

# STAR TREK HORIZON



*First Command  
Part 1*

*Darrin Drader*

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**Historian's Note:** The following takes place in 2378, just after the return of the U.S.S. Voyager from the Delta Quadrant.

# First Command

By Darrin Drader

## 1

“Would you care to take a tour of the ship’s exterior before we dock, sir?” the shuttlecraft pilot, a young male ensign from Earth asked.

Captain Sean Sheppard didn’t remember his name, having met for the first time twenty minutes prior. He has seen several Sovereign Class starships before, but this was the first time he would see his own ship anywhere other than a PADD. He couldn’t wait to come aboard, meet the crew he had selected, and start his first mission, but this was the first look at the first command of his first starship as its captain, not counting the times he had temporarily taken charge of the USS Robinson. He decided it was right to savor the moment. It was also customary to tour the ship’s exterior prior to departing Spacedock. “Sure, ensign,” he said casually. He briefly considered asking the ensign his name again, but decided it would be easier to learn it by looking at the crew manifest after he was aboard.

The shuttle approached from the bow, and Sheppard took in the graceful arc of the starships saucer section. The Sovereign Class ship’s saucer section was elongated, which was the opposite of the Galaxy Class’s, which looked as though it were stretched side to side. Sheppard noted that Starfleet had taken his request seriously to change the shading on the top and the sides from gray to azure. It was just a paint job, but he had requested it as an homage to the ship’s name: Horizon. Ever since the beginning of flight, people would look to the blue horizon, and ultimately that was Starfleet’s primary interest, to push outward and explore the horizons of knowledge and understanding.

Sheppard was of average height for a human at six feet tall. He had a full head of dark hair that he wore swept back, and he had taken to arranging his facial hair in a Van Dyke style goatee.

At fifty-four years of age, he was in the prime of his life, and he was considered a damn attractive man. The ship's counsellor aboard the *Robinson* had written in his personnel file that he exerted a certain presence that inspired confidence and loyalty among the crew. He'd recently been told that it was that comment that put him over the top when choosing between the three top contenders to captain this vessel.

As he watched the graceful secondary hull of the starship glide slowly by out the fore viewport, he reflected upon his time aboard the *Robinson*. It was a Galaxy class ship that had been launched a year after the *Enterprise-D*, but given the fact that it was commissioned, it now had more years of service than that other storied ship commanded by Jean Luc Picard that was destroyed on Veridian III.

The decision to leave his previous post hadn't been an easy one. Outside of wondering whether he was truly competent enough to command a Starfleet vessel, there were also the bonds of friendship formed that would not so easily be replaced. Sophie McKinnon, Nellar, Synod, and more... each of them had begun as subordinates, and in the end were people he would be willing to sacrifice his life for. Despite his emotional attachments, the top-performing senior officers serving aboard the various ships of the fleet often eventually reach a point where Starfleet extends the offer to promote them to captain. When that day comes, they typically look at all the others who have recently been given ships, and know that they can do just as good a job—that their turn to take the center seat has arrived.

In the wake of the Dominion War, the Federation was rebuilding. Starfleet had lost a lot of vessels to the invaders from the Gamma Quadrant, and numerous worlds had been devastated. This created serious vulnerabilities, as well as numerous newly constructed starships that needed captains and crews. The *Horizon* was one such ship.

The Sovereign class starship was designed after the Battle of Wolf 359 as a vessel designed to combat the Borg. The Enterprise-E was the first one that entered service. The Horizon was a second generation of the ship and included several upgrades that hadn't yet been installed in the first generation of the ship, including additional torpedo launch tubes, more efficient warp nacelles, and an upgraded power management system that would, theoretically, make the ship even more adept at managing getting power to vital systems during a crisis. Of course, these systems were state-of-the-art, and therefore untested aboard an actual starship. If things went poorly, some systems could go the way of the ship-wide holomitters of the previous century.

Sheppard's attention returned to the tour as the shuttle spun around to the aft and began to descend into the shuttle bay. *I guess the joyride is over*, he mused. When he wasn't wrapped up in the day-to-day operations of a starship, he allowed himself to be amazed at the sheer size and scale of these vessels... of the level of engineering that went into their creation... and of the depth of love their captains would have for them and their crews. It was the only healthy way to be at space for years at a time.

"Magnificent ship," the ensign commented.

"That she is, ensign. That she is."

The shuttle turned toward the bay doors, which were parting to admit them. They were now a couple hundred feet from the starship's hull, and Sheppard could clearly see the assembled officers just beyond the shield keeping the atmosphere contained.

The vessel glided in and came to a rest on the deck. As the main hangar doors closed, the shuttle's bulkhead parted horizontally, the bottom of which came to rest on the deck below. Sheppard walked down the stairs and looked at the Starfleet officers assembled before him.

At the front of the assembly was Kevia Turner, his first officer. Although her ancient heritage was African, she'd been

born on Barisia Prime. He noted the cybernetic implant on the left side of her forehead and her mechanical left arm, both made necessary due to injuries sustained during the Dominion War.

“Permission to come aboard,” Sheppard said.

Turner’s expression remained neutral as she said, “Permission granted, captain. Welcome aboard.”

Beyond Turner was the remainder of his senior staff, at least those currently aboard the *Horizon*, and beyond them were another twenty five officers, each some of the higher ranking officers from the various departments aboard the ship. He noted the Andorian Science Officer, Sass Ch’qahrok, who was one of the few non-Vulcans to study at the Vulcan Science Academy. Next to him was Tavika, the Romulan woman with shoulder-length brown hair who would serve as bridge crew at Tactical. Born on Tantalus Penal Colony, she was one of the only Romulans serving in Starfleet. Next to her was Ipesh Nod, a Bajoran man with sandy blond hair and a fit physique who had spent considerable time in a Cardassian prison, and would serve as his Chief of Security. Finally was Adriana Cunha, a slim girl with red hair and slight features. Still in her mid-twenties, she was something of an engineering prodigy who assisted in the design of the Luna class vessel. Not present was Doctor Julian Bashir, who would be joining them at Deep Space Nine.

“Thank you, Commander,” Sheppard said pleasantly. “It’s good to see all of you here. I picked each of you from the finest officers Starfleet had available and I expect this crew to do amazing things.” He winced inwardly, realizing how generic that greeting must sound to them. He needed to follow that up with a special touch—a captain’s touch. He paused a moment, then said, “A starship isn’t just a machine that sails between the stars. Every ship has a personality, a memory, and will one day leave a legacy. That essence isn’t simply defined by its captain, or the missions it undertakes—it is defined by the people who serve aboard her. Each of you, and every other person serving aboard her will make her what she is, and what she will be remembered

for. I look forward to getting to know each of you.” He paused again for effect, deciding that he’d said enough. “Dismissed.”

The officers visibly relaxed and began heading for the door to the shuttle bay. Sheppard walked briskly into the corridor himself. Turner kept pace beside him.

“Commander,” Sheppard said to Turner.

“It’s good to have you aboard, captain,” she replied as they began their walk down the corridor toward the turbolift.

Starfleet vessels within the same class looked nearly identical from the outside, but the interiors were not always the same. The Enterprise was the same class of vessel, and was the Federation’s flagship, and its interiors were primarily rendered in browns, grays, and reds. The Horizon’s interior was mostly blue, with black trim, and gray seats and carpeting.

Likewise, uniforms varied from ship to ship, and captains would periodically change them after a few years. They had been mostly black with red, blue, or yellow shoulders prior to the Dominion War, then they switched Starfleet-wide to black with gray shoulders and colored collars during the war. This remained a popular uniform aboard most vessels, but the older design with the colorful shoulders became an option captains could choose. Sheppard had grown tired of their wartime uniforms, so he had elected the latter over the former for the Horizon.

“The crew’s been aboard for about a week now, testing systems and making sure she’s ready to depart Spacedock. How are they coming together?”

“Some of the crew has been aboard for a week,” Turner corrected him. “Others of us have been supervising final installations of equipment longer than that. Others beamed aboard within the last few hours.”

“Others?”

“Ipesh Nod was apparently on shore leave until about two hours before your scheduled arrival. Admiral Conolley vouched for his absence, so I didn’t feel the need to follow it up.”



“I remember when I was first assigned as senior staff aboard the Robinson. I reported for duty at Starbase twenty-three as soon as I could. I couldn’t wait to get to know the other officers, and get acquainted with the ship. You don’t think he’s going to be a problem, do you?”

“His service record is impressive and he spent time in a Cardassian gulag, so I doubt we have anything to worry about.”

They approached the turbolift node in this section of the ship and waited for it to arrive. “Anyone else stand out?”

“Yeah, Adriana Cunha. Brilliant engineer, but if I didn’t know any better, I’d swear she was still a teenager.”

Sheppard frowned. “Rebellious?”

“No. Awkward.”

“Brilliant minds sometimes have social deficiencies. It’s not unusual, and nothing she shouldn’t be able to overcome.”

The door to the turbolift hissed open and they stepped in. “Bridge,” Sheppard said and the lift began moving. “How is the rest of the Engineering department reacting to her?”

“You mean how do they feel getting bossed around by someone younger than most of them who’s never actually served aboard a starship? They’re following her orders. Ask me again when we get into a crisis.”

“The crew as a whole is untested, so that’s true of all of us,” Sheppard commented. The lift came to a stop and the door to the bridge swooshed open and as they stepped off they were immediately immersed in a cascade of sounds of the bridge, with its constant beeps and alerts. Sheppard proceeded toward the control center and an ensign at the conn shouted, “Captain on the bridge!”

“Ensign, you don’t have to do that every time I walk in,” Sheppard said with a touch of annoyance. Captains who insisted on continuing that ridiculous tradition struck him as arrogant.

“Aye, sir,” she said.

The bridge followed the standard Starfleet layout. It was circular, with a large viewscreen in front, a command well in the

center, and a slightly raised rear portion that contained separate tactical and ops stations, and three operations panels along the back wall. The command area contained two chairs, one each for the captain and first officer, and the conn station was up front. Finally, the science station was on the left, and the Andorian Sass Ch'qahrok was already at his post. Near the back were two doors, one to the captain's ready room and the other to the turbolift. Like the rest of the ship, the color scheme was blue, gray, and black. It was not the expansive area that was found on the Galaxy class starship, with its varnished wood tactical console which sat behind the three command chairs.

The cavernous interior of Spacedock was on the viewscreen. He was still amazed that the massive structure had been in service for over a century. Twenty years ago it had been refit with larger doors to accommodate the Galaxy Class ships that were about to enter service, and it had undergone regular maintenance and upgrades over the years, but it was still a monument to engineering, and had changed very little since it entered service.

“Ensign, are all systems online?” Sheppard asked.

“Aye, sir,” came the response.

“Signal Starfleet that the Horizon is almost ready to depart.”

Tavika walked quickly from her quarters. The ship would launch soon and she would be needed on the bridge. With prominent brow ridges and ears that ended in pointed tips, Tavika was unmistakably Romulan. While there were others in Starfleet with some Romulan blood, there were very few full Romulans. In fact, there were more Klingons in Starfleet than there were Romulans. While the Romulan Star Empire had entered the Dominion War on the side of Starfleet, their position was against the Dominion rather than on the side of Starfleet. Despite their brief alliance, they were far from friends. In fact, brinkmanship along the Neutral Zone remained as common as ever.

