

## let's fuck up the friendship

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## let's fuck up the friendship

by [meriwethersays](#)

### Summary

“My dear—Doctor Bashir,” Garak begins. “I don’t wish to offend you, and I certainly never intended to mislead you.”

“Really.” Julian’s voice is tight now. “Really.”

“I have never—desired a more intimate relationship with you.”

“Five years of lunches and holosuite dates and book recommendations and that fitting today, when you had me undress so that you could put your hands all over me, and you never intended to mislead me.”

## Chapter 1

After the revelation of his secret, the dear doctor is—even less restrained. He's always been recklessly emotional, at least to Garak's sensibilities (but then, what human isn't recklessly emotional, you have only to look at Captain Sisko), and now it turns out that all of that was a beautifully constructed front for who he *really* is. No feigned awkwardness, no mooning after the Trill, never even the ordinary level of clumsiness that inheres in every non-Cardassian that Garak has ever met. His eyes were always a little starry when he babbled on about frontier medicine, and now they're sharp, clear. When the promenade is crowded, he slides through the crowd easily, never jostled. When Garak knocks a laser scalpel off his tailor's bench, Julian catches it in a motion so fluid that it barely registers as out-of-the-ordinary. He stops losing at darts, stops losing at springball, goes into Quark's every so often to run the dom-jot tables against passing travelers, and always knows when to stop just before anyone gets angry.

It's marvelous to watch him shuck his old identity now that the pretense is over. Garak, of course, has no prejudices against genetic engineering. He doesn't know that he could slip out of any of the various identities that he wears, but it's almost intoxicating to watch someone else do it, to derive immense satisfaction from seeing something done properly. So few things are done properly here.

Garak is alone in the shop, staring in despair at the truly hideous wedding costume that he's constructed, when Julian strolls in and says, "Garak."

"Good day to you, my dear doctor." How much of the knife's-edge shape of his shoulders is a release of his old identity, and how much of it is left over from his time in Internment Camp 371? "Can I help you with something? Have you finally decided to take me up on my offer of a new suit?"

He expects the usual dodge, the flailing, intended to cover some latent discomfort that the doctor carries about his own body, but instead Julian says, "Yes."

Internally, Garak is surprised, but he's too well-trained to let it show on his face. Instead, as though it's the most natural thing in the world, he says, "At last! Come, follow me, I'll need to take your measurements."

Julian follows him into a fitting room and looks surprised when he pulls out an old-fashioned measuring tape. "You measure by hand? I would have assumed—"

"Don't worry, I also use a sizing scanner. But the tape tells me things that the digital imaging can't. How cloth will lie against your skin, the way that you twist your shoulders or your hips—everything that I need to make the perfect suit. Now, undress so that I can measure accurately."

Julian laughs. "You know, sometimes you actually sound like a real tailor." He slips off his shoes and removes his uniform with swift, precise motions. Garak takes a purely professional moment to examine the shape of him, his sharp shoulders and narrow hips, the way he holds himself with perfect balance. Imagine what Garak himself could have been, if Tain had taken the same efforts as the Bashirs.

"You have ample evidence all around you that I am, indeed, a humble tailor." Garak begins with the column of his neck, then the breadth of each shoulder—sometimes they aren't uniform, though Julian's are identical. He slides his fingers along the tape to press it flat to Julian's skin and thinks that he hears the faintest indrawn breath. Julian's skin betrays him, prickling with the slightest hint of goosebumps—human bodies hide nothing—and Garak says, "Do tell me if I cause you any discomfort."

"After the camp, I think I can handle a little tickling from a measuring tape."

Very carefully, Garak measures from nipple to nipple and notes the way that they harden beneath his touch. "Even with your particular—gifts, I find it hard to imagine that you spent much time in the ring the way that the Klingons did."

Julian laughs again. "None at all. But you know me, I talk too much."

"I have never found that to be the case," Garak says honestly. And how much of that was pretense too? Is this the way that Julian feels every time Garak reveals another of his identities? He finds he doesn't like that thought.

"The Jem'Hadar would disagree with you. They believed that the best way to keep me from talking too much was to put me in isolation." He truly is marvelous at this, the way his voice stays level even as he relates the story. Garak crouches to measure his legs, from heel to knee, knee to hip, inseam, and he feels the heat of Julian's body as he does it. "It was—very cold. Dark. I worried at first that I might lose the use of my fingers." He does flex his fingers almost unconsciously.

Garak recognizes this—unburdening that humans sometimes do. That even Cardassians do, when necessary. "You did not, I see." He takes one of Julian's hands in his and measures the length of each finger, for no reason other than to feel the warmth of those fingers. They are quite intact.

"No, nor my toes." The slightest shiver ripples across his skin.

Garak pulls away regretfully. "You may dress yourself again." He would like to stand here a little longer and look at Julian's vulnerable form, the softness of his skin even where it pulls tight over bone, but he has no reason to do that. Apparently Julian's parents did not see fit to make their son truly beyond human limitations.

Julian dresses just as swiftly as he undressed. "I'll leave it to you to choose the color." He smiles a little wryly. "As I suspect you would anyway."

"Of course." Garak tucks away the measuring tape. "Lunch?"

"I'm in the middle of running an experiment," Julian says. "Why don't we have dinner instead? My quarters? My real quarters, that is."

A surprising deviation. "Very well. The suit will not be ready by tonight, of course."

"Of course. I wouldn't want you to rush it."

"Until tonight, then, my dear doctor." For some reason, the endearment tastes strange in his mouth this time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Garak is punctual. He certainly did not spend the last ten minutes in the shop calculating exactly how long it would take to walk to Julian's quarters and identifying which of the station's residents he would need to avoid to prevent undesirable delay. That would have been unnecessary. And, in any case, neither he nor the doctor arrives on time for their designated lunches each time. In fact, Julian is routinely a little late due to some minor injury or other that he has insisted on finishing healing.

But Garak is punctual. When Julian calls, "Come in," he enters to discover that the quarters are pleasantly warm, the lights dimmed to a tolerable level. There are two glasses, a bottle of clear liquid, and a small dish of ice set on a low table in front of a—sofa? These quarters are substantially modified from their Cardassian origins. "Sit down," Julian says, gesturing him toward the sofa. When he does, Julian joins him, a little closer than Garak would allow anyone but him. "Here," Julian says, and lifts the bottle. "I thought we should have a toast."

"A toast?"

There's that reckless flash of teeth, that new heedlessness. "All my secrets laid bare," Julian says. He pours a healthy amount of the liquid into each glass. "This is called raki." He passes Garak one of the glasses and says, "Now, watch." When he drops an ice cube into Garak's glass, the raki begins to turn milky white all around it.

Garak swirls the glass gently. "All your secrets hidden again."

"Very well. To secrets," Julian says, and clinks his glass against Garak's before drinking.

Humans love their anise-flavored liquor, for reasons that Garak will never understand. "My dear doctor, this is vile—" Perhaps he should have been expecting it, when Julian leans in and kisses him, but he isn't—so much so, in fact, that he doesn't pull away immediately but instead wonders at the softness of Julian's lips, at the warmth of his hand when Julian touches it to his face. As a result, they pull back at the same time. In the dim light, Julian's eyes are very bright.

"All my secrets laid bare," Julian repeats, and his voice is a little—huskier than usual, to Garak's practiced ear.

"My dear—Doctor Bashir," Garak begins. "I don't wish to offend you, and I certainly never intended to mislead you."

"Really." Julian's voice is tight now. "Really."

"I have never—desired a more intimate relationship with you."

"Five years of lunches and holosuite dates and book recommendations and that fitting today, when you had me undress so that you could put your hands all over me, and you never intended to mislead me."

"I enjoy our—friendship," Garak says, and it's strange even to contemplate that he considers a human a friend. "But I am not—" He considers. "I have never coupled with a human. If that is all you desire, I am open to a new experience—"

For all that he is superior to other humans in many ways, Julian's emotions are plain on his face. Shock, pain, disappointment, and Garak hates to see any of them there. Has Julian misinterpreted everything so poorly, when he is supposed to be so intelligent? "No," Julian says. "No, I don't do that anymore." He stands abruptly. "I'm sorry to impose on you. I'm afraid I'm not feeling very hungry anymore."

Garak stands as well. "Truly, I regret any pain—" and is he *apologizing*? This is dreadful. What a dreadful misunderstanding. There is a part of him, deep in the corner of his brain where the Obsidian Order lives on, that reminds him what power he has just been given, but he can't find it in himself to clutch at that power now.

