

Chapter 1

As Tev woke from his nap, he smiled and felt completely refreshed. The past few weeks had been trying, and to be able to sit, lean back, and relax for hours on end put him quickly to sleep. He snorted, clearing his nose, and stretched his facial muscles to loosen them. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. This had been a very good nap.

He turned to the Kharzh'ullan seated next to him. "How long until we reach the base station?" he asked.

The Kharzh'ullan checked his wrist chrono and frowned. "I never was good at math. Should be soon. Half an hour, perhaps."

"Good," said Tev as he leaned back into his seat and closed his eyes. He had traveled from Kharzh'ulla to the Ring and back many times in his life, and he had always enjoyed the passenger cars. They were oriented differently than subway trams he had used in and around San Francisco when he had been at Starfleet Academy- the subway trams had seating on a single, long level, but the Kharzh'ullan passenger shuttles had seating on five levels, with chairs arranged in a circle around the central ladder that ran from level to level, and the conductor's station at the base of the passenger car. Like the trams, the Kharzh'ullan shuttles traveled through tunnels, but where the San Francisco trams traveled beneath the city, the Kharzh'ullan shuttles moved through the space elevators between the planet's surface and the Ring.

The passenger beside him shook Tev's shoulder. Tev sat up, turned his head, and half-opened his eyes. "If you wouldn't mind my asking...?" Tev's neighbor said.

Tev shrugged.

"You're an off-worlder," said the neighbor. "Have you been to Kharzh'ulla before?"

Tev smiled. "Many times." He leaned back in his seat, his eyes focused on some distant point beyond the central ladder. "I used to live on Kharzh'ulla. In Prelv, actually."

A skeptical look crossed the Kharzh'ullan's face. "Been away long?"

"Years."

"Why did you leave?"

Tev sighed. "Starfleet." It wasn't the complete answer, but it would suffice for a stranger.

His companion nodded. "What brought you back?"

"Business," said Tev after a lengthy pause, his voice low. He closed his eyes. His companion seemed to take the hint, and said nothing more.

Tev had spent too long in space. He could feel the shuttle's movement through the elevator just as he could feel a starship's, down the superconducting magnets that ran thirty thousand kilometers from surface to terminus at the Ring.

Tev's eyes shot open. Something felt wrong. Very wrong.

"Aeh-hvahtin," said Tev.

"What are you talking about?" said his companion.

"We should be decelerating, but we're not." He did a quick mental calculation- the passenger shuttle should have been decelerating rapidly from its speed of five thousand kilometers per hour. If the passenger car didn't begin braking soon it wouldn't have the time or space to slow to a stop when the car reached the elevator's base.

Tev unfastened his shoulder harness and began to rise from his seat. A hand on his shoulder stopped him. "What do you think you're doing?" his companion asked.

"There's some sort of problem, probably with the passenger car's brakes. I'm a Starfleet engineer. The conductors need my assistance."

The other passenger unclasped his hand from Tev's shoulder. Tev nodded in wordless thanks and lunged for the ladder.

The climb down the ladder felt endless. Time seemed to slow for him. What should have taken at most a minute, from the fourth passenger level to the conductor's booth, seemed to take hours. Tev heard the voices of the other passengers, their fright and anger as they too realized that the passenger car was in grave danger, that their lives might soon end. He paid them little attention; he was an engineer with a job to perform, and he would save them.

The conductor's cabin was dark, with computer monitors ringing the compartment. Some consoles flashed red, others were dark. A Kharzh'ullan stood over one of the consoles, his hands frantically working the controls.

"What's happening?" Tev raised his voice over the din of the cabin's alarms.

The Kharzh'ullan turned, startled. "Who are you?"

"Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev, Starfleet Corps of Engineers." Tev steadied himself against the base of the ladder as the passenger car rocked.

The conductor nodded, his eyes dark. "The brakes appear to have failed." He paused. "We're in free fall."

"What of the emergency brakes?" Tev asked, referring to the friction brakes that explosively deployed against the interior of the elevator shaft.

The conductor shook his head.

"There must be something we can do," said Tev.

"Your ship," said the conductor. "Can they beam us away?"

Now Tev shook his head. The superconductive sheathing of the elevator shaft made transporter locks on objects within the shaft difficult, and with the passenger car increasing its speed with every passing moment, such a lock would have been impossible.

Tev staggered against the g-forces toward one of the computer readouts. The electromagnets that slowed the passenger car showed a reversed polarity- instead of

breaking the car against the shaft's sheathing they were accelerating. "I think," said Tev, "if we restart the computer system, we might be able to restore the electromagnetic polarity." He reached over to the next console and began a shutdown sequence. The console went dark.

The cabin rocked again as the passenger car bounced off guide rails. Tev fell to the floor. He felt a stabbing pain in the right side of his chest. One of his ribs might have cracked. He tried to push himself up, but his right arm felt weak. He looked across the dim cabin and saw the conductor leaning heavily on one of the consoles.

"Can you restart that console?" Tev's voice was muffled as he felt his mouth fill with blood. The broken rib must have punctured one of his lungs.

"I don't know how," a voice said.

"What?" said Tev, uncomprehending. The conductor had been male, yet this was a female's voice he had just heard.

"Tev? Tev, I don't want to die," said the conductor, and she turned.

Tev's eyes widened as they lost their focus. Tev couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Mother?" he said as he reached out across the cabin with his left hand. His mother had slumped to the cabin floor and rested her back against the base of one of the control consoles.

"Tev?" she said again. "We're not going to stop, are we?"

Tev's mind felt dizzy and disoriented. "We will," he said, his voice hollow and weak.

Everything stopped as the passenger car plowed into the base of the elevator shaft at seven thousand kilometers an hour.

Tev sat up, his eyes open wide. "Fvirhiehs!"

The covers of his bunk were drenched with sweat. He felt his heart hammering in his chest. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath.

He had had the nightmare again.

"Computer," he said as he rubbed his eyes, "how long since I doused the lights?"

"Thirty-four minutes."

Tev frowned. He sighed and lay back on his bunk.

He first had the nightmare five years before, while he served aboard the Madison. It resurfaced from time to time, especially in times of great stress, but he hadn't had the nightmare for over a year, and he thought himself past it. But this mission, to return to Kharzh'ulla, to return to that very place where his mother died, Tev had been expecting the nightmare.

What he hadn't expected was for it to be quite so vivid.

Lying on his bunk, Tev stared at the ceiling. He had thought he might be able to squeeze in an hour-long nap after his bridge shift before presenting the Kharzh'ullan mission briefing. Re-experiencing the nightmare, though, removed that option. He needed to put his mind on other things, alleviate the emotional pressure.

He turned his head and looked at the clock on his desk. The mess hall would be empty this time of morning. He could prepare the briefing there in relative peace.

* * *

Sonya Gomez stopped by the mess hall to get herself some tea, and found Tev sitting alone at one of the corner tables. Something that looked like a plate of twigs sat untouched on a plate next to him as he riffled through several padds at once.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked.

He looked up from the padds and flared his nostrils. Placing all but one of them on the table, he said, "I am endeavoring to complete my mission briefing, Commander. Is there something you want?"

Gomez sat down across from him. "How's the briefing coming along?"

Tev snorted. "It will be ready in time for this afternoon's meeting."

She reached across the table and began to pick up one of his padds until he snatched it away from her. "I just wanted to take a look at your progress," she said as she pulled her hand back.

"My presentation," Tev said, his voice heavy, "will be ready."

"Is there a problem, Tev?"

Tev fell quiet and said nothing. Gomez sighed. It always seemed to be one step forward and two steps back with her second officer. Every time she thought he was making progress in integrating himself with the rest of the crew, his behavior would remind her that he was still the insufferably arrogant twit who had reported to the da Vinci at McKinley Station months ago.

"Commander," said Gomez, "we can stare at each other across the table all day if that's how you want to play it. If there's a problem, I'd prefer to know about it now, when we can do something about it, rather than later, when the mission's on the line."

Tev took a deep breath and scrunched his snout. "I request that I be taken off this mission," he said at last.

"Why?" Gomez asked as she shifted in her seat.

Tev looked at her quietly from behind impassive, bleary eyes. Finally he spoke, with a depth of emotion that Gomez had never heard from the Tellarite before. "Had Starfleet given me any choice in the matter, I would have chosen not to be here, Commander." Gomez began to cut him off, but he held up a hand. "Yes, I was raised on Kharzh'ulla. But I left there many years ago, and I would prefer not to return. My life there-" He paused, then continued: "-

ended badly."

Gomez shook her head. "You'll have to do better than that, Commander." She paused. "Whatever your misgivings about returning home, whatever happened in the past, the fact remains that I need you and the team needs you. Captain Scott pushed for the da Vinci to be assigned this mission on the strength of your experience, and you would be doing the team a disservice if you sat out this mission."

Beneath his beard, Tev's face flushed red and his nostrils flared in anger. "Kharzh'ulla IV is not my home, Commander. I am from Tellar. I merely lived on Kharzh'ulla."

"There's no one aboard who knows more about Kharzh'ulla IV than you do," said Gomez, hoping to appeal to his overweening pride. She stood, planted her hands firmly on the table, and her stare bored into Tev's eyes. "I won't take you off this mission, Commander, not now. If you want to put in a request to the captain, I won't stand in your way, but I will go on record as believing you are putting your personal history ahead of the mission. Understood?"

Tev nodded slowly, his eyes and expression unreadable.

Gomez stood up from the table. "Good. You'll have the briefing ready?"

Tev nodded again. "As I said I would."

"Then I won't keep you from your work, Commander."

As she left the mess hall she heard Tev munching on his twigs and humming softly to himself. She shook her head. This mission promised to be simple, but Tev's attitude made her question just how simple it would be.

Chapter 2

Captain David Gold drummed his fingers on the conference room table. He never liked to be kept waiting, and certainly not for a routine mission briefing.

"Where is he, Gomez?" he asked, looking pointedly at his first officer seated next to him.

Gomez frowned. "I don't know, sir. He was preparing for the briefing earlier this morning, and he assured me he would be ready. Should I page him?"

"Your call."

Gomez tapped her combadge. "Gomez to-"

The doors opened, and Tev bounded into the conference room, several padds clutched in his arms.

"You're late, Tev," said Gold.

"My apologies, Captain. Commander," he said with a quick nod of his head in Gomez's direction. "Preparing one of the simulations took longer than I had anticipated."

"Let's get the briefing started," said Gomez. "The floor is yours, Tev."

Tev took a deep breath and looked at the team seated around the conference room table. He touched the table's computer interface, and the viewscreen image changed from the Federation emblem to an image of a Class-M planet, mottled blue and orange. "This is Kharzh'ulla IV, a Tellarite colony on the fringe of Federation space," Tev said. The image zoomed in, and the planet grew larger. Continents took on distinctive features. An archipelago near the planetary equator came into focus. Solid structures rose from the planet's surface like spokes on a bicycle wheel arrayed around the equator and reaching far into orbit. A solid ring encircled the planet, connecting the terminus points of each of the shafts rising from the surface. The viewing angle shifted suddenly from the equatorial approach and the profile view of the structure to a more polar view and a straight-on view of the planet and the artificial ring surrounding it.

"Wow," said Fabian Stevens, the da Vinci's tactical systems specialist. "I'd heard stories, but never thought I'd see it."

Tev ignored him. "The structure you see is called simply 'the Ring.' It has no other name, and perhaps no other name would suffice. Until the discovery of the Dyson Sphere by the Enterprise-D eight years ago, the Ring was the largest and most complex artificial structure known in the Alpha Quadrant." The camera closed in on one of the shafts. "These shafts are a functioning space elevator system, capable of delivering any payload- people, merchandise, raw materials- to and from orbit without resorting to transporters or shuttles. Cargo can be off-loaded at the port terminus atop each elevator, and then delivered to the base a few hours later." The image panned across the shaft, zoomed out, and began moving toward the Ring at the terminus. "The Ring itself is inhabitable, essentially a space station one hundred and sixty thousand kilometers long, five hundred wide, fifty deep. In terms of living space, the Ring's interior can support comfortably the population of this entire sector." The view panned past the terminus, curved over the edge of the Ring, and zoomed in toward the outer edge, revealing massive docking bays. "The Kharzh'ullan Ring was utilized extensively during the Dominion War, both as a staging area for fleet deployments and as a drydock facility for damaged starships. The fleet yards here, if developed to their full capacity, would be capable of supporting tens of thousands of starships."

Tev paused and regarded his audience. He then touched the computer console.

The image on the viewscreen changed dramatically. What had been a vibrant, functioning structure on the viewscreen- brightly lit and with starships in the drydocks under repair- was replaced by nothingness. The camera panned to one side and something metallic, frayed and twisted, came into view. As the camera moved onward, the image came into focus as the wreckage of what had once been the Ring. The camera pulled back, and perspective revealed itself. A section of the Ring simply was gone, destroyed.

Someone let out a gasp.

"What happened?" asked Dr. Lense.

Tev sighed deeply. "The Jem'Hadar." The viewscreen image changed again, and the Ring returned intact to the viewscreen. "One month before the cessation of hostilities, the Dominion attacked the fleet yards. The attack force was small"- three Jem'Hadar warships appeared on the screen-"but Kharzh'ulla's defenses were negligible, and what few ships were able to leave the drydock facilities to engage the Jem'Hadar attempted to defend the planet." On-screen, starships that had been decommissioned decades before tangled with the Jem'Hadar cruisers, destroying one, disabling another. "With the battle turning against them, the commander of the undamaged Jem'Hadar vessel made an attack run on the Ring

itself, rather than engage the defense fleet." The image changed quickly, following the Jem'Hadar ship as it skirted the edge of the Ring. "The Jem'Hadar ship took several phaser blasts and photon torpedo hits. The ship lost control and crashed into the Ring's edge." The Jem'Hadar ship collided with the Ring, and the screen flashed white for several seconds. When the image cleared, a debris field radiated outward from where the Ring had once been.

The viewscreen image altered again, with the image of the shattered Ring changing to a high-angled schematic of Kharzh'ulla IV and its elevator and Ring system. Tev took one last look at the viewscreen, turned, and came to the end of the conference room table. "Not only did the Jem'Hadar destroy a large section of the Ring's structure, they also struck at one of the elevators, cutting deep gashes into the shell of the elevator shaft closest to the section destroyed by the Jem'Hadar ship."

"How big a hole in the Ring did the Jem'Hadar make?" asked Stevens. "The damage you showed looked rather extensive."

Tev grunted. "And rather complete. The kinetic energy from the impact, combined with the matter annihilation from the collapse of the ship's antimatter containment fields, was sufficient to destroy the Ring's structure over a four-hundred kilometer section."

"Then what are the Kharzh'ullans expecting us to do?"

Before Tev could answer Stevens's question, Gomez said, "The Kharzh'ullan government approached the Federation Council asking for assistance in rebuilding and repairing the Ring. The Council passed the request along to Starfleet, and they assigned the da Vinci to make a survey of the damage done to the Ring and the elevator, evaluate any repairs the Kharzh'ullans might have made, and then provide whatever assistance we can."

Stevens looked to Gomez. "The last time I checked we didn't have the personnel or the hardware aboard to essentially build a space habitat four hundred kilometers long." He paused. "No offense meant, Commander, and I know we'd do fine work on a job like this, but this doesn't sound at all like our sort of mission."

Gomez nodded. "I would agree with you, Fabian, if that's what the Kharzh'ullans wanted from us. There are any number of private contractors and engineering firms that would line up for work on this scale, if only for the notoriety of being the ones that repaired the Ring. I have no doubt that once we've made our report, Interworld or another of the habitat builders will descend on the Kharzh'ullan system looking for the work." She stood, crossed to the viewscreen, and tapped the computer terminal. The image zoomed to focus on one of the elevator shafts. While most of the shaft showed as blue against a black background of deep space, a portion showed as red. Gomez pointed this out. "As Commander Tev mentioned, one of the elevator shafts took phaser damage during the Jem'Hadar attack. The Kharzh'ullans haven't repaired the damage, either because they don't know how or they don't have the resources. If the elevator shaft isn't repaired, then there's the chance the elevator might collapse onto the planet's surface."

"What would that do to the Ring?" asked Lense.

Wordlessly, Tev called up another simulation on the viewscreen. The elevator shaft toppled, and as it fell, it pulled the Ring attached to its terminus down with it. Halfway to the surface the Ring structure snapped, but the elevator to the west had already begun to fall. Like dominoes, the elevators fell to the ground, and large sections of the Ring tumbled out of orbit

and crashed into the surface. When the collapse was finished, the time-index counter read twelve hours. No elevator stood standing, and the planet's equatorial region showed the ravage of the impacts from orbit.

"We think," said Gomez, "that if one elevator fell, the entire system would as well. Each part supports the others. Much, if not all, of the debris would impact with the surface. It would be like asteroid strikes all the way around Kharzh'ulla's equator."

Tev continued: "Sixty percent of the planet's population resides within five hundred kilometers of the equator. Another fifteen percent lives in coastal areas near the base of the ocean-based elevators. These areas would be ravaged by the falling debris, either from direct strikes or from tsunamis caused by the fall of the elevator into the ocean." He paused for dramatic impact. "Kharzh'ullan civilization would not survive."

"What about evacuation?" asked Lense. "If we can't repair the elevator, then there's always the chance that it would fall."

"It's an option," said Gold. "If we have to take it, Federation relief agencies will step in and handle the matter. But that's the final option, not the first."

Carol Abramowitz, the da Vinci's cultural specialist, cleared her throat. "Tev, you said Kharzh'ulla is a Tellarite colony. I wouldn't think a colony would be capable of building a space elevator, let alone fifteen and an inhabitable ring around the planet."

Gomez smiled. "The Kharzh'ullans didn't build the elevators and the Ring. They found it."

"Found it?" said Bart Faulwell, the ship's linguist. "Useful artifacts like that aren't usually left around for anyone to find." He looked to Tev. "Where did the Ring come from?"

Tev placed both hands on the table and leaned forward slightly. "Two and a half centuries ago a Tellarite ship surveyed the Kharzh'ulla star system and located several planets, with the fourth planet apparently inhabited, as the Ring was detectable by telescopic observation even from far outside the system. As the survey ship drew closer to the fourth planet, however, they detected no life save for some lower animals and vegetation. When they made planetfall they found the Ring and elevators intact, but no intelligent life, and as the planet seemed in all respects to be capable of supporting a civilization, a colony ship was dispatched from Tellar. Several years after the colony's founding the mechanism for working the elevators was discovered, and a few years after that archeological expeditions placed the age of the elevators and Ring at nearly fifty thousand years."

"Who built it?" Faulwell asked.

"For a long time they were called the Tomeq."

"The Tellarite word for 'unknown,' " said Faulwell.

"Correct, Bartholomew," Tev said. He touched the computer terminal, and the viewscreen image changed from the schematic view to the image of an old Constitution-class starship. Gomez read the sensor tag at the bottom of the image- NCC-1701, U.S.S. Enterprise- and concluded it was at least a century old. "Analysis of the wreckage of this starship, the Rath, led xenoarcheologists to conclude that the original inhabitants of Kharzh'ulla IV and the builders of the elevators and the Ring were"- he turned to the screen, toggled the image it displayed, and waited for the crew's reaction-"the Furies."

On the viewscreen a pale yellow humanoid appeared. He had red eyes with slits for irises, and instead of eyebrows red horns protruded outward and upward from his skull. This was one of the races known collectively as the Furies, inhabitants of the Alpha Quadrant some five millennia before, then cast across space and banished to the Delta Quadrant. They had attempted to invade the Alpha Quadrant and take their homeworlds by force at least three times in the past century, each time stopped by only the slimmest of margins.

"You mean, Kharzh'ulla IV is the Fury homeworld?" said Abramowitz.

Tev flared his nostrils slightly. "Analysis of the native lifeforms on Kharzh'ulla IV show few genetic links between them and the Fury corpses retrieved by the Enterprise-D at Brundage Point eight years ago. The evidence is inconclusive that the Furies evolved on Kharzh'ulla IV. It may have been one of their colony worlds."

"Why build the Ring, though?" asked Faulwell. "The cost in resources would have been immense. Plus, there are easier and quicker ways to get into space. It seems like too much effort for too little benefit."

"We know from Captain Kirk's encounter with the Furies a hundred years ago that they didn't have transporter technology," said Gomez. She pulled up a galactic map on the viewscreen. Kharzh'ulla IV was indicated by an over-sized red dot. "This is Kharzh'ulla IV's present location. Run its location backward through time"- the location of Kharzh'ulla IV moved, as did the positions of many other stars-"and fifty thousand years ago Kharzh'ulla IV was here." She zoomed the image to focus on a single sector of space. "The heart of the Culostan Expanse. A region of space twenty thousand light-years wide in which spatial density is such that transporters do not function and warp travel is limited. If the Furies had the knowledge of transporter technology, even the theory, within the Culostan Expanse that knowledge would have been useless. It could be that they built the Ring because they needed it to expand outward into space."

"Another possibility to consider is this," said Tev. "The docking facilities of the Ring are capable of supporting tens of thousands of starships. In the Furies' war against the Unclean thousands of years ago, they would have needed extensive ship facilities to build and support their fleet. They might have built the Ring for the sole purpose of building the ships they needed to prosecute the war."

"Which doesn't make Commander Gomez's theory wrong," said Faulwell, "or your own theory negates hers. It could have been a bit of both."

"Or one facilitated the other," said Tev. "Or neither may be correct." He shrugged. "We haven't the evidence to make a definitive conclusion."

Faulwell stroked his chin, as if lost in thought. "Commander," he said, "how long did it take the Tellarite colonists to work out how to use the elevator system?"

"Twenty years, if memory serves," said Tev.

"You mean that this structure the Furies built fifty thousand years ago works without regular and ongoing maintenance?"

Tev nodded. "Essentially, yes."

"One thing about Fury engineering," said Gomez, "is that they build using 'brute force' principles. One hundred years ago the Rath wasn't shielded; it had thick plate armor, instead."

"Correct, Commander," said Tev. "The elegance of the Kharzh'ullan solution to building a space elevator is that the structure is self-supporting and requires no outside assistance for its own maintenance. The Ring and the elevators were built to stand the test of time. Except for a single incident a few decades ago, the safety record of the elevators has been impeccable."

"What happened?" asked Abramowitz.

"A passenger carrier coming from orbit down the elevator crashed into the base when the braking magnets failed to engage," said Tev softly.

"Survivors?"

Tev shook his head wearily and looked downward. "None. Estimates placed the speed of impact at nearly two thousand kilometers per hour. Many of the bodies recovered were never positively identified."

Abramowitz nodded when it became clear that Tev had nothing more to say on the matter.

"This mission sounds too simple, Commander," said Stevens. "A vacation compared to some of our other missions."

Gomez smiled. "We can't go black-hole-diving on every mission, Fabian." She paused. "The Kharzh'ullans want to use the S.C.E. as consultants on the rebuilding, to give them advice and point them in the right direction. If they have matters in hand, I can't imagine this mission requiring any more than myself, Commander Tev, and Pattie for materials analysis."

Around the conference table heads nodded.

Tev looked to Captain Gold. "Sir, what is our ETA to Kharzh'ulla IV?"

"About sixteen hours," said Gold.

Gomez nodded. "Tev and I will meet with the planetary leaders, and then we'll proceed from there as events develop." She took a look at each of the faces around the conference room table. "Any further questions?"

Other than a few head shakes, there was no response.

Gomez smiled. "Very well, then. Dismissed."

Chapter 3

Sonya Gomez caught her breath as the transporter effect dissolved around her, surprised at how light she felt. "Gravity, Tev?" she asked.

"Eighty-two percent of Earth normal, sixty-seven percent of Tellar's gravity."

Gomez nodded. The air seemed thinner, too. She knew Kharzh'ulla was a small world by

Class-M standards and not especially massive, poor as its crust was in the heavier metals, but there was a world of difference between knowing that intellectually from reports and experiencing directly the effect of the planet's lesser gravity upon her body.

She glanced around the entrance hall to the presidential palace. "I'd have thought there would be someone waiting for us," she said, seeing that she and Tev were alone in the massive hall.

"Patience, Commander," said Tev with a flare of his nostrils. Gomez smiled. Tev got annoyed at the slightest provocation, and there were times when she couldn't resist baiting him.

The ceiling vaulted far above Gomez and Tev. White marble columns rose to support the roof, and a fresco depicting the Tellarite planetfall two hundred years before adorned the ceiling. Ringing the hall stood statues of important Kharzh'ullans, perhaps past presidents and other notable leaders. But to Gomez's eye every statue looked wrong, almost as if they were carved out of proportion.

She turned, startled by both the sound of footfalls on the marble stairs at the end of the hall and the snort of derision Tev made. She looked to Tev, and saw him scowl for the briefest of moments, then turn his attention away from the stairs and back to her. Descending the stairs was the oddest Tellarite she had ever seen- lanky, but not thin; stretched out, but full on his frame. She thought Tev short even by Tellarite standards, but by this newcomer's measure Tev was a veritable dwarf. Evolution adapted organisms for their environments, and at two hundred years Kharzh'ulla was old for a colony world. Each successive generation born on Kharzh'ulla would no doubt be taller than the generation that preceded it as bodies designed for a much higher gravity could grow taller than the Tellarite norm in a vastly different environment.

Gomez and Tev crossed the hall to meet him at the base of the stairs. "You must be Commander Gomez," he said. His voice was pitched higher than Tev's, an alto tenor to Tev's bass, and his enunciation was drawn out, his s's sibilant, his pronunciation precise in the manner of a speaker whose native language wasn't Federation Standard.

"I am," she said, and she held out her right hand in greeting.

The Kharzh'ullan took her hand and clasped it with both paws, then brought his forehead down to touch the joined hands. The traditional Kharzh'ullan greeting, she remembered from Abramowitz's cultural briefing.

He straightened, and his hands fell away. "I am Eevraith, the minister of transportation. We've been expecting you."

Gomez smiled. "We're glad to help."

Eevraith bowed slightly. "Thank you. We haven't the resources or the technological expertise for such a massive undertaking, and any assistance your crew can provide in repairing the Ring and the damaged elevator will be greatly appreciated."

"After our last few missions, Minister, this one should be a walk in the park."

"I have no doubt, Commander." He turned and gestured up the stairs. "Come. The first minister awaits."

Gomez nodded, and she and Tev followed Eevraith up the staircase. But upon reflection two things bothered her- Tev had been unnaturally silent during the greetings, and Eevraith hadn't looked in Tev's direction even once, even though he had been standing just off to her side the entire time.

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By any standards, First Minister Grevesh was old. Tellarite fur colored from brown to yellow, with Tev tending toward the ruddy and Eevraith toward the blond, but Grevesh's fur was uniformly near-white, and his face was nearly hairless and deeply lined with wrinkles. He sat in an antigrav wheelchair, and Gomez decided that by the lengths of his arms and legs that if he stood he would be no taller than she was and certainly nowhere near Eevraith's height, yet still taller than Tev.

"First Minister," said Eevraith as they entered his office, "I would like to present to you Commander Gomez of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, here to look into our... problem." He gestured toward Gomez. She bowed slightly, and wondered why Tev hadn't been introduced as well.

"Follow me, Commander," said Grevesh. He turned his chair toward the French doors at the far end of his office, and began moving in that direction. Gomez, Eevraith, and Tev followed "Eevraith, the doors, please."

"Of course, First Minister." He pushed forward, and threw open the wide doors. Grevesh motored out onto the balcony, and Tev and Gomez stepped out into the sunlight.

The city of Prelv stretched out before them.

Much of the city was modern. Off to the south a complex of modern skyscrapers, thirty and forty stories tall, shiny and gleaming in the mid-morning sun, rose in a cluster perhaps a few blocks wide. Past those skyscrapers and to the east Gomez could see the ocean beyond- Prelv was a coastal city and a major port, with cargo ships running routes from the city to the elevator launches to put cargo into orbit and bring the cargo of the galaxy to Kharzh'ulla. Closer to the palace, the buildings were older and reflected a different design philosophy. Where the skyscrapers were undistinguished and the sort seen on dozens of planets, the older buildings were short and squat, built of piled mud or brick with tiled roofs, in a style that Gomez would have labeled Mediterranean on Earth. The area around the palace, she realized, was the old town, dating back to the very founding of the Kharzh'ullan colony, with much of the area turned to the workings of the planetary government, while the more distant area represented the modern economy and the trade interests that relied upon the Ring to drive the engines of Kharzh'ulla's industry.

But what dominated the view from the balcony was not Prelv.

From east to west a thin line, shining bright in the sunlight, cut across the sky. Gomez looked up. Her gaze caught the Ring in the southeast, and she followed it upward through the blue sky and the wafting clouds. Here and there she saw thin, bright lines intersecting the Ring- the elevators- and she followed one or two down to the horizon or until the clouds obscured them. She continued westward along the Ring, and to the southwest, not far below the Ring's maximum elevation in the sky and one of the elevator junctions, the Ring's reflected splendor was broken. She hadn't known the position of the destroyed segment of the Ring, but she thought that the first minister of the planet could come on his balcony and see it every day

saddened her deeply, and she turned from the sky and looked to Grevesh who, as she had been, was looking up into Kharzh'ulla's morning sky.

Grevesh turned to her and smiled. "An impressive sight, is it not, Commander?"

Gomez nodded. "Yes, First Minister, it is."

He moved his chair to her side, and he took her right hand in his hands. "The Ring matters to my people. It stands as a symbol of everything that we are." He looked up into her eyes. "Please, we need your help, your expertise." Grevesh then looked past her to Eevraith and nodded in his direction. "When he was but a student at the university, my minister of transportation wrote the definitive work on the Ring, how to build it and how to work it, but repairing it is a different and difficult problem."

Gomez turned and looked at Tev. He wore a neutral expression on his face, and she thought his eyes especially sad and pained. She gave him a reassuring nod, turned back to Grevesh, and said, "We'll do what we can, First Minister."

"I knew you would."

Eevraith seated himself on a nearby couch on the balcony, and he gestured at the couch opposite. "Please, Commander, be seated," he said.

As Gomez moved to sit, Grevesh asked, "Who would this be? We haven't been introduced, Eevraith." He stared directly at Tev, whether out of shock or confusion Gomez could not decide.

"First Minister," began Eevraith, "this is no one-"

"Nonsense," said Grevesh just as Gomez was about to object to Eevraith's assertion that Tev was "no one."

Tev stepped forward quickly, knelt at the arm of Grevesh's chair, took Grevesh's right hand in his, and touched them to his forehead. "It has been far too long, sir," he said as he stood. "You were a friend of my father's. I am Mor glasch Tev, second officer of the U.S.S. da Vinci. I knew your granddaughter, Biyert, quite well, and my family and hers spent summers together at your vacation home."

"Tev," whispered Grevesh, recognition dawning on his face. "Your father-"

Tev nodded. "When you were the chancellor of the Kharzh'ullan University, my father was the chair of the political science department, and he served as your campaign chair during your first campaign for the Kharzh'ullan Assembly."

Grevesh smiled widely, his teeth yellow with age. "Yes, I remember! Oh, so long ago."

"Thirty-seven years ago, sir," said Tev. "Twenty-five Earth years," he amended, no doubt for Gomez's benefit.

"How is your father?"

"He passed away, six years ago."

Grevesh's blurry red eyes narrowed, and Gomez thought she could see tears welling in them. "I should very much have liked to talk with him again. He had a fine political mind, and I valued his counsel highly." He looked about his office, nodding slowly, then settled his gaze once again on Tev. "And your mother?" Tev did not answer. "Ah, I remember now. The accident..."

Tev nodded slowly. "Yes, sir. The accident with the passenger transport."

Gomez blinked rapidly. Suddenly the unelaborated mention during the mission briefing of a passenger transport accident in one of the Ring's elevators made sense. Tev's mother must have been a passenger aboard the shuttle that plunged into the elevator base.

"Tev," said Eevraith as he rose from his sofa, "these reminiscences are all well and good, but haven't we more pressing concerns?"

Tev turned and faced Eevraith. "I would think, Eevraith, that if matters were more pressing, your government would have approached the Federation Council long before they did. What was it, two months ago, that you asked for help? The war ended over a year ago. If that time wasn't pressing, five minutes of reminiscence is hardly more so."

Eevraith glared at Tev. "You were never so leisurely, Tev."

Tev's nostrils flared. "You were never so lacking in basic decorum, Eevraith. What was my father's favorite dictum? 'A polite politician is an oxymoron.'"

Eevraith's face flushed red beneath his pelt.

"Gentlemen," Gomez said as she stood and moved to break them apart, "our time is pressing." Eevraith shook his head, muttered a curse beneath his breath, and sat back down on his couch. Tev simply glared at him. Gomez looked hard at Tev and put her hand on his left shoulder. "Tev?" His gaze turned from Eevraith and he locked eyes with Gomez. She saw something in those blurry eyes, something distant and haunted. These two, Tev and Eevraith, knew one another, Gomez realized, and more than just as colleagues and fellow engineers. What was their past relationship? Childhood friends? Fellow students? Something else entirely? Would the history between them impede the mission? Whatever their story, it obviously had a bad ending.

Grevesh looked to Tev and smiled, as if oblivious to everything else that had just transpired. "That dictum of your father's- he said I was the exception that proved its inherent truth. He wondered if that might have been why I proved so popular with the people, that I was polite and solicitous of them." The first minister inhaled deeply and sighed slowly.

"I would rather not discuss the past," said Eevraith. "We have far more pressing concerns, such as the damaged space elevator."

Grevesh nodded slowly. "I agree, Minister Eevraith." He turned to Gomez. "Did you know that Eevraith is the galaxy's greatest authority on the elevator?"

"No, I didn't."

Eevraith nodded, but his eyes remained fixed on Tev, and there was no mirth in them. "The first minister overstates my reputation. A study I did on the elevators from an engineering standpoint won me a doctorate. The first minister thought it an important enough work to

bring me into his government as a transportation expert, and years later to appoint me transportation minister."

"What's your evaluation of the damage to the Ring and the elevator shaft, Minister?" asked Gomez.

Eevraith breathed deeply and relaxed into the couch. "The damage to the Ring does not concern me nearly half as much as the damage to the elevator. Rebuilding the Ring would be no different, except in matters of scale and curvature, to building a space station four hundred kilometers long." He paused. "The elevator concerns me far more."

"How so?" asked Gomez.

"The structural integrity of the elevator was severely compromised by the damage inflicted by the Jem'Hadar. Had the Ring above it remained intact, the elevator's structure would have been supported from both ends, by the base and by the Ring, against gravity's pull. But as the very segment of the Ring that supports the elevator from above was compromised by the impact of the Jem'Hadar ship, the elevator structure is not receiving the support from above that it requires, and both the elevator shaft itself and the Ring structure west of its terminus are beginning to show strain from the stress and buckling."

Grevesh shook his head. "Forgive an old fool, Eevraith, but this makes no sense to me. How does the Ring hold up the elevators?"

"Counterweight, First Minister," said Tev before Eevraith could answer. "The centrifugal force on the Ring from Kharzh'ulla's spin throws the Ring outward from the planet, but because it's anchored to Kharzh'ulla by the elevators, the same centrifugal force pulls the elevator shafts taut."

"Should the destruction of the Ring section not concern us equally to that of the elevator damage?"

"It would," said Eevraith, this time cutting Tev off, "but the Ring's geosynchronous altitude serves to keep the Ring in place. The centrifugal force counterbalances gravity's pull. A lower or a higher altitude for the Ring would be a concern for us. The builders put in place a system so finely balanced that it keeps itself intact."

"Until something happens to upset that balance," said Gomez.

Eevraith shook his head. "The elevators and Ring are quite resilient. Even the accident with the passenger transport two decades ago posed no threat to the stability of the system."

"Only now there is a threat," said Tev.

Eevraith scowled. "Would you not consider the possibility of the system falling onto the planet a threat, Tev? Or have you grown too indifferent to the plight of our people...?"

"I think that if the elevator truly posed the threat you claim, Minister, you would have asked for Federation assistance a year ago."

"There was never a need to ask for assistance. Not when we were able to deal with the problem ourselves. We were able to shore up the elevator shaft, but when we discovered several months ago buckling and stress fractures in the Ring to the west of the damaged

elevator, the problem had become larger than our ability to contain it."

" 'Shore up,' " repeated Gomez. "How? Did you patch the phaser scoring?"

"Have you seen the damage?" asked Eevraith.

Gomez shook her head. "Not up-close, no. From the da Vinci, yes."

"The phaser damage is not insignificant, and certainly more than mere 'scoring.' " He looked to Grevesh, who nodded slowly, his eyes closed. "The Jem'Hadar phasers cut a gash into the elevator shell nearly forty kilometers long. Sensor analysis of the battle shows it was probably not deliberate, merely a shot gone awry. Regardless, the damage was done, and we installed starship-rated structural integrity field generators along that section of the elevator shaft, until we were ready for a permanent repair."

"What sort of repair do you have in mind?" asked Tev.

Eevraith's eyes narrowed on Tev, and then he quickly looked away to Gomez. "We have manufactured a new shell to bridge the gap. Our hope" he looked to Grevesh-"is that your team will be able to install the new elevator shell."

"What about the superconducting magnets within the shell? Will the transport pods be able to travel up and down within the shaft?" asked Tev.

"Replacements for those have been fashioned as well." He looked hard at Tev. "You of all people should know, Tev, how the elevator housing is put together. The new shell we've built will suffice for all of Kharzh'ulla's needs."

"Minister," said Gomez as a thought occurred to her. "You said the westward Ring segment and the elevator were buckling under the strain of the damage, yet you also said you were supporting the damaged elevator by using structural-integrity fields. How can you have buckling if you also made the elevator artificially rigid?"

Grevesh was silent, his eyes still closed. Eevraith sat back on his couch and said nothing.

Tev turned and looked at Gomez. "The structural integrity fields. The elevator shafts require a certain amount of movement and oscillation, but by making the damaged elevator shaft artificially rigid in the middle-

"- the elevator shaft couldn't oscillate as it should have," Gomez finished. "The oscillation wave would reach the structural integrity field and die."

Eevraith nodded. "By artificially supporting the elevator, we actually increased the stress on the shaft and the adjoining Ring segment."

Gomez said, "I'll want to examine the new elevator housing you've constructed, and I'll want to examine the damage to the elevator shaft personally." She looked to Tev. "You'll be with me, Commander." She turned to Eevraith. "You, too, if you're interested."

Grevesh opened his eyes, blinked a few times, and fixed on Tev. "You can repair the elevator?"

"We'll try, First Minister," said Gomez. She rose from her couch, and Tev followed suit.

He smiled. "Good. Very good."

"You should know, sir," said Tev, "that the damage may be more extensive than even we can repair."

Eevraith stood quickly. "Tev!" he cried. "The fact remains that the replacement shell need only be installed for the elevator to be repaired."

"The fact remains, Minister, that Commander Gomez and I know nothing of the sort." Tev turned from Eevraith to Grevesh. "If we cannot repair the elevator shaft, the likelihood is that Kharzh'ulla will have to be evacuated."

A look of cold fury crossed Grevesh's face, and the white skin flushed dark red. "I once thought you worthy of being a Kharzh'ullan, Tev, but I can see now that you are only a Tellarite. Your father would be most disappointed in you." He turned his chair and retired to his office, leaving Gomez and Tev alone on the balcony with Eevraith.

Gomez looked to Tev. "You have a way with tact, Commander."

He shrugged. "It needed to be said." He looked to Eevraith, and his eyes narrowed. "I imagine, Minister, that you have been keeping the truth from him."

Eevraith crossed the space between Tev and himself. "Evacuating the planet is not the truth, Tev, but merely a possibility." He spoke his words with precision and barely veiled anger.

"You hadn't told him," Gomez said. "You hadn't told him that the damage might be so extensive that even we might not be able to repair it."

Eevraith nodded slowly. "You've seen him. He's barely conscious of where he is. That was the fifth time in a month I've had to explain centrifugal force to him. Telling him that the Ring poses a danger to the entire planet is more than he can deal with."

"And what will you do, Eevraith, if you must abandon Kharzh'ulla?" asked Tev. "Return to Tellar? Where will your political career be then?"

Eevraith reached out, grabbed Tev's uniform collar, and pulled his face into Tev's. "I would be very careful, Tev."

Tev shoved Eevraith away. "Is that a threat, Eevraith? You're the one putting personal politics before public safety." He nodded toward the city beyond the balcony. "Those lives are on your head, not mine."

"Gentlemen!" said Gomez as she came in between them.

Eevraith stamped the balcony tile with his foot. Tev turned and looked at him. "You left, Tev. In the end, you left. Tell me truly that you know better than I what is best for these people."

Tev narrowed his eyes, shook his head, and wandered to the balcony's railing, leaning on it to look out over the city.

Gomez planted her hands on her hips. She looked at Tev, frowned, then turned her attention to Eevraith. "Will you join us, Minister, in surveying the elevator damage and the

replacement housing?"

Eevraith nodded slowly. "Of course. I presume you will want to see the housing first."

Gomez shook her head. "I'd rather examine the elevator shaft and see firsthand what needs to be done before passing judgment on the housing." She raised her hand, cutting off Eevraith's coming objection. "I'm sure what you've assembled is fine, but I want to see what will work without any preconceived notions of what you think will work."

"Very well," said Eevraith. "If there is anything else?"

Gomez sighed. "Tev?" she called.

Tev turned. "I have nothing more."

Gomez nodded. "Then I think we have everything we need at this point, Minister Eevraith. How would 1600 hours strike you?"

"That should be fine." Eevraith paused. "Should I have someone escort you to the entrance?"

"I think Commander Tev and I can beam out from here."

Eevraith nodded. "Sixteen hundred hours, then." He turned and walked crisply back into Grevesh's office.

Gomez came up to Tev's side. She nodded in the direction of the departed Eevraith. "An old friend, Commander?" she asked with a flash of humor.

"Friend?" Tev snorted derisively.

Gomez rolled her eyes. She tapped her combadge. "Da Vinci, two to beam aboard."

Gomez's last sight of Prelv was of the Ring glittering in the daytime sky. As the transporter beam took them, she wondered who would suffer more this mission- the people of Kharzh'ulla if they had to abandon their world, or Tev.

Chapter 4

Gomez reached up, took the environmental suit helmet in her hands, and gave it a sharp turn counterclockwise. She heard the hiss of atmosphere as the pressure seal broke, and she lifted the helmet off her head. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath through her nostrils. She smiled. Every planet had a distinctive smell, and Kharzh'ulla IV was no different. The air was tangy and sharp, but not unpleasant- a welcome change from the processed smell of the da Vinci, or the earthy or industrialized smell of far too many worlds she'd visited in her career.

"Commander," she heard. She turned to Pattie, standing beside her, and the only one not wearing an environmental suit. The Nasat was pointing up with three of her limbs.

Gomez, Tev, Pattie, and Eevraith had beamed from their inspection of the elevator shaft damage to the manufacturing plant at the base of the elevator that was constructing the new hull to replace the phaser-damaged areas.

The elevator rose upward from an artificial island raised in the middle of Kharzh'ulla's ocean. Gomez followed Pattie's gesture to view the structure, and she found her mind temporarily unable to comprehend the size of the thing. In orbit as they floated in environmental suits scanning the damage with their tricorders, the elevator lacked scale. She knew instinctively that in orbit the elevator shaft was forty or fifty kilometers in diameter, and she had seen and worked with starships or space stations of that size many times in the past. Even though it dominated her experience, she could conceive of it as an object. But here at the base, the elevator was two hundred fifty kilometers around, and even at a kilometer's distance she lacked the perspective to see it as anything more than a wall that stretched from horizon to horizon. It had curvature, but she couldn't see it. It had shape, but it was formless to her. It rose before her, and as she craned her neck upward it filled the sky. The Ring was overhead, but she couldn't see it. Someone envisioned this, someone built this. She felt small, she felt insignificant, she felt...

She felt a hand on her shoulder. "Sonya," said Tev in an uncharacteristically soft voice. "Turn around. Please."

Her eyes blinked a few times rapidly, and she turned at the sound of Tev's voice. "What...?"

"The sight of the elevator from the base can be... overwhelming, if you don't know what to expect."

"But..." she began.

Tev nodded. "You knew, up here," and he tapped his head. "But knowing doesn't mean understanding."

"Is everything all right?" asked Eevraith as he hurried to their side.

Gomez nodded. "I'm fine, Minister. Just a touch of agoraphobia."

Eevraith looked from Gomez to Tev, uncomprehending. Tev merely shrugged in response.

Two Kharzh'ullans approached the group. Both were tall, nearly three meters in height, and wore red coveralls and yellow helmets. Seeing Eevraith, the Kharzh'ullan in front smiled.

"Commander Gomez," said Eevraith, "may I present the restoration project leader, Gringa."

Gomez held out her hand, and Gringa took her hand in his and touched them to his forehead. "A pleasure," he said as he rose.

"Commander Gomez and her team have come to assist in our repairs of the elevator," said Eevraith. "They wished to inspect the new elevator shell."

Gringa nodded. He turned to Gomez. "I believe you'll find our work satisfactory."

"Let's take a look," said Gomez.

Gringa led them down a metal staircase, across an open field, and into a large warehouse. Inside the entrance, Gomez, Tev, and Eevraith placed their environmental helmets in a storage locker. Gringa in turn handed all four of them hardhats to wear. "For your protection," he said.

Pattie refused hers, using her top left limb to point to her head. "This is harder than the helmet- besides, it won't fit."

Looking down at the helmet in his hand, Gringa saw that the helmet was too small to fit over the Nasat's exoskeleton. He shrugged and replaced it on the shelf.

They stepped from the entrance alcove into the warehouse. The interior was cavernous. Kharzh'ullans operated machinery and metal presses, and a forklift passed them as it drove down an aisle. "This is where we're fashioning the replacement shell," said Gringa. "These workers are taking processed ore and molding it into panels." He pointed to an area far to the left. "Over there, we take the panels and bolt them together into a 'sandwich'- the outer casing, a reinforced skeleton, an electromagnetic sheath, and then the inner shell."

Gomez looked up as she heard something above her. A large panel, three meters square, passed overhead on the end of a crane arm. Gringa noticed her attention. "Those panels will form the inner shell."

"The outer tiles are the same size?" Pattie asked.

"No," said Eevraith. "They're much smaller, half a meter across."

"Why the difference in size?" asked Gomez.

"Different materials and repairability," said Gringa. "On the inside of the elevator shaft we use a frictionless ceramic tile to facilitate the transports up and down the elevator, while on the outside of the shaft we use a shielded metal panel to withstand and reflect the solar radiation to protect the delicate electromagnetic sheath within. More importantly, the smaller panels on the outside will enable us to access the interior of the elevator shell should we need to effect repairs in the future."

He then led them further into the warehouse. They stepped through an open doorway, and in the room stood hundreds of the replacement panels on their ends, which showed the different construction materials- black on the metal side, beige on the ceramic side. As they walked down the central aisle, one or two might stop and examine a panel before continuing on.

"How will these be installed, Supervisor?" said Tev.

Gringa stopped, turned, and looked down on Tev. He took a deep breath, and Gomez thought he might have even frowned. "We will bolt them onto the elevator shaft, beginning from the edges of the phaser gashes and then working inward."

Tev flared his nostrils in annoyance. "The phaser gashes are not even. I presume that special panels are built to match exactly with the damage done."

Eevraith nodded. "We will cut out more of the elevator shaft, if the special panels do not work."

"Could we examine one of the custom panels?" asked Tev.

Neither Gringa nor Eevraith answered.

"They don't exist," said Gomez.

"Not yet, no," said Eevraith quietly, confirming Gomez's sudden suspicion.

"How do you know these will work?" said Gomez, gesturing at the panels around them.

"They will," said Eevraith. "While the Furies left no instructions on how to work the elevators or how to repair them, they left us the elevators to study and reverse engineer. That is what we have done- studied the work they left us and replicated it. We know what the Furies did. We know how they did it. Rebuilding the elevator shaft poses no great difficulties if we follow their example."

Gomez looked to Tev. His expression seemed neutral to her, but when he caught her gaze he nodded sharply.

They inspected the panels for an hour, with Pattie and Tev taking extensive tricorder readings for analysis aboard the da Vinci to compare them to the earlier scans of the elevator shaft. Gomez performed a quick tally of the number of panels in the warehouse, and to her it seemed as though there weren't enough. The phaser gashes were kilometers long in some cases and many meters wide, yet the panels here might have been enough to stretch only half a kilometer if set end on end. What were the Kharzh'ullans hoping for? she wondered.

Gomez stepped outside onto a grassy field, and she was glad enough to be outside the warehouse.

"Have you seen Commander Tev?" said Pattie.

Gomez looked about. While she saw a number of Kharzh'ullans- Eevraith and Gringa were standing with a group near the facility's exit- she couldn't see Tev. Where had he gone?

Gomez frowned. "Pattie, take a look inside. He might be with some of the engineers or inspecting the new elevator shell." She looked back to Eevraith. "I'll look around out here."

Pattie nodded and went back into the warehouse.

Gomez went over to Eevraith. Seeing her approach, Eevraith said, "What's your analysis, Commander?"

She shook her head. "I don't know yet. Give us some time, and we'll let you know."

Eevraith grimaced. Gomez knew he was impatient. Every day the elevator went unrepaired it posed a threat to Kharzh'ulla.

"Have you seen Tev?" she asked.

Gringa shook his head. "Not for some time," he said. "I believe he left the warehouse before Eevraith and I did."

Gomez scowled. She tapped her combadge. "Gomez to Tev." No response. She repeated the hail, but still nothing.

"Would the elevator be blocking communicator signals?" she asked.

Eevraith shook his head. "Follow me."

He led her around the warehouse and past the observation platform where they had beamed down to. Gomez knew they were walking toward the elevator's base, and she forced herself not to look at it, lest its size overwhelm her. They climbed a short hill, and Eevraith stopped at the top. He pointed. "You'll find Tev there."

Gomez looked down the hill. Sure enough, she saw Tev. "What...?" she asked. "What's going on? What's down there?"

Eevraith shook his head. "My apologies. I must return to Prelv."

He turned and began walking back to the warehouse.

"Minister!" Gomez called.

He stopped and turned.

She closed the distance between them. "I don't understand. Why is Tev down there?"

"That is Tev's tale to tell. Not mine."

"There's history between you."

Eevraith said nothing.

"If that poses a risk to this mission..."

Eevraith held up his hand. "Tev will do as he will. Whatever the differences between us, he will never endanger your mission." He turned and continued back toward the warehouse.

"No, he won't, Minister," Gomez called after him, "but what of you?"

Eevraith continued walking as though he hadn't heard her.

Shaking her head, Gomez proceeded down the hill. She looked at Tev. He stood near what she took to be a monument of some sort. Might this have been the elevator that had suffered the transport accident?

If Tev heard her approach, he gave no notice.

"Tev?" she said.

He turned. "Commander Gomez," he said, his voice flat and low.

"You didn't answer my hail."

He said nothing.

Gomez frowned. She looked past Tev to the monument. It was a simple granite obelisk. Curvy writing that she recognized from the da Vinci's past missions to Tellar and Maeglin as the Tellarite script ran down the obelisk's face.

"What does this memorialize?" she asked.

Tev's nostrils flared. He looked back to the monument. "The victims of the transport accident."

Her guess had been correct. "Your mother."

"She was returning from family business on Tellar. She had been away for six months."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve."

Gomez nodded. She placed her hand on his shoulder and squeezed lightly. "I'm sorry, Tev."

"My father..." he began, but his voice choked. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths to center himself. "Nothing was left in the wreckage. No bodies. The force of the impact, the speed of the transport, it left nothing to be identified. My father... hoped she hadn't been aboard, that she missed the transport when it left the orbital terminus. Until he died, he hoped she would come through the door to our home." He shook his head. "She never did."

Gomez understood. The monument was all Tev had to remember his mother by.

"Come on, Tev, let's get back to Pattie," she said. She turned and started back up the hill. She stopped, turned, and saw that Tev had not moved. "Tev?"

He turned, and his eyes were damp and blurry. "I blamed myself."

"You couldn't have done anything if you had been here."

Tev shook his head. "I had a dream." He took a deep breath. "I was serving aboard the Madison. We were ordered to Brundage Point, to stop the Fury invasion."

Gomez nodded. The Furies had attempted their third invasion of the Alpha Quadrant a few years before, and Starfleet sent three ships- the Enterprise, the Madison, and the Idaho- to counter the invasion. She had transferred off the Enterprise to the Oberth by that point, but she remembered the late Kieran Duffy telling her about that invasion attempt, which had come very close to succeeding.

"They used a fear weapon," Tev said, his voice still and quiet. "It made nightmares real."

"Your mother's death."

Tev nodded, biting his lower lip. "I hadn't thought of her death for a very long time. When the Furies used their weapon, I was there aboard the passenger car. I saw my mother." He closed his eyes tight. "I saw her. She begged me to help her. She didn't want to die. No one did. I couldn't do anything."

"The accident wasn't your fault, Tev."

He nodded. "I knew that then. I know that now." He paused. "Knowing that doesn't keep me from feeling, though."

Gomez sighed. She walked up to him, put her hands on his shoulders, and looked straight into his eyes. "Tev, we can't change the past, neither of us. If we could, we would. Kieran, your mother..." Her voice trailed off. "We can't make yesterday, but we can make tomorrow. I have to believe that to keep going forward."

"I know, Commander," said Tev softly. "I know."

She dropped her hands from Tev's shoulders. "Let's get back to Pattie and the da Vinci. I want her analysis of the Kharzh'ullan repairs." Tev scowled. Gomez found this unsettling. "Something bothering you, Commander?"

"I have my doubts about the Kharzh'ullan solution," said Tev as he walked up the hill back toward the warehouse.

Despite her asking him to elaborate, Tev said nothing more on the subject until they beamed back to the ship.

Chapter 5

"Computer, pull up file Eevraith-Ring-One," Gomez said with a sigh as she collapsed backward onto her bunk. If Eevraith's was the definitive study of the construction of the Ring and the elevators, she decided that comparing the study's analysis of the elevator's composition, particularly its structure and flexibility, to the newly fashioned shell would be of immense aid in the repair job.

"Acknowledged."

Gomez rubbed her eyes, as much out of exhaustion as out of habit. The morning's visit to the palace had begun a promising day, but the next six hours of survey and analysis of the damaged elevator shaft and the Kharzh'ullan replacement hull took its physical and mental toll. "Begin playback, from subsection 14, paragraph 4."

"Playback in Tellarite or Federation Standard?"

"Standard," she said, momentarily confused.

"Acknowledged."

Gomez closed her eyes as the computer's recitation began. "The structural demands placed upon the shafts lessen exponentially as the elevator shaft approaches terminus-

"Computer," she said, interrupting the playback, her curiosity piqued. "What was the language of the original text?"

"Tellarite," the computer replied.

It made sense. The study had been written by a Tellarite- Eevraith- for a Tellarite audience- his university professors- and the speech had the telltale sign of a speaker of Federation Standard who used it as a second or third language- too mannered, the syllables drawn out and the stresses misplaced. Kharzh'ulla IV, like so many non-human worlds, spoke Standard only when necessary, and oftentimes the universal translator worked just as well in everyday conversation between native and non-native Standard speakers.

"Computer," she said, "resume playback from beginning of sentence."

"The structural demands placed upon the shafts lessen exponentially as the elevator shaft approaches terminus, hence the narrowing of the shafts as they progress from surface to geosynchronous orbit. Theoretical models formulated of space elevators prior to the discovery of the Kharzh'ullan system relied upon ungrounded skyhooks that reached into the upper atmosphere, space tethers, or extensive cabling systems to counteract the gravitational effects a structure the size of an elevator would experience. The Kharzh'ullan elevator shafts by contrast support their own weight over their thirty-thousand kilometer length in two ways. First, the Ring structure itself acts as a counterweight to the elevator shaft, thus anchoring the weight in orbit and providing an upward 'pull' that prevents the structure from collapsing due to gravity. Second, the base itself distributes the weight of the shaft by spreading the gravitational pull across a base two hundred fifty kilometers in diameter. The elegance of the Kharzh'ullan solution is that the structure is self-supporting and requires no outside assistance for its own maintenance."

Gomez sat up in the dark with a start. "Computer, halt playback. Repeat last sentence."

"The elegance of the Kharzh'ullan solution is that the structure is self-supporting and requires no outside assistance for its own maintenance."

Hadn't Tev said exactly that the day before during the mission briefing? Would Tev knowingly quote Eevraith, if their relationship was as damaged as she thought it was?

Gomez glanced at the wall chronometer, an idea half-formed in her mind. "Locate Bart Faulwell." Very likely he was off duty- the current mission afforded him nothing to do- but she wanted to be certain. But the time- would he be awake?

"Crewman Faulwell is in his quarters."

"Computer, download Eevraith-Ring-One to my padd." The padd beeped as Gomez grabbed her uniform jacket, threw it on hastily, and headed out, padd in hand. At the late hour- 0130 hours, in the middle of gamma shift- she met no one in the corridors.

She stopped at the door to Faulwell's cabin, tapped the chime, and waited. Seconds later the door parted.

"Commander," Bart said as he rose from his desk. "Please come in."

Gomez stepped into the cabin and waved him down. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything." She glanced about. "Where's Fabian?"

Faulwell shrugged as he sat back down at his desk. "The surface, I think. The captain approved a sightseeing trip to see the Ring from the planet."

Gomez nodded. "You didn't go, obviously."

Faulwell shrugged in his seat. "I wanted to catch up on some reading. I've gotten behind."

Gomez smiled. "I know the feeling. Anything good?"

Faulwell handed her an old book, hardcover, its spine bent and tattered. "A gift from

Anthony."

She gently opened the cover and read the title page. "The True History of Planets, by Reginald Tyler." She looked back at Bart. "Never heard of it."

"Few have. At the time it was one of the great works of heroic fantasy in twentieth-century Terran literature, standing alongside Lord of the Rings, Gormenghast, The Swords of Lankhmar, even Thieves' World." He sighed. "Unfortunately, heroic fantasy has never been my particular choice for recreational reading."

"Then why-"

"- did Anthony give me this? Because of the dogs, I'm sure."

"Dogs?"

"Poodles, actually. With opposable thumbs."

Gomez shot him a quizzical look.

"Seriously, it's a heroic fantasy with super-intelligent poodles as the heroes, caught up in a revolution against the vaguely medieval tyrant that rules their world."

Gomez shook her head and handed the book back to Bart. "Doesn't sound all that serious to me at all. Why dogs?"

"Growing up, my grandparents raised purebred dogs." Faulwell shrugged. "I suppose Anthony thought I would have a particular affinity for the book because of my childhood. It makes a certain perverse sense- I spent a lot of time around dogs, so I would have some emotional connection to them."

"Not a dog person, eh?"

"When I was completing my postgraduate work I had three cats. It may have been an uneasy relationship for the four of us, but we each respected the others' space. Dogs, though, are like children, needy and loud. Cats are a bit more self-reliant than that." Faulwell laughed. "I hated dogs. Raised around them for so long, I grew tired of them, the way children grow tired of peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches because their parents make them all the time. When we had that big gathering at the captain's house a few months ago, I was so grateful that he had that dog of his tied up, you couldn't believe it."

Gomez shook her head. "I never knew."

"That my parents raised dogs?"

"No," said Gomez with a smile, "that children ever liked peanut butter and jelly."

Faulwell laughed. He set the book down on his desk and leaned back in his chair. "I don't imagine you dropped by my cabin to talk about childhood."

Gomez's smile upturned at the corner, and she nodded slowly. "I have a little project for you, Bart."

Faulwell gave a noncommittal shrug. "Public or private?"

"Private."

"What do you have in mind, Commander?"

She handed him her padd. "How good are you at analyzing writing styles?"

"I'm a linguist, not a literary scholar."

Gomez smiled. "You're the one reading twentieth-century fantasy fiction."

Faulwell shrugged. "Just because I work with words on a daily basis doesn't mean I have any special facility with style analysis."

"I can think of no one better equipped for this little project than you."

Faulwell looked at the proffered padd and reached out gingerly. He looked directly into Gomez's eyes, and in that moment took the padd from Gomez's hand. "You don't believe Eevraith glasch Tremen," he said, reading the author's name off the padd, "wrote this text?"

Gomez shook her head. "I have my doubts."

Faulwell called up the document and looked at the first page. "Original text in Tellarite." He looked back up at Gomez. "This will definitely stretch some mental muscles." He paused. "Sounds like a challenge. It might take weeks."

Gomez nodded.

"What do you want to know?"

Gomez took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I want to know who the author is." She paused. "The real author."

Chapter 6

Gold stood at the ready room window as he listened to Vivaldi's Four Seasons, and looked out over the da Vinci's saucer at the Ring and Kharzh'ulla beneath it. From the ship's position in orbit the damaged Ring segment could not be seen, but behind the ship Gold could see an elevator thousands of kilometers distant move out of the terminator and into the dawn. Few sights he had seen in his Starfleet career could inspire such awe at the power of technology to add to the beauty of nature. The Dyson Sphere Montgomery Scott and the Enterprise-D had discovered represented the ultimate in stellar engineering. The Kharzh'ullan Ring was so much smaller than that, but no less impressive. Planets always held a fascination, each unique in its coloring, its features, and space stations reflected the sensibilities of their designers. Here, however, was a synthesis of both the natural and the artificial- functional, yet inspiring.

He heard distantly over the strains of violins the sound of the door chime. He sighed, asked the computer to mute Vivaldi, and took a seat behind his desk.

Gomez and Tev entered the ready room, and they took their seats opposite the desk.

Gold leaned back in his chair. "Anything to drink?"

Both Gomez and Tev shook their heads.

"How did the surveys go?" Gold asked.

"Exhausting," said Gomez.

"Long," said Tev.

Gold nodded. "Care to elaborate?"

Gomez looked to Tev. He nodded, and an unspoken communication passed between them.

"The Kharzh'ullan plan won't work," she said.

Gold folded his hands together and lazily tapped the tip of his nose. "Why?"

Gomez bobbed her head from side to side in thought, then scrunched the side of her mouth. "The Kharzh'ullans' makeshift solution- using the structural integrity fields- actually damaged the elevator shaft more than the Jem'Hadar attack did. Pattie found stress fractures all along the shaft. The SIFs held the structure too rigid, and it wasn't designed to take that kind of stress."

"They had the right idea," said Tev. "The system's design was rather ingenious- the Ring holds the elevators up, but that centrifugal force would have pulled the elevator apart eventually. The structural integrity fields were meant to hold the elevator together. Ironically, they hastened the Ring's collapse."

"How long until the system fails?" asked Gold.

Gomez shrugged. "We can have an answer for you in a few days. If I had to take a guess, we have some time, perhaps even a few years." She took out her padd and passed it across the desk to Gold. "Pattie's preliminary report hasn't been able to pinpoint an exact time."

"There may not be an exact time," added Tev. "There are too many factors in play."

"What about the Kharzh'ullans? I thought they were building a new elevator casing."

Tev nodded. "They are. Unfortunately, fixing the hole the Jem'Hadar made in the elevator shaft would be the beginning of the cure, not the end, as the stress fractures themselves also need to be repaired."

"What about welding the fractures back together? I thought the Kharzh'ullans were building a new skin for the elevator shaft."

Gomez shook her head. "It wouldn't be as strong if those areas were simply torn out and replaced."

"To keep the structure stable while replacing the stressed areas, we would need to use structural integrity fields to hold the elevator in place," said Tev. "More importantly, what the Kharzh'ullans are building will not be as strong or as stable as the original shell."

"Which would exacerbate the problem," Gold said.

Gomez nodded. "The Furies built the elevator shells of solid diamond."

"Diamond?" repeated Gold.

"Diamond has one of the highest natural tensile strengths," said Tev.

"I thought tungsten was harder," said Gold.

"It is," said Gomez. "But diamond is easier to find. Or fashion, if the Furies used molecular engineering."

Gold drummed his fingers on his desk. "Tev brought up how the Ring holds itself up. If the Ring were repaired first, wouldn't that be enough to hold the elevator in place?"

Gomez scratched at her nose in thought as she considered the idea. "We'd have to run a simulation, but I don't think that would work. There are two problems I see. First, the Kharzh'ullans aren't even ready to rebuild the Ring; they focused on building the new casing to repair the elevator as that was the more obvious threat. Second, while the Ring itself orbits at a geosynchronous altitude and has an angular momentum to remain in place at that altitude, the elevators move at a greater angular speed than they should at all altitudes because they're held in place by the anchoring effects of the base and the Ring. The damaged elevator, because of the stress fractures, would fly apart and rain debris down onto the planet."

Gold took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "It sounds to me that you're both saying this is a problem we simply cannot repair. If Captain Scott wants recommendations, what do you suggest?"

Gomez looked to Tev and frowned. "If we can't repair the elevator, I don't see that we have any choice but evacuation. The Ring will fall to the surface, and that will render Kharzh'ulla uninhabitable for generations."

"I don't like that option, Gomez."

Gomez shook her head. "I don't either, sir. But looking at what we're facing, I don't see any other option." She looked to Tev. He sat impassively, biting his lower lip. "We could make the attempt to repair the gash, but there's no guarantee it would work. Judging by Pattie's findings, I doubt that it would."

Gold looked to Tev and to Gomez. They had presented their findings, and there was nothing more to say. "Very well," he said, "I'll send a preliminary report to Starfleet requesting the evacuation of Kharzh'ulla IV. Dismissed."

Gomez nodded and stood. She stepped to the threshold and stopped. Tev continued to sit, as if lost in thought. "Tev?" she said.

Tev looked up at Gomez. "What if there's another way?"

"What've you got, Tev?" asked Gold.

"Our problem is that the elevator will collapse. Nothing we do can stop that." Tev paused. "What if that's the solution? Allow the elevator to collapse, but a controlled collapse."

"And the Ring?" said Gomez.

Tev shook his head. "Irrelevant. At a geosynchronous orbit it will stay in place, and it will hold the elevators up. But the damaged elevator, if we detach it from the Ring and let it fall, won't pull the rest of the Ring down onto Kharzh'ulla."

"The problem is the solution," said Gold quietly.

Tev shrugged.

"Captain," said Gomez, "it's worth a shot. It's not as if we have anything to lose."

Gold nodded slowly. "I see one problem. A big problem." He looked straight at Tev. "If I know Tellarites, they won't like an outsider telling them how to do things."

Gomez hastily resumed her seat. She spoke quickly, excitedly. "But it would save their world. First Minister Grevesh would see that. Minister Eevraith would see that. It's the best possible solution."

Tev spoke, his voice low and hushed. "The captain is correct. The Kharzh'ullans wouldn't accept the idea, not if we proposed it to them. Pride defines Tellarites, just as honor defines Klingons, creativity defines humans, and logic defines Vulcans. It is part and parcel of who we are and how we see ourselves. Tellarite pride kept the Kharzh'ullans from asking for help a year ago. Tellarite pride would keep them from seeing the rightness of our solution to their problem." Tev shook his head. "No, we cannot tell them how to save their world."

"What are you suggesting, Tev? That we take it on ourselves to just drop the elevator without telling them?" said Gomez. "I somehow doubt they'd appreciate that."

Tev locked eyes with Gomez. "The Tellarites have to tell us how to save their world."

Chapter 7

Eevraith looked up into Kharzh'ulla's night sky. It was rare for the Ring overhead to be visible at night- unlike a moon, the Ring was too close to the planet for it to ever leave Kharzh'ulla's shadow- and tonight proved no exception. To the east and west, however, close to the horizon where the Ring's arc still fell in sunlight, the Ring shone bright and silver against the dark sky. One of his first proposals as transportation minister was for running lights to be mounted along the Ring's edge, to make the whole of the Ring visible day and night, but cost-benefit analysis found no practical use for such a system. Perhaps when Grevesh retired, and he took the reins of government as Grevesh's chosen political heir, then things might be different.

Prelv's streets were largely deserted as he walked through Old Town. This section of Prelv had once been the original settlement, and around it the apparatus of government and industry had developed. But cities, when given space, grew outward, leaving behind buildings out of date and no longer needed, and such had happened with Old Town. One of the proposals Grevesh had put forth when he ran for first minister fifteen years before had been to turn the area into a memorial museum and park devoted to those early days, and on that platform the masses elected him.

Eevraith did not much care to mingle with the common folk- too low-class for his tastes, and too prone toward sentiment for the old ways- but he recognized their value to his chosen career; had it not been for them, Grevesh might still have been an academic, and Eevraith might have been a mere councillor, not transportation minister.

Still, had he not urgent business in Old Town, Eevraith would not have been there, not at this hour. He would rather have been home, in bed with his wife, and not on an unknown errand at the behest of a cryptic message: "As you value your career, meet me tonight at two bells at the Chrainolga." The Chrainolga was a cathedral, built in service to one of Tellar's ancient religions, one relating to ancestor worship. He stood before the building, an imposing structure that dated back to the colony's earliest days, and the only building in Old Town still used for its original purpose. Three towers rose above the building's vast sanctuary hall, and Eevraith mounted the steps to the Chrainolga's massive doors. He had been here only twice before, both times for Grevesh's political appearances, and certainly for no personal or spiritual reasons of his own.

Atop the steps stood a robed Tellarite. Eevraith had seen the type before, clerics of the religious priest-hood. They had never been a factor in past campaigns, and they generally asked for nothing from the government, so he gave the cleric no attention as he strode up to the doors. He took the brass handles in hand and gave them a hard pull. Nothing. The doors were bolted from within.

"What do you seek?" he heard from behind him. Eevraith turned. The cleric. He was short, his voice deep, his head and body covered by the white robe he wore. Eevraith couldn't place his accent. One of the southern continents, perhaps.

"I was to meet someone here," said Eevraith. He shook his head. "It doesn't matter, it was probably of no importance." He turned and started back down the steps.

"Wait," said the cleric. Eevraith turned, and the cleric held before him the key to the sanctuary.

He looked past the cleric and nodded toward the doors. "There's someone within?"

The cleric nodded. "Perhaps even the answers you seek."

Eevraith chuckled silently. "I have no questions."

"None that you have asked."

Eevraith closed the space between them. "Are clerics always so cryptic?"

The cleric ignored the question, and turned and unlocked the sanctuary doors. Eevraith pushed him to the side, took the brass handles, and pulled the doors open.

Inside the sanctuary was quite dark, with only the lit candles along the walls and at the pulpit providing any illumination. Eevraith slowly stepped inside.

He walked halfway up the central aisle, his footfalls on the polished stone echoing loudly in the silent chamber. He looked back over his shoulder twice toward the doors, hoping to see the cleric, hoping for some reassurance that there was some meaning to this midnight rendezvous, but the cleric had vanished, and Eevraith continued onward alone.

He heard footfalls, and turned. Framed in the door, backlit by the street lamps outside, was a Tellarite. From his distance, Eevraith could judge nothing- height, age, even gender. "Who are you?"

No answer. The newcomer took a few tentative steps into the Chrainolga's sanctuary, then stopped.

"Come no closer!" shouted Eevraith, and his voice reverberated off the carved stone walls. "I'm armed."

The newcomer took something from his side- perhaps a weapon- and held it up.

"What are you doing?" said Eevraith, his voice rattling.

A brilliant light blinded him, and Eevraith clutched his eyes in pain. The footfalls began again and came closer, and Eevraith fell to the ground in pain and fear. "Who are you?" he cried again.

The footfalls stopped, somewhere near his head. "Eevraith?" he heard.

He opened his eyes. Purple afterimages filled his vision, and his eyes were unable to focus. "Tev?" he said, half-recognizing the voice. "Tev, what's the meaning of this?"

Rough hands grasped his shoulder and yanked him up off the sanctuary floor, then shoved him into a seat on a wooden bench. "You could hurt yourself like that, Eevraith."

"Tev, you blinded me with that light!" Eevraith shouted. His vision had begun to clear, but the interior of the sanctuary and Tev still appeared murky to him. Tev took his torchlight and set it atop a table pointing upward, and the interior was bathed in twilight as light reflected from the high ceiling.

"How was I to have known you would look directly into my light?" Tev took a seat on a bench opposite Eevraith and propped his head in his hands.

Eevraith rubbed his eyes. "What do you want, Tev? I haven't the time for this. I have a meeting of some sort." Realization dawned on him, and he looked up at Tev through his bleary eyes. "The meeting. It was you. This was all your idea."

"I knew I could appeal to your baser natures- curiosity and your career. Who would send you a cryptic note, asking for a clandestine meeting at a little-visited location at an inconvenient hour, offering to further your own political ambitions? You had to know. You wouldn't have been you if you hadn't come."

Eevraith's head hurt. "We're not children anymore, Tev." He paused and looked at Tev. "How did you get that message into my office?" Before Tev could answer, he realized the answer. "The transporter. You beamed it into my office, onto my desk."

Tev shrugged. "Not onto the desk. Above the desk. Six centimeters, to be precise, and gravity took its course."

"You're too insufferably pleased with yourself."

Tev said nothing, and they sat together in silence as Eevraith's eyes cleared somewhat.

"How is Biyert?" asked Tev.

"Fine," said Eevraith, caught off-guard. "She's fine. She dotes on our daughters too much for my taste, but that makes her happy." He shrugged. "She wants another child, but I don't know that I love her that much anymore. If I ever did." He looked at Tev and scowled. "Why does this even matter to you? The two of you weren't going to be together, not the way you wanted to be. Her family would never have approved. How would it have looked to have the granddaughter of the rising leader of the ruling party marry an off-worlder? By Phinda, Tev, that would have cost the party more than an election- it would have cost it power for a generation." He paused. "Is that what you really wanted? To destroy everything your father worked so long and so hard to achieve for Grevesh and the party?"

"Leave my father out of it," Tev said, his nostrils flared in anger. Eevraith said nothing. Finally, Tev said, "Did you at least tell Biyert I had returned?"

Eevraith shook his head. Reading the expression on Tev's face, he said, "I didn't even know until I saw you in the palace that you were aboard the da Vinci. Had I known, I would have asked Starfleet for another ship."

Tev nodded. "Starfleet thought, in light of my history here and my experience with the Ring, that the da Vinci was the ship best suited for this mission."

Eevraith blinked a few times, his vision very nearly returned to normal. "Under other circumstances, I might agree," said Eevraith quietly.

Tev looked down, following Eevraith's gaze, to the padd in his hands. "I have the mission report." He paused. "It's as I feared. The elevator cannot be repaired."

Tev held out the padd. Eevraith considered it for a moment, then reached out and took it. He looked down at the screen, weighing whether or not he should read the report. He wanted to read it, had to know what it said, what the options were, but there would be time enough the next few days for that. "The elevator," said Eevraith at last. "You can't repair the damage."

"No," said Tev quietly.

"The dampened oscillation from the structural integrity fields."

Tev nodded. "The shell was held too rigid. At the edge of the structural integrity fields, the shell stressed more than it should have."

"You wanted to gloat," Eevraith said, his voice neutral, his statement flat. "You always had to be right. You always had to know more about the Ring and the elevators than anyone else. This is your payback, for all the perceived slights of twenty years ago." He stood, his face flushed in anger, and threw the padd onto the stone floor. "Did you do any legitimate work? Or did you and your team work from a preconceived notion that Kharzh'ulla would have to be abandoned out of your misplaced sense of spite?"

Tev spat on the floor in front of Eevraith, then looked up into Eevraith's eyes with a look of cold fury behind his own. "Don't ever insult my work again, Eevraith," Tev said, his voice low. "Forget that at your peril." Tev paused as Eevraith stumbled back to his bench. "You owe me a favor. I left you in peace twenty years ago. I did nothing to derail your personal and

political ambitions when you know damn well I could have."

He stood, walked across the chamber, picked up the padd Eevraith had so carelessly thrown, and held it out to him. Eevraith looked up at the proffered padd through bleary eyes.

"The solution," Tev said. "How to save Kharzh'ulla without evacuation." He paused and looked meaningfully at Eevraith. "How to save your career and further your ambitions."

Eevraith looked at the padd held before him. He thought about taking it in his hands again. "The elevator will collapse," said Eevraith, his voice tired and heavy. "What else is there to say, other than evacuate Kharzh'ulla?"

Tev bared his teeth. Eevraith found this disconcerting. "Accelerate the collapse," Tev said.

* * *

"You look tired, Gomez," said Gold.

They walked together through the da Vinci's corridors toward the bridge, their morning ritual.

Gomez smiled wanly. "Late night, sir."

"Work or pleasure?"

She made a pffft sound and shook her head. "Work. Strictly work." They reached the turbolift, stepped inside, and took up positions on opposite sides.

"I heard you approved some sightseeing trips to the surface," Gomez said.

Gold nodded. "I've thought of going down myself. The Ring is impressive enough from orbit, and I'm told it's spectacular from the surface."

Gomez gestured, her hand cutting an arc through the air in front of her. "You should see how the sunlight catches the Ring."

"With luck, I'll have the chance before we leave."

Gomez nodded. "How long will a planetary evacuation take, do you think?"

Gold exhaled loudly and frowned. "Six months, for a population this size. The real problem is whether or not the Federation has the resources for an evacuation." He paused. "I don't know that they do."

"The Dominion War," said Gomez.

Gold nodded. "The rebuilding is part of it, certainly. There's also the question of political expediency."

"How so?"

"Tellar is a Federation member world, but Kharzh'ulla isn't. As a political entity, it's aligned with the Federation, hence their offer to allow Starfleet to use the Ring as a staging area for the fleet during the war. But their acquiescence to the request was grudging, and Starfleet,

which would be the one to handle any evacuation, is likely to remember that."

"Even with lives at stake?"

"It would depend, I think, on the urgency of the situation. How close is the elevator to collapse? How long can the Kharzh'ullans' temporary solution hold the elevator in place? How many people can the Kharzh'ullans evacuate themselves? Starfleet would take those three questions into account, and if in their opinion the elevator can remain stable for three or five years, any evacuation might not happen until a few years down the road." He paused. "There are planets who contributed more to the war effort and who suffered more than Kharzh'ulla."

The turbolift doors opened onto the bridge. Gold and Gomez had arrived early for their shift- gamma shift hadn't yet gone off duty, and alpha shift hadn't yet arrived.

Tev turned in the command seat to the turbolift doors and stood as Gold and Gomez stepped onto the bridge. "Good morning, Captain," he said.

"How was the mission to the surface?" asked Gold as he took his seat in the command chair.

Tev shrugged. "The Kharzh'ullans have their choice now- abandon their world, or collapse the elevator to save the Ring."

"And it's up to them to decide which path to take," said Gomez.

"Which way do you think Eevraith will go, Commander Tev?"

"Eevraith will do what is best for Eevraith. Saving Kharzh'ulla saves his career."

Gold nodded. He turned to Gomez. "If the Kharzh'ullans accept Tev's plan, how long would it take to implement it?"

Gomez looked to Tev. "A day. Maybe less." She paused. "We'd have to evacuate some of the Ring and the elevator base, and then place detonators near the base of the elevator."

Gold leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Now begins the waiting." He turned to Tev. "You're dismissed, Commander. Get some rest."

"With all due respect, sir, I would prefer to remain on the bridge."

Gold nodded. "As you wish."

Alpha shift came on duty- Haznedl at ops, Wong at conn, Shabalala at tactical. Gomez and Tev reviewed reports, but there was little to be done unless or until the Kharzh'ullans accepted the idea of collapsing the elevator.

"Sir," said Shabalala, "we're being hailed. First Minister Grevesh."

Gold nodded. "On screen."

The viewscreen changed from Kharzh'ulla and the Ring to the interior of Grevesh's ministerial office.

"First Minister," said Gold as he rose from his command chair and approached the viewscreen, "this is an unexpected surprise."

"Captain Gold," said Grevesh, "I bid you a happy morning. Is your Commander Gomez there?"

Gold nodded, turned, and gestured to Gomez. "She is, yes."

Grevesh nodded. "I wish her advice, Captain. I trust you do not mind."

"Not at all, First Minister." He nodded to Gomez, and she took Gold's place before the viewscreen.

"First Minister, what can I do for you?" Gomez asked.

Grevesh smiled. "Minister Eevraith came to me this morning with a most unusual proposal, and I wished to solicit your opinion."

"If I can help, of course."

"I thought his idea mad, but if he says it can be done, perhaps there is some truth to it. He tells me that the elevator cannot be repaired, and that our only option to save Kharzh'ulla and the Ring is to allow the damaged elevator to collapse."

"Collapse?" said Gomez with a hint of skepticism in her voice. "Wouldn't the elevator's collapse bring the Ring down on Kharzh'ulla?"

"Indeed," said Grevesh. "I thought much the same. But Eevraith tells me that if we separate the elevator from the Ring and allow just the elevator to collapse, the Ring will remain fixed in place."

Gomez crossed her arms and stroked her chin pensively. "Collapse the elevator, but allow the Ring to remain in place?" She paused. "First Minister, could I discuss this with Captain Gold and Commander Tev?"

Grevesh nodded. "Please, Commander Gomez, take your time."

Gomez smiled. "Just a few moments, First Minister." She made a throat-cutting gesture to Shabalala.

"The channel is mute."

Gomez looked at Tev. "Eevraith presented your plan as his," she said.

Tev nodded. "Of course."

"Doesn't that bother you?" said Gold.

"If it saves Kharzh'ulla," said Tev, "I do not care what Eevraith does."

Gomez nodded. She knew Tev's sense of pride from personal experience. She could only imagine the sense of pride Eevraith had to be the politician that he was.

She returned to the center of the bridge. "Tony, reopen the channel."

Shabalala nodded. "Channel open."

"First Minister Grevesh," said Gomez, "I've consulted with Captain Gold and Commander Tev. They're skeptical of Minister Eevraith's plan, but they're willing to look into whether or not it will work."

"Minister Eevraith assures me that it will."

Gomez nodded. She turned and looked at Tev, hunched over a computer terminal. "Commander Tev?" she said loudly.

Tev looked up. "Commander, I believe Eevraith's plan will work."

"Did you hear that, First Minister? Tev has run a simulation of Minister Eevraith's plan."

On-screen, Grevesh smiled. "I thought Minister Eevraith mad. It reassures me that his idea was not."

Tev rose from his seat and came to Gomez's side. "Commander," said Tev, "Eevraith's plan is a simple one. We could implement it within six hours."

"Six hours?" repeated Gomez. "So soon?"

Tev nodded as he looked directly at Grevesh on the viewscreen. "Yes, Commander. We need only detach the elevator from the Ring, and if we were to detonate explosive charges near the elevator's base the elevator would collapse into the ocean."

"Or," said Gold as he joined Tev and Gomez in the center of the bridge, "we could use the da Vinci's tractor beams to pull the elevator into deep space, so as not to pollute Kharzh'ulla's oceans."

Grevesh nodded. "Very clever, Captain. And very wise."

"If the minister approves," said Gomez, "shall we make the attempt today?"

"I am not by nature a hasty person, Commander Gomez, but we have delayed enough with the elevator. Time may not be essential, but I would feel more secure with the knowledge that the threat of the falling Ring had been resolved, as would all Kharzh'ullans."

Gomez smiled. "Then we shall begin preparations here to collapse the elevator, First Minister. If you and Minister Eevraith would care to beam aboard, we would be glad to have you aboard to witness the elevator's collapse."

Grevesh nodded. "I would very much like that, Commander Gomez. I hope to give you an answer soon."

"Of course," said Gomez. "Da Vinci out." The viewscreen went dark.

"Well," said Gold with a sigh, "fine acting job, both of you."

"Thank you, Captain," said Gomez.

Tev said, "What is your plan?"

"We'll place detonators on the elevator shaft as soon as Grevesh gives the word. We'll also need to coordinate an evacuation of part of the Ring and the elevator base with Kharzh'ullan authorities."

Gold rubbed his chin. "That could take some time, Gomez. There's no need to rush this."

Gomez nodded. "I agree, Captain, but collapsing the elevator will be simple and straightforward." She turned to Tev. "Grab a quick nap, Commander. You'll need it."

Chapter 8

Tev materialized in space, alone. Tev, Gomez, and Pattie were beamed to locations one hundred twenty degrees apart around the damaged elevator shaft, two hundred kilometers above the base. There they would await the transport of antimatter charges to be clamped magnetically to the shaft's outer surface.

He opened his eyes, which had been closed tightly before he dematerialized aboard the da Vinci, and ten meters in front of him was the elevator shaft casing. "Daokhra!" he exclaimed as he lost his equilibrium in the zero gravity environment.

The elevator shaft dominated his view, filling his vision as far as his eyes could see in any direction. The shaft was ten kilometers in diameter at this point along its length, and from Tev's perspective the curvature was so slight that the shaft appeared to be flat, not curved. Had he been able to look down in his environmental suit he would have seen Kharzh'ulla two hundred kilometers beneath his feet. Tev felt queasy in his stomachs.

He heard Gomez's voice in his ear through the open comm circuit. "Tev, can you read me?"

"I... I read you, Commander," he said, his voice quiet and hoarse.

"Are you all right?"

Tev squeezed his eyes shut. His breathing went ragged. "Fine, Commander. I'm fine."

"Tev, I need you to focus."

Tev's breathing became shallow and fast. "Tev!" he heard, but as he began to hyperventilate in his environmental suit he couldn't answer Gomez. His breathing slowed, he began to pant—the suit's atmosphere changed, recirculating carbon dioxide and decreasing the oxygen content.

He caught his breath and began to breathe deeply. Lancing pain sliced through his eyes. Distant voices sounded over the comm channel, probably Gomez and the bridge, but he couldn't focus on them. Despite the head pains, despite the confusion his body felt at the zero-gee environment of open space, he felt peaceful. Calm.

"Commander," he said, after several seconds, "I'm all right."

"Tev," he heard, recognizing Captain Gold's gravelly voice, "what's your status?"

"A touch of space sickness, sir."

He heard in the background what he thought was Dr. Lense's voice. "Tellarites don't handle null gravity well. Upsets their equilibrium. We might want to beam him back, have someone else place the detonation charges."

"I will be fine, Doctor," Tev said. "Might we continue with the mission?"

"I agree with Tev," said Gomez. "If he says he's fine, I'll take him at his word, then expect him to visit sickbay once he's back aboard. But he's in place now, so let's move on."

Moments later a detonation charge materialized silently between Tev and the shaft. It was large- a circular based cone two meters around and five tall. Within the cone was an antimatter pod and a remote detonator to collapse the antimatter containment field, causing an annihilation capable of destroying the elevator shaft.

Tev touched the maneuvering thruster control on his right arm and moved slowly toward the charge. "Contact," he said as he grappled with the handle at the end of the cone.

"Contact," Gomez said.

"Contact," said Pattie a few moments later.

Using the maneuvering thrusters, Tev pushed the cone toward the elevator shaft. A minute later he felt a slight jolt as the broad base of the cone made contact with the shaft, and he cut off the thrusters. He ran his hand along the side of the cone, touched the maglock control, and locked the cone to the side of the shaft.

"Cone in place, Commander," he said.

"I copy that, Tev."

He let go of the cone and floated in space beside it. He closed his eyes, touched the maneuvering thruster control by memory, not sight, and oriented himself with his back toward Kharzh'ulla. He opened his eyes to look straight up the length of the elevator shaft. He took a deep breath, taking in the sight of the shaft dwindling into infinity. It had stood for thousands of years, and by his actions it wouldn't stand even another day. He felt his eyes go moist, and his breathing became choked. He wanted to look down, down to Kharzh'ulla, to the places he had known so well as a youth, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He had always looked up. When his mother died, he looked up. When he declared himself for engineering at the university, he looked up. When he left Kharzh'ulla, his career in disgrace, he looked up.

As the transporter beam took him, he looked up.

* * *

"I'm fine," said Tev, his arms crossed, his brows knotted.

Lense frowned. "That's my determination to make, not yours." She picked up her medscanner off the worktable. "Now, lie down on the biobed."

Tev sat resolutely on the biobed. "Doctor, it was the merest case of zero-gee discomfort." He looked to Gomez standing near the sickbay doors. "Commander Gomez will attest to that."

Gomez held up her hands in a don't-look-at-me gesture.

"Discomfort?" repeated Lense. "The med sensors in your suit showed your heart rate up, your blood pressure up, and you were hyperventilating." She paused, taking in Tev's defiant expression. "I can have you medically relieved from this mission, Tev."

Tev flared his nostrils and narrowed his eyes. He flopped backward onto the biobed in exasperation. "Very well, Doctor. Run your tests."

Lense smiled sardonically and shook her head.

"Well," said Gomez, "if the patient's in good hands, I'll be in the transporter room meeting First Minister Grevesh and Minister Eevraith."

Lense nodded, then turned back to running her medscanner above Tev's body. The last thing Gomez heard as the sickbay doors closed behind her was a snort of derision from Tev.

* * *

Slumped in his antigrav chair, Grevesh looked frail. Gomez thought he hadn't looked particularly strong on the surface, but under the da Vinci's higher gravity, he seemed to wilt. "First Minister, are you all right?"

Grevesh blinked his eyes a few times, as if to clear them, and Eevraith knelt down on the transporter platform beside him. "First Minister?" Eevraith said.

Grevesh pushed Eevraith away, and he inhaled loudly and deeply. "I feel heavy," he said, his voice weak. He smiled when his eyes focused on Gomez.

Gomez nodded and smiled. "You feel that way because, in essence, you are heavier. But as your body becomes accustomed to the higher gravity aboard ship that feeling will pass." She stepped up onto the transporter platform and knelt at Grevesh's knee. "Welcome aboard the da Vinci."

Grevesh patted Gomez's hand. "Thank you, my dear."

Eevraith and Gomez rose, and Grevesh's chair floated off the transporter platform and out into the corridor. Two security guards led the way as they walked to the turbolift.

"How much preparation has your team done, Commander?" asked Eevraith.

"We've placed the detonation charges, and now we're moving on to the next phase—detaching the Ring segment westward of the damaged elevator."

"How?"

"The Ring consists of segments a few hundred kilometers long. What we're doing is simply 'breaking' the Ring at one of the joints with explosive charges, then using focused phaser

bursts if needed."

"Clever," Eevraith said. "How long until you 'break' the Ring?"

Gomez shrugged. "Within an hour, once our engineering team reports back."

The turbolift doors parted, and Grevesh, Eevraith, and Gomez entered the cabin. The doors slid shut, and Grevesh looked up at Gomez standing on his left. "What of the people living in the Ring?" The Ring was inhabited along much of its length. The section above the damaged elevator had a large population due to its proximity to the elevator that serviced Prelv. The Ring segment east of the elevator's terminus had been abandoned after the Jem'Hadar attack, but to the west twelve thousand Kharzh'ullans called the Ring home.

"Fortunately," she said, "we've moved only a thousand Kharzh'ullans."

"The rest of that Ring segment won't be affected?" Eevraith said.

Gomez shook her head. "We wanted to remove the parts of the Ring that were most affected by the stresses the SIF on the elevator caused. Only a few hundred kilometers."

"We evacuated the elevator base of the repair and construction teams this morning," said Eevraith.

Gomez nodded. It was a wise precaution if the elevator shaft fell onto the base as the da Vinci attempted to pull the shaft away from the planet.

Grevesh patted Gomez's hand as the turbolift doors opened onto the bridge. Grevesh's chair floated forward onto the bridge, and Eevraith and Gomez followed closely behind.

Grevesh's eyes were transfixed by the image on the viewscreen. From the da Vinci's vantage point high above the elevator terminus the Jem'Hadar-inflicted damage to the Ring was clearly visible- the shattered Ring dominated the viewscreen, with Kharzh'ulla IV as a backdrop.

Grevesh's eyes watered and grew heavy.

Eevraith knelt beside him. "First Minister...?"

Grevesh waved him away. "Every morning I go out onto the balcony and look up into the dawn sky. Every morning I see the break in the beauty and order of the Ring." His voice grew quiet. "I saw it happen. I watched the battle. I saw the lights dancing in the night sky." Then his voice hardened in anger. "I saw the explosion as the grelvian Jem'Hadar destroyed the Ring." Looking to Gomez, he bowed his head slightly. "I apologize. My feelings are strong. I meant no disrespect."

Gomez smiled, uncomprehending. "Grelvan" must have been a strong Tellarite curse. She would have to ask Faulwell about that. "No apologies necessary, First Minister. May I present Captain Gold?" She gestured to Gold, standing at his command seat just beyond the bridge railing.

Grevesh nodded, and his chair came around the railing and into the center of the bridge. "Captain," said Grevesh, "I had not seen the damage from space before. Thank you for the opportunity." He smiled, and his hairless face seemed to brighten. "Now we can save our

future."

* * *

"How did you even find this place?" asked Carol Abramowitz.

Fabian Stevens leaned back in the chair at the open-air café and shrugged. "Just playing tourist." The café sat along Plev's waterfront, and from their table Stevens and Abramowitz had an excellent view of the ocean and of the elevator that rose to the southeast.

"I'd have thought they'd be busier," she said. She took a sip from her glass of obrie, a local fruit wine, and scrunched her eyebrows. It had a stronger bite than she expected; she wondered idly what the trema fruit tasted like, if the fermented juice was so strong.

Stevens turned and looked into the restaurant behind them. A dozen patrons milled about inside. "Seems busy enough to me."

Abramowitz shook her head. "No, I would have expected to see more Kharzh'ullans getting a good view of the elevator's collapse."

Stevens glanced at his wrist chrono. "That's not for several hours yet."

"Then why...?"

"Why are we here?" finished Stevens. He shrugged. "Why not? Get good seats? Get lunch?" He smiled. "Maybe even both."

Abramowitz looked up into the sky. Stevens was right- they had a fantastic view. The sky was relatively cloudless, save for a bank of cumulus clouds off to the far south. The sky had a deep blue color, almost cobalt. Kharzh'ulla's sun, while not directly overhead, had fallen slightly to the southwest, and sunlight glinted off the Ring. The damaged elevator rose in the south, a straight line rising from beyond the horizon to the Ring high above, looking perfectly serene. Even the smell of the ocean salt put Abramowitz into a quiet, reflective mood. Sometimes, she realized, there was a value to playing tourist.

The waiter came by with their lunch order. Abramowitz had ordered a vegetable platter, but to her eyes the Kharzh'ullan vegetables had the wrong color. What might have been green on Earth was nearly black in hue, and things that might have been tomatoes were blue instead of red. She looked at Stevens' order, a native meat of some kind.

"Are you sure that's wise?" she asked.

"Hmm?" said Stevens as he took a bite off his fork.

"Eating that," said Abramowitz as she pointed at Stevens's lunch with her fork.

Stevens followed the line of her fork and looked down at his plate. "This?" he said with a slight frown. "Looks fine to me." He shrugged. "Even if I couldn't pronounce it." He took another forkful, shoved it in his mouth, and began to chew.

Abramowitz rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Don't blame me," she said, "if you end up in sickbay, eating something you shouldn't have."

"From lunch?" He crinkled his nose. "Not going to happen. Not with my cast-iron stomach."

A Kharzh'ullan came running along the boardwalk toward them. He ran past the café's outdoor tables. Stevens paid him no attention, but Abramowitz turned and followed him with her eyes as he continued down the boardwalk. He stopped and looked up into the sky. She nodded slowly- the elevator was sure to be in everyone's mind today- and turned back to her lunch.

"That was odd," she said quietly.

"Hmm?" said Stevens. She hadn't realized she had spoken loud enough for Stevens to hear her.

"That Kharzh'ullan that ran past us." She turned back and gave him another look. Where he stood, there now had gathered a crowd. "He was in too much of a hurry. The elevator won't be collapsed for another few hours."

Stevens nodded. He glanced up at the elevator shaft.

"Carol," he said. "Turn around. Take a look."

"What?" she said as she turned in her chair.

Her gaze followed Stevens's.

The elevator shaft was listing.

What had been a straight line from horizon to sky was now bent, and far above the terminus was detached from the Ring.

"Fabian," she said.

He stood. "I think we have a problem." He tapped his combadge. "Stevens to da Vinci. What's going on up there?"

Chapter 9

"Gomez!" exclaimed Gold as he rose from the command seat. Red alert sirens screamed. "What happened?"

Gomez turned from the rear science station and took in the sight on the viewscreen. The elevator terminus appeared to have risen above the Ring in its geosynchronous orbit. Eevraith huddled over her shoulder and fidgeted nervously. "The elevator shaft decompressed when we detached it from the Ring." He nodded toward the viewscreen. "The decompression caused premature detonation of the charges we planted five hundred kilometers above the base."

Gold came to the railing and looked to Gomez. "Decompression? Explain."

Gomez frowned as she tried to put her thoughts into words.

"I can explain, Captain," said Eevraith.

Gold said, "Go ahead, Minister."

"The structural integrity fields we used to keep the elevator intact. In keeping the elevator shaft too rigid, we may also have made it too heavy."

Gomez nodded. Structural integrity fields could make matter artificially as dense as neutronium, increasing its weight temporarily. "That could be why the Ring was stressed by the SIF. It wasn't holding the elevator shaft up. It was holding it down. When we detached the terminus from the rest of the Ring, it would bounce up like a coiled spring."

"Precisely, Commander," said Eevraith. "By 'springing' up, the elevator could have jarred the charges enough to cause them to detonate prematurely."

Gold nodded.

"Captain," said Shabalala, "Mr. Stevens is hailing us. He wants to know what's happening."

Gold sighed. "I want to know that myself. Tell Stevens to stand by." He turned to Songmin Wong at the conn. "Position us above the elevator terminus, Wong." The lieutenant's hands danced across his console. "Engage," said Gold.

The da Vinci was thousands of kilometers out of position. The plan had been for the da Vinci to make a tractor lock on the elevator terminus, then detonate the charges. Now that the elevator was in motion, Gomez wondered, would the da Vinci be able to prevent tragedy?

* * *

"I'm needed on the bridge," said Tev as he sat up on the sickbay biobed. Red alert sirens screamed in the corridors and they could be heard in sickbay.

Lense moved to block him from leaving as he stood. "No," she said, putting her arm across his chest, "not until I say you can."

"With all due respect, Doctor," said Tev, his voice low, "if something has gone wrong with the elevator or the Ring, there's no one aboard better qualified than I to deal with it."

"Commander Gomez? Minister Eevraith?"

Tev snorted.

Lense took a step back and folded her arms. "If I give you permission to leave, you'll be back once the crisis is over?"

Tev considered this for a moment. "You may have Lieutenant Commander Corsi send a security detail to drag me back."

"I'll hold you to that." Lense gestured to the sickbay doors. "Go."

* * *

"In position, Captain," called Wong.

Gold resumed his seat and nodded. "Very good."

Grevesh's chair came up to Gold. "Captain," he said fretfully, as he looked back and forth between Gold and the viewscreen. "Can you save the planet?"

"If we don't, it won't be for lack of trying, First Minister," said Gold. "But these people haven't let me down yet." He looked at Grevesh, then looked squarely at the viewscreen. The terminus of the elevator had shifted from its earlier position. Where before it had risen above the Ring's geosynchronous orbit, it now had fallen back to its earlier height and out of its equatorial position. "Where's she falling, Gomez?"

Gomez looked to the sensor console, then looked up at the viewscreen. "The elevator is angling to the south by four degrees." She paused. "Given its height, if it continues to fall in that direction, it will wrap around the planet."

Gold rose and came to Haznedl's console. He planted his hand on her shoulder. "Can we get a tractor beam lock on the terminus?"

Susan Haznedl's hands played across her console. She frowned, and looked up at Gold. "We'll need to move in closer because of the weight of the elevator."

Gold looked to Wong. "You heard her. Do it."

Eevraith rushed to Gold's side. "Captain? We haven't much time."

Gold looked up into Eevraith's blurry red eyes. "We can't make the time, but we can steal it where we can."

The turbolift doors opened, and Tev stepped out. Gold, Gomez, and Eevraith all turned. Tev took a long look at the viewscreen. "I apologize, sirs," he said. "I was delayed."

* * *

A crowd had begun to gather near the waterfront, more than just the few that had gathered at the end of the boardwalk minutes before. From the shop next door to the restaurant, Kharzh'ullans poured outside and began to look up into space. Stevens imagined that the local broadcast networks were covering the impending collapse of the elevator.

A Kharzh'ullan ran up to Abramowitz and Stevens. He towered over them both; he stood nearly three meters tall. "You're from the Starfleet ship. The one sent to repair the Ring." He looked up into the sky at the elevator and the Ring. "What have you done?"

"I don't know what's going on," said Stevens.

"Fabian," said Abramowitz, "I think the elevator is starting to sway."

Stevens scowled. To him, it appeared as though the elevator were stationary and straight, albeit with a kink near the horizon. At the Ring, however, the elevator was no longer attached; where he could see the break to the east where the Jem'Hadar had destroyed the Ring during the war, he could now see another break to the west of the terminus. He only wished that the da Vinci had given him more to go on than Tony's terse "stand by."

Stevens looked up at the Kharzh'ullan. "The da Vinci is doing what they can. What they

planned on doing."

The Kharzh'ullan looked skeptical. "I thought they were not collapsing the elevator for several hours yet."

Stevens shrugged. "We probably had the time wrong." He looked past the Kharzh'ullan at the elevator. It wasn't swaying, as Abramowitz had thought, but it did have a pronounced list.

Abramowitz pointed up at the elevator's terminus. Stevens and the Kharzh'ullan followed her gaze. "Fabian! The elevator is starting to fall!"

* * *

"Tractors!" ordered Gomez.

Shabalala nodded as he touched the tractor beam control. "Tractor beams engaged."

"Take us to a higher orbit," said Gold.

"Aye, sir," replied Wong.

The bridge lights flickered momentarily, and the usual smooth engine hum was replaced by a grating whine. Gold frowned.

"Captain," said Tev from the engineering console, "engines are showing strain due to the tractor beam."

Gold rose and looked at Tev. "Already? We've only just engaged it."

Tev nodded. "It's the elevator's size, sir. Its length and its mass, now increased due to the structural integrity fields. The tractors simply weren't designed for it."

Gold looked to Shabalala. "We're holding the elevator in place, Captain," he reported. "I could be wrong, but it looks like bottom of the shaft may have fallen into the ocean."

"Damn," said Gold as he returned to his seat. He looked to Grevesh at his left. "We're doing what we can."

Grevesh nodded slowly and put his withered hand on Gold's knee. "I know, Captain. I know."

"Captain," said Gomez, catching his attention, "I have an idea. What if we broke the shaft in two with a photon torpedo?"

Shabalala shook his head. "With all due respect, sir, we'd never get a firing solution. Not from where we are."

Tev came to Shabalala's side and looked to Gomez and Gold. "The lieutenant is correct. Positioned above the terminus as we are, we could not fire on the elevator's base, nor at any point along its length, with any accuracy. But if we were to drop the tractor beam and maneuver to a lower orbit, we could accurately target any point we wish."

Eevraith put his hand on Tev's shoulder and shook his head. "We haven't time for that, Tev."

Tev brushed Eevraith's hand away. "Captain," he said quietly, "we have the time. We need only go down and away, as quickly as we can."

Gold looked from Eevraith to Tev and back. He scowled.

"Shabalala," Gold said at last, "load torpedo bays." He turned to Wong. "You heard Tev. Down and away, your discretion."

The conn officer nodded. "Course plotted, Captain."

Gold took a deep breath. "Wong, as soon as the tractors disengage, full impulse."

Wong swallowed hard and nodded. "Aye, sir."

Leaning back in his command chair, Gold said, "Shabalala, disengage the tractor beam. Wong, go!"

The engine whine ceased as Gold felt himself pressed back by inertia into his command seat as the inertial dampers worked overtime.

"We're in position, Captain," said Wong.

On the viewscreen was the elevator, running from top to bottom of the screen. Behind it, curving away, was the Ring as it passed behind Kharzh'ulla and dwindled in the distance.

Gold looked to Tev. An unspoken communication passed between them. Tev nodded.

"Fire," said Gold.

* * *

Dark clouds had begun to roll in from the south. Abramowitz paid them no attention, save to note their obscuring of the elevator at the horizon.

"The elevator looks as though it's toppling," said Stevens.

Abramowitz nodded. The terminus had fallen significantly away from the Ring by ten degrees of separation. Whether the separation was due to the elevator falling toward Kharzh'ulla or away from them in Prelv she couldn't tell from her vantage point.

A bright flash in the southeast sky caught her attention. A shuttlecraft, the sunlight glinting off its side? No, something else.

"Those are photon torpedoes," Stevens said.

Overhead bright lights streaked across the sky and made contact with the elevator above the cloudheads.

Above the point where the torpedoes struck the elevator, it began to list significantly. Abramowitz even thought the elevator might have been broken in two.

* * *

The da Vinci sped back to the elevator terminus. In the minutes since the torpedo detonation it had fallen closer to Kharzh'ulla's surface- not by much, only a few dozen kilometers.

"Engage tractors," ordered Gold.

Shabalala nodded and touched his console. "Tractors engaged." The engine whine, while not as harsh as earlier, was still louder than Gold would have wished.

"Captain," said Tev, "the lower portion of the elevator will fall into Kharzh'ulla's ocean."

"Impact?" Grevesh asked, his hands trembling.

Tev took a deep breath and sighed. "The section is three hundred kilometers long. In its impact path there are no landmasses. At a guess, waves five meters high might come ashore in Prelv."

"What's the distance from the base to Prelv?" asked Gomez.

"Three thousand kilometers. By the time the waves reached Prelv, they would be largely spent of energy." He looked meaningfully at Gomez. "That would be hours from now."

Gomez nodded.

"Captain," said Wong, "we are pulling the elevator shaft into orbit."

Gold nodded. He looked at Grevesh and patted the back of his hand. "We're saving your planet, First Minister."

Grevesh smiled and nodded contentedly.

"Captain," said Tev, "the lower portion of the elevator broke into three pieces. They have all landed in the ocean."

Gomez looked up from the computer console at her side. "Captain, sensors show the Ring is stable in its geosynchronous orbit."

"Good job, Gomez."

"Captain," said Wong, "we're now passing two hundred thousand kilometers. If we disengage tractors, the elevator shaft will fall into Kharzh'ulla's sun in about four months."

Gold turned to Grevesh. "It's your call, First Minister."

Grevesh looked at the viewscreen. Kharzh'ulla had receded into the distance, and the Ring was prominent, but the elevators were invisible against the blackness of space. The elevator shaft- now twenty-five thousand kilometers long- trailed behind the da Vinci, the tractor beam an electric blue against space. "Let it drift," he said, his voice suddenly strong.

Eevraith rushed to his side and stood between Grevesh and the viewscreen. "First Minister," said Eevraith. "Don't be hasty. We can use the elevator as the building block of its replacement. We needn't toss it away."

Grevesh looked up at Eevraith, a hard look in his eyes. "If we rebuild the elevator, we do it

on our own terms. We rebuild because we can, because we have the knowledge and understanding to do so. For two centuries we rode on the back of a long-dead civilization. We used what they left behind and made it part of our culture, without understanding what it was and how it worked. The Ring and the elevators were a gift, but an unearned one." He turned and looked at Tev standing near the tactical console. "If the Ring is to be our destiny, we must learn how to make it our destiny on our own terms. Not on history's terms."

Grevesh's chair moved forward, and Eevraith stepped gingerly out of its path. The chair came around the bridge railing, and the eyes on the bridge followed. Around the tactical console Grevesh came, and he stopped before Tev. "I have shamed you, Mor glasch Tev. I accused you of not being a Kharzh'ullan, and I should not have done so. Your thinking saved our world. We can make a future together."

Tev knelt at Grevesh's knee and took Grevesh's weak hands in his. "No forgiveness is needed, First Minister."

Grevesh smiled. "Your father would be proud of you today, Tev."

The chair backed away, and Tev rose. Grevesh stopped at the turbolift doors, took one last look at the sight on the viewscreen of the elevator shaft still under the da Vinci's tractors, then turned and entered the turbolift car.

Gold thought he seemed content.

"Cut the tractor beam, Shabalala," he said.

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said with a smile. "Tractor beam disengaged."

The electric blue glow faded, and the elevator shaft drifted in space.

"Thank you, Captain Gold," said Eevraith.

Gold jerked a thumb in Tev's direction. "Tev's the one you should be thanking, Minister."

Eevraith's brows knotted. Tev said nothing.

"We know whose plan it was that saved Kharzh'ulla, Minister," said Gold slowly. "Perhaps the first minister doesn't, and it doesn't concern me especially whether he does or not. But on my bridge, we know. You can make that right, here and now, or you can't. The choice is yours, and I won't belabor it."

Eevraith looked hard at Gold, then at Gomez. A scowl crossed his face. "I haven't any idea what you're talking about, Captain Gold. If you're accusing me of something, I would expect something more than a vague threat."

Gold leaned back in his chair and spread his hands wide. "I'm neither accusing nor threatening, Minister. Merely stating."

Eevraith rose from his chair. His eyes narrowed, and he looked quickly to Tev standing next to Shabalala at the tactical console. Tev kept a neutral expression, his eyes locked on the viewscreen. Eevraith frowned. "I'll be in the transporter room. I have business to attend to in Prelv."

Eevraith turned and hurried to the turbolift.

As the turbolift doors snapped shut behind him, Gold stood and looked at Tev. "I'm sorry, son. I thought he'd have been a big enough person to admit that he wasn't who he thought he was."

Tev shook his head. "No need to apologize, Captain. Eevraith is who he is, a creature of politics and necessity."

Gomez stood and nodded. "Well, gentlemen, we still have personnel on the surface."

"Wong, take us back to Kharzh'ulla IV. Standard orbit," Gold ordered.

* * *

Abramowitz and Stevens huddled with several Kharzh'ullans beneath the canopy in front of the restaurant against the pouring rain. The storm had risen suddenly, the black clouds moved in from the south as the elevator fell, and a sudden thunderstorm erupted. They would have gone into the restaurant to ride out the storm until the da Vinci beamed them back, but the Kharzh'ullans crowded the interior and there was no more room.

Stevens thought he heard another thunderclap, but when Abramowitz pointed at the pier, he saw three human shapes take form in a transporter effect. He could barely make them out- Domenica Corsi and two security guards- and as they materialized, they raised their hands above their heads in a futile effort to block the rain and ran toward the restaurant.

"You took your sweet time!" shouted Stevens over the sound of the rain.

Corsi stopped in front of him, and Stevens thought he detected a sardonic smile cross her face. "You're all wet," she said.

"So are you," he retorted feebly.

"Why didn't you just beam us back?" asked Abramowitz.

Corsi nodded. "The captain wanted us to beam down and see if everything was all right."

"It is, except for this storm," said Abramowitz.

"Tev says it's because of the elevators that fell into the ocean," said Corsi. "They evaporated the water when they hit, and now you've got the rain."

That made sense to Stevens. The storm clouds had come in from the south, just as the elevator fell.

"Corsi to da Vinci," she said as she tapped her combadge. "Five to beam up."

"Domenica," said Stevens.

"Yeah, Fabe?"

"I don't feel so hot."

Corsi frowned. "Stand in the rain, you catch a cold. That's what my grandfather always said."

Abramowitz laughed as the rain fell. "I think it's more that he ate something he shouldn't have."

Corsi shrugged as the transporter effect took them. "Why am I not surprised?"

Chapter 10

"We're being hailed, sir," said Lambdin, the da Vinci's gamma-shift ops officer. He turned in his seat back toward Tev. "It's a private communication for you."

Tev snorted. "From whom?"

Lambdin's fingers played across his console. "Sender identity not disclosed. But the message is tagged as coming from the palace on Prelv."

Tev stood. He began to move toward the conference room doors, then stopped. "On screen," he said to Lambdin.

"Sir?" said Lambdin, confused.

"On screen," Tev repeated as he returned to the captain's chair.

Lambdin raised his eyebrows, and the image of Kharzh'ulla on the viewscreen was replaced with Eevraith.

"I thought this was a private communication," said Eevraith.

Tev flared his nostrils. "Look about, Eevraith. There are but four of us on the bridge." Tev, Lambdin, Winn Mara at tactical, and Martina Barre at conn. "Whatever you say will remain here."

Eevraith nodded slowly. "I wished to thank you, Tev."

Tev said nothing.

"Did you hear me? Thank you."

"I heard you, Eevraith. What do you wish me to say? That I appreciate your gratitude?"

Eevraith snorted. "Is that what you want, Tev? An argument?"

"I want nothing, Eevraith."

They fell silent, the only sound the hum and chirp of consoles about the da Vinci's bridge.

At last Eevraith spoke. "You should see the celebration. Fireworks over Prelv, now that the rains have subsided, the crowds at the waterfront. It's momentous, Tev, to put away a year of fear, to open a new door to the future." He paused. "Some of your crew are there. You should be there, too."

"I did all that was needed."

"Biyert asked about you, earlier today."

Tev's nostrils flared. "I don't believe you."

Eevraith frowned. "You know me too well." He paused. "I thought if you believed..." His sentence trailed off, incomplete.

Moments passed with neither saying a word. Tev sat impassively in the captain's chair, while Eevraith fidgeted behind his office desk.

"Will there be anything else, Eevraith? Or should I close the channel?"

Eevraith sighed. "No, I suppose there's not," he said with finality. "I had hoped..." The sentence trailed away. He looked down at his desk, away from Tev.

"Gersha gorva orga," said Tev in Tellarite. May your life prosper.

Eevraith looked up at Tev. His eyes narrowed, his brows tightened, and the corners of his mouth turned upward. He smiled, a most un-Tellarite gesture. "Thank you, Tev."

Eevraith's office disappeared from the viewscreen, and the image of Kharzh'ulla, centered on Prelv, returned to the screen. Above Prelv bright flashes could be seen, the fireworks of the Kharzh'ullan celebration. The elevator that had risen from the ocean to the city's south now drifted in space, but the city and the world would live to face the future.

Tev felt, for the first time this mission, content.

* * *

Bart Faulwell touched the door page. Sonya Gomez answered, her uniform jacket undone, her hair askew.

"I am not interrupting anything, Commander?"

Gomez shook her head wearily. "Not at all. Just working on the post-mission reports. Come in." She gestured to her worktable. "Care for anything to drink?"

Faulwell took a seat at the table in Gomez's cabin, setting his padd in front of him. "Thanks for the offer, but no."

Gomez nodded. "Earl Grey tea, hot," she told the replicator. A steaming mug materialized, she took it, and took the other seat at her table. "What do you have for me, Bart?"

He pushed the padd across the table to Gomez. "Believe it or not, the answer to your little puzzle."

Gomez stared at Faulwell. "You said it might take weeks...."

Faulwell smiled. " 'Might' being the operative word. In actuality it took two days."

"Two days? How?"

"No one but a linguist with anything less than a passing familiarity with Tellarite, Federation Standard, and another language would have noticed or even known what to look for. The universal translator would have been insufficient and would have hidden the evidence."

"How so?"

Faulwell shrugged. "The UT lacks a sense of humor. Don't misunderstand me, Commander- it's a fabulous tool, and it makes my job easier, but it doesn't have an understanding of the subtle nuances of language. Puns and wordplay are beyond it. Commander Tev's dissertation-"

"It is Tev's writing?" Gomez interrupted.

Faulwell nodded. "No doubt whatsoever in my mind." He paused. "Have you noticed that Tev curses in Romulan?"

A puzzled look crossed Gomez's face. "No, I always assumed he was speaking Tellarite."

"You'd think that, unless you knew Tellarite and Romulan. He'd been aboard a good two weeks before I noticed. I can't say how or why he does, only that he does. And, curiously enough, Romulan curses turn up in the dissertation."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. The curses as transliterated match with actual Tellarite words, and fit the context of the work. There are twenty-seven examples of Romulan curses in the document, the most frequent one being hviehti ifv swuihsywhilluei, which means roughly 'Klingon vermin dung.' "

"But the phrase isn't written that way, is it?"

Faulwell shook his head. "It's a transliteration of the Romulan words into the Tellarite alphabet arranged into Tellarite words. In Romulan the phrase 'Klingon vermin dung' is three words long, while the Tellarite phrase used time and again is written in six words- hveet tiv swih sih il li- meaning 'torque of the turning gears.' "

"Coincidence?"

"I doubt it. The phrases used come across as awkward and ungrammatical and don't fit the style used in the rest of the dissertation. He could get away with it for two reasons. First, he wasn't a native and didn't speak the Kharzh'ullan dialect. Second, the only way to catch the Romulan curses would be to read the dissertation aloud."

"You didn't-" Gomez began.

Faulwell shrugged. "The computer has a fine reading voice, Commander. It wasn't as if I had anything better to do this mission."

"But you did, Bart. You could have gone on one of the tourist parties."

Faulwell shrugged. "Believe me, Commander, I'm glad I wasn't on Fabian's restaurant tour of Prelv."

Gomez laughed. She'd heard how Stevens landed in sickbay after beaming back to the

ship. Kharzh'ullan cuisine didn't sit well with the da Vinci's tactical specialist.

"Thank you, Bart. I owe you for this."

"We'll worry about that another day," he said as he stood. "Get some sleep, Commander. You look like hell."

"I will, later, once these reports are out of the way." She smiled. "You'd better get back to that book I interrupted. Anthony would never forgive me for keeping you from it."

As the doors to Gomez's cabin opened, Faulwell nodded. "Good dreams, Commander."

Gomez reclined on her bunk. She needed a change of pace from the traditional post-mission stress and began reading Faulwell's report on the dissertation. Ten minutes later she fell asleep, exhausted.

* * *

In the center of the mess hall Tev again sat alone, a plate of those twigs- according to Lense, it was called coun'unr, and it aided middle-aged Tellarites like Tev with their digestion- in front him and padds scattered across his table. Gomez went to the replicator and asked for chicken teriyaki and rice. The plate materialized, and she walked to Tev's table and took a seat across from him. "Mind if I join you?"

"I was attempting to work, Commander," said Tev. He fingered the coun'unr on his plate, and plucked one of the dried leaves in his mouth. He indicated the padd before him. "Captain Gold asked for the mission reports at 1500 hours, and I have much work yet to do."

"If you wanted to work, you wouldn't do it in public," said Gomez with a smile.

Tev glared at her. "Perhaps." He shrugged.

Gomez paused. "I want you to take a look at something." She proffered a padd to Tev.

He looked at it, then at her, and finally took it. "What is this?"

"Something I had Bart research for me."

"Why should I care, Commander?"

Gomez shrugged. "I don't know, Commander. You might find something of interest in it."

He flared his nostrils in annoyance, called up the file loaded on the padd, and began to read. He thumbed through several pages, his eyes ranging back and forth across the text. He glanced up at Gomez from time to time, shook his head, and read more. Reaching the end, he sighed, snorted, and handed the padd back to Gomez.

"Aetiu khieth," he said.

"Romulan?"

Tev nodded. "Roughly translated, aetiu khieth means 'damned to the seven hells.' "

Gomez smiled sardonically and shook her head wearily. "How did you ever learn Romulan curses?"

He shrugged. "Kharzh'ullan society can be rather... conservative, so I turned to Romulan curses to express myself, as the Kharzh'ullans wouldn't understand what I said, but I could express what I really felt."

"But you could have used any language- Vulcan, Klingon, Andorian. But Romulan, though- why?"

Tev sighed and scrunched his nose. "Why not?"

"What did you do, Tev? Sit in your room and study Romulan on your own?" She shrugged. "That seems rather dull."

"Perhaps." He paused and looked meaningfully at Gomez. "I had few friends in my youth. Eevraith was one of them. I needed... hobbies... to keep the mind occupied. Math and science provided little challenge for me. Language, however, proved more difficult, and why not Romulan, a language that few knew? I must commend Bartholomew for his detective work. I hadn't thought the evidence would be so transparent."

Gomez leaned back in her chair. "If it's any consolation, I thought he would do a simple style analysis on the Ring dissertation. It never occurred to me that there might be hidden messages within the text."

"Blame it on the cleverness of youth, Commander."

"Then the paper was, in fact, yours?"

Tev's nostrils flared. "Of course. We wouldn't be having this conversation otherwise, would we?"

Gomez shook her head. "No, I suppose we wouldn't."

Tev nodded slowly, but said nothing.

"Why, Tev? Why allow everyone to believe the paper was his and not yours? You could have exposed him as a fraud at any time in the past few days. You could have even exposed him twenty years ago. Why remain silent, when he has the life that could have been yours?"

Tev sighed deeply and rocked back and forth slowly in his chair. His eyes narrowed and focused somewhere beyond Gomez, almost as if he was looking past her into the memories of the past.

Finally, Tev spoke. "Do you remember our first meeting with First Minister Grevesh? How he said I would never be a Kharzh'ullan, only a Tellarite?"

"Yes," said Gomez. "I thought that was rather insulting."

"Such is the attitude my family faced for the entirety of our time on Kharzh'ulla. I was born on Tellar, spent my first decade there. Tellar is a cold world, a wet world. Tellarites lead their lives in a state of constant fog and mental oppression. Our eyesight is poor. Our digestion is terrible. Gravity makes us short and stocky." He paused, took a deep breath, and then

continued. "Kharzh'ulla, on the other hand, was everything that Tellar was not. The weather was mild, the climate warm. Gravity was much lighter than the norm, and our bodies adapted to the new environment. Even though immigration from Tellar continues to this day, off-worlders are looked upon as outsiders and never as part of the community. Had I accused Eevraith of stealing my dissertation, nothing would have happened to him. The Kharzh'ullans expect such behavior on the part of off-worlders, never from one of their own."

Gomez nodded. "You hate him, don't you? Eevraith?"

Tev shrugged. "Hate? I stopped hating him long ago."

"Why?"

"There was a time when I thought I wanted the life Eevraith has now. When my first attempt at an engineering career ended so abruptly, my father secured an appointment to Starfleet Academy, despite my being in my mid-twenties, and I discovered that I liked what I did in Starfleet. Do I have regrets? Certainly. But I have seen more and done more in my tenure with Starfleet than I would have if I had remained an outsider on Kharzh'ulla. So, no, I don't hate Eevraith anymore. He has a politician's instincts. I do not. Were it not for him, I would not be here now."

Gomez smiled. "That's very enlightened, Tev. Very philosophical."

"Merely a statement of fact, Commander."

"I'll leave you to your work, then," said Gomez as she stood.

"One thing, Commander," said Tev.

She nodded perfunctorily.

"If this matter could remain between us...?"

"Of course, Tev. Well, between you, me, and Bart. And I think we can trust to his discretion."

Tev nodded. "Thank you."

She turned and walked to the mess hall doors. She turned and looked at Tev. "Good work on the mission, Commander. Thank you."

Tev nodded, made a grunting sound, and turned back to his padds. Sonya Gomez smiled as she stepped through the mess hall doors. She had often heard the saying, "you can never go home again," but until this mission it hadn't occurred to her that it was more often a case of "you wouldn't want to go home again."