Of course Tavika had never been a part of the Romulan Star Empire. Her parents had been, but they had been in a Federation prison from the time she was born. Despite this, there were many in Starfleet who didn't trust her simply because of her bloodline. So much for the great enlightened society... She wasn't sure if Captain Sheppard had selected her to be part of the Horizon's senior staff based on her service record or if he simply wanted to help her advance in the ranks because there were so many forces within Starfleet that would be aligned against her simply due to her bloodline. In either case, she was cautiously optimistic that this could turn out to be a good assignment.

She rounded a corner and caught sight of the Bajoran Security Chief, Ipesh Nod. She sped up so she could walk beside him. She had met the other members of Horizon's senior staff, but she had yet to speak with him due to his recent arrival. "Lieutenant Commander," she said, acknowledging him.

Ipesh Nod was tall and athletic, with dark blond hair that he wore short and combed to the left. He did not wear the d'ja pagh on his right ear as many of his people did, and Starfleet had no regulations against them.

"Tavika, right?" She noted immediately that his tone of his voice did not sound overly friendly.

"That's correct. As the Chief of Security, I would imagine that the two of us will be working closely."

"Most likely," he said.

They approached the turbolift doors and Nod remained silent. She wasn't sure if he was normally this curt with everybody, or if he had a problem with her specifically. Having never met before, she could only imagine why he might not like her. "Lietenant Commander, I apologize if I caught you at a bad time. I merely wished to introduce myself."

"Noted," said Nod.

Tavika felt her cheeks flush in anger. This was not how she wanted to begin a working relationship with another senior officer aboard the ship. “Computer, halt the lift.”

Nod simply looked at her wordlessly.

“Is there something I have done to offend you in the hour and a half we have both been present aboard this vessel?”

“Not as such,” Nod replied.

“Do you speak in three word sentences with everyone?”

“No.”

“Then why are you doing so to me?” she asked. Her eyes narrowed, her jaw set. While she had spent no time among other Romulans, she had inherited their heightened emotional state, and though she tried to keep it under control, she did not back down when she felt someone was discriminating against her on the basis of her heritage.

Nod was silent for a moment. Finally, he lowered his eyes to his boots. “I apologize Lieutenant Commander. I did not mean to offend you.”

“Computer, resume lift,” she said. As the turbolift moved smoothly into motion again she said, “As one of the few Starfleet officers who happens to be of full Romulan heritage, I am not oblivious when people are discriminating against me. I wish for us to have an amicable working relationship, but I will not tolerate blatant disrespect. I hope I don’t have to take this up with the captain.”

“No ma’am,” Nod said.

The lift doors parted and the two stepped onto the bridge. Captain Sheppard stood in front of his command chair and looked at them as they entered. “Well, it looks like we have a full compliment now. Let’s be underway. Signal to Spacedock to open the bay doors so we can depart.”

Tavika took her place at the Tactical station, which also handled shipboard communications. “Aye, sir,” she said as she tapped a few controls at her station. A moment later she

received her electronic reply. “Starfleet confirms and wishes us well on our way.”

They watched as the doors in front of them parted revealing the star dotted blackness of space beyond.

“Ensign Sanchez, take us out,” Sheppard said.

Tavika barely felt the movement as the maneuvering thrusters kicked on and the ship went from a dead stop to slowly inching its way toward open space.

“Impulse engines are coming online and functioning within normal parameters,” Ch’qahrok reported.

They watched the open doors grew increasingly larger on the viewscreen. A moment later, the open starfield filled the entire screen, with a corner of the Earth in the lower right hand field of view.

“We have cleared Spacedock,” Sanchez said. “Switching propulsion to impulse.”

“Mister Sanchez, set course for Deep Space Nine at Warp Seven. Engage.”

The ship jumped smoothly to warp speed. The Horizon had taken flight.

All in all, Sheppard's first three days as Horizon's captain was mostly uneventful as they traveled through space at warp speed uninterrupted. He'd spent time getting to know the senior staff and familiarizing himself with the ship by walking it from deck to deck. In all, it was a fine ship. Smaller but more advanced than the Galaxy Class ship he'd served on, the Sovereign Class had been built to fight the Borg. After the return of Voyager and the collapse of the transwarp conduits leading into Federation Space, the threat of the Borg was diminished, at least for the time being.

Sheppard stripped off his Starfleet uniform, donned a gray and black colored robe, and climbed into bed. He wasn't sure exactly how a person became this tired aboard a ship at warp. He had certainly not been bored, but all of his departments seemed to be functioning smoothly thus far. Granted, the ship was still untested, and the minute they ended up in a combat situation all manner of complications would arise, from operations difficulties, to ship repairs, to dealing with the inevitable loss of crewmen. What they were in right now was still the honeymoon phase.

"Computer, kill the lights," he said. His quarters went dark and Sheppard closed his eyes, looking forward to a solid six hours of sleep before his next shift began. It was true that most Starfleet doctors and counsellors recommended eight hours of sleep in order to maintain a normal circadian rhythm aboard a starship, Sheppard had never been one to spend any less than twelve hours on duty, which came at the expense of sleep, which he really didn't miss. Six hours was a normal amount for him most evenings. Less than that and he would feel fatigued the next day, and he considered more than that a waste of time.

His thoughts trailed off quickly and he was soon very close to sleep. He hoped he wouldn't dream of the second battle of

Chin'toka again... His mind began to drift as he surrendered consciousness to fatigue.

A chime woke him with a start. "Computer, lights."

As the lights came up, he heard the chime again. "Bridge to Captain Sheppard, you have a priority communication coming in from Admiral Jellico." He swore that foul tempered admiral knew his schedule and chose now to call just to rouse him from a deep sleep.

Sheppard groaned. "Computer, how long was I asleep?"

"Three hours, forty-two minutes," came the reply.

"No wonder I feel like crap," he said. He grabbed the badge on his uniform, tapped it, and said, "Sheppard here. I'll take this in my quarters."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

Sheppard moved over to a communications screen which came alive and displayed the Federation logo the moment he was seated in front of it. "Computer, put the admiral through to me."

The logo was soon replaced with the face of the admiral, who's graying blond hair framed a countenance that could be described as simultaneously tired and cantankerous. "Captain Sheppard, you appear to be out of uniform. I didn't interrupt your sleep, did I?"

"No, I always dress like this," Sheppard replied. "The bridge crew particularly enjoys it when I walk in wearing this robe and a sleeping mask." He wouldn't dream of addressing most of the admiralty in this way, but Jellico was known as being overbearing, embracing the most militaristic of attitudes about Starfleet. He was also a bully with subordinates, so the only way to deal with him was to ensure that he understood from the beginning that his jackholery would not be tolerated.

Jellico's stoic expression indicated that he didn't appreciate the captain's attempt at humor. "Sheppard, don't make me order a psych eval on your first assignment."

“Admiral, with all due respect, our first assignment was simply to leave Spacedock and jump to Warp. Other than a stopover at Deep Space Nine, our orders are a blank slate.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Jellico said. “I’m sure you know the Federation’s situation in the wake of the Dominion War. It’s been three years and we’re still trying to recover, both in terms of rebuilding our fleet, and training new officers.”

“I’m familiar,” Sheppard said. “My understanding is that this ship’s mission is to help shore up the Federation’s holdings... keep worlds from seceding, and generally show the flag in areas where we haven’t been able to maintain a presence recently.”

“That’s an accurate assessment,” Jellico replied. “And I’m officially giving you your first mission.”

“Well, don’t keep me waiting,” Sheppard said. “It’s not like I was trying to sleep or anything.”

Jellico’s face reddened visibly. “Captain, you do realize that your ‘wit and attitude’ might be part of the reason it took this long for us to pull out the captain’s chair, right?”

“And here I thought it was all those times I decided I was happier where I was at than I would be taking command of whichever vessel Starfleet was offering me at the time.”

Jellico paused, clearly annoyed with Sheppard. “Captain, I need the Horizon to load up with medical supplies at Deep Space Nine, including retrovirals to combat an emerging plague on Gour II, which is in Federation space not far from the Breen’s border.”

“I think we can handle that,” Sheppard said.

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Jellico said.

“I had a feeling it would be.”

“We’ve been hearing rumblings that the planetary government of Gour II has been considering severing ties with the Federation.”

“They’re pretty far out. I can see why they’d consider it,” Sheppard said.



“Well the Federation would like them to remain in. It has strategic importance against the Breen, not to mention the fact that seceding would show a sign of weakness and encourage other systems to do the same.”

“So our real mission is to go there, show that the Federation still cares about them, and figure out how to convince them to stay.”

“That sums it up,” Jellico replied.

“Is there anything else I should know about this before we arrive?”

“Only that this close to Breen space, I wouldn’t be surprised if they have something to do with Gour II’s sudden interest in secession.”

“That thought also crossed my mind,” Sheppard said. The thought of possibly going up against the Breen sent a chill down his spine. He’d seen enough of what they were capable during the Dominion War. If they were trying to encroach upon the Federation’s territory and take a piece of it, this could lead to another conflict, and it was one he would not be happy to see. Their ships were just as capable as their Federation counterparts, and their troops were as ruthless as any Klingon. There was also the simple fact that they creeped him out a bit with their covered heads, refrigeration suits, and the metallic screech of their voices. No, regardless of what was at stake, it would be best to find a peaceful solution to the situation.

“Captain, I can’t stress how important it is that we don’t lose Gour II. Do anything you can to keep them in the Federation.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now go get some sleep,” Jellico said with a wry grin. “You look exhausted.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sheppard said. “Computer, end transmission.” The screen went blank and the Federation logo returned after a moment. If they were even potentially going to face the Breen, odds were better than average that he’d dream about the second battle of Chin’toka again tonight. It occurred

to him that he had post-traumatic stress from that battle, but he'd thus far done a good job hiding it and avoiding the ship's counsellors.

Julian Bashir looked at the emptiness of his quarters. Aside from brief outings from the station, he had spent ten years of his life living out of this place. His time at Deep Space Nine had gone from being a posting he'd felt was beneath him to a place he considered home. And yet, three years after the conclusion of the Dominion War, it felt like a home where all the kids had grown up and moved out.

Sisko had been the first to go. Initially believed dead, Cassidy had told them that Benjamin had come to her and told her that he would be staying with the Prophets for some time. As much as Bashir believed her to be a rational person, the fact was that his appearance to her could not be proven, nor had he appeared to anyone else within the past three years. There had been complete silence from Benjamin Sisko, which would be consistent with a completely different classification for him: dead. Bashir wanted to not believe that, but his faith was stretched to the limits on this matter. The Benjamin Sisko he knew would never knowingly abandon his wife and two children, knowing that one was still a young child and would grow up without ever knowing him if he didn't return to them.