"No," Julian says. "It was my mistake."

"Perhaps...lunch instead?" For all that Julian has misinterpreted, Garak doesn't wish to end their friendship over something like this.

"Yes," Julian agrees. "Perhaps next week."

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

“Foolish,” Garak breathes. “Of all the foolish things, to put yourself in Tain's debt and then to attempt to honor it—spies have no honor, have I taught you nothing?” He's behaving unreasonably. He's standing too close to Julian, crowding him in against the wall, and he can smell the salt of Julian's sweat, the faint dark scent of the Nausicaan still on him, the little bit of blood in the corner of his mouth.

After extensive consideration, Garak decides to consult another source to assist him in determining where the misunderstanding developed. He finds that source at a table in Quark's, by herself for once.

“Lieutenant Jazzia Dax,” he declares. “Do you mind terribly if I join you?”

She looks a little surprised, but her manners are impeccable. He's always appreciated that about this incarnation of Dax. He suspects that he wouldn't have liked previous incarnations nearly as much. “Of course, Garak. How can I help you?”

Garak arranges his fingers precisely on his glass of kanar. “I have a—question, the answer to which may require some discretion. As you are the person on this station with the greatest life experience, and the greatest experience with the—relevant party, I wish to hear your thoughts on the matter.”

“All right,” she says. “You can count on my discretion.”

He considers how to begin. His training should have prepared him for this in some way, but he can't locate the necessary skills at the moment. “Doctor Bashir,” he begins, and stops.

“You're having problems?”

“*Problems?* Lieutenant, he—*declared* himself to me last night.” Perhaps he's being a little too emphatic. “The dear doctor appears to have dreadfully misinterpreted the nature of our friendship.”

“Oh.” Dax's face is carefully impassive. “You said no, I take it.”

“Said no? Of course I declined his—ridiculous expression of sentiment.” It makes Garak surprisingly angry to remember it. “I told him that, at most, I would consider a single encounter to broaden the scope of my knowledge.”

“He declined?” Dax takes a very small sip of her drink.

Garak takes a larger drink of his kanar and remembers the taste of the raki on his tongue just before Julian kissed him, the way the clouds bloomed in the clear liquid. “He did. He appeared to be—emotionally distraught.”

“Yes, I would imagine so.” Dax scans the room. He was forced to take the seat that exposed his back to the crowd, so he's glad to see that she's taking basic precautions. “So you came to me.”

“He has pursued you extensively despite your repeated rejections.” This thought also makes Garak angry. “I would appreciate your insight.”

“You want me to tell you how to make him stop feeling that way about you?” He hears a tiny sad laugh in her voice. “Garak—” She seems lost for words.

“Please say whatever it is that you're struggling with, Lieutenant. You're not going to offend me.” He's not sure there's anything left that a person could say to offend him.

“If Julian misinterpreted your feelings, so has everyone else on this station who's ever seen the two of you together,” she says, and it feels like a slap across the face—an insult. “You have to remember, most of us don't have any experience living in proximity to a Cardassian, and certainly not in—peace,” as though that's what this is. “From what I've seen of humans—”

“The doctor did say something about that. Five years of lunches and holosuite dates, and—other things,” and why is his mind now supplying such a vivid sense-memory of Julian's skin beneath the measuring tape? “But you humored him, with the dinners and the compliments, every time. He never believed that you returned his feelings.”

Dax shakes her head. “It seemed performative even then, but now that I know his secret—it really was a performance. As I'm sure you know, there are some people who hide themselves by being quiet, making themselves small, and there are others who do it through flashy misdirection.”

Garak nods and lifts his glass in acknowledgment. “And the dear doctor was flashy indeed. Perhaps his behavior toward me was an affectation as well.” It rings false even as he says it.

She squints at him a little. “We both know you don't believe that.”

All his secrets indeed. “I don't wish to end my association with Julian,” he says, and of all the slips, he doesn't call the doctor *Julian* except in

his own head. “Only to continue it with the understanding that I do not intend it to represent what he believed that it represented.”

“Even knowing how he feels about you?” She signals at Rom, who brings him a full glass of kanar.

Garak waves a hand dismissively. “Now that he understands, he’ll move past it. The next pretty dabo girl that crosses his path will make him forget all about it.” There’s something sick and hot in his stomach as he says it. “We have lunch plans for next week.”

“You do.” Dax doesn’t sound like she believes it. “Excuse me,” she says, and finishes her drink. He nods, and she leaves.

There’s an angry itch at the back of Garak’s neck, a certain restlessness. He’s not going to keep sitting here, his back exposed, so he goes downstairs to sit at the corner of the bar and drink his kanar in peace. Dax’s information was singularly unhelpful, beyond illuminating the fact that he is indeed the one who created the misunderstanding by unintentionally conforming to certain human norms. His last—partner was in the old days, another member of the Obsidian Order. They were affectionate when they saw each other, vigorous when they could find the time—there were no leisurely lunches, no frivolity. There had been no courtship of the kind that Julian has imagined, only a recognition and understanding and mutual satisfaction.

There’s a cheer and Garak is sharply aware of his surroundings. Julian is playing dom-jot with a Nausicaan, two of the Nausicaan’s friends watching at the side of the table. Garak traces the arch of Julian’s spine with his eyes, remembers the way that the notches of it had felt beneath the thin cloth of the tape. Julian looks very slender compared to the Nausicaans and Garak feels an absurd surge of—protectiveness. Of course he does, it’s not absurd, he went to all the trouble of rescuing Julian from an internment camp. The Nausicaans are hulking brutes. No sense of style, naturally.

Julian’s hands are graceful on the dom-jot cue. Garak remembers the feeling of his fingers, measured for no particular reason other than to touch them, while Julian stood there in his underwear and talked about being shut up alone in the cold isolation cell. No fear at all in his reactions to Garak’s touch. The cue slides easily through his grip, striking perfectly, and Julian says, “I suppose that means I win.”

The Nausicaan is viciously angry, his friends too, and Garak sees the attack coming before he can leave his seat. He has to shove his way through the crush of people surrounding the fight, throwing a hard elbow whenever he needs to. He reaches the front in time to see Julian dispatch the third Nausicaan. How beautiful he is like this, the efficient clean violence of his strikes, the way he never seems to be in the place where the Nausicaan strikes, until he slams the Nausicaan’s head against the dom-jot table and lets him drop.

All of Quark’s falls silent, perhaps for the first time since its inception. Someone ruins the clear beauty of the moment by hissing, “*Augment*,” and if Garak knew where that person was he would have silenced him before he could speak. “An augment? Here?” someone else says, in a high-pitched voice that carries, and if Julian hadn’t heard it the first time, he certainly can’t fail to hear it now.

Quark hurries over and presses a bottle into Julian’s hand. “Congratulations, congratulations, now get out of here,” he mutters. “You can pay me later.” He gestures at Julian to shoo.

Garak follows, ears keen, body braced to block an attack if one of those whisperers comes at Julian, but they escape onto the promenade unscathed. Julian tolerates Garak’s presence on the promenade, until they’re in a deserted hallway, when he turns on Garak and says, “Thank you, I’m quite all right. You can stop following me.”

The word augment carries no weight to Garak, but he knows what it means to the humans, knows that it’s why Julian kept his secret for so long. “My dear doctor, you don’t appear all right.” He’s reaching out to touch Julian’s shoulder before he realizes what he’s doing.

Julian steps back almost imperceptibly, just enough that Garak’s hand hangs in empty space for a minute. “I don’t want to be touched right now.”

“You were *magnificent*,” Garak can’t help saying. There’s the slightest sheen of sweat on Julian’s skin. Fascinating. He’s never tasted sweat. Perhaps if he’d said what Julian wanted to hear last night, he could taste it now.

Julian’s laugh has no humor to it. “All credit to the doctors who made me.”

“You could have escaped the interment camp yourself, couldn’t you.” He wonders if Julian will allow him any more secrets now.

“Had I known that there was a changeling here in my place, perhaps I would have attempted it. It would have revealed that I’m an *augment*, undoubtedly, but I might have.” Julian lets himself lean back against the wall, the only other sign that the fight affected him. “As it was—I thought about it.” His lip quirks in the tiniest smile. “I never told you what happened when I went to see Tain to get the leukocytes for you, did I.”

“You were suicidally stupid,” Garak says. “Or perhaps not, considering your abilities.”

Julian lets that pass. “He let me have them—”

“Because he wanted to prolong my suffering, yes.”

“Not only that. Tain told me that he would give the leukocytes to me, but that I would owe him a favor, and that he would come to collect it one day.”

Old childhood fear shoots through Garak, almost blinding. “You never should have agreed to that. Not for anything. Certainly not—” *For me* goes unsaid. “You have no idea the things he could have asked of you—”

“He told me that he was collecting that favor, at the camp. That I had to take care of him as he was dying. I had to make sure that he survived long enough for you to get there.” Julian’s body is like a tension wire. “Even with Martok’s help, I never could have gotten Tain away from there too, not in his condition.”

*“Foolish,”* Garak breathes. “Of all the foolish things, to put yourself in his debt and then to attempt to honor it—spies have no honor, have I taught you nothing?” He’s behaving unreasonably. He’s standing too close to Julian, crowding him in against the wall, and he can smell the salt of Julian’s sweat, the faint dark scent of the Nausicaan still on him, the little bit of blood in the corner of his mouth.

Julian steps forward and pushes him away, with a strength that shouldn’t surprise Garak but does. “You’ve taught me a great deal, Garak,” he says. Something eerie shifts in him, some change within, and suddenly Garak sees the happy babbling doctor that he knew once. “I never could have hidden myself so well, without all those days with you, learning better and better how to lie. Never certain whether a single word you said to me was true, knowing that most of them weren’t.” His old shell disappears again. “I suppose I should have realized.”

“My dear doctor.” The endearment slips his lips and he realizes that he doesn’t want this power over Julian, doesn’t want Julian to have said aloud what he now realizes was obvious all along. But Julian did and now Garak keeps catching glimpses of his bare dark skin, feeling phantom heat and breathing Julian’s smell into his lungs. It frightens Garak, to try to wish away any part of his own power over someone, and not many things frighten him these days. “Never make a promise to a member of the Obsidian Order. Never make yourself vulnerable to them.” The irony is not lost on him.

Apparently it’s not lost on Julian either, because that of all things makes him smile. “Lunch at the usual time tomorrow, Garak?”

Garak can admit it to himself: he wants to push Julian back up against the wall, feel the strength of that lithe body struggle a little against his own, hear the noises that he would make when Garak licked that sweat from his neck. He wants the heat of Julian’s fingers on the ridges of Garak’s face and collarbones, can almost imagine it—really, it’s selfish of the doctor to refuse Garak’s counteroffer of one coupling. Dax never did tell him why Julian would refuse something like that.

“Yes. Lunch.”

## Chapter 3

It's an unpleasant surprise when Chief O'Brien stops Garak in the hallway on his way to lunch with Julian. O'Brien has never made a secret of his feelings about Garak, or the Cardassian race as a whole. Garak doesn't think they've ever spoken to each other for more than a sentence of two, and only then with some technical purpose in mind. "Garak, see here," he says in that absurd voice of his, stepping into Garak's path.

"And what is it that I am supposed to see?"

"I've come to know Julian pretty well," and oh dear, is O'Brien giving him some kind of ridiculous blustering threat? "I always thought it was strange, the two of you, and I never liked it—especially not after Gilora explained to me what it means, the way you behave toward him." Garak thinks that he does a very good job not reacting, but it spurs O'Brien to be even more explicit. "You know, that arguing is the Cardassian way of—"

"Yes, I'm well aware." Garak tries to keep his tone light, just a humble tailor, nothing more or less. But O'Brien is irritating him and so he says, "You know, Chief, lying is a skill like any other. One must practice constantly to maintain it."

O'Brien grimaces. "You lie so much you wouldn't know the truth if it was right in front of you."

"And yet that's what Julian has been doing for all these years." Damn. He has to stop saying *Julian* aloud.

The man is shifting into a fighting stance, clenching his large fists. Garak almost hopes that O'Brien will hit him, even though he would undoubtedly be the one blamed for O'Brien's violence. "*Julian* did it to protect himself and his parents. He would have resigned rather than let it come out. And now instead he has you calling him a liar and people in the halls calling him *augment*." O'Brien spits it like a dirty word.

Garak is tired of this conversation. "I'm afraid I'm late for lunch with the doctor, Chief. I do appreciate your insights." Who will be next to confront him, Major Kira? Sisko? Odo, warning that he's watched every interaction that Garak has ever had with Julian?

The replimat is busy as usual, which means that he and Julian greet each other and then stand in what feels like an endless line. There's the slightest bubble of space around Julian, as though the humans all around him don't want to get too close. The augment nonsense again, Garak assumes. Julian looks unbothered, but Garak finds himself moving a little closer, just enough that he's pointedly inside the bubble. "I'm afraid I don't have your suit ready quite yet, Doctor." It's probably a flight of fancy to think that he can feel warmth emanating from Julian. When Julian looks away for a moment to wave to Dax, Garak sees that his hair has grown a little beyond its usual style, a slight curl to it at the base of his skull. Then Julian glances back and catches Garak looking.

"That's all right," he says, and for an absurd moment Garak thinks that he's approving Garak's observations. But no, of course, the suit. "I won't have any use for it for quite some time, not until Captain Sisko's Winter Solstice party. I just thought I would get in ahead of the rush."

"My dear doctor, I'm flattered." Garak has never felt the slightest wisp of awkwardness in his conversations with Julian before, but now it seems that Julian's ill-advised confession has infected their interactions. "You know, it has been quite some time since you attempted to inflict some of your Earth literature on me," he says. "I have another Cardassian novel, one that I think you might just find a little more to your taste. I would be willing to make an exchange if you will be open-minded *for once*."

"I'm always open-minded!" There, that's the satisfying note of outrage that he likes to hear in Julian's voice. "All right, since you've asked for it, I'll try to come up with something appropriately jingoistic."

"I look forward to it," Garak says. They've reached the front of the line. "I—"

"Doctor Bashir to sickbay. Doctor Bashir to sickbay," Julian's badge chirps, and Garak tries to stifle the wave of disappointment at the thought that there will be no lunch together today.

"I'm so sorry, I have to run." Julian really does look sorry. "Tomorrow!" He begins to weave his way through the crowd.

Garak replicates an apple. "Julian!" he calls, and the doctor turns, stunned, just as Garak lobs him the apple. He catches it, of course, and hurries away. Another error on Garak's part.

\* \* \* \* \*

Garak has to go to Quark that night, after hours, and explain to Quark exactly what it is that he wants. "So, what's it going to be? Do you people even *have* erotic novels? Or are you looking for a holoprogram? I can be very discreet, you know. I know the kinds of things the Cardassians liked during the occupation—"

He doesn't want to know. "It's just a novel, Mr. Quark. I simply don't have a copy myself." He certainly wouldn't have kept it anywhere that someone else could find it. Garak's collection of Cardassian literature has, even for the last several years, remained impeccably appropriate to that of a loyal Cardassian. This novel is—dangerous.

"For enough latinum, I can get you anything," Quark says. At Garak's expression, he reconsiders and says, "I can get you almost anything." They both remember his failure with the implant. "Four bars of latinum, paid up front." Garak remains silent. His silence makes people uneasy, particularly now that he's cultivated a loquacious persona. The price is outrageous in the abstract, though perhaps not for a banned Cardassian novel, the possession of which is punished severely. "All right, three bars of latinum, two up front and one on delivery."

"I find it difficult to pay anything 'up front' when, in the past, you have struggled to meet your obligations."

Quark strokes one of his lobes nervously. "Two on delivery."

Garak is silent for a long time again. Finally, he says, "I accept your price. I expect delivery shortly."

"According to the Fifty-Fourth Rule of Acquisition, rate divided by time equals profit," Quark intones. Garak mentally notes this. The Rules of Acquisition are a useful guide when interacting with Ferengi. He can't help remembering, though, the Eighty-Seventh Rule: "Learn the customer's weaknesses, so that you can better take advantage of him." He must be careful not to purchase Quark's assistance too often, or the Ferengi will begin to form a picture of his—weaknesses. Of course, the purchase of a novel is not a weakness; in exile, possession of Cardassian contraband becomes an asset.

He has the novel by 0600. He considers rereading it himself, but that would delay his gift to Julian, and he truly wants to know what the doctor thinks of *Severance and Solitude*. He goes, of all places, to sickbay, where he knows that Julian will be at this hour, and Julian hurries over. "Garak! What's wrong?"

Garak realizes that he has miscalculated. Julian knows that he detests sickbay and would never enter of his own accord. "I am quite well, my dear doctor. Merely eager to remove this novel from my possession."

"Oh?" Julian pauses with an eyedropper in one hand. "Why?"

Garak sets the novel on the table next to him. "This novel is—banned in Cardassia." Julian's eyes light up. "Although it is perfectly acceptable for you to possess it, it poses slightly more risk to me."

Julian picks up the novel with the kind of reverent delicacy that he usually seems to reserve for medical treatment. Abruptly, Garak recalls the near-delirious memory of Julian asleep in the chair in his room, the fact that he too *could* sleep while Julian was there. "What is it?"

"*Severance and Solitude*. I believe you may find it—more to your taste than *The Never Ending Sacrifice*." It occurs to Garak, belatedly, that he is showing far more to Julian with this novel than perhaps he ever intended. But to take it back now would reveal even more, and he can't risk that.

"I'll look forward to it," Julian says. He digs around in one of his pockets and presents Garak with his own little tube of literature. "You may dislike this one, I'm afraid, but since you thought that the last Shakespeare I gave you was a farce, I decided to give you one of Shakespeare's true comedies."

"I look forward to telling you how insipid I found it," Garak does, more than he looks forward to...almost all other things. Tailoring is satisfying, mildly diverting, but his lunches with Julian are undoubtedly the best part of his life now. And oh, there, what a weakness indeed. That Julian could—take that away, if he chose. If he grew tired of Garak, or if his misguided romantic interest made lunch emotionally painful. If he found a different lunch companion who reciprocated that interest. If something happened to him—here on Terok Nor, where things routinely go wrong, or out beyond the station, where Garak would never be—

Julian is looking at him a little strangely and Garak realizes that he's failed to answer some question of the doctor's. "I'm afraid I won't be able to have lunch with you today," Julian repeats. "I'm running an experiment that has to be carefully attended and I won't be able to leave the laboratory."

For one appalling second, Garak almost suggests that he could bring Julian lunch. "That's quite all right," he says instead. "Why don't we postpone until tomorrow."

"All right." Julian's teeth flash when he smiles and there's something twisting inside Garak, some—feeling?—he doesn't quite comprehend.

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He has tailoring work to do, but he finds himself standing at the back of his shop instead, reading the play that Julian has given him. The plot is ridiculous and hinges on a series of misunderstandings and Earth customs with which Garak is unfamiliar. But the arguments between the two leads, Beatrice and Benedick, are—in Cardassian literature, they would be considered the interaction immediately preceding a liaison, the beginning of one of the pornographic novels that Quark has offered to obtain for him. The clever language—and the universal translator struggles, but Garak has learned enough English to grasp it—and the occasional vitriol, the request to kill another as a demonstration of love—the end is obvious from the beginning, just as it was in the previous play, but it is somehow more satisfying. He finishes it by the end of the day and Garak is horrified to realize that he's quite enjoyed it.

It's actually quite frustrating to have to wait until lunch the next day to hear what Julian thought of the Cardassian novel. At least he reads very quickly, so that Garak won't have to wait long. Sure enough, Julian meets him outside of his shop to walk to lunch and yawns, which means he stayed up to finish it. "Perhaps we might go to Quark's, upstairs, instead?" Garak offers. "Given that my book is banned." It's unnecessary. The replimat is noisy. No one but him knows the danger of the book anyway. Certainly no one cares.

But Julian gives him a strange soft look and says, "Very well, I'm a bit tired of the replimat food anyway," and they go to Quark's.

When they're settled, and Rom has taken their respective orders and the cries of "dabo!" are floating up from the first floor, Julian says, "All right, give me your best complaints, tell me how outrageous it was."

"My dear doctor, it was preposterous from start to finish! A series of manufactured coincidences and contrivances—" Julian is very nearly beaming at him. "The writing was, I must confess, a bit more clever than most Earth literature. But for it to be considered such a classic that it has endured for nearly a millennium—"

"It's one of my favorites," Julian admits, and how freely he shares little things like that. "The title is a pun, you know—at the time it was written, the word 'nothing' was a vernacular term for female genitalia. *And* the word 'noting' meant gossip and rumor, and it was pronounced almost the same way as 'nothing.'"

"You humans do enjoy your plays on words," Garak says.



“Garak, you do nothing *but* play with words.” He’s never thought of it that way, but he supposes the doctor is right. Lies are simply a different form of wordplay. “And of course the story is a series of manufactured contrivances—you read it, you know that it becomes a battle between Don Pedro and Don John through the manipulation of their—social inferiors. I would think you would appreciate that.”

“That does explain why there was a certain—underlying appeal to my Cardassian sensibilities. But my point stands, that it should endure for a millennium only demonstrates the frivolity of the human spirit, and of yours in particular—”

Julian laughs, and Rom must have brought their food at some point because Julian has a fork halfway to his mouth and Garak is a little mesmerized. “Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending,” he says.

There are words that want to escape from Garak’s mouth, ridiculous words that don’t belong there, and so instead he says with some difficulty, “And what did you think of *Severance and Solitude*?” There is a small tender spot deep inside him that aches to know.

Julian lays his fork down and tilts his head a little. “It was very different than any other Cardassian literature I’ve ever read. I didn’t see an author.”

There is too much that Garak wants to tell him about the book. “It was written by a—member of a dissident splinter group that conducted attacks on the Cardassian government before fleeing Cardassia. They were pursued and captured and promptly executed, of course.”

“Of course,” Julian echoes.

“But the myth is that the novel was passed from person to person, from a prisoner to a guard to a sympathetic Gul, and was duplicated and shared before it could be stopped. When I was…younger, I was quite interested in the myth of its origin.” Until Tain had warned him not to show so much interest in something like that—not to show so much interest in anything, which would reveal weakness.

“You know, there was so much focus on the idea of home, of the longing for a place to belong, that it almost made me homesick,” Julian says, very carefully. “I know that the family is very important to Cardassians—I never thought I would read something where Cardassian families were split by political ideologies.”

“No. Traditional Cardassian literature would not tend to emphasize such—internal divisions, even to condemn them.” Garak knows the opening scene by heart: the father and mother and son, arguing passionately about the role of the state, until the father finally strikes down the son and the mother flees.

Julian looks as though he’s choosing each word delicately, as though they’ll land stinging upon Garak’s skin. “Many human academics have written about the ways in which we interpret or experience certain works of literature differently at different stages in our lives.”

“My dear doctor! Are you telling me that you preferred Hero to Beatrice in your youth?”

Julian allows him the dodge. “Hero seemed so sweet. I didn’t understand why Beatrice and Benedick were so cruel to each other.”

Unthinkingly, Garak says, “I’m sure Chief O’Brien has explained to you the role that argument plays in Cardassian courtship.”

He doesn’t mean it to be cruel but it must sound that way, because Julian lashes out at him and says, “And who were you, Garak? Who are you now?”

And this is the trap that he has laid for himself. There is no answer that does not reveal something more about himself than he wants to share. Is he, or has he ever been, the father? The loyal organ of the state, so devoted to his Cardassian principles that he ultimately violates them by killing his son? The son, disobedient and rigid even in his open-mindedness, struck down in the first few minutes? Or the mother, who should have taken a side in the first moment of the argument, and pays for her failure to do so with the loss of everything important in her life? How much did Odo ever tell Julian, about how quickly Garak returned to the fold when Tain offered him his place again?

“The spy in the next room, of course,” Garak says, and throws his most innocent expression behind it. There is no spy in the next room.

“That answers one question, I suppose. The mother never stayed anywhere long enough to make it a new home. Perhaps that represented her fear of bringing the dangers of the state to bear on anyone with whom she took refuge, the way that the state had killed her son.”

Garak stiffens. “My dear doctor. There is no spy in the next room.”

“Isn’t there?”

Of course there was no safe answer to his question about who Garak was when he read the story, not even the answer of a false character. Any lie reveals something about the truth, no matter how deeply it is buried. “Perhaps you could write a paper and present it at the next Cardassian literature conference,” Garak says acidly. He’s angry at Julian now, for taking the one vulnerable thing that Garak has given him, this book, and using it as a wedge to pry open more of Garak’s secrets. He isn’t supposed to be able to do that. But Julian was with Enabran Tain in the detention camp for all of that time, he must have learned everything that Tain wanted to crow about, including Garak’s pathetic devotion to him. Garak imagines what else he could say to Julian—but isn’t this the great irony, that Garak’s power over Julian comes from whatever passing romantic interest Julian has deluded himself into, and that Julian’s power over Garak comes from the fact that Garak cannot—will not—lose him to anything.

“By the way,” Julian says lightly, “I hope I didn’t distract you from finishing my suit by giving you that play to read.”

No, the problem with the suit is that every time Garak begins to work on it, he remembers touching Julian. It would be wrong to say that Garak needs to measure him again—foolish, dangerous even—just to feel that heat again. His body is lean, soft, not meant for war, and Garak likes looking at him. But that’s understandable, he looks at many different forms to assess what type of clothing might flatter them the most. “Of course not,” Garak lies. But isn’t that true—aren’t they both true? Julian has distracted him from finishing the suit in many ways.

Garak allows himself to wonder, only for a moment, if perhaps O'Brien is right—if he has lied so many times to so many different people that he doesn't always remember what the truth is.

## Chapter 4

After their lunch is over and Julian is well out of earshot, Garak goes to Quark and says, "I would like to purchase one hour of holosuite time."

Quark leers at him. "I have many programs that I can recommend—"

"No. I'll browse the catalog myself." Garak certainly isn't going to articulate the type of program that he wants aloud to Quark.

"Holosuite three," Quark tells him. "I'll set the computer to display our—full selection."

Garak pays him and goes to holosuite three. The computer catalog begins with the adventure section, which he skips past, and then the extensive listing of pornographic programs organized by the species of the participants. At the very end of the human collection, he finds what he's looking for—one of the very first old-fashioned programs that isn't interactive but simply allows the viewer to select participants from among a list. Garak has never seen a human coupling before. He chooses a slim dark man who looks something like the doctor and a taller, broad-shouldered man who is not his own height and looks nothing like anyone on the station. Then he begins the program.

They start by kissing and Garak brushes his fingers across his own lips, remembers the softness of Julian's. There's a great deal of touching, almost grappling, and then the taller man drops to his knees—ah. Human sex between males is not unlike Cardassian sex. After the man who is certainly not Julian has come, the taller man pushes him onto his hands and knees on the bed and begins to finger him open, prompting enthusiastic noises.

That, of all times, is when Garak hears someone enter the holosuite and Julian says "Oh! I apologize—Garak?"

"Computer, freeze program." Garak turns very slowly to face Julian. "What are you doing here, Doctor?" His mind is working rapidly to come up with a believable explanation for the fact that he is sitting here watching a man who looks—he can admit it—very much like Julian, preparing for intercourse—

"I need to practice a medical procedure. Quark unlocked this holosuite for me."

"Quark should already know all of the ways that I can kill him," Garak says. He doesn't want to think about what Julian can see right now. "Verbally, of course."

Julian coughs. "Of course." He sounds strangely calm compared to what Garak would extrapolate from his previous behavior. "I can find another holosuite and leave you to your program. Of course."

Garak allows himself only a brief second to contemplate it. He wants to watch the rest of it—wants to see the look on the not-Julian man's face as the other man pushes inside, wants to discover—all of it. Wants to see *Julian* like th— "No, my dear doctor, the holosuite is entirely yours. Computer, end program."

As he starts to walk out of the holosuite, Julian says, "Garak—what were you doing?" His voice is very soft.

"I couldn't possibly begin to explain it to you." It's the absolute truth.

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There are some days when the thought that this is all his life will ever be again—days in the tailor shop, nights to himself or lurking just to keep in the habit of it—nearly overwhelms him. When he thinks to himself that Tain knew what he was doing when he exiled Garak because it is the keenest form of torture—to take a man like him, who has spent his life in the pursuit of something more, and chain him to this station with no hope of anything ever beyond this tailor shop. He is a very good tailor, but it occupies only a fraction of his mind, of his capabilities. This place can be a prison worse than any labor camp or cell sometimes.

It is on those days that he becomes almost desperate for the doctor's company—even Odo's company—anyone who will challenge him. Two women browse his shop and he spends the hours on the most meaningless pleasantries he can imagine. He tells himself it is all an exercise, all practice, to spin out lies with his voice and his body that disarm them. See the Cardassian who will sell you pretty things, the toothless viper, turned into a station pet. He has transformed himself so entirely that he wonders if some of the Bajorans that he has interrogated would even recognize him.

"You look tired," one of the women tells the other. "Not sleeping enough?"

"Not even for good reasons," the other sighs, and her friend laughs. "Just lousy dreams."

"Like what?"

The dreamer is examining a silk shirt with a very light touch. It's the wrong shade for her hair, which Garak will tell her and offer a different color if she comes to purchase it. "You know, that one where all my teeth are falling out."

What a dreadful kind of dream. Cardassians don't dream much, as a rule, or at least Garak doesn't. But Garak's impression has always been that human dreams are meant to be pleasant.

"You know what that means," the other woman says, and then recites the meaning too quietly for Garak to hear. When they come to purchase the shirt, Garak locks down the impulse to ask what it means and instead persuades the dreamer to purchase two silk shirts in different colors. What a meaningless success, to perform well as a shopkeeper. Quark appears to derive some pleasure from this kind of thing, from selling a customer more than they originally wanted. Perhaps it's only a Ferengi trait.

The lack of purpose in his days translates into poor sleep at night. He blames the women in his shop for the dream that he has tonight: he is on Cardassia Prime and, after his first molar is pulled for identification, the dentist continues. The pain of each pulled tooth is an annoyance, but a distant one. When Garak looks closely at the dentist, he sees Julian.

Garak wakes abruptly from the dream and decides that perhaps he's slept enough for the night. He goes to the replimat, which is nearly deserted, and sits drinking tarkalean tea until the morning rush begins. He doesn't even really like tarkalean tea.

"Garak? Are you—all right?"

An inexcusable lapse in focus, to have failed to notice the doctor approaching. He smiles his best plain-simple-Garak smile. "Of course I am." Julian, it appears, does not plan to mention the holosuite—incident. Strange, when it should give him such power over Garak, that he does not take the opportunity at least to remind Garak that he knows.

"It's 0500," Julian says. "I don't think I've ever seen you awake this early." He sets his tray down and sits opposite Garak. He has a cup of raktajino—perhaps that would have been a more appropriate beverage choice.

What an image Garak has cultivated here, to make Julian of all people think that he is the sort of man who would never be awake at this hour. Garak can remember days spent without sleep in the old days, when 0500 and 1700 might as well have been the same time, when he trained himself to need only a few hours of sleep every few days because that was all that was available to him. The 26-hour Bajoran day is hardly a challenge. "Do you have many dreams, doctor?"

Julian looks startled and coughs a little into his cup. Perhaps this is too personal a question? "Well, I suppose eventually I'd like to cure certain genetic diseases—"

"Ah. No." This tea lacks the stimulant properties that Garak would like to have right now. He eyes Julian's cup. "I heard—you humans are always talking about how you dreamed that you were flying or all your teeth were falling out or any one of a number of banal dreams, that you then persist in interpreting based on your psychology. The unfortunate dreams that I have heard Mr. O'Brien describe—"

"I see." Julian sets down his cup. Garak's fingers itch to take it. "Did you have a dream last night?"

"It was the oddest thing," Garak says. "I can't remember the last time I dreamed. But there I was having my first molar pulled, as we do when young—but I was an adult, and the doctor continued to remove my teeth." Julian grimaces and runs his tongue over his own teeth, but doesn't comment. "And then I saw the face of the man removing my teeth." He wonders abruptly if he's erring in admitting this.

"Who was it?"

Why has he set up this situation? There was no need to mention the dream in the first place, and certainly no need to tell Julian any details. "It was you, my dear doctor." He sees the full-body flinch as Julian hears the words. There was a time that every word he said had an intention behind it, a goal. Now, he fears, he's telling Julian for no reason beyond the fact that it was a strange experience and Julian was part of it.

"Well, in that case, I apologize for my part in it." Julian's voice is light, belied by the shape of his body. "I imagine it was quite painful."

"More puzzling than painful, I would say." Garak wants to touch the place where his first molar used to be, but he doesn't. "I understand that humans have methods of interpreting such dreams."

"I wouldn't think of trying to apply the extremely fuzzy practice of human dream to interpretation to the dreams of a Cardassian," Julian says. "Maybe it symbolized your willingness to sacrifice everything for Cardassia, or maybe it symbolized your gradual disconnection from Cardassia—I would hate to guess." Garak would hate to guess too, but he would like Julian to try.

That's when the dreaded words come over the comm: "*Medical emergency. Dr. Bashir to sickbay. Medical emergency.*"

Julian leaps up, preternaturally graceful. "I'm so sorry, Garak, I have to go." He doesn't wait for acknowledgement before he slips away into the crowd.

Garak sighs and reaches for the doctor's abandoned cup of raktajino. It's too sweet, but he drinks the rest of it anyway.

## Chapter 5

Garak has been reading Julian's latest recommendation—the *Iliad*, which Garak finds most compelling and which Julian has warned him does not reflect current human attitudes toward war—while observing Julian at the bar, with some concern. Julian has ignored him entirely since entering the bar and is drinking what appears to be substantially more than the average human could and still remain upright. Eventually—and only out of concern that the doctor might injure himself—Garak walks up to the bar and says, “My dear doctor, may I sit?” Every time he says *my dear doctor* these days, it feels a little different.

“Of course,” Julian says, a little too loudly, and then waves at Quark. “Quark! Kanar for my friend Garak! Another bottle of Saurian brandy for me!”

Quark is wearing that particularly harassed expression of his that appears when a patron demands too much of his attention or the dabo tables are running in the players' favor. “Of course, Dr. Bashir.” He sets a fresh bottle of liquor in front of Julian and pours a glass of kanar for Garak. “I'll put it on your account.”

“You do that! Thank you, Quark!” Julian splashes a good amount more into his glass and Garak catches his wrist as he sets the bottle down.

“You should be careful, Doctor,” he says. “You may be—gifted, but you are only human.”

Julian snorts a little. This kind of heedlessness on Julian makes Garak nervous. “Gifted,” he says. “Do you know, my father used to tell me that. When I was old enough to know better, I finally told him that he was wrong, all those *gifts* I supposedly had only came out of a laboratory.”

“But you were, in fact, gifted,” Garak says. “You did not purchase those—characteristics. Improvements. You received them as gifts.” When Julian's arm jerks as though he wants to hit Garak, he can't help adding, “Do you think you could have killed me, Doctor? When I attacked you, when I was—recovering from my implant?” He's been thinking a great deal about those hours, a great deal too much. He thinks about Julian too much lately. “Do you think you're strong enough?”

Julian takes another drink and seems to consider the question. “I don't know. Physically, I likely could have overwhelmed you, particularly in that condition. I had never killed anyone.” *Then* is unspoken. Garak can't remember how long ago it was that he could say he had never killed anyone. A very long time ago.

“Still. Whatever your gifts, I imagine you will feel poorly after consuming this amount of alcohol.”

He laughs a little. “There's no need to be concerned, Garak. My body metabolizes alcohol extremely quickly. You don't know how much time I spent pretending to be drunk, at the Academy.”

“But you can become—drunk—if you drink quickly enough?”

Julian dips the tip of his little finger into his glass and then licks it off. It's mesmerizing, the shape of his finger, the drop clinging to it, the way that his tongue flattens briefly against the pad of his finger before swiping up to catch it with the tip of his tongue. Garak is—entranced. Only from an objective observational perspective, of course. Garak would not lick brandy off Julian's finger if given the opportunity. “Yes,” Julian says, and it takes Garak a moment to remember the question. “I can overwhelm my metabolism if I try hard enough.” Even like this, Garak suspects that his abilities remain largely undiminished.

“If you don't mind my asking, is there a reason that you are trying to do so tonight?”

Julian spreads his fingers wide and drags them along the bar. Quark grimaces at him. “My—*gifts* failed to prevent the death of two children who were beamed to sickbay as their shuttle was destroyed by a plasma leak.”

Garak lacks a strong sense of human empathy, but he can understand that the doctor is upset, drastically so. He puts one hand on Julian's arm and says that human platitude, “I'm sure you did everything you could.”

From the way Julian's arm twitches beneath Garak's hand, he would fling that hand off if it wouldn't attract too much attention. Garak removes his hand gingerly. “Yes, everything I could.”

“You don't find that thought comforting.”

Julian swallows his drink and pours himself another. Garak has always found true inebriation risky. It's too easy to slip and reveal something dangerous, whether by word or by deed. But it seems he has never actually witnessed the doctor inebriated and so he cannot assess whether Julian will reveal anything more drunk than he does while sober. “Do you know why I'm such a good doctor, Garak?”

This question is a trap. There are two obvious answers: because Julian has been genetically enhanced to be intelligent and because Julian has worked hard to become one. Which, of course, was made more possible by his enhancement. Garak takes a sip of kanar instead of answering.

“My memory is extraordinary,” Julian says. “My recall is—nearly perfect. Not only for information, but for images, events.”

“I see.” Garak can't help wondering how perfectly Julian recalls every lie he's ever told. He knows better than to tell the same lie too many times, but he also knows well enough that every lie told reveals something about the teller. Julian may well be able to discern truths from all of the lies told, if he remembers them all clearly enough.

Julian is leaning slightly to one side, and Garak braces him. He seems to accept the touch. “I know you won't tell me the truth, Garak. But I think there are things in your own past that you've managed to—not quite forget, but to render fuzzy, less painful, with the passage of time and

the slow fading of details.” He taps his own head. “For me, though, that doesn’t work. I don’t forget things. With time I can—shut them away, but if I allow myself to think about it, the memory is fresh in every detail. The Teplan blight—if I let myself, I can see all those bodies around me, everyone I couldn’t save.” Julian told him about that, afterward, in one of those frightening moments of openness.

“But you can shut it away.” Garak watches Julian’s face intently. He learned to—shut things away early in life, but some are more persistent than others.

“With time. I haven’t—had enough time yet, for those two children’s bodies. Which means that I am sitting here drinking like an ordinary person to distract myself from what’s in my extraordinary mind.”

The best thing he can do is to say, “Really, doctor, you’re very self-impressed sometimes.” He watches Julian’s expression rotate from shock to anger to a very dry humor, and yes, the doctor’s inebriation does render his face even more open.

“Go back to your book, Garak,” Julian says. “I’m afraid I’m not much for conversation tonight.” To prove it, he stands, taking the bottle of Saurian brandy with him, and wanders over to the dom-jot tables. Garak does return to his table, but he keeps half his attention on the noise coming from the tables, just in case the doctor is too inebriated to get out of a bad situation. The doctor stays another half-hour more without incident and then leaves with one of Quark’s new dabo boys, steady enough on his feet that Garak can persuade himself not to shadow Julian back to his quarters.

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Three hours later, Garak is wandering through the habitat ring on a very roundabout way back to his quarters when he sees the shape of a familiar man exiting a very different set of quarters. Out of boredom, or perhaps curiosity, Garak follows Julian at a distance for nearly twenty meters before revealing his presence.

“I knew you were following me,” Julian announces. He no longer appears intoxicated, but he is—the word ‘debauched’ presents itself in Garak’s mind and he dismisses it intentionally. Julian’s appearance suggests that he has recently engaged in vigorous physical activity. His lips are red, a little swollen; his hair messy, as though someone’s fingers have raked through it; the civilian shirt he wears, which Garak knows does not belong to him, reveals his collarbones and a few marks on his neck. It’s obvious what he’s been doing and Garak feels—anger? Annoyance. Only annoyance. That his verbal attempts at Quark’s to comfort Julian were insufficient.

“I wasn’t aware you were in a romantic relationship, doctor.” He’s forgotten Julian’s enhanced abilities yet again, forgotten that what Julian pretended to miss when he was still lying is no longer something that he’ll miss.

Julian laughs. “What, with Keti? I’m certainly not.”

“I’m aware of your—preference for the attractive individuals who run the dabo tables,” Garak says. There’s no reason that this should bother him. The doctor is very attractive, as humans go. It’s unsurprising that he would seek out other attractive individuals.

“Garak, it was a—brief liaison.”

“Not *that* brief. I was under the impression that you were—against such encounters.”

“What, sex with an attractive man? A *one-night stand*?”

“You refused a—one-night stand with me, when you expressed your feelings.” Garak is horribly aware that he sounds petulant. His lack of control is appalling.

Julian’s entire demeanor shifts. “Garak, if you can’t tell the difference—” He stops himself. “It’s been a very long day,” he says. “I’m going to go back to my quarters and go to sleep.”

As he walks away, Garak can’t help asking, “Lunch, tomorrow, doctor?” He hurries to add, “I have many thoughts on the Iliad.”

Julian looks back at him and shakes his head, but he says “Yes.”

## Chapter 6

The doctor makes no mention of the previous night—not to question why Garak followed him, not to ask why Garak would care about having been refused casual sex, not to explain his drunkenness or tell Garak whether he’s been able to push the latest memories to the side. The only hint that the previous night happened at all is when he greets Garak and says, “You seemed positively enthralled by *The Iliad*.”

“It was positively Cardassian.”

Julian looks outraged. “It most certainly was not! *The Iliad* is—a critique of war and all the pointless savagery that goes with it. The tragedy of Achilles and Patroclus—all of the needless death—”

“You see a critique because your society no longer seeks out war. I see a celebration. You mean to tell me that all of that poetry, all of that—loving description of violence—is intended to demonstrate that the war was wrong?”

“You’re completely missing the point!” He almost shivers with pleasure at Julian’s tone. “The entire war was begun and manipulated by the gods, for their entertainment. Every truly loving relationship was torn apart. Nothing was gained by the death of Patroclus, nor of Hector.”

“I admit to some surprise,” Garak says, “that the war did not end at the close of the book. Human literature seems to prefer a tidy resolution.” Julian starts to speak, but Garak holds up one finger to silence him. “Yes, I do see that the rage of Achilles has—quieted. But I had expected —”

“Oh, if you want to see the war end, you’ll have to read *The Odyssey*. I don’t think you’ll find that quite as Cardassian.”

“What weakness Achilles showed,” Garak muses. “His pride, and the depth of his—sentiment—for Patroclus.”

“Of course, a man should have no pride, no intimacy in his life.” Julian looks as though he wants to say something more, but Garak can’t help continuing.

“My dear doctor, a *spy* should have no ego. But his failing was in *revealing* his vulnerabilities. His display of pride made it clear that he could be manipulated by challenges to that pride. The openness of his regard for Patroclus similarly did so. Agamemnon could have brought Achilles back into the fight with a more subtle demonstration of the dangers that the Trojans posed to Patroclus—there was no need to wait until Hector had killed him.” Garak takes a satisfied bite. His analysis is impeccable. Julian must be able to understand this—the danger of allowing oneself to be manipulated by obvious attachments.

Julian watches him chew for a long time, until Garak begins to feel acutely uncomfortable. “Do I have something on my face, doctor?”

“It’s only that I forget sometimes. What the inside of your mind must be like.” There’s something strangely painful in hearing Julian say that. “I suppose you would never openly demonstrate your regard for anything.”

“I would—” Garak finds himself too ready to answer this question honestly, and diverts to a different truth. “I’m afraid I have openly demonstrated my regard for a well-tailored suit on many an occasion,” he says.

“Ah, so your enemies know that they need only wear poorly-hemmed pants to excite your emotions.”

“Precisely.”

Julian shakes his head at that. “You win, Garak.”

“And what exactly do I win?” Garak suddenly doesn’t want to hear the answer to his question. “You told me there is another book, in which the war concludes?”

“*The Odyssey*? Yes.” Julian hesitates. “I know that nothing bothers you, Garak, but you might find it—” He can’t seem to find the right word, which Garak finds ominous. “It’s the story of a man trying to get home.”

Something freezes deep inside Garak, something that he can’t allow the doctor to see. “Goodness, why would that bother me?” *That* impossible desire is a particular weakness of his, too easily spotted.

“All right. I’ll drop by your shop with it.”

Disappointingly, Julian comes by the shop with the book while Garak is occupied with three different customers. It means that Garak has little time to consider the expression on his face—the particular pull of his lips, the lines at the corners of his eyes—as Julian sets the cylinder containing the book on his shop counter. When he starts to walk away without saying anything at all, Garak says, “My dear doctor—”

“Let me know when you finish it. If you want to talk about it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

There’s something in Julian’s tone, in his carriage, his attitude toward the book, that makes Garak shoo his customers away as quickly as he can and close the shop as soon as he has done so. He replicates a cup of Tarkalean tea, only because he is about to read a book that Julian gave him, and sits in a chair in his quarters to read.

The book is gutting.

Garak rarely finds himself emotionally involved in whatever he happens to read. Cardassian literature has a certain formal structure to it, a

symmetry, much like a well-constructed suit or even a Cardassian trial. There is no room for deviation. Even *Severance and Solitude*, banned as it is, adheres to such a structure. The human literature Julian has given him to read has typically had its own clear structure. Rarely does either Cardassian or human literature present a character with whom Garak can—no, not empathize, but—a character upon whom Garak does not look down in some way.

Perhaps all of these flaws are present in *The Odyssey*. But it is as though Julian has found each ill-fitting piece of Garak and assembled them into a character to present to him. Odysseus is the cleverest of all and yet his men die and he wanders, exiled, because he believed himself a little cleverer than he was. He wins the war for the Greeks and it is ruinous to them all, but Odysseus is within sight of home before the winds snatch him away. The language, the rhythm, certainly Garak can appreciate these things, but Odysseus—

He reads the entirety of it. He does not sleep.



## Chapter 7

Garak understands, now, why Julian was so careful about offering to talk about the book. He needs time to—practice his reaction. To determine what response will give the doctor the appropriate amount of information without revealing any more. Julian knows that he lies constantly, but there is lying and there is—insincerity. A lie, like a suit, must be carefully tailored, and at the moment he can't manage to do either for Julian.

It takes him a few days. Julian must see that Garak is avoiding him, but he doesn't force the issue, does nothing more than nod to Garak as they pass on the promenade. Perhaps once or twice Garak catches Julian watching him. Finally, he braces himself and contrives to walk past the infirmary at just the time that Julian typically leaves and ambushes him—no, it's not an ambush, it's a simple greeting—to say, "My dear doctor, I fear we're overdue for lunch. Can I interest you?"

"It's 1900 hours," Julian says.

"Ah, I must have lost track of time while working in my shop. I'm dreadfully busy, you know. In that case, dinner?"

Julian looks very suspicious of this, likely because Garak has never lost track of time in his life. "...All right."

"Perhaps—your apartment in Hong Kong? It's been quite some time since I ate Chinese food." Since the last time they ate there, in fact.

Quark is more than happy to sell them a few hours of holosuite time. When he looks at Garak with a certain amount of innuendo, Garak remembers that it was Quark who let Julian into his holosuite the first time and lets a little bit of danger creep into his own eyes. There has been a little too much forgetting, lately, that Garak is not just another cheery station resident.

When they've sat down to dinner, Garak announces, "I would like to discuss the book," and then finds it very hard to go any further.

"If you like," Julian says. After a moment of silence, he adds, "Did you—enjoy it?"

"I don't believe that *enjoy* is quite the right word," Garak says. "It was—compelling."

"Yes, that's what you said about the *Iliad*."

Garak feels a sharp stab of emotion as he contemplates his next words. He never did figure out quite the right thing to say. "I found Odysseus to be—" The words catch in his throat.

Julian tries to save him. "Did you know, Homer was quite famous for the epic similes in the *Odyssey*? It's one of the great difficulties in translating from the ancient Greek to English, and I would imagine through the Universal Translator as well—"

"I found that I—empathized with Odysseus," Garak says. "His emotions were—familiar." He can say it here in this unreal place, this hologram of a four-hundred-year-old apartment in a nation-state that no longer exists. Julian says nothing, only waits and watches Garak. "After everything he went through during the war, the only thing he wanted was to return home, and when he did, he found it—tainted."

"Penelope was faithful to him," Julian points out.

"And yet he returned home to find himself nearly displaced again. To find that he had to commit acts of brute violence there too." Many parts of the book were unutterably sad to Garak, but in some ways that was the worst violation: to dream of home for years, to search for it through hardships, only to return and discover that there is no home to which one can return, not the way that it was. He has enough insight to see the parallels to his own life. "Everything he suffered, during the war and during his travels home..."

"Weren't you just telling me that the *Iliad* was a *celebration* of war?"

"My dear doctor." Julian is being facetious. "The *Iliad* is about a warrior and so is a celebration of war. The *Odyssey* is about a—an exile," and there, he's said it. "And so it is about the tragedy of exile." He finds that he can't continue.

"We don't have to talk about it more," Julian says. "If you'd prefer, I would be happy to tell you why I think your choice of salt-and-pepper squid was inferior to my choice of mapo tofu for this meal."

It feels like cowardice, but Garak can't help but agree. He picks up a piece of squid with his chopsticks and offers it to Julian. "Try it again, I think you'll change your mind."

\* \* \* \* \*

Garak has had rather a lot of kanar. "I've had rather a lot of kanar, my dear Julian," he announces. He's a little fuzzy on how they got here. Ran out of time in the holosuite, perhaps? Decided to have a drink or two at the bar?

"Yes, I can see that." Julian tries to encourage him off of his bar stool. "Come on, why don't we get you something other than kanar. Away from Quark's."

"You will accompany me?" This is very important to Garak, for some reason. "I'm not sure I can find my way back to my quarters without your assistance." He's found his way through unfamiliar hallways while blindfolded and drugged, but right now, it feels true.

"Yes, yes." Julian doesn't stop him from grabbing his bottle of kanar, but he does steer Garak out of Quark's. Julian supports him as they make their way through the promenade. Garak would be stumbling but for his grasp—Julian is steady, infallible, the smoothness of his gait somehow smoothing Garak as well.

“Wait, wait,” Garak says. He stops once they’re out of public sight and leans back against the wall for a moment. “My dear Julian—”

“You don’t usually call me that.” Julian’s voice is soft. There’s something confused spinning inside of Garak, something frantic, and he pushes himself off the wall and back onto his feet.

“We should keep walking,” he declares. “This is—not the appropriate place to continue drinking.”

“No, never that.” Julian wraps his arm around Garak’s shoulders again and hoists him along.

His strength is...appealing. There are few people Garak would trust with his full weight. Perhaps no one else. He puts his arm over Julian’s shoulder as well and leans into that warmth. Then he turns his face a little against Julian’s hair, breathes out onto his ear and feels Julian shiver a little. “My dear doctor,” he says.

Julian hesitates just a fraction and then continues them on. “Only a few more meters,” he says, and Garak doesn’t know whether Julian is lying or whether he himself has lost his sense of location. It’s not long before Julian has deposited him onto the bench in his own quarters and handed him a glass of water.

Garak considers the bottle of kanar in one hand and the glass of water in the other, and elects the bottle of kanar. “Thank you. Won’t you sit?” He’s not sure Julian has been here since he sat vigil by Garak’s bedside.

Julian hesitates again before sitting next to him. “Drink the water, please, Garak.”

To humor him, Garak drinks it. He stares into the empty glass. “Do you know, doctor, I fear I may have been—less than truthful with you.”

Julian laughs. “Garak, the only time I think you’re telling the truth is when you tell me what you think of a book I’ve recommended, and then only to be contrary.”

“You’re not wrong.” Garak sets the glass down and turns to face Julian. He’s golden in the soft light. “But I fear I was less than truthful—with regard to you. My—feelings about you.”

“Oh?”

He’s about to gut himself open, and the worst part is that he *wants* Julian to see it all. “I find—” He reaches out to touch Julian’s temple, trace down to his cheek. How different from a Cardassian his face is. “I find that I am—strangely aware. Of you. At all times.”

“Aware of me?” Julian’s voice is rough.

“The way that you move. The way that you speak. Your—physical presence next to me.” The words burn in his throat. “What you think, when I say something to you. What you might be thinking when I am not with you.”

“I saw you in the holosuite,” Julian says quietly.

“I was—educating myself.” Garak touches his own lips, to keep from touching Julian’s. “It has become difficult to focus on things that are not you.”

“I see.”

“And you must see how dangerous it is,” Garak tells him earnestly. “For anyone to know my feelings for you.” He sees a flash of something in Julian’s eyes. “A vulnerability for both of us. You would be a—target, for anyone who wished to harm me, to manipulate me.” He does touch Julian’s mouth then, softly, fleetingly.

“And I suppose you’re a target for anyone who wants to manipulate me?”

Garak nods in approval. “You see what a weakness it would create.”

“I thought you didn’t have that sort of feelings. For me.”

Garak is stroking Julian’s shoulder now, cupping his hand around the warm curve of it. “As I said. I fear I was less than truthful.” He’s not sure if Julian is leaning toward him or if Garak is pulling him, but Garak presses his forehead to Julian’s and closes his eyes, drawing in a long breath. The heat of Julian’s body soaks into his skin.

Julian touches the ridges of his face. “What are you saying, Garak?”

What *is* he saying? “I don’t wish to be—separate from you. More than necessary. I—” It’s too hard to put it into words. He pulls Julian closer and tilts his head to fit their mouths together. Julian opens his mouth to Garak and there, the slightest brush of tongues, then deeper, Julian stroking his fingers along the ridge that runs down his neck to his shoulder and Garak wants to *bask* in it. He clutches at Julian and pulls him closer until Julian turns fully to him and swings his leg across Garak’s lap. He straddles Garak, pressing him back against the bench as they kiss. Garak tilts his head back to expose his neck—vulnerability upon vulnerability—and Julian breaks away from his mouth to place hot, wet kisses across his neck. It would be easy for him to kill Garak now, like this, and Garak would do nothing to stop him. What does Garak’s skin feel like to him, to his bare human mouth? How sensitive it is to his touch—his lips, his tongue, his teeth—and Garak can do nothing but gather him closer, slide a hand through Julian’s hair and brace the other at the small of his back.

“Wait,” Julian says, and he pulls back. Garak recognizes the red of his lips from that night in the corridor, the shape of his hair. “Wait.”

“For what?” Garak can feel how little Julian wants to wait for anything.

“You’re drunk,” Julian tells him. “You’re drunk and you’re having a lot of complicated feelings.”

“My dear,” Garak begins to protest, and then remember that he is indeed drunk and that it was denying having feelings that got them into this entire mess. “I don’t see the relevance.”

Julian—stands up? Why is he standing up? “Don’t get me wrong, I want to hear more. When you’re sober. But I don’t want you to tell me something now that you won’t say—or do something you won’t do—when you’re sober.” He’s breathing fast and good, this should be difficult for him, because it’s very difficult for Garak.

“What if I can only tell you more when I’m drunk?” The doctor is already out of his grasp.

“I’d like to imagine you have a bit more emotional fortitude than that.” Julian is askew, every part of him, and Garak doesn’t want to let him go.

“Come to the shop tomorrow, at least. For a suit fitting.” He reaches out and Julian catches Garak’s hand with his own. “I haven’t finished your suit yet, but I need—more measurements.”

“More measurements,” Julian repeats. “All right.” He releases Garak’s hand slowly. Garak is very cold. “Get some sleep. I don’t want you to...take inaccurate measurements tomorrow.”

“My dear Julian. I wouldn’t dream of it.”

## Chapter 8

Cardassians have strong constitutions; even so, Garak had a great deal of kanar last night and is not feeling his best this morning. It takes him several raktajinos and a large bowl of plomeek soup—odd, that one of the best hangover remedies should come from Vulcan, where few people ever drink—to feel a bit more himself.

Of course, it doesn't help that his mind is full of Julian. The previous night was a show of extreme sentiment—weakness—and yet he finds that he can't bring himself to regret it. He's beginning to think that perhaps it is worth the vulnerability to have every part of Julian. As long as he's vigilant, as long as he anticipates all of the possible threats, it will be an acceptable exchange.

All of this means that he spends much of the morning watching the promenade from his shop to see when Julian will come in. He straightens the clothes hanging on the walls, neatens the shelves, sketches out three different designs for the Bajoran wedding dress that he has commissioned and has to erase each one when he realizes that he's drawing Klingon wedding costumes instead.

Finally, *finally*, Julian comes into the shop while Garak is haggling with one of Quark's employees over the cost of a new waistcoat. Garak is excruciatingly aware of his presence a few meters away during the entirety of the negotiation—though it does not, of course, prevent him from charging the Ferengi a substantial price for the waistcoat. Only when the Ferengi is gone does Julian say, "Hello, Garak."

"My dear—Julian," and he likes how it sounded last night when he said it. "What a pleasure to see you."

"I've come for my fitting. If you still have time."

"For you, always," and how true that is, how true that's always been. Garak gestures back toward the fitting room. Before he follows Julian back, he says very quietly, "Computer, lock shop."

The beginnings of the suit are hanging in the fitting room. Garak chose a dark green with the faintest hint of silk sheen to it, and he turns away from Julian to fuss with the sleeves a little more as Julian undresses. