walk over to Postinveko and Muhetz before turning to Dr. Baxter.

“Adm . . . Dr. Baxter – does this have anything to do with the, um, problem we faced on the *Enterprise* a few years ago?”

Baxter took the engineer by the elbow and began to escort him from the hangar. “Not exactly, Reginald. There are no 27th century Romulans involved this time. Let’s get you settled in and meet with the other officers. Best you hear this all at once.”

* * *

An hour later, Lt. Barclay sat in the wardroom, his face even paler than when he first came on board.

“And that’s how I came to be here – nearly four years in the past,” finished Commander Strauss.

Barclay glanced around at the expectant faces that sat around the table. He swallowed.

“I see . . . well . . . that’s a fascinating account, Commander, but I’m not sure how I can be of any help.”

Gralt snorted. “By the four drunken, leprous demi-whores! I knew this dunce would be a useless . . .”

“Hang on!” interrupted Baxter. He looked at Barclay. Reg looked like he wanted to crawl under the table. “Pay no mind to Gralt – he says that about all his friends.” He paused.

“Reginald, you’ve done this before,” he reminded him, gently. “Surely, you have some idea of how we can return Ms. Strauss to her proper time.”

Barclay shook his head. “That was different Doctor; w-we had the Rom . . . the person’s device to send him back.”

“Yes,” pressed Baxter, “but the device was damaged. As I recall, you figured out an alternative plan.”

“Th-that’s true. But I was able to salvage key components from his temporal accelerator that allowed us to send him back.” He shrugged helplessly. “I’m afraid I don’t have a spare.”

Strauss smiled bravely. “It’s alright, Mr. Barclay. I understand. It was a long shot at best.”

Bane suddenly stood. “What! That’s it? We’re just going to give up? Sorry, but that’s a load of dingo crap. Come on! We can’t quit now – bloody hell, we haven’t even made a half-assed effort on her behalf.”

“No one is giving up, Mr. Bane,” Akinola replied, mildly. “Please be seated.”

Bane retook his seat, his cheeks flushed. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“I happen to agree with Mr. Bane,” continued the Captain. “To be blunt, I’m a little tired of the no-can-do attitude I’m sensing. Mr. Galt? I want you and Lt. Barclay to go over all the data provided by Commander Strauss. T’Ser, you will assist them. Go over everything, no matter how inconsequential it may seem. I want you to figure out how she got here. Maybe if you can do that, you can figure out how to send her home.”

He stood and his tone became icy. “I want a progress report by 1900 hours. Do – not – disappoint - me. . . Everyone else, return to your posts. Commander Strauss, you’re with me.”

Barclay ogled as Akinola and the others filed out of the ward room. He turned to Galt and T’Ser, eyes still wide.

“Is he always like that?” he asked.

T’Ser lifted an eyebrow, suppressing a smile. “The Captain is in a *good* mood, Mr. Barclay. If he had been in a foul mood, he would have sent you back to Jupiter Station strapped to a torpedo.”

* * *

Sometime in 2373
USS *Bluefin*

Strauss accompanied Captain Akinola through the cutter's narrow corridors. She was now clad in an era-appropriate uniform with two pips of a lieutenant on the collar. It had been her suggestion to do so – the idea being that if they encountered someone outside the need-to-know group they could explain her presence as a part of a visiting inspection team. A lieutenant would be far less memorable than a full commander.

As they approached the turbo-lift, the doors slid open and Senior Chief Solly Brin stepped off.

Inga forced a neutral expression on her face and she lowered her head slightly. For his part, Solly barely glanced at her before shifting his attention to Akinola.

“Senior,” said Akinola in greeting. He began to enter the turbo-lift.

“Skipper.” Solly was about to continue, when he suddenly turned. “Hey Skipper, what about tonight?”

Akinola turned, a slight frown on his face. “Tonight?”

“Yeah – the weekly card game down in the armory. Remember – you said you'd try to join us?”

“Right, right . . . sorry, Solly, it must have slipped my mind. Maybe next week?”

“Yeah, sure, no problem,” replied Brin with good humor. His gaze had reacquired Strauss and she could sense his curiosity.

Akinola spoke. “This is Lt. Smith. She's on TDY with us for a few days as part of an inspection team.”

Brin frowned. “Inspection? First I heard of it.”

“Well . . . what kind of damned inspection would it be if they announced it in advance?” Akinola growled.

Solly considered that. “Since you put it that way . . .”

“Speaking of which,” continued the Captain, now on a roll, “you best light a fire under those miscreants on the lower decks. I expect them to get things ship-shape. God help you if the inspectors find a mess down there.”

“Sure, Skipper – I’ll get right on it.”

“See that you do!” The lift doors slid shut, leaving a somewhat perplexed Solly Brin standing in the corridor.

“Smith?” asked Strauss, eyebrow askance.

“Best I could do on the spur of the moment,” Akinola grumbled.

* * *

Akinola and Strauss stepped off the turbolift onto the bridge and moved to the ready room. Inga kept her face turned slightly away from the center of the bridge as she followed the Captain.

Lt. Commander Deedee Townsend, Bluefin’s Second Officer, turned in the command chair. She was about to speak but Akinola and Strauss disappeared into the ready room.

The buxom Centauran turned back to face the viewscreen wearing a slight frown of puzzlement. “Why is everyone in such a flipping big hurry today?” she muttered.

Bane lifted his gaze from the sensor hood. His sharp ears picked up Townsend’s question. “I hear that we’ve got an inspection team on-board. Bit of a surprise, I gather.”

“Lovely,” replied Townsend, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Bunch of PADD-pushing bureaucrats poking about, just looking for things to write-up.”

Bane smiled to himself, relieved that the Second Officer had accepted the explanation so readily. His smile faded as he gazed back into the sensor hood.

“I’m picking up a gravimetric vortex, Commander. Looks like an ion storm brewing.”

Townsend straightened. “Where away, Mr. Bane?”

“Twelve degrees to starboard, ranging from plus 20 to minus 48 degrees. Point oh-six A.U.s in size and expanding.”

She let out a soft whistle. “That’s going to be one bodacious storm. Range and intensity?”

“Still a good ways off – leading edge at 14 A.U.s, intensity force 3 but likely to increase in strength.”

“Log it and broadcast a general warning bulletin to ships in the vicinity. Let me know if the intensity begins to spike.”

“Aye, ma’am, you can count on it,” replied Bane.

“Very good, Lieutenant. Helm – adjust course ten degrees to port. Let’s give ourselves some maneuvering room around that storm.”

* * *

It was vaguely surreal for Strauss to sit in Akinola’s ready room. It was virtually identical to her own time, yet with subtle differences. She recognized most of the hand-carved ship models that the Captain had so skillfully crafted, but there were a few present that she did not recognize and some absent that existed in her time.

The furnishings were identical, however, as was the penetrating look on Akinola’s face she recalled from their first meeting, when she joined the crew in 2376.

I guess this is the new first-meeting, she mused. Time travel could be very confusing.

“Commander, we have a couple of issues to deal with in addition to the problem of getting you back to your correct time,” said Akinola.

“Just a couple?” she smiled weakly.

He chuckled. “Well . . . I’m sure we’ll think of more. One we can deal with fairly easily – Dr. Baxter can provide those of us who have met you with a drug to provide short-term memory loss. It won’t totally erase our memories of these days, but he tells me that details will become blurred – hopefully enough to prevent any problems.”

Inga nodded. "Yes sir, that makes sense. What is the other issue?"

Akinola's expression became somber. "One of us will need to keep our memories of your presence here in this time. Your odds of getting back to your proper time will be greatly improved if someone is expecting the situation and is ready to carry out what needs to be done on that end."

"I see." Strauss became pensive. "That has its own set of problems, you know."

The Captain nodded. "It certainly does. But fewer problems than if we fail at this."

"I suppose not." She looked past him out the viewport. The colorful energy traces of the Badlands swirled past the cutter, providing a dream-like quality to an already bizarre scenario.

"Inga . . . I need to know who will be available to help you. . . who will still be on *Bluefin* in four years – out of the group that's aware of your predicament."

She kept her eyes fixed past Akinola and swallowed. No point saying more than necessary.

"You will be there, sir."

Akinola nodded ever so slightly. She knew he wanted to ask more but he wisely kept those questions to himself. "Very well, Commander. That's all I needed to know."

* * *

For nearly two hours, Lt. Barclay absorbed the various bits of arcane data and circumstances surrounding Inga Strauss' trip from the future. As the eccentric engineer immersed himself with the problem, his nervousness waned, replaced with barely restrained excitement.

He stood at the end of the ward room – the large viewscreen now serving as an oversize data PADD. Complicated formulae crowded the screen – most well beyond the expertise of either Galt or T'Ser.

"Gragnar's mangy pelt!" exclaimed Galt, "How can you fit a Subzerian fractal in an inverse wave constant?"

Now in his element, Barclay responded like a veteran school master. He tapped the viewscreen for emphasis. “Look – just take the coefficient of the Hyjornian Theorem, factor in the flow of anti-chroniton particles, and the fractal replaces the cosine of the flux signal.” He stepped back, grinning as he clasped his hands together.

“It’s beautiful, actually,” he said in a voice tinged with emotion.

T’Ser felt like a preschooler in a quantum physics class. “Uh, Mr. Barclay – beauty aside, what does it all actually mean? Can we send Commander Strauss back to 2377 or not?”

He blinked, coming out of his reverie. “Well, um, yes – of course we can. Don’t you see it?”

Both Galt and T’Ser shook their heads.

“Oh.” He sounded slightly dejected. He cleared his throat. “Sorry – I sometimes get carried away.”

He resumed his seat at the table, his lips tight as he considered how to answer. He threw his hands forward, and grabbed the salt and pepper shakers. Holding up the salt shaker for emphasis he said, “This . . . represents Commander Strauss.” He placed the salt shaker on the table with a firm “thwok.”

Holding up the pepper shaker, he said, “And this . . . is the *Bluefin* in our current year of 2373.” He likewise placed it on the table. Once again picking up the salt shaker, he poured a sizeable pile of salt on the table.

“This salt represents Commander Strauss in her quantum state – much as any of us exist in a transporter stream.” He then poured a generous amount of pepper around the pile of salt.

“The pepper represents the sudden release of anti-chroniton particles that resulted when the ion surge disrupted the transporter beam.”

Without warning, Barclay blew the salt and pepper off the table in a black and white cloud.

“And that represents the combined energy surge that sent the Commander back in time. Understand?”

Gralt sneezed violently.

T'Ser calmly brushed salt and pepper from her tunic. “An interesting demonstration, Mr. Barclay. Now how do we get Ms. Strauss back to 2377?”

He beamed. “Simple! We merely have to reverse the procedure by replacing all the grains of salt and pepper into their proper containers in the precise order and manner in which they were emptied.”

T'Ser turned to Gralt. “We’re screwed.”

* * *

USS Bluefin **Sometime in 2373**

As the *Bluefin* plunged through the Molari Badlands, the ion storm picked up speed and intensity, sending out powerful gravimetric waves at nearly the speed of light. One of these energy waves flowed over the cutter like a rogue ocean wave, buffeting the cutter with hellish radiation. For a moment, the *Bluefin* was engulfed in blue fire as her shields absorbed the sudden bombardment of concentrated ions before shedding the energy through heat sinks in her warp nacelles.

Her shields protected the crew from the onslaught of lethal radiation, but the sheer pressure of the wave rolled the cutter along her centerline, briefly over-stressing her structural integrity fields.

On the bridge, Lt. Commander Dee Dee Townsend instinctively grabbed the armrests of the command chair as the deck seemed to slide away. The PADD that had been lying beside her in the chair floated briefly in mid-air before clattering to the deck.

"Commander?" Lt. Bane was speaking while focusing on numerous warning alarms, "that energy spike you were waiting for? It just hit us."

"You think?" she replied with barely concealed sarcasm. "I thought you were going to give just a little bit of a head's up, Nigel."

"Sorry. It blossomed out of nowhere, Commander. Now reading force six."

Townsend grimaced. The storm had doubled in intensity in less than an hour.

"Damage?"

"Nothing too serious. Power surges shut down primary transporter circuits, but I've rerouted power and they're back up. Structural integrity fields were maxed out for a second before secondary power kicked in. I'm working on augmenting the shields and structural integrity fields now."

"Good." She tapped the inter-ship comm stud on the arm of her chair.

"All hands, go to yellow alert - we are tracking an approaching force 6 ion storm. Damage and fire control parties report to your stations. Repeat, all hands go to yellow alert."

As soon as the inter-ship message ended, her own combadge chirped.

"Akinola to bridge - status report."

Townsend tapped her communicator. "We got rolled by a gravimetric wave, but no damage to speak of. That storm is surging - do you want us to try and outrun it?"

"Too late for that. Just batten down the hatches and we'll ride it out. I'm heading to the wardroom for a meeting. Keep me posted about the storm. Akinola, out"

As the channel closed, Townsend frowned. *Damned odd time for a meeting*, she thought.

* * *

In the wardroom, Galt, T'Ser and Lt. Barclay picked up over-turned chairs and tried to clean up spilled coffee. Barclay's face was noticeably pale.

"What caused that?" he asked, tightly. The nervous hitch had returned to his voice.

"Gravimetric wave, most likely," replied T'Ser. "The ion storm must be getting stronger."

"Brilliant deduction," wheezed Galt, his eyes still brimming with tears after catching a face full of pepper. "As frakking obvious as the ears on your head."

T'Ser shrugged, not in the mood for banter. "Perhaps. But our more immediate concern is providing the Captain with a plan. We have only a few minutes before he arrives and I strongly suggest, Lieutenant," she fixed Barclay with a sharp stare, "that we provide him something more than table condiments sprayed in his face."

"Yes. Right. Sorry." The slender engineer ran a shaking hand through thinning hair. "It's just that I tend to work better alone. My counselor says my people skills are somewhat lacking, though she says I'm making progress."

T'Ser silently counted to ten. "I hadn't noticed," she lied, grateful that Galt was too busy sneezing at the moment to reply. "However, we don't have the luxury to grant you sabbatical leave for research purposes. Believe me when I say, Captain Akinola expects results, not theories. He is not a patient man."

Barclay bobbed his head in acknowledgment. "Yes. Well . . ." He rubbed his hands together and looked around as if searching for something. "I, ah, actually do have a plan. Of sorts."

"Care to let us in on it?" Inquired T'Ser with heroic patience.

"Yes, right. Um, it's somewhat technical."

Galt blew his snout loudly on the sleeve of his uniform, leaving gray, sticky tendrils of snot hanging from his nostrils. His blood-shot eyes blazed with raging indignation.

"Pustulent DUNG-hurling, BABY eating, ill-tempered HORDES of the 4th level PANTHEON!" roared Galt. "BERKLEY!"

"Barclay."

"DO NOT INTERRUPT ME BOY! I've been a by-the-gods ENGINEER for nearly 40 YEARS. I EAT 'TECHNICAL' for breakfast and shit INSTRUCTION manuals BEFORE LUNCH! Now quit trying to IMPRESS us with your FRAKKING HIGH-BROW, ESOTERIC, WIZ-KID, KNOW-IT-ALL ATTITUDE. If you weren't a guest on MY SHIP, I'd use your LIVER to collect HYDROGEN, mop the DECK with

your PELT and mount your MISBEGOTTEN. UGLY. HEAD on the bow of this fine ship for a FRAKKING HOOD ORNAMENT!"

Reg stepped back wide-eyed and stunned under the thunderous assault. T'Ser took advantage of another sneezing jag to gently but firmly push Galt into a chair. She forced a smile that was a bit too tight onto her face before speaking calmly to Barclay.

"What Commander Galt means to say," she continued sweetly, "is that we are sensing a bit of condescension from you. We would greatly appreciate it if you would simply Get. To. The. Point." She was unaware that her fingers had left indentations in the metal chair she tightly gripped.

Before Barclay could stutter out a reply, the door to the wardroom slid open, allowing Captain Akinola and Commander Strauss to enter. Akinola stopped in the middle of the room, and placed his hands on his waist. He was not in a good mood.

"Report!" He barked.

Barclay turned to see Akinola glowering at him. He turned back toward T'Ser who had nearly succeeded in pushing her fingers through a steel chair and then to Galt, who managed to stare daggers at him between sneezes.

A primitive part of Barclay's brain took in these images and assessed the situation before providing a solution.

Barclay fainted.

Strauss knelt quickly down and checked the now unconscious engineer before directing a puzzled gaze toward T'Ser.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked.

"You'd have to ask his counselor," T'Ser replied. "I don't think I'm qualified to answer."

* * *

Sometime in 2373
USS Bluefin

Barclay opened his eyes then quickly closed them as a wave of dizziness washed over him. He waited a moment before opening one eye slightly.

Dr. Calvin Baxter smiled down at him. "Feeling better?" he asked.

Reg opened his other eye and glanced around. He was lying on a diagnostic bed in sickbay.

"W-what happened?"

"You experienced a sudden hypoglycemic event accompanied by a rather sharp drop in your systolic and diastolic pressure. In short, you fainted."

"Oh, great." Barclay covered his face with his hands. "As if I didn't have enough issues."

"Reg, when was the last time you ate?" Baxter asked gently.

Barclay spread his fingers so he could peer at the CMO. "Umm, I'm not quite sure. Probably back on Jupiter Station before I was sent TDY. My stomach doesn't do too well when I'm on a runabout, or under stress, or . . ."

Dr. Baxter chuckled and held up a hand. "I get the picture. I've given you something to help stabilize your blood sugar level and your blood pressure is back in the normal range. But you've got to eat, Mr. Barclay. You can't help us if your blood sugar bottoms out again."

Reg sighed and stared up at the ceiling. "I-I don't think I'm helping at all Dr. Baxter. I'm just not able to convey my ideas effectively." He shook his head in resignation. "It's probably b-best if they send me back to Jupiter Station and find someone else."

The white-haired sawbones frowned. He placed his hand on Barclay's shoulder. "Now listen to me, Reg. I've seen what you can do first-hand. You've pulled this off before under tighter circumstances than these. Don't you quit on me now!"

The sound of the sickbay doors opening caused Baxter to turn before Barclay could reply. Captain Akinola glanced around before spying the CMO.

"I'll be right back," said Baxter to Barclay. He strode purposefully toward Akinola.

"My office. Now!" growled Dr. Baxter as he brushed past the Captain. Akinola blinked in surprise. The normally soft-spoken CMO was obviously in a bad mood.

Nonetheless, he followed Baxter into the transparent aluminum cubicle. The Doctor closed the door and whirled on Akinola, his eyes blazing.

"You need to cut that kid some slack, Captain!" Baxter snapped in a biting tone - his "command" voice.

Once more, Akinola was surprised. He had grown so accustomed to the normally genteel manner of the CMO, that he tended to forget that Baxter was a former Admiral.

But 'former' was the operative word. The physician was retired from Starfleet Medical and now held the provisional rank of Commander. Akinola's four pips trumped Baxter's three.

"Who pissed in your coffee, Doc?" Akinola attempted to keep a light tone but there was more than a hint of warning in his eyes.

Baxter would not be deflected. "Don't change the subject, Joseph! You and your cohorts have gone out of your way to give Lt. Barclay grief. I would have thought the severity of the situation would have dampened your misplaced disdain for the regular fleet!"

That was too much for Akinola. "That's enough!" he thundered. "Doctor, I respect the hell out of you, but you are dangerously close to crossing a line. I suggest you back down - now!"

Instead, the white-haired CMO actually stepped closer to the Captain, placing his nose inches from Akinola's face.

"Or what, Captain? Will you have me brought up on charges? Tossed out an airlock? Or will you just humiliate me, like you've done to . . ."

Without warning, Akinola gave Baxter a hard shove. The CMO stumbled backward, sitting heavily in his chair. He stared up at the Captain with a look of startled incredulity, his expression almost comical.

Akinola was horrified by what he had done. "My God . . . Calvin, I'm sorry . . . I don't know why . . ."

Dr. Baxter blinked and shook his head, as if to clear it. "It's alright, Joseph. . . " He frowned. "What the hell is wrong with us?"

"I think I know," said a third voice.

Baxter and Akinola turned. Lt. Barclay stood in the doorway of the cubicle. He still looked slightly pale, but he wore an intense expression.

"Lieutenant? Explain yourself." Akinola was torn between shame over pushing his friend and irritation at the interruption.

"We're in an area of space where the space-time continuum is very thin. It has an effect on most life-forms to some degree - anxiety, confusion, anger . . . even violence. It's a well-documented phenomenon . . . I should have anticipated it."

Akinola looked from Barclay to Baxter. "Is there anything we can do for it?"

Baxter nodded. "Yes, of course - a mild sedative will help - nothing strong enough to keep us from functioning, but it should take the edge off."

The Captain let out a breath. "It seems I owe you an apology, Mr. Barclay. And you too, Doc."

Barclay shook his head. "You couldn't help it, sir. None of us could. But much longer without treatment and we could have a very serious situation."

Akinola nodded. "Understood. Doc - see to the treatment for the crew." He glanced back at Barclay.

"Do you feel like getting back to work?"

A crooked smile formed on Barclay's lips. "Y-yes sir, I do. In fact, this is the first real break we've had."

"How so?"

Barclay steepled his long fingers and tapped his lips. "This has to be the right location for the time transference. All we need now is a strong enough ionic

surge to recreate the conditions that brought Commander Strauss back to our time."

Akinola allowed himself a small grin. "Well, Mr. Barclay, I think we can accommodate you in that regard. How does a force nine tail-twister suit you?"

Reg swallowed. "Ah, f-force nine, you say? Um, that, uh, should do nicely."

* * *

Inga lay in her borrowed cabin, fingering the hypo-spray she lifted from sickbay. The cold aluminum cylinder would provide her a definite solution to this situation.

She gazed at the small view-screen on the handle. The words glowed in red, warning that the safety protocols were disabled and the current dosage was lethal.

The words from a very old song suddenly came to mind . . .

Sail on, silver girl . . . sail on by . . . your time has come to shine, all your dreams are on their way . . .

She laughed without mirth. The hollow sound mocked her as she rolled the hypo-spray in her hand.

"Time to sail on, silver girl," she said to the hypo, and softly hummed the tune to the old song.

Strauss was not afraid. She was tired, though. Tired of this stupid situation, tired of feeling like part of a science experiment, but mostly tired of being a liability.

Every moment she stayed in this era, the chances of corrupting the time-line multiplied. She could not bear the thought of ruining her friends' future.

Better to end her own.

Her initial hope that Lt. Barclay could find a solution had evaporated when she found him passed out on the wardroom floor. And she had not missed the expressions of despair on the faces of the other officers.

No, it was time to stop fooling herself and do the right thing.

She examined the hypo-spray, placing her thumb on the trigger mechanism, and drew the device up to her neck.

The chime from the door caused her to pause. Her hand wavered as she considered ignoring the chime.

"Inga?" The voice was muffled, but Strauss recognized it as Dr. Baxter.

She considered ignoring him, but finally she slid the hypo-spray up her sleeve to hide it from the CMO.

"Just a moment," she said. She moved to the sink and splashed some water on her face. Glancing in the mirror, she was satisfied that all traces of tears were gone. She stood, facing the door.

"Come in."

Calvin Baxter entered, hands thrust in the pockets of his lab coat. Strauss thought he looked . . . relieved. He glanced around the cabin, as if he were looking for something.

"Hello, Inga. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," she said, flatly. "I was just resting a bit."

Baxter nodded. "Good, good." He turned so their eyes met. She felt somewhat uneasy under his scrutiny.

"Is there anything else, Doctor?" she asked, wishing he would leave.

"Yes, actually, there is one thing." He held out his hand. "Please hand it over, Inga."

Startled, she took an involuntary step backward. "Hand over what?"

His smile was sad. "Commander, surely you know every item in sickbay has a tracking device. We don't want important medical supplies or devices to go missing . . . say like a hypo-spray?"

She regarded him silently for a moment while he stood patiently, his hand open and outstretched.

For a moment, she considered pulling out the hypo-spray and jamming against her neck, but she thought it likely that he would be able to counteract the dosage if he acted quickly.

With a sigh, she extracted the hypo-spray from her sleeve and handed it to Baxter.

He accepted the device, glanced at the screen and grunted. "I always said we needed to upgrade these things. They are far too easy to hack." He shook his head.

"I'm sorry you felt the need to use this, Inga. It would have been a terrible waste."

Her face flushed, not with shame but with anger. *How dare you!* she thought, *You'll do the same thing in three years - the only difference is, you'll succeed!*

Baxter misinterpreted the redness that spread across her cheeks. "We're all under the influence of this region of space, Inga, so I'll spare you any lectures. All of us have experienced various mood and behavioral changes, but we're on top of that. The good news is, all of the pieces of the puzzle are nearly in place - Lt. Barclay believes we can send you back to your proper time in about two hours."

Strauss blinked in surprise. "He . . . he's actually figured it out?"

The white-haired physician smiled. "Yes, my dear. In this case, it's a matter of us being in the right place at the right time. The space-time continuum is quite thin in this region, and there's a corker of an ion storm moving in. With your pattern still in the transporter buffer, Reg believes we can send you back from whence you came. I'll let him explain the fiddly bits."

Strauss forced a weak smile. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not know."

He chuckled. "Yes, Reg has a way with the techno-babble, but he's a brilliant engineer Inga. I have every confidence he'll get you where you need to go."

He placed the hypo-spray in the pocket of his labcoat. "Best get this back to sickbay and 'disarmed' before someone grabs it by mistake."

"Doc . . ."

"Yes?"

She hesitated. She wanted to warn him about his future, beg him not to take his own life. *How can it hurt to let this sweet man live? Who would even know I violated the temporal prime directive?*

"Thank you . . . for, you know . . ."

He patted his pocket. "Our little secret. Like I said, not your fault. The corpsmen will be coming round shortly with a very mild sedative for the crew - just enough to keep everyone on an even keel."

Inga nodded. "That's good." She was unable to hide the note of sadness in her voice.

His smile wavered slightly and his brow creased. "Is something wrong?"

She looked down, unable to meet his gaze. "You have been very kind to me, Doctor. I'm very grateful and very fond of you."

"Well, thank you for saying so. I've grown to be fond of you as well."

She looked up quickly. "Doctor, there's something I must tell you . . ."

"Stop!" Baxter held up a finger in warning, his expression stern.

"But . . ."

He shook his head sharply. "No, Inga. Absolutely not. I have a strong suspicion you want to tell me something about my future. You must not! Please - this is far bigger than you or me or anyone else on this ship."

She glanced down again, not wanting him to see the tears welling up in her eyes. "You're right, of course."

"Now that's better," he replied gently. He turned for the door. "It's best not to know the future, don't you think?"

If you only knew, she thought. "I'm just concerned about the next four years, Doctor. After that, I don't want to know either."

* * *

Sometime in 2373 **USS *Bluefin***

Commander Dale McBride stepped off the turbo-lift onto the bridge, grabbing the rail surrounding the lower level as the cutter shuddered under an assault of concentrated ions.

"How's it goin' Dee Dee?" he asked as he steadied himself and moved to the command chair.

"Better, I guess," replied the Centauran Second Officer. "The reports of fights and other weirdness have diminished markedly since Doc had the meds sent 'round. We're still holding steady at 113 mark 12 at one-quarter impulse, though I'm still wondering why the hell we're heading into an ion-storm that's frakked up the space-time continuum?"

"It's, uh, part of the inspection protocol to see how we handle extreme conditions."

"Huh. Personally, I hope it doesn't get any more extreme. Did you know that Ensign Hart was running around deck three wearing nothing but a towel around his neck and shouting, 'I am the walrus! I am the walrus!'"

McBride stifled a laugh at the thought of the normally reserved environmental officer running around buck naked. "Nope, didn't hear about that one, though I understand Crewman Heideger planted a wet, sloppy kiss on Corpsman Rice before she could give him the sedative."

"What about you, Dale? Did our XO go off the deep end?"

"Not me. I slept like a baby through the whole thing." He cocked a glance at Townsend. "Any strange behavior on the bridge?"

She cut her gaze away. "None worth mentioning," she replied brusquely.

McBride considered pressing the matter when Lt. T'Ser stepped onto the bridge and over to Ops, relieving Bane.

"Okay Dee Dee, you're relieved. Get some rest - I think you've earned it."

"The bridge is yours she said," vacating the center chair with unusual haste. She followed Bane onto the turbo-lift and faced ahead as the doors closed.

"Deck four," she announced, sneaking a side-long glance at Bane who seemed very interested in the ceiling.

"Uh, Commander?"

She sighed. "Yes, Mr. Bane?"

"About that 'obnoxious, over-endowed, knicker-twisted sheila' remark? I apologize . . . I was out of line."

Townsend cleared her throat. "Not your fault, Nigel. We were all 'under the influence,' so to speak."

"Yes ma'am."

"Nigel?"

"Ma'am?"

"Sorry about the crack about you and sheep."

"No worries, Ma'am."

* * *

"Okay, let me see if I have this straight," said Akinola. "We continue into the heart of the ion storm until we reach the coordinates where the Bluefin will be in four years, according to the transporter trace?"

Lt. Barclay nodded. "Yes sir, that's correct."

"Doc, you will administer something to instill short-term memory loss for the crew members who know of Commander Strauss' identity and her trip into the past?"

"Yes, the effects are mild with no harmful side-effects. These days will not be a blank but more like a blur, sort of like waking up from a dream you can almost but not quite remember."

"It will have to do," remarked Akinola. "Then I will continue with the charade of an inspection with Mr. Barclay assuming the role of observer - our story is that we're testing the feasibility of using the transporter in an ion storm."

"Which, in fact, we are doing," pointed out Commander Strauss, wryly.

"True enough," conceded the Captain, "but not in a way I ever hope to repeat."

Barclay handed a PADD to Akinola. "Captain, in four years it will be imperative that you enter these precise coordinates into your transporter and boost the gain on circuit A. I cannot stress enough how important that will be. If you don't, well . . ."

Akinola smiled. "Perks of being the C.O., Lieutenant. If I want to operate the transporter, I can damn well do so."

"Yeah - but what if something happens to you between now and then?" interjected Galt. "Four years is a long time and I know you well enough that you won't play it safe."

"He'll be there," replied Strauss, with confidence.

The Tellarite shook his craggy head. "He was when you left. But none of us know how your arrival in this time has already changed things in the future. Just a minor deviation in the time-line could have him somewhere else or even dead."

"Always the optimist, eh Galt?" Dr. Baxter smiled, trying to lighten the mood. "I think we've done an admirable job containing knowledge of Ms. Strauss' appearance to a small group and, once I administer the appropriate dosage, our memories of her will fade like fog on a sunny day."

Lt. Bane stood against the wardroom wall, arms crossed. *I'm not sure I can ever forget that face*, he thought.

"You mentioned one more thing, Mr. Barclay - please share it with the entire group," directed Akinola.

Reg nodded and cleared his throat. "The ion storm and the 'thin space' in this region provide two of the three main ingredients needed to complete the time transfer, not including Commander Strauss of course."

"So what else do we need?" asked Inga.

Barclay glanced at Akinola and Galt before answering. "Your Stallion exploded just as you beamed out. We have to duplicate that as well."

Akinola frowned. "It's going to be tough explaining a missing Stallion to the Squadron Commander."

"You won't have to," interjected Galt. "We can simulate the explosion with a photon warhead. I can adjust the yield to give us what we need."

The Captain nodded. "Very well." He glanced around the room. "Does anyone have any questions?"

"Yeah, I have one," replied Galt, leaning forward over the table. "You plan on just carrying all of this around in your head for the next four years, pretending it never happened, even when you 'meet' Strauss for the first time in three years?"

Akinola stared calmly back at the Chief Engineer. "Yes, Galt. That's exactly what I plan to do."

The Tellarite sat back, momentarily abashed. "Oh. Well, okay then."

Akinola's combadge chirped. *"McBride to Captain."*

He tapped his chest. "Go ahead, XO."

"Skipper, we've arrived at the designated coordinates and holding station, but it's not going to be easy. The pressure waves keep pushing us back. Fralk has us at ahead-slow just to keep us in place."

"Tell him it's imperative we remain at these coordinates. Do whatever it takes, but keep us on-station, understood?"

"Aye, sir, understood. Any other instructions?"

"Just have damage control parties standing by. Make it part of the drill. We'll have to open a window in the shields for a second when we make our attempt. I don't need to tell you what might happen when we do."

"I've got the picture, Skipper. Tell our guest 'good luck' for me."

Akinola glanced at Strauss who smiled. "She heard you, Dale. Akinola, out."

The Captain looked around the wardroom. "Let's get this done."

* * *

It was somewhat crowded in the small transporter room with Galt and Barclay at the controls and Akinola, Strauss, Dr. Baxter and Lt. Bane standing by.

Strauss was once more wearing her normal uniform and rank insignia. "I don't know how to thank all of you . . ." she began.

"Just show up in four years," replied the Captain. "That will be thanks enough."

She stepped up on the dais and looked around. Akinola was the epitome of calm, his expression neutral. Galt glowered, Baxter stroked his short beard thoughtfully, Lt. Barclay fiddled with the transporter controls . . .

. . . and Nigel winked.

It took all her poise not to giggle, but the gesture made her feel much better.

Her gaze moved back to Dr. Baxter and the ebullient mood faded, replaced with a sense of profound sorrow. Baxter must have seen something in her expression, because his brow knitted as they made eye contact.

She was vaguely aware of the conversation between Galt and Barclay as she tried to will her thoughts to Dr. Baxter.

Don't do it, Doctor! Please, don't take your life.

"Phase sequence complete. Boost containment beam."

"Shields and tactical slaved to my station. Standing by to launch torpedo."

"Energizers at 110%. Ionic energy levels reading at 9.2 kilo-ergs."

"Standing by to open shield window for 2.7 microseconds."

Doc - please!

"Torpedo away!"

"Stand by to energize."

"Synchronizing shield controls to initiation sequence."

Please, Doc! Don't...

"Warhead has detonated!"

"Energize..."

* * *

The transporter room began to fade to gray as Inga was engulfed by the matter-transfer beam. She heard a high-pitched screech - a sound like rending metal and steam under high pressure.

Darkness.

For a time (it could have been a nano-second or a thousand years, she could not say) Inga felt like she was floating in a billion pieces. It was a tranquil feeling. She felt no fear or pain, only a sense of calm well-being. A light began to glow, faintly at first, then with increasing intensity until...

* * *

Sometime in mid-2377

USS Bluefin

"Pulse is thready and irregular!"

"10 cc of Cordrazyne, then get him to sickbay, stat!"

Dr. Castille glanced up from the prone form of Chief Deryx to Captain Akinola who continued to work frantically at the transporter controls. Sparks flew from one of the transporter pads as an energy surge fried a coalescer diode.

"Do you have her?" It was probably a stupid question, but Castille asked anyway. It was obvious that things were not going well.

"Sir - if you'll cross-circuit . . ." urged an agitated Ensign Li.

"Back off, Mr. Li! Go help Doc and the Corpsman with Chief Deryx."

The Asian ensign glanced helplessly at the Doctor. For his part, Castille wondered if Akinola had lost his mind.

"Captain, maybe you should . . ." Castille began.

Before he could finish, a column of energy appeared on the transporter pad. It swirled and shifted before slowly taking on a human form. For what seemed like minutes (but in fact was only a few seconds) the shimmering column became solid.

Inga Strauss tumbled forward onto the deck.

Akinola reached her before Castille. The XO was pale and apparently unconscious. Akinola cradled her, his expression tight with worry.

"Inga? Can you hear me?"

"Captain, let me . . ." Castille gently extricated Strauss from Akinola's arms and placed her gently on the deck. The cutter shuddered slightly, then steadied, reminding the CMO that they were hardly safe.

Akinola seemed to realize the same thing. He tapped his combadge. "Captain to bridge - Delta, get us out of here - best possible speed!"

"Aye, sir. Skipper, did you get . . ."

"Yes Commander, we got them. Just. Akinola, out."

He glanced down at the prone woman, her blond hair splayed out on the deck, her face pale as death.

Castille ran his bio-scanner over her quickly before muttering something in Spanish. He pulled a hypo-spray from his pouch and pressed it against her neck.

For a moment, nothing happened, and Akinola's heart sank. *All of this, all the effort, all the years . . . for naught?*

Inga's eyes flew open and she arched her back, drawing in a long, gasping breath. She quickly settled back on the deck, her eyes blinking until they focused on Captain Akinola, then Dr. Castille. Upon spying Castille, an odd expression flickered across her face. The CMO was too busy looking at the medical scanner to notice, but Akinola caught the look.

It was an expression of sorrow.

* * *

Two hours later.

"I'm fine, Doctor, really! Please, just let me go to my quarters and get some rest . . . I promise to behave."

Dr. Castille regarded Commander Strauss with a look of exasperation. Captain Akinola stood by, obviously relieved, but maintaining his poker face.

"Captain, maybe you can convince Commander Strauss that she nearly died two hours ago. She doesn't seem to believe me."

"I feel fine," protested Inga. "Look - I'll go right to bed, I promise, but let me sleep in my own bunk. I can't rest with all of this . . . stuff around!" she gestured at the diagnostic equipment that surrounded her bed.

"She looks okay to me, Doc," remarked the Nigerian C.O.

"Well thank you, Dr. Akinola," groused an irritated Castille. He sighed. "Oh, hell, go on - get out of here. But you get back here on the double if you have blurred vision, dizziness or anything else out of the ordinary, understood?"

Inga nodded. "Count on it." She swung her legs off the bed, like the gymnast she had once been, landing lightly on the deck. She smiled and spread her arms. "See? Good as new."

Castille snorted. "Why are command officers the worst patients? Look, at least stop by tomorrow so I can check your vitals. Your initial reading when you beamed in were off the scales . . . I've never seen anything quite like it."

"I will, I promise. Thank you, Doctor."

"Yeah, yeah, sure. At least Chief Deryx knew enough to stay put for 24 hours. He's got more sense than the two of you put together."

* * *

Akinola accompanied Strauss to her quarters. In the quiet corridors she spoke softly.

"Thank you," she said, softly.

"You're welcome."

She stopped and turned to him. "Dr. Baxter, he's . . ."

A pained expression crossed Akinola's face. "Dead. Yes, about a year ago. Is that what you remember from this timeline?"

"Unfortunately, yes." She sighed. "Captain . . . I should have warned him . . ."

He placed a paternal hand on her arm. "No, Inga, you couldn't. Don't blame yourself. I guess Calvin couldn't bear the thought of being used by the Romulans that way."

She shook her head. "But he was so . . ." She stopped, not wishing to reveal her own near-brush with suicide.

"What?"

"Nothing." They stopped in front of the door to her quarters. "But what if I had warned him, Captain? He might still be alive today. I'll always wonder . . ."

Akinola pressed the hypo-spray against her neck. Her hand shot up to the site of the injection, a look of surprise on her face before she sagged and the Captain caught her.

"No, Inga," he said, gently as he carried her into her quarters and placed her on her bunk. "You won't. That will be my burden."

* * *

EPILOGUE

Sometime in mid-2377

Hy'Aegal City by the Omidan Sea, Rigel IV

A warm breeze flowed through the open store front of the small coffee, tea and herb shop. Randall Frieze savored the salty tang of the ocean air as he bagged k'leeton leaves for an elderly Vulcan woman. She nodded to him in thanks before shuffling out of the store on her cane. Frieze had owned the ship for half a year and the old woman was a regular, every quarter-week at 1430 hours.

He walked behind the counter where Paul Ruiz was checking inventory on a PADD. The young man licked the end of his stylus, his brow creased in thought.

Frieze smiled. "Paul, why don't you take a break? The inventory doesn't have to be completed today - why don't you head to the beach for a while?"

Ruiz shook his head. "Can't. I'm on until closing, remember?"

Randall sighed and picked up his coffee mug. How could he forget? Neither Ruiz or Selan or J'Yanter ever left him completely alone. He sat at one of the small, round tables and watched people walk by on the pale, gray stone street.

A group of Hintaran monks entered the store. Ruiz paused to fill their order for herbs. Frieze sipped his coffee and observed the three robed figures. Two were human males, one advanced in years, quite a bit older than Frieze. The female was a Rigellian of avian descent, her head covered with a plume of thin, brown feathers.

Receiving their bags of assorted herbs and teas, the three left the shop. The woman nodded at Frieze who lifted his mug in greeting.

He sighed. In some ways, this was an idyllic setting - a beautiful little sea-side town with a wonderful climate, settled against purple hills and a clear, azure sea.

So different from his old life. Yet, he would give almost anything to reclaim . . .

A commotion outside and a sudden shout for help brought him out of his reverie.

The Rigellian woman hurried back in. "Help us, please! Brother Nik has collapsed. I think it's his heart!"

Frieze was on his feet in an instant, but he felt a strong restraining hand on his arm. He turned to stare into the dark eyes of Paul Ruiz.

"No," Ruiz said, simply. "You can't take the risk."

"I have to!" Frieze protested.

"I'll call the med-center. They can beam him over . . ."

"Paul! He's a Hintaran monk - it's against their beliefs to use a transporter."

"Then we'll get medics to come here. Go in the back. Now."

"Or what? Do you plan on stunning me? That would be real subtle, wouldn't it?"

Ruiz removed his hand from behind his back, a look of uncertainty on his face. "Dammit, you can't just . . ."

"Watch me." Frieze brushed past Paul Ruiz and quickly trotted after the woman to the monk who lay motionless on the sidewalk. A small crowd of on-lookers had gathered, but no one had offered any help.

In a year, much had changed in the life of Randall Frieze, his name being the least of these. His once white mane of hair was shaved, leaving a tanned, bald pate. His short beard was now full and dark. Genetic modifications had altered his eye color, blood type and his finger prints. Even his bio-signature was different. Starfleet Intelligence had gone to great lengths to protect Randall Frieze from the reprisals of the Tal'Shiar, faking his death and relocating him many light-years from his home on Earth. Even his wife and children did not know the truth.

But one thing Starfleet Intelligence could not do was change the nature of a man. Randall Frieze, once and always a physician, hurried to render aid to the sick old man.

END