Miles O'Brien had been the closest friend Bashir had on the station, and he had left shortly after Sisko's departure to go teach at Starfleet Academy. While O'Brien had returned to the station briefly, and he had stayed in contact, the kind of distance between them drove home the fact that they were not in each other's lives on a day-to-day basis as they once had been. Their conversations no longer consisted of what period conflicts they were going to simulate in Quark's holosuites, but were more oriented around how Keiko and Molly and Kirayoshi were doing. They still touched on the large events in their lives, but the day-to-day concerns and banter were a thing of the past—

but such was the way of friendships when so much distance came between them. While he hoped that their paths would once more come together on a more permanent basis, he knew that careers were rarely kind to the bonds of friendship.

Another friend of his, Odo, had returned to the Founders after the war had ended. Julian had often questioned the lack of compassion and understanding from the gruff Constable, but he had respected him, and he had learned to like him over time. He missed listening to the constant banter between him and Quark.

Another exit was Elim Garak, who he had spent a great deal of time with. He remembered many meals spent with the exiled Cardassian who managed to maintain the cover of a simple tailor for much longer than really necessary. But Garak had enjoyed the deception, and had made due as best he could amid people who were not his own when what he wanted more than anything was to return to Cardassia.

And then there was Ezri Dax. He still felt so many conflicting emotions when thinking about her. The fact that she had been interested in him romantically while Jadzia had rebuffed every effort he'd made to get closer to her proved that the Trill symbiont became fundamentally different when they joined with new hosts. He had enjoyed being with Ezri, given the fact that she remembered the friendship he'd had with Jadzia. The end of their relationship still saddened him since he knew that he still loved her, and she him. Ultimately, Ezri chose to end it between them because she believed their relationship was born out of unrequited feelings Julian had for Jadzia. It had been painful for both of them. She had also left the station recently after she accepted a promotion to captain and put into a specialty training program in preparation for captaincy of a new class of starship.

Bashir remembered when he had first come to Deep Space Nine. He had been so disappointed to be stationed at what he had referred to as the ass end of space. Over time, the fact that it wasn't originally built by the Federation, and it wasn't a

starship seemed to fade. Sure, they did very little exploration, but that didn't mean that interesting things didn't come to them. Over the years, he'd been involved in many interesting situations, some of which had involved medicine while others didn't. Despite that, it was the people he had come to appreciate the most, and with so many of them absent, he felt that the time had come to go elsewhere and try something different. Deep Space Nine would always be home for him, or at least one of the places in the universe he considered home, but lately it was a place filled with ghosts. There were the ghosts of the dead, the ghosts of the living, and the ghosts of the possibly not dead...

When Bashir had entered Starfleet, he had graduated second in his class at Starfleet Medical. He had wanted to serve aboard a starship and see the galaxy, and be on the frontier of medical science. Aboard Deep Space Nine, he had been able to do all of those things, just not in the way he'd imagined. He had also been caught up in a war that seemed pointless to him, lost people he knew and cared for, seen friends disfigured... There were too many ghosts here, and it was time to take his leave.

He looked in the dark quarters that now lacked the pictures of his friends, his belongings, and all the other things that had made this place home for the past ten years. It was time to leave. As if on cue, his comm badge chirped. "Nerys to Bashir."

"Yes, Kira."

"Your ride is here."

"Thank you," he said, feeling relieved that the Horizon arrived on time. "How long are they planning to stay?"

"I'm not sure. It looks like we're loading a bunch of medical supplies onto the ship, so it's safe to say they'll be here a few hours—long enough for you to come to Ops and say goodbye."

"Perfect," said Bashir.

He walked out of his quarters, looked back one more time, and then exited into the corridor. It was silly, he thought, getting sentimental over living quarters. On the station, they were all pretty close to identical, and it was just a space

constructed of metal, with furniture, carpeting, and machinery. His food replicator would not miss him after he was gone. No, this was the time to seek out the next adventure, and hopefully do some exploration that didn't lead to interstellar war, pain, and death.

It took little time to make his way to the Promenade where he saw Quark up ahead. He allowed the Ferengi to approach while he continued on.

“So you were just planning on leaving without saying goodbye?”

“Don't you have a bar to run?” Bashir asked with a smirk.

“Sure, and I have people who can take over for a while, so long as I don't have my back turned on them for too long.”

“Well, I'm flattered you left your bar long enough to see me off. I'm about to go say goodbye to Nerys. Would you like to join me?”

“I wouldn't miss it.”

They entered the lift that connected with the Ops center. A few moments later the doors opened and Bashir and Quark stepped out to a group of faces that were extremely familiar—faces that he didn't expect to see at the same place and time again—at least not for many years. Miles O'Brien and Keiko were here from Starfleet Academy. Garak had come here from Cardassia. Ezrie was here from the Aventine, which was not docked at the station. Even Jake Sisko had taken the time away from his writing career to be here. In addition to them, Kira Nerys sat at the command console while Nog stood at attention along the back wall.

“What are you all doing here?” Bashir asked, incredulous that so many would make the trip all the way back to the station just to see him off.

O'Brien stepped up and slapped Bashir on the shoulder. “Apparently Starfleet considers us all heroes, so they wanted us all to come see you one more time before you left.”

“It took three days by shuttle to get here,” Ezrie said with a smile.

“And you actually *wanted* to come see me?” he asked.

“Julian, you’ll always be someone special to me. Let’s just leave the past in the past where it belongs.”

“And you, Jake, Starfleet can’t order you around. What are you doing here?”

“Remember about nine years ago when Nog and I did that trading? You know, yamok sauce for self-sealing stembolts for a chunk of land? Well, I felt like it was time to actually go take a vacation on that land. Maybe get some writing in while I’m there.”

“You’re sure the Noh-Jay Consortium will be alright with you being there?”

Jake looked to Nog, and a huge smile crossed the Ferengi’s face. “I think they’re fine with it.”

“And you Garak, what brings you back to the station?”

“Dear Doctor, I can only say for sure that I have been looking for an excuse to come back to the station, temporarily, for quite some time. When I learned that you were finally moving on, I felt the time was right.”

Bashir looked around the room, his heart much lighter than it had been moments before. “I can’t believe you all came back here for me. It was completely unnecessary.”

“On the contrary, Doctor,” said Garak as he presented Bashir with a wrapped rectangular package. “For years you were there for each of us. Now it’s our turn to repay the kindness.”

“I hope this isn’t yamok sauce,” Bashir said. He tore open the package, revealing icy blue liquid in a glass decanter.

“Romulan ale?”

“Only the best for this occasion.”

“It turns out that the Horizon will be docked for a couple days,” said Kira deviously. “That gives you more than enough time to have a farewell party, and recover, before starting your

new assignment. Captain Sheppard has already given it his approval.”

“Well, thank you all for coming,” Bashir said. “I have to admit that lately I’ve been feeling alone here without all of you. I’m glad that I don’t have to leave while still missing you.”

The presence of the friends who had moved on from the station was comforting, but that didn’t change the fact that there were still those who wouldn’t or couldn’t come back, even for this occasion. So many times he had looked out the windows to see the wormhole, knowing that Benjamin Sisko might very well be alive out there. Beyond that, in Dominion territory, was Odo, and he harbored no illusions that they would make a surprise appearance here. Be that as it may, it warmed his heart to see so many of his friends had come here to surprise him.

“So what do we know about Gour II?” Sheppard asked. He sat at the end of the conference table, facing his senior officers. With Deep Space Nine behind them, they would be arriving at the planet in less than a day.

Ch’qahrok spoke up first. “The easiest way to describe Gour II is what happens to a planet when the Prime Directive is not there to protect a culture,” the Andorian said with no emotional inflection in his voice. He really has spent too much time with the Vulcans, Sheppard thought. “They emerged from a dark age a hundred years ago as a warp society. They have no recollection of their history before that time, other than that they were servants as those they refer to as *The Oppressors*. Their world served as a massive manufacturing colony for these oppressors until the Gourans overthrew them and drove them from the planet. They left in such a hurry that they didn’t have time to collect or eradicate the technology they’d had them produce. The Gourans already knew how to make it and how to use it, so they quickly became a warp capable society. They joined the Federation fifty four years ago.”

“So for half of their recorded history, they’ve been part of the Federation?” Nod asked. The sinewy Bajoran frowned, as though this very notion was difficult to believe. He glanced at Tavika, and the captain noticed that she flashed him a borderline hostile glare for a fraction of a second. Sheppard could tell that there was something unpleasant between those two. He would stay out of it unless one of them came directly to him about it, or it became a disruption to the crew’s morale.

“That is correct,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Then why would they want to leave the Federation?” Turner asked.



“That’s part of what we need to figure out,” Sheppard said. “Jellico’s mission briefing states that thinks it’s because we don’t have enough of a presence out there, particularly after the Dominion War.”

“Have they announced their intention to leave?” Turner asked.

“No. This comes from intelligence sources from within the Federation,” Sheppard said.

“If they aren’t talking about it openly, how are we supposed to figure out what’s going on there?” Adriana Cunha asked. Sheppard noted how her voice wavered slightly, as though she was unsure whether she should be asking the question.

“That’s what we need to figure out,” Sheppard said.

“Given their distance from Breen space, is it possible that they’re being influenced by them?” Tavika asked.

“We can’t discount that possibility,” Ch’qahrok said. “While planetary governments are capable of making such moves on their own, it isn’t at all unusual for other powers to be influencing them.”

“And if that’s the case, is it really our place to stop them from leaving the Federation?” Bashir asked.

“Of course it is,” Turner replied. “We fought a war to preserve the Federation. What good was our sacrifice if our member worlds start leaving?”

Bashir cleared his throat. “Just because they joined the Federation doesn’t mean that they’ve lost the right to self-determination. If we start interfering with our member world’s rights to be or not be part of the Federation, how are we better than the Romulans?” He glanced nervously at Tavika. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Tavika replied.

“We’re better because we’re a free and open society,” Turner said.

“Without the freedom to leave, are we truly free?” Bashir asked.

“Let’s get one thing established,” Sheppard said. “If Gour II decides they’re going to secede, we will not stop them. We’re here as envoys, not the military. We aren’t going to coerce, threaten, or demand that they stay.”

“With all due respect, that seems to run counter to Admiral Jellico’s orders,” Turner said. “He said to stop them from leaving by any means necessary.”

“Gour II leaving the Federation would constitute a threat to the security of the Federation,” Nod agreed. “Not to mention the fact that other Federation worlds would look at this as a sign of weakness and be tempted to leave themselves.”

Sheppard cleared his throat. “Let’s just say that this mission was placed in my hands, and I’m going to execute it the way I feel is best. The United Federation of Planets is dedicated to peace, not war.” He looked at his first officer. She was tough as nails, he decided, but he wouldn’t have chosen her to be his number one if he didn’t think she could command the ship as he would in his absence. “We will do everything possible to keep Gour II in the Federation, but we will play by the rules. If, after we’ve tried our best, they decide to leave, we have to accept that. If any further actions are to be taken, it will have to be decided by the Diplomatic Corps and the Federation Council.”

“Fair enough,” Turner said.

“But I appreciate your commitment to the mission,” Sheppard said. He turned to Tavika. “So there’s a good chance we’re going to run into the Breen on this mission. Is there anything we can do to better prepare ourselves against them?”

Tavika shook her head slightly. “Some Breen vessels can cloak, they use organic technology, and they use energy dampening weapons. All Starfleet ships are already equipped with countermeasures against the energy dampening weapons, but that doesn’t change their effectiveness if those systems go down. I’m fairly confident in our ability to fight them off if

we're faced with a single ship. If we're outnumbered, we should consider a tactical retreat."

Sheppard nodded. It was the answer he'd expected. He'd seen the Breen in action and they were a terror to behold. They fought without hesitation or consideration for their own lives, and negotiating with them was a fruitless effort.

"So we should come up with a method that doesn't rely purely on the combat capabilities of the ship," Nod said, irritation clearly evident in his voice.

"That would be within your area of expertise," Tavika said, clearly just as irritated as Nod had sounded. "What do you have in mind?"

"We could use a couple of class two shuttles to deliver boarding parties to the Breen ships. They're fast and maneuverable, which would give them an advantage against enemy weapons, and if we equipped them with multi-phasic phase emitters, we could punch a hole in their shields large enough for them to get close. From there, the boarding parties could blast a hole in their hulls, disable their shields, leaving them vulnerable to our attacks."

"Based on similar strategies employed during the war, the chance of failure of such a strategy would be sixty eight percent," Ch'qahrok said. "If they did prove successful, we would still see casualty rates of fifty percent or higher."

"If we're outnumbered, it would be a valid strategy," Nod said.

"Those odds are too steep," Sheppard said. "We should only resort to those tactics if we're presented with a definite no-win scenario."

"We should be prepared, just in case," Nod argued.

"I concur with Mr. Nod," Tavika said. "We should have a strategy for a worst case scenario."

Sheppard had to admit that they were both right, and that they agreed despite the fact that they clearly didn't care for one another added weight to their argument. "Lieutenant Nod,

come up with a plan, outfit the shuttles, and prepare the boarding teams. But we'll only resort to that strategy if the situation becomes desperate."

"Sir, I have a thought as well," said Cunha.

"I'm listening," Sheppard said, hoping that she caught the hint that she didn't need to hesitate when offering up ideas to the captain.

"Gour II has two moons. If the battle isn't going well, we can vent drive plasma into space and ignite it. While doing that, we can simultaneously beam out a load of unprocessed refuse. We then warp behind one of the moons. The plasma explosion will blind their sensors while we make our escape, and it will destroy the refuse, leaving trace matter behind, which should lead them to believe we've been destroyed."

"I like that idea a little more," Sheppard said. "Less loss of life, and it would allow us to back off, contact Starfleet, and regroup. Doctor Bashir, could you tell us what the medical situation is on the planet?"

"About eight months after the end of the Dominion War, a virus started showing up on the planet. The rate of infection is now up to about forty percent, and those who become sick have a zero percent survival rate without retroviral medication. Gour II is simply not capable of producing enough for the entire planet, which is why we're shipping four full bays of the stuff. Once it's been diluted, there should be enough to cover an eighty percent infection rate."

"Are the retrovirals a cure?"

"For now," Bashir said. "As with anything, the more we treat it, the more likely that we'll accidentally create a super strain of the bug that will require a new treatment. With luck, we'll be able to wipe it out before that happens."

"Well, it sounds like we have our bases covered," Sheppard said. "Let's get to it."

The senior officers stood up and started to leave. Sheppard noted that Nod stayed behind as the others filed out. *Here it*

*comes*, he thought. “Mister Nod, is there something I can do for you?”

“Captain, I seem to be having a problem with a member of the senior staff.”

“Let me guess. You and Tavika don’t get along.”

“I feel she’s a security risk to this ship,” Nod said tersely.

“Because she’s Romulan,” Sheppard said.

“Yes. The Romulans may have switched sides during the war, but that doesn’t mean they’re our allies now. I don’t trust them and I don’t trust her.”

Sheppard sighed. “You do realize she was never part of the Romulan Empire. Her loyalties are to the Federation, and she has served in the fleet for over twenty years.”

“Yes, sir, I have read her personnel profile. I’ve familiarized myself with the files on all the senior officers and the various section heads.”

“Mister Nod, let me make this as clear as I possibly can. She is not the only Romulan to serve in Starfleet. She has done so for years with distinction, and her advancement through the ranks have been hampered by her Romulan blood, which just happens to be one of the things about her she has absolutely no control over whatsoever. Your attitude is the height of xenophobia, it’s unbecoming of a Starfleet officer, and it’s not something I will tolerate in my crew. If you persist with this attitude, I’ll give you a field demotion and promote the next guy in line to take over your responsibilities. Do I make myself clear?”

Nod paused for a moment. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

Sheppard could feel his face grow warm with anger.

“Lieutenant, I’m denying that request. Just answer me one thing—can you do your job according to Starfleet protocols, or do I need to replace you?”

Nod straightened up and looked straight forward, avoiding eye contact with the captain. “I will carry out your orders as you’ve directed.”

“I suggest you look past her appearance and try to get to know her as a person before you entertain any further notions about where her loyalties might lie.”

“Aye, sir.” Said Nod.

Tavika sat at a table in the farthest corner from the door in the crew lounge. Her jaw was clenched, and her fists were shaking. She had spoken to that Bajoran prior to this and she’d thought she’d set him straight. Apparently she not only hadn’t, but he took that as an invitation to increase his harassment.

She barely noticed when a short bald human in civilian clothing approached her table. “You look like someone who needs a drink,” he said in a friendly yet awkward voice. “What’ll you have?”

“Romulan ale,” Tavika said.

“I’m sorry, but we can’t serve that in the lounge,” the man said. “For that you’ll have to talk to the captain,” he whispered in her ear.

“Then get me whatever the strongest fake alcohol you can serve in this establishment,” she said.

“You sound rather irate,” the man commented. “Care to talk about it?”

“No,” Tavika replied. The last thing she wanted was someone she didn’t know prying into her life.

“Well, if you change your mind, my name is Aurelio Caruso. I run this place.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Tavika said dismissively.

A short time later Tavika sat with her synthehol beverage that tasted somewhat like petroleum. It was what she asked for, so she sipped it cautiously, trying not to taste too much of it at one time. While she did this, she noted Caruso bouncing from table to table, engaging the officers in small talk. Every once in a

while he'd throw his head back in a hearty laugh, and then lean in for more conversation. He was quite the friendly one, and possessed a charisma that transcended his unusual speech pattern and short stature.

She watched as the main doors parted and Kevia Turner entered. Tavika averted her gaze and took a torturously long sip of her drink. As the only other senior officer in the lounge, she suspected Turner would want to sit with her, which was exactly what she didn't want right now.

Her wishes didn't seem to matter at the moment. Turner walked straight to her table. "Mind if I take a seat?"

"Why not?" Tavika replied.

"What was going on between you and the Security Chief?"

Tavika sighed. She really didn't want to talk about this right now, but she reported directly to Turner, so she felt it best to just answer the question. "Apparently he doesn't trust me due to the fact that I'm of Romulan heritage."

Turner frowned. "Are you sure about that?"

"I'm quite certain," Tavika replied. "I've dealt with this kind of behavior my whole life. You'd think I'd be used to it by now."

"No, you should never have to just be used to it," Turner said. "It's true that there aren't many Romulans in Starfleet, but you have nothing to do with the Romulan government, and there's nothing in your service record that would show that you're anything by loyal to the Federation."

"I'm glad you see it that way," Tavika said. Just hearing someone say that openly and unequivocally felt as though it took a weight off her shoulders. "I'm accustomed to having to prove my loyalty with every new assignment. People don't want to trust me because of who and what my parents were."

Turner smiled. Tavika decided that she liked the look of the Commander's face when she showed warmth. "I hope you don't take offense, but when I saw the way the two of you were

looking at each other in that meeting, I thought there had been something romantic between you.”

Tavika laughed. “Impossible.”

“You never know, sometimes it’s the people who seem to be immediately at odds who end up together.”

Tavika smiled herself and looked into Turner’s warm brown eyes. “No, you don’t understand. That would be absolutely impossible.”

“Why? Because you can’t stand him?”

“No, because I only have relationships with women,” Tavika said.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Why be sorry? You’ve actually brightened my mood already. Tell me Commander, do you have a husband and children?”

“No,” Turner said. “I’m married to my…” she paused for a moment. “You’re very direct, aren’t you?”

“It’s in my nature,” Tavika said.

“No, I’m not currently in a relationship, with a man or a woman. I’m not really looking for it right now either.”

“A shame,” Tavika said. She wasn’t sure if she should be disappointed, or if she should make a point to spend more time with the first officer in the future.

“So, I was thinking, this place needs a name,” Turner said with a smile.

“*Horizon* seems to suit it just fine,” Tavika said playfully.

“No, the lounge. Do we really want to serve aboard one of those stuffy ships where they don’t bother naming the Officer’s Lounge?”

“Are you looking for suggestions from me? How about The Watering Hole?”

Turner cocked an eyebrow. “That doesn’t sound quite right. I was thinking something a little more… festive, like the Merry Tap Emporium.”



“I think we should keep working on it,” Tavika said. “Maybe something a bit more understated, but not as utilitarian as my suggestion.”

“Let me know if you have any good ideas.”

“I can’t guarantee any good ideas, but I’ll give it some thought,” Tavika said.

“Look, one thing you should keep in mind with Ipesh Nod is that he spent quite a bit of the war in a Cardassian prison camp. From his point of view, the Romulans were the enemy. Before he was captured, it was kill or be killed by them. I think he might be having a hard time adjusting to having one so close to him.”

“Commander, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but you’re making excuses for his behavior. And believe me, I’ve heard them all. My life might be easier if I had been born to parents from a different province on Romulus... ones without the brow ridges... who can pass as Vulcans. But I wasn’t, and I will not apologize for how I was born. If Ipesh Nod has a problem with me, I suggest he visit one of the ship’s counsellors to get over his issues.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Turner said. “I’m sure you’ve noticed the hardware built into my skull and my arm. Some people see that and start having Borg flashbacks. I can’t control that. Half of my frontal lobe and most of my right arm was blown out in a fight with the Jem Haddar. I’d be dead right now if it weren’t for cybernetics, but when some people see that, all they think of is what the Borg have done to the Federation over the years. They’re afraid of me.”

“Just like Ipesh Nod is afraid of me,” Tavika said.

“And some people handle fear differently,” Turner said.

“Yes, they do,” Tavika said. “I still refuse to accept his behavior.”

“Just give him some time. If he doesn’t start treating you with respect, I’ll talk to the captain and have him moved to a different assignment.”

“That I can do, Commander,” Tavika said. Turner had given her some things to think about. She took another sip of her drink, winced, and then decided to give up on it.

The Horizon dropped out of warp and approached the planet Gour II. It was blue-green that skewed slightly more green than Earth from a distance. The two natural satellites were both large and closer to it than Earth's moon.

"Enter a standard orbit, Mr. Hernandez," Sheppard said. "Those moons really are close to the planet."

"Indeed," said Ch'qahrok. "The presence of two moons creates tremendous tidal forces on the planet. High tides come more frequently than on single moon systems, and the planet experiences roughly three times more earthquakes than is typical on Earth."

"Sounds like a lush and peaceful garden," Turner said with a hint of sarcasm from the chair next to the captain's.

"In fact it is," Ch'qahrok said. "Average temperatures are five degrees Celsius higher than Earth normal, it has no polar ice caps, but due to the larger sun that is not quite as hot as a standard yellow star, the entire world experiences comfortably warm weather year round."

"Sir, we're being hailed from the surface of the planet," said Tavika.

"Put them on screen," Sheppard said.

The viewscreen shifted from the image of the planet spinning slowly below them to the image of Drokka, the High Chancellor of Gour II. The Gourans were generally very slender by humanoid standards with pale skin, angular eyes, and ridges starting between their eyes, which swept up to peaks above their eyebrows, and then dissipated toward their temples. Their hair ranged from black to various shades of blue. Drokka looked to be middle aged with gray streaked blue hair that was cut in a bowl shape.

Sheppard rose from the captain's chair. "Chancellor, I'm Captain Sean Sheppard of the Starship Horizon."

“Hello Captain,” Drokka said. “Thank Gaazi you’ve arrived. We’ve been losing an average of six thousand people a day to the Dakkar plague.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t have gotten here any sooner with the retrovirals your people need. We can begin beaming it down immediately so you can get your people inoculated,” Sheppard said.

“That’s a relief, Captain,” Drokka said. “We’ll send you the coordinates where the medicine can be beamed to. We have people standing by to process it.”

“I’d like to send down some officers so we can assist your physicians deploying the treatment,” Sheppard said.

“Oh Captain, I appreciate the offer, but I assure you we can handle it. As a matter of fact, I see no reason we should take up any more of your precious time once you’ve beamed it down.”

“It isn’t a problem,” Sheppard said. “In fact, the process for diluting this is different than what’s commonly used on your world. It would really be best for your people if you allowed our medical staff to assist you.”

Drokka appeared visibly at odds with himself. Sheppard thought he heard the audio cut out completely for a moment. When it returned, Drokka nodded his head. “Forgive me Captain, we merely did not wish to occupy too much of your time. You are absolutely welcome to send a team down to the surface and help us in any way you can.”

“Thank you, Chancellor. Sheppard out.”

As the viewscreen reverted back to a live image of the planet, Turner said, “Well, he didn’t sound too happy that we’re not dropping the cure and leaving.”

“I expected as much,” Sheppard said. “They need our help but they don’t want us poking around on the surface. They’re obviously trying to keep something hidden from us.”

“Well, I think we should go do some poking around to find out what it is,” Turner said with a mischievous grin.

“I agree Commander. It’s your away mission. Who do you want to bring?”

“Nod, grab four security officers to join us. Tavika, you’re with us too. Doctor Bashir is an obvious choice, and since the engine room is presently in order, we’ll take Cunha too.”

“Cunha? Why her?” Sheppard asked.

“Because if she’s going to be part of the senior staff on this ship, she needs to get down on some planets and find out what an away mission is like,” Turner said.

“That’s a good idea,” Sheppard said.

Bashir felt the familiar sensation of transporting down to the planet as the room aboard the ship faded away and was replaced by a crowded street near several tall yet austere buildings. He noted immediately that the Gourans seemed to like their architecture dark and grandiose. The nearby structures reached high into the sky and seemed to be constructed of a dark gray stone that looked like marble. The building shapes were almost neo-gothic, with grand arches and statues of Gourans. It was a monument to how far they had come as a species since overthrowing *The Oppressors* such a short time ago. All along the streets was abundant vegetation that looked to him as though it were overgrown, with long green vines that sprouted flowers that ranged from yellow to purple.

Bashir immediately noted the high level of humidity in the air as sweat began beading on his forehead and he took his first breath in several weeks that wasn’t processed by shipboard life support systems. He looked to the sky and saw a few puffy clouds in a green tinted sky, and he couldn’t help but notice that the sun was larger than he was accustomed to, and also just dim enough that he could look at it with his naked eye without discomfort... still a bad idea though, he mused.

Two Gourans approached the away team, both of whom wore grandiose flowing crimson robes. One was Tarim, whom

Bashir recognized from his mission brief, while the other was an individual he had not seen before, with short-cut white hair.

“Welcome to Gour II,” Tarim said. “I’d like to introduce you to Drokka, our Chief Medical Examiner.

“It’s good to meet you,” Turner said, offering her hand.

Tarim took her hand and shook it warmly. “Thank you for bringing the retrovirals. This plague is laying waste to our world, particularly in the rural areas.”

“Why the rural areas?” Bashir asked.

“We don’t know,” Drokka replied.

“What can you tell us about the plague?” Bashir asked.

“We’re still not sure where it originated. It seemed to have infected people first on the Southern continent, but it has spread globally.”

“Airborne?” Bashir asked.

“No, it seems to be coming in through the food supply,” Drokka replied.

“That doesn’t make a lot of sense,” Bashir said. “How could its primary vector be the food supply?”

“We’ve looked into that, and we still don’t know how or when it was infected.”

“What about mutation?”

“It’s actually been quite stable, and we’re the only species on this planet that it’s able to infect.”

“Yes, I checked the gene sequence you sent us and your species seems to be the only one it can infect at all. It attaches to H-Chromosome, which is unique to your people. Everyone from the Horizon should be perfectly safe from it. It does strike me as odd that this seemingly appeared from nowhere and is laser-focused on your people in particular.”

“What are you trying to say, doctor?” Drokka asked.

Bashir paused for a moment. He knew the political situation on the planet and their thoughts of exiting the Federation. Poorly chosen words could help drive a wedge between this outlying member world. “I’m saying that I’ve seen this sort of

thing in the past, and to me, it looks as though it might have been engineered.”

“We had considered as much ourselves, but who would do this? We are a peaceful people,” Tarim said.

“Sometimes an attack is not a reflection upon the aggressive nature of any given species,” Bashir said.

“This is all very fascinating,” said Tarim, “but might I recommend we turn our attention to the more practical issue of distributing the cure?”

“Of course, Chancellor,” Turner said. “Julian, you and Adriana go with Drokka and see what you can do to help them dispense the retrovirals. Tavika and Nod, you’re with me.” According to Starfleet protocol, the four security officers accompanying them split evenly so that both groups would have protection. Turner mused that it was a sad day when starship personnel had to beam onto a Federation world with a security detail, and it was even more sad when that world’s leaders saw it and didn’t ask about it.

As Drokka led the Bashir’s group away, Turner continued following Tarim.

“I really can’t emphasize enough how much your timely arrival means to our world,” the Chancellor said. “Given the state of the Federation after the war, we didn’t know if we were going to get any relief before half the planet was infected with this disease.”

Turner nodded. “I realize that the Gouran system is on the outskirts of Federation space, and you might feel far removed all the way out here, but Starfleet is recovering from the war and the Federation is continuing to move forward and make life as good as ever for its citizens.”

“No offense, Commander, but that sounds exactly like the propaganda we’ve been hearing from the Federation Council since the war. We are concerned about the health of the Federation.”

“Yes, Starfleet Intelligence brought to our attention that your world is considering secession.”

“And you’re here to keep us in line?” Tarim asked.

“That’s not our role, no,” Turner replied. “As always, any member world that wants to withdraw from the Federation is legally entitled to do so. There will be no threat of force to coerce you into staying.”

“That’s good to hear,” Tarim said, “though I have to admit that your presence here would probably be more reassuring if our people weren’t considering a break with the Federation. Our needs almost seem secondary to the larger political concerns.”

“Chancellor, just how serious are the rumors we’ve heard about Gour II’s talk of secession?”

“Ah yes, finally to the heart of the matter... the reason for your visit. There are some on this world who feel that the Federation’s best days are behind it... that Starfleet protection is spread too thin due to the threats that have emerged over the last decade... that we would all be safer if we simply withdrew.”

“Those people wouldn’t happen to have noticed that we won the war against the Dominion, and we’ve risen to the challenge of the Borg. I’m not going to say that the galaxy isn’t a more dangerous place now than it was before, but we still stand a better chance of survival when we stand together rather than apart. That has always been one of the Federation’s core beliefs, and it always will be.”

Tarim smiled weakly. “To be completely honest with you, Commander, the secessionists are still in the minority, and I am not among them. As the leader of this planet’s government, I must represent every faction and their interests—even the ones I disagree with.”

“What do you think are the odds they will succeed?”

“Only Gaazi knows the will of politics. What seems a ridiculous notion today can gain support and become the policies of tomorrow. I will say this, however, your presence



here right now and your help against the plague means a great deal. While I can't make any guarantees, there will be people alive at the end of this who wouldn't have been if not for your help, and that will mean a great deal."

"Doctor, do you have any idea why I was sent on this mission?" Cunha asked.

Since splitting the away-team, Bashir, Cunha, and the two security officers assigned to them, Roger Lashwan and Ella Cruz, had been taken to a warehouse where the medical supplies were beaming in. Bashir had to admit to himself that his own expertise was quickly exhausted once he showed Drokka how to properly dilute the drug. From there, he had simply been monitoring the beaming process as more and more of the drug materialized. When the beaming process was over, he would test the integrity of the drug to ensure that it survived the beaming process intact, but he fully expected that it would. Cunha, on the other hand, had no function to speak of. There were no engineering problems for her to solve, reducing her role to that of an observer... an annoyed observer.

"One of the things you'll find as a senior officer aboard a starship is that not everyone sent on an away mission is necessarily needed. Sometimes people are sent on the hunch that their expertise might be useful, or sometimes whoever is in charge of the mission has other reasons," Bashir said. Although he let his own mild annoyance with her attitude slip through in his response, and his explanation was somewhat condescending, he had to admit that his own attitude had been similar when he was first assigned to Deep Space Nine. "Keep in mind that our mission here entails more than simply the delivery of medicine. We're supposed to be trying to uncover the real reason Gour II is considering secession from the Federation."

A faint smile played over Cunha's fair features. "That sounds a lot like spying."

“In fact, spying does seem to be an implied aspect of our mission,” Bashir agreed.

“So why are we hanging out here?” Cunha asked. “They didn’t tell us we had to stay in this warehouse. Besides, this is the planet’s capitol city, which means that the answers we’re looking for are probably nearby.”

“Right, we’re all one big happy Federation. They shouldn’t mind if we go poking around,” Bashir agreed.

“I don’t think we need to tell Drokka that we’re going to go wandering, do you?”

“I see no reason to bother him with that information,” Bashir agreed. “Ensign Lashwan, I’d like you to stay here. Let us know if our hosts miss us. Cruz, you’re with us.”

“Aye, sir,” Cruz acknowledged.

Bashir retraced his steps through the massive open area of the warehouse where increasingly large amount of the retrovirals were materializing. They passed through a corridor that connected to some small offices, and to the door leading to the street. The exit was unguarded, and there were no obvious security devices monitoring it. As they approached, it swished open, revealing the street beyond.

“So what are we looking for?” Cunha asked.

“Right now, not much. Just look for anything that seems out of place on a Federation world.”

Bashir looked around and didn’t see anything that looked out of the ordinary at first glance. The street was moderately populated with people, and none of them seemed to be looking at people in Starfleet uniforms with suspicion or alarm. Above, hover vehicles filled the air-lanes. In short, it had the appearance of any other Federation world.

“I’m not seeing anything that raises a red flag,” Cunha said.

“No, but they tried to discourage us from beaming down. That usually means there’s something going on they don’t want us to see.”

“Or it could just be that the secessionists are worried that our presence here could be seen in a positive light by the planet’s population, and that might set back their agenda.”

Bashir nodded. “Maybe, but I still think this goes deeper. Commander Turner said they seemed legitimately nervous. Maybe they tried to hide whatever it was they don’t want us to see quickly.”

“If that’s the case, what are the odds they didn’t cover things up perfectly?” Cunha asked.

“I’d say the odds of that are very good.”

“I just wish I knew what we’re looking for.”

“Me too,” Bashir agreed. He took his tricorder from his belt and pulled up a map of the city. He then pulled up a list of the most important government facilities, which included the ruling council chambers, a defense manufacturing facility, and a small spacecraft landing port. “These seem like the most important public facilities here. We can cross off the ruling council chambers since that’s where Turner is already headed. Maybe we should go take a look around the other two.”

Cunha nodded. “It looks like the nearest one is the port, which is five kilometers away. The other is fifteen kilometers in the opposite direction.”

Bashir tapped his combadge. “Bashir to the Sheppard.”

A moment later he heard Captain Sheppard’s voice from him combadge. “Yes, Doctor.”

“Cunha and I have been unofficially confined to the warehouse you’re beaming the retrovirals to. We’d like to get out and take a look around... maybe see if we can find some things they’d rather us not see.”

“I think that’s a good idea, Doctor,” Sheppard replied.

“Thank you, sir. Two to beam to another point on the planet’s surface. I’ll feed you the coordinates with my tricorder.”

“Affirmative, Doctor” A moment later the world dissolved around them as the transporter took hold.

“Transporter Room two reports that Bashir’s team has been successfully transported,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Very good,” said Sheppard as he settled back in the captain’s chair. “What’s the status of the retroviral transport?”

“It’s currently at ninety-five percent,” Ch’qahrok replied. “We should have it all down to them in approximately ten minutes.”

“Very good. I’d be willing to bet that they’re going to wait until they have all the retroviral treatment before they decide we’ve overstayed our welcome,” Sheppard said. “Keep monitoring the away teams as well and be prepared to pull them out of there at the first sign of trouble.”

“Aye, sir,” Ch’qahrok said calm and confidently.

Sheppard stood up and walked near Ch’qahrok’s console and gave him a half-smile. “Lieutenant Commander, are you sure your ears aren’t pointed?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t understand the question,” Ch’qahrok said.

“I mean I’ve known many Andorians over the years. Stoicism and strict adherence to logic aren’t exactly what your species is known for. I find your demeanor almost Vulcan.”

“Is this going to constitute a professional conflict?” Ch’Qahrok asked.

“No, of course not,” said Sheppard. “I’m just making an effort to get to know you. Before I stepped foot on this ship, you were just another personnel file, and a damn fine officer.”

“As I’m sure you’re aware, I was one of the few off-worlders invited to attend the Vulcan Science Academy. The Vulcans not only appreciated my academic achievements, but they also felt comfortable with my lack of emotions. During my time there, I picked up more of their mannerisms.”

“Is there a reason you’re... emotionally flat?”

“There is,” Ch’qahrok replied. “I realized as a child that emotional outbursts are counter-productive in most situations,

and I endeavored to prevent them from having a negative impact on my life.”

“But isn’t emotion one of the fundamental things you get to experience in life?”

“It is one aspect of personality,” Ch’qahrok said. “Even in Vulcans, it exists, albeit suppressed into the background. I choose to suppress it as well, so it doesn’t interfere with my ability to pursue more enlightened goals. Emotion does exist in me, but I refuse to allow it to interfere with making the most logical choices at all time.”

“Do you adhere to the disciplines of Surak, or do you take a different approach?”

“I have studied Surak, and I agree with his philosophies, but because my brain is not Vulcan, I’m not capable of participating in the Kolinahr ritual to purge emotions entirely.”

“Interesting,” Sheppard said. “Would you if that were possible?”

“I have often pondered the possibility, and I believe I would if I could.” Their banter was interrupted when a beep sounded at Ch’qahrok’s control console. “Captain, sensors are picking up a very faint energy distortion between the planet and its nearest moon.”

Sheppard frowned. There were a number of possibilities when it came to energy distortions, but they were one of the primary ways Starfleet had to detect cloaked ships. “Do you think it’s a cloak?”

“The only way to tell for sure would be to flood the area with tachyons. Would you like me to do that, sir?”

Sheppard considered his options. It was tempting to do exactly as Ch’qahrok suggested and flush them out. But, if they did that now and it turned out to be a cloaked ship, they would likely soon be engaged in combat, and the remaining retrovirals might not reach the planet’s surface. They would also likely be forced to raise their shields, which would make it impossible to

beam back the away teams. “Can you tell if it’s moving towards us?”

“I’ve picked up the distortion three separate times with passive scans and it appears to be holding position between the planet and the moon,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Alright, let’s not tip our hands that we’ve found them just yet,” Sheppard said. “Let’s go to yellow alert, but keep shields down until I say otherwise. Let’s proceed as though it’s a confirmed cloaked ship unless we determine otherwise.

“Aye, sir,” said Ch’qahrok.

“Keep an eye on that, and let me know if it starts to move. Oh, and alert the away teams that we might have trouble up here.”

Bashir breathed a sigh of relief as he Cunha, and Cruz materialized inside a forty-foot long industrial container. He activated the light on his tricorder and scanned the area. Stacked in neat piles throughout were pieces of metal that appeared to be unassembled portions of some sort of structure. Given that this was a defense facility, odds were that these were portions of some sort of weapon platform that hadn’t been welded in yet. He quietly walked to the end of the container, grabbed the door’s latch and slowly rotated it. He heard the metal groan slightly, but it moved to the open position without making too much noise.

He pushed the door open a crack and peaked out. Ahead of them were several more storage containers in an open area, and beyond that was a massive hangar type building that he estimated stood a hundred fifty feet tall or more. There were Gourans milling about, but they were wearing blue jumpsuits. They were workers, not guards. There was almost certainly security on site, and he knew they should make every effort to avoid them, but workers were unlikely to realize that they weren’t supposed to be there. He opened the container door a little wider. “Let’s go,” he said as he motioned for the two

women to follow him. He noted that Cruz had her phaser in hand. “And put that away unless we need it.”

Cruz glared at him darkly, but followed his instruction.

“Are you sure it’s safe to just go walking out there?” Cunha asked.

“No,” said Bashir, “but we’re not going to learn anything if we don’t. Just act casual.”

He led the way from the storage container. And approached the large hangar-style building. The workers they neared along the way glanced at them, but went back to their conversations without paying them any extra attention.

“Why aren’t they paying attention to us?” Cunha asked.

“They probably think we’re just part of the regular inspection team,” Bashir replied.

“What happens if we run into someone who’s part of the actual inspection team?” Cunha asked.

“Hope they aren’t paying attention. We can always try and bluff them and say that we’re new arrivals,” Bashir replied.

“We’re all Starfleet, so we could just tell them the truth and they can verify it through the Horizon.”

Bashir opened the door to the main hangar and led them inside. Within was a massive production facility where it appeared that they were constructing small but highly armored starships. He’d never seen these designs in Starfleet.

Everywhere he looked, there were semi-completed starship components, ships that were in various stages of completion, and people working on them with advanced production equipment. It was loud in here. In fact, it was so loud that he realized they should either place audio dampeners over their ears or risk hearing loss that he’d have to correct after they returned to the ship.

“What is this place?” Cunha asked.

“It looks like they’re constructing small starships for combat purposes.” He glanced at his tricorder which identified this place as a shuttle manufacturing facility, but he had never seen

shuttles that looked like this. These ships were wide, with cockpits that could probably seat no more than three, and they bristled with energy weapons on their thick hulls. “This is supposed to be a shuttlecraft manufacturing facility, but those look more aggressive than any shuttle I’ve ever seen.”

“Those ships look downright mean,” Cruz said.

“Just at a glance, it looks like their hulls are twice as thick as most standard shuttles. The weapons look more like disruptors than phasers...” Cunha said.

Bashir commented, “Come on, let’s start walking. Look like we’re going someplace specific so we don’t attract attention. I’ve noticed something else though.”

“What’s that?” Cunha asked.

“Since we got inside the main building, I haven’t seen any other Starfleet personnel. If this were still a Starfleet facility, I should have seen some in the distance by now.”

“That sounds problematic,” Cunha said.

Bashir passed by an unoccupied work table where he saw a stack of PADDs. He glanced around quickly, saw that nobody was observing them, and grabbed three of them. He kept one and handed the other two over to Cunha and Cruz. “Keep these up. It will help sell the disguise.”

Cunha surveilled the room and noted a table with holographic displays showing plans. A strange looking device sat near the holo-projector. Judging by the multiple dataports and small display built into it, it looked like a data storage device, but it wasn’t anything she was familiar with. There were others at the table, but they looked like engineer types, not security. “See if you can distract them,” she said to Bashir.

“Have you found something?”

“I think so,” she replied.

Bashir walked up to the engineers gathered around the station. “Gentlemen, so nice to see you. I’m here to conduct a quick inspection.”



Bashir noticed a pained look on their faces, but they didn't seem as though what he was doing was particularly unusual. "This isn't going to take too long, is it?" asked one of the Gourans.

"Quick and easy. Let's just start by everyone showing me your identification." Bashir glanced over while everyone was digging their identicards from their pockets to see Cunha grab the data device and hide it under her PADD.

"Which part are you building here?" Bashir asked.

"This is the rear section of the plasma induction manifold," said the same one who had spoken before.

Bashir took their identicards and scanned them with his tricorder. None of them turned up any information since he wasn't plugged into the local database, but they didn't need to know that. He handed them back and said, "Do you have your daily agendas?"

"Agendas? They stopped assigning those when we switched projects," the man said. "Speaking of which, it's been a while since we've seen Starfleet inspectors around. Are you guys back?"

Bashir frowned. This was not supposed to be a friendly exchange. "I'm asking the questions here," he said pointedly.

"Yes, sir," said the Gouran.

"How long do you expect it to take to complete this section?" Bashir asked.

"We have a work cycle of three days," said the engineer. "But between us, we all think it's unrealistic to think we can finish it in under five days."

"Well, I suggest you find some new motivation and get it done on schedule. I don't want to have to come back here."

The engineers looked at one another uneasily but said nothing.

"This has gone on long enough. Get back to work," Bashir said loudly. "I'd better not see the group of you standing around while this thing remains unfinished."

“Yes, sir,” said the engineer again.

Bashir led Cunha and Cruz away from the table and toward the nearest door that led outside. “I think we have enough to go over for now. Let’s get out of here.”

They stepped out into the humid air and looked around. Bashir still saw a number of workers milling around, but there was still no sign of security. He walked back to the storage box they had beamed into, opened it up, and wandered inside, closing it behind them once they were safely inside.

“Doctor,” Cruz said, faintly nodding to her left.

Bashir moved his eyes to follow hers, but didn’t turn his head. There were six of them in official-looking uniforms cutting through a cluster of workers and walking quickly toward them. Bashir looked to his right and spotted the storage container they had beamed into. That would still be a good location to beam out of, but they had to lose them first.

He noted that Cruz had her phaser in hand already, but he could tell by Cunha’s expression that she was frightened. He never stopped being frightened in dangerous situations, no matter how many times he had faced them, but he had training, and he was born genetically engineered to withstand the stress. Captain Sisko had helped develop his ability to manage stress. Cunha didn’t have that. “Just stay close to me and don’t panic,” Bashir said calmly.

Cunha nodded, but said nothing in response.

Directly up ahead were two smaller metal sheds. Bashir picked up the pace and walked between them. There were only a couple workers here, but he didn’t see any good hiding places, and not knowing how many he would find inside the sheds, he didn’t want to chance them. He broke into a run, leading the other two to the far side of the buildings. The storage container he wanted to reach was still far in the distance. He paused for a moment.

“There,” said Cruz, pointing. Bashir looked in the distance and saw a pile of slightly rusted cylindrical metal parts he

couldn't identify that were stacked as high as he was tall. It was the largest unattended object he saw that they might be able to hide behind. He ran for the opposite side and squatted down behind the pile of parts. There was just enough room between the parts to see through to the other side. He hoped it would provide enough cover.

He watched through the gaps as the Gouran security personnel moved into view on the other side. "Split up! You three, go to that side of the building. We'll stay here and see if they're hiding somewhere," said one of the male Gourans.

Three of them ran off, but Bashir could see the three men walking around in front of them. Their hiding spot wasn't going to work for long. He looked to Cruz and handed her his tricorder. "Get ready to make a move. I'm going to buy some time."

"Understood," the security officer said.

Bashir moved to the side of the pile of parts and faced his pursuers, raising his hands as he did so.

"You! Don't move!" the Gouran said.

"I assure you, I'm not going to give you any trouble."

"What happened to your friends?"

"I'm not sure. We split up," Bashir said. It was a misleading statement, but it was somewhat true.

The officer who had been speaking pointed to one of the others. "Cuff him, and keep a phaser on him."

The other officer nodded and approached Bashir, a pair of energy-cuffs in his hand. "Lower your hands, slowly," he said.

Bashir did as he was told, and he could feel the Gouran's chill flesh grab him by the forearms. A moment later, the cuffs were on and the energy field that would immobilize his wrists was activated.

"Take him back to the office and detain him. We'll keep looking for the others," said their leader.

"Yes, sir," said the officer.

Bashir began to worry. Cruz and Cunha had more than enough time to slip away, but part of the plan was that they were supposed to come back for him. This could get ugly if the Horizon was forced to become involved and answer for his actions. The man began leading him off. He counted his steps, one after the other, increasingly convinced with every step that the other two had found a calm spot and simply beamed out. It would have been the intelligent thing to do. It also left him in an unfortunate position.

Then he heard the phaser fire behind them. There were two shots in quick succession, and then a third, at which time the guard holding him fell limply to the ground. Bashir turned around to see Cruz standing next to the pile of parts, her phaser still in her hand.

“Ensign, get me out of these,” he said as he ran back to his crewmates. “I thought you were going to abandon me.”

“No, I don’t leave anyone behind,” Cruz said as she activated her phaser again. Bashir felt the cuffs power off and fall to the ground.

“Thank you,” he said.

Cruz smiled in response.

“Can we get out of here now?” Cunha asked.

Bashir tapped his combadge. “Bashir to Horizon, three to beam back to the facility where they’re storing the retrovirals.”

Bashir felt the familiar sensation of the transporter beam enveloping him. A moment later they were once again standing in the warehouse. He looked around and saw that they had been beamed back into proximity with Lashwan. “Were we missed?”

“I don’t think so, sir,” Lashwan said. “Nobody has been down to check on us since you left.”

“Perfect,” said Bashir, his heart still pounding from adrenaline. “Now let’s see what we managed to make off with from that facility.”

Cunha produced the device and handed it to Bashir as he led them into a small supply closet. “I can’t even figure out how to power this on,” she said.

Bashir set his tricorder to scan and passed the device in front of it. There was electrical activity within the device, but the frequency registered as four-hundred-fifty-five gigahertz. “Well, that confirms it,” he said. “This is Breen technology.” He tapped his combadge. “Bashir to Horizon.”

He waited heard nothing in reply. He tapped his combadge again. “Bashir to Horizon.”

“Either they can’t hear us, or they’re no longer there.”

Bashir heard the sound of marching outside the door. He peaked out to see a group of metal-masked Breen marching toward them. The one in the lead pointed a disruptor at him. “You’re coming with us, Starfleet,” it said in a metallic metal screech.

Bashir sighed. This situation escalated quickly.

Kevia Turner suppressed the urge to issue an annoyed retort and reminded herself that diplomacy with a strained ally was much different than it would be if it was with a world one hoped to become allies with. In the latter case, it was a matter of putting on a pleasant face and showing them the benefits to their world should they wish to join. In the present situation, it was a matter of evaluating the current state of the alliance, assess the degrees to which her own side at the table had failed to deliver their promises, and try to find an angle that would make salvaging the alliance possible. She was finding this difficult on all counts.

Her and her portion of the away team were seated around a table, along with High Chancellor Tarim and three other high ranking government officials, each of whom had wasted no effort to needle her for the failings of the Federation since late in the Dominion War—and these were the officials who claimed to be on the side of keeping their membership with the Federation. Despite the heated nature of the meeting, the Gourans had offered no insult through their choice of food. Their plates were full, with a meat that reminded her of pork, in a spicy sweet sauce that Ipesh Nod had couldn't stop complimenting them on. There was also some form of vegetable she couldn't identify, but enjoyed due to the fact that it had a flavor that reminded her somewhat of pistachios, and a white food that could only be mashed potatoes and gravy. They had also been served with a drink that was clearly an intoxicant, and was definitely not synthanol.

“Commander Turner,” said Tarim, “We were forced to make four separate attempts over three weeks to contact the Federation about the disease that’s ravaging our planet before anyone with any clout whatsoever bothered to contact us back. That was time when our people were dying in numbers that were entirely unchecked.”

“Chancellor,” Turner started, “We fully acknowledge that the Federation’s resources are strained at the moment...”

“At the moment?” one of the advisors asked in such a loud voice that it was practically a shout. “We provided you with our people and resources to bolster your military during the Dominion War. We lost many Gourans on the front lines...”

“As did every member world,” Turner reminded them.

“Nevertheless,” the Gouran continued, “We have continually provided more to the Federation than we have received in the services that are guaranteed to us by the charter signed by all sides.”

“Again, we understand your frustrations, but recovery from the war has been slow and taxing, but we’re here right now to help. We’ve already provided you with the cure to the disease, and we’re also here to try and figure out what else Starfleet can do to make amends,” Turner said, the annoyance in her voice rising to the surface.

“Regardless, you come here wondering why our world is considering what was once unthinkable—leaving the United Federation of Planets!” Tarim said.

“Chancellor, would you mind terribly much if we took a recess. While we appreciate your hospitality and the quality of the food you’ve provided, I don’t think we’re covering any new ground right now, and I think we’d both benefit from a break.”

Tarim sighed. “Perhaps you’re right. You have yet to offer any real incentive for staying in the Federation while we have yet to provide you with a list of demands. Perhaps we can reconvene in a few hours.”

“I think that might be best,” Turner said.

The Gourans rose from the table in unison. Tarim began moving toward the door, and then the other three followed him, each lining up behind the individual immediately outranking him.

Once they had left the room, Turner rose and began walking toward the room's exit. "Well, that could have gone better," she said.

"Commander," said Nod, "Given the level of anger they have toward us, what if there isn't a way for us to stop them from leaving the Federation?"

"I have to agree," said Tavika, raising an eyebrow as she glanced at Nod. "I've faced down Cardassians in battle who had better things to say about the Federation than they do."

Turner tapped her combadge. "Turner to Horizon."

There was no response. She did it again and was met with the same result. "Turner to Bashir." Still silence.

"I don't like this," Turner said.

Nod pulled his phaser, as did the two security officers accompanying them. "Provided that the Horizon is still in orbit, the only reason communications would be down is if there's a suppression field in effect."

"All right, we need to be very calm and exit this building. Who knows how big their suppression field might be, but we need to try and find a way out from under it so we can contact the ship."

"I agree," Tavika said. "But I'm not sure we're going to be able to do it without calling attention to ourselves."

Turner exited the room to find the anteroom empty. Beyond that, the hallway that led to the main stairway down was not so empty, and the ones there to meet them were not the Gourans she was expecting. The figures carried disruptors and wore bulky insulated encounter suits, with metal helmets that included faceplates. "Breen," she breathed.

Nod and his two security officers immediately raised their phasers. The hostile response was mirrored by the Breen immediately. Both groups stood facing each other silently in the hallway, weapons raised.

And then one of the Nod's security team broke the stalemate and fired. The beam struck the Breen soldier



crumpled to the floor, likely dead. The cryo-suit punctured, she could smell ammonia gas leaking out.

The Breen responded to the assault immediately, firing upon the security officer. Green bolts fired true found their mark. The security officer, who's name Turner had not even bothered to learn, fell against the wall, and then vanished over several seconds as the intense energy reduced him to ashes from the inside out.

“Surrender,” one of the Breen said. Its voice was a metallic screech that was completely devoid of compassion. “Or the same will happen to the rest of you”

“Captain, a suppression field just went up over the capital city,” Ch’qahrok said.

Sheppard snapped to attention and rose from his seat. “Can you lock onto the away teams with the transporter?”

“Negative,” Ch’qahrok responded. “Communications with the surface and transporters are both jammed.”

“Hail the Gouran government. I want answers.”

“No response,” said Goetz from the Comm console.

“Captain, the energy distortions we picked up early has started moving toward us,” Ch’qahrok said.

*So this was it, Sheppard thought. They’re making their move.*

“Flood the area with a tachyon burst. Let’s find out what we’re up against. Enhance the main viewer to show what we pick up.”

Ch’qahrok entered in some commands on his console. The viewscreen shifted to the view of the moon. A moment later, three objects appeared, each of them roughly oval in shape.

“Captain, there are definitely three cloaked ships approaching.”

“Red alert! Shields up! Open up hailing frequencies.”

Ch’qahrok nodded from his console.

“This is the Federation starship Horizon to unknown vessels. We know you’re there and demand an explanation for your presence here.”

“No response,” Ch’qahrok said. “They’re closed to seventy thousand kilometers.”

Sheppard looked to Lieutenant Reese, the young man with sandy blond hair who was manning the tactical console in Tavika’s absence. “Fire a spread of torpedoes near those cloaked chips. Detonate half a kilometer away from their positions.”

Reese nodded and keyed his console. A moment later three torpedoes flew from the Horizon and raced toward the three cloaked ships. They exploded a moment later and Sheppard could vaguely see the outline of the vessels on the viewscreen.

“They’re dropping their cloaks,” Ch’qahrok said.

The three shapes shimmered, and the resolved into the dark forms that were unmistakably Breen warships.

“Breen warships, this is Captain Sheppard of the USS Horizon. You are in violation of Federation space. Explain your presence or we will be forced to fire upon you.”

“Captain,” said Reese, “Each one of these ships would be formidable against this ship. I don’t think we can survive a fight against three of them.”

“I’m aware of that, Lieutenant,” Sheppard said.

“Nevertheless, it’s our job to defend Federation space... for so long as it still belongs to the Federation.”

One of the ships pulled out ahead of the others and fired a barrage of disrupter beams and torpedoes.

The Horizon rocked violently as the attacks found their mark.

“Lieutenant, fire at will. Hernandez, evasive maneuvers!”

“Aye, sir,” said the helmsman.

The ship rocked again as more attacks found their mark. Sheppard could smell smoke coming in through the ventilation.

“Shields down to sixty percent!” Reese shouted.

“Any damage to the enemy vessels?” Sheppard asked.

“Negligible,” Reese said.

“Concentrate all firepower on the lead vessel’s warp engines. Hernandez, switch to Evasive Pattern Delta.”

Both officers executed his commands, and Sheppard could feel the ship shift as the inertial dampeners struggled to keep up with the ship’s change in course.

The ship shook again.

“Damage report!” Sheppard called out.

“Shields down to forty-five percent. Minor hull breaches on decks three, seven, and twelve. Still awaiting casualty reports... all systems still functioning.”

“Damage to the lead ship?” Sheppard asked.

“It’s taking a beating, sir,” said Reese. “Its shields are down to fifteen percent and it’s venting drive plasma into space.”

“Keep firing at it,” Sheppard said.

The Horizon rocked as another volley of torpedoes found their mark. The lights dimmed as the tactical console exploded, flinging Reese onto the lower level.

Sheppard looked at the fallen Lieutenant. A piece of his console protruded from his neck and blood was leaking onto the blue carpet.

“Ch’qahrok, reroute the tactical control to your station and keep firing!”

“Aye, sir,” said the Andorian.

One of the ensigns who had been manning a station knelt down next to Reese and applied direct pressure to stop the bleeding. She felt the Lieutenant’s neck. “Captain, he’s dead.”

On the viewscreen, Sheppard could clearly see that the lead ship was in dire shape. Green drive plasma vented into space from two hull breaches while fire was visible from half a dozen others damaged locations on the ship. A moment later there was a flash, and that ship exploded.

“Lead ship is destroyed,” Ch’qahrok said. “But we can’t stand much more of this. Shields are down to ten percent.”

“Hernandez, vent drive plasma into space surrounding the ship and then lay on a course to take us behind the moon.”

“Aye, sir,” said Hernandez.

Just as suddenly as it had begun, the merciless pounding from the Breen stopped.

“Captain, they’re hailing us,” Ch’qahrok said. “Audio only.”

“Put them on. Let them tell us what this is all about.”

“Starfleet vessel,” came the screeching metallic voice of a Breen’s vocoder. “This is Thot Sar of the L’Chan. You are the ones encroaching on space claimed by the Breen Confederacy. Your vessel is severely damaged. Surrender and prepare to be boarded.”

“Breen vessel,” Sheppard replied, “We do not recognize your claim to this world and we will neither surrender nor allow you to board.”

“Then you have chosen to die,” said the Breen.

“They’ve closed hailing frequencies,” Ch’qahrok said.

Both remaining Breen ships began firing on the Horizon again.

“Ch’qahrok, ignite the drive plasma. Hernandez, warp one along the course you laid in.”

The viewscreen suddenly shifted to brilliant red. A moment later it showed only black as the ship jumped to warp. Just over a second later, the ship dropped back out of faster than light speed. The ship shook again.

“Captain, shields have completely failed and the warp drive is offline,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Damn. We’re sitting ducks. Can you tell if the Breen bought it?”

“They are not pursuing at this time,” the Andorian replied.

“Well,” said Sheppard, “At least there’s that... How long until we can get the engines back online?”

“Engineering is reporting that we’re looking at three hours minimum. Impulse engines are down to thirty percent as well,” the Andorian said.

The bridge lights went dark for a moment. Sheppard waited for emergency power to kick in, then dim lights kicked on and illuminated the bridge.

“Main power is also down. Emergency power is online.”

“Casualties?”

“Sickbay is reporting that five crewmembers were killed in the fighting, and twelve others are being treated for injuries.”

“So we’re dead in the water, we seem to have lost Gour II, and if we don’t get this ship repaired fast, we’re as good as dead ourselves,” Sheppard said. He realized, for the Breen, this wasn’t simply about taking a world away from the Federation. They had accomplished that before their arrival. No, for them, this was about facing a Starfleet ship head-on, blowing it out of the sky, and then gloating about what they had done. The entire thing had been carefully orchestrated well before their arrival, and the Gourans were clearly a party to it. “Please let me know if there’s any other way we could possibly screw up our first mission.”

Adriana Cunha walked along behind Bashir and Cruz, the Breen surrounding them. There was no point in trying to resist at this point. She felt the cold lump of plastic and steel inside her uniform in the small of her back. The one thing she had managed to do before being taken into custody was hide the Breen device they had stolen from the production facility. She wasn’t certain if she would be able to dig any information out of it, and if she could, if it would be worthwhile, but it was still some small item to protect as they were taken into custody.

They were led out of the warehouse where they’d been arrested and marched through the street. The Breen were operating in the open here. Perhaps Gour II had been lost to the Federation far in advance of their arrival.

The Breen led them away from the capital building and into a square. She saw another group of Breen already standing there, along with four others in Starfleet uniforms. It was

Turner, Nod, Tavika, and one member of their security detail. One of their numbers was missing, and given the way they'd been treated thus far, she didn't hold out much hope for his survival.

The Breen marched Bashir's group toward the others from the Horizon. Once there, they had them stand together.

"I'm guessing this means our mission is a failure," Bashir remarked.

"We're still alive," Turner said. She looked at the remaining member of her security detail. "Most of us, anyway."

The Breen surrounded them, but stopped moving them. A crowd of Gourans had formed around them and they were growing increasingly agitated, yelling and holding signs protesting the Federation.

This went on for over a minute, Cunha felt the fear growing inside her. If they were simply being arrested, wouldn't they have walked them to their cells by now? No, this was a public spectacle, and it was growing increasingly hostile. There were only a few ways this could progress from here. The Gourans might decide to put some trumped up charges on them, formally accuse them, and then march them off to their holding cells—this would probably be the ideal situation. The next possibility was that they were going to be executed on the spot—somehow this seemed the most likely. Finally, someone might come to their rescue—this was seeming increasingly unlikely. She didn't know what the Horizon was doing right now, but it was clearly unable to help them in this situation.

The crowd slowly began to quiet and it parted around a single figure that was walking toward them. The figure was older, with silver hair cut in a bowl shape. It was Tarim. The High Chancellor was clearly involved in this.

The Chancellor continued moving toward them until he reached the front of the crowd. He looked them over, then looked to the Breen and smiled.

“Citizens of Gour,” he said as he turned to face the crowd. “Before you are the criminals... our supposed allies, who stood by for months while our people died of a virus... a virus for which they had a cure.”

He paused while the crowd became agitated again. “Kill Starfleet!” someone yelled from the back. Tarim waited while the call to end their lives swept through the crowd and became a chant.

“Before you are those who would do nothing in the face of our suffering. Why? Because they were too busy... Too busy to help the dying on our poor, forgotten, world. The Federation turned its back on us.”

“We never turned our back on you!” Turner shouted defiantly into the crowd. “We came here as soon as we could to help. We want to help you.”

“A likely story,” Tarim said. “But if we mattered so much to you, we would have had the retrovirals months ago. Before close to a million of our people died while Starfleet looked the other way.”

Bashir shouted back. “You accuse us of not caring about you, yet once we received the genetic data on the virus, we began synthesizing a cure. We had to analyze it and figure out a treatment that wouldn’t be dangerous to your biology. Had we rushed here with it, we could have unleashed something far more dangerous than the plague you faced. We couldn’t have brought it to you any faster!”

“So you insist,” Tarim said. “But that rings hollow in my ears. Like many of those around you, I lost people who were important to me. I lost my oldest child. I lost my beloved wife. These were people who could have been saved if the Federation had simply decided that we were important enough to save.”

Turner’s voice broke over the noise of the crowd. “Enough of this. We’ve already had this conversation with you. What do you intend to do with us?”

“Do with you?” asked Tarim. “Very simple. We intend to make you pay for your neglect. We’re going to subject you to the same suffering we have faced, and when we’re done doing that, you will die.”

To Be Continued...



## Afterword

First Command Part 1 is the first work of a series called Star Trek Horizon. I took on this project in light of the resurgence of Star Trek, and an era in Trek that I feel is missing. In the show Deep Space 9, we see a war that wrought an amount of devastation that was equal or even greater than what the Borg did at Wolf 359. A couple years after the end of that show, we saw Voyager return home, and then aside from one more Next Generation movie, the events of the Federation in the 24<sup>th</sup> century were effectively abandoned. Enterprise was to be the next show, and it was a prequel, then the next set of movies came, focusing on Kirk's Enterprise in an alternate timeline.

And yet, there remained many questions. Did the Federation ever face the Borg again? Did they truly recover from the Dominion War, or was the Federation damaged? The fact is that all wars inflict damages that take time to address, account for, and eventually heal. But we never saw that in Star Trek.

Star Trek Horizon is completely unauthorized, completely non-canon, and I hope that both CBS and Simon and Schuster take no interest whatsoever in what I'm doing and don't sue me. Horizon is about showing the cracks in the Federation while continuing some of the many plot threads that were dropped when they decided to stop pursuing the Next Gen era.

Speaking of Simon and Schuster, you might be wondering if this ties into the novels that have so satisfyingly picked up where the shows and the movies stopped. The answer is... sort of. The Next Gen relaunch began in 2006 with the novel *Death in Winter* by Michael Jan Friedman, and it took place in 2380. For those paying attention this novella is set in 2378, in an era not covered by any of the books at all. Having this gap means that I can borrow characters from the Star Trek universe and show things going on that were never front and center in any of the books. But to answer the question, while it's my goal to not contradict anything from the Next Generation relaunch books,

it's also not my intent to be a slave to them either, particularly since this era will soon be rewritten in Star Trek Picard. In fact, it's more my goal to stay true to the upcoming show, and because it's far enough downstream from the era this story takes place in, (hopefully) there won't be any significant overlap.

So, that said, this is the first installment of the series. The goal is for the first season to consist of ten novellas of the same length as this, each of them an approximation of a television episode. I hope you have enjoyed it, and I look forward to pushing ahead with the events of 2478.

Darrin Drader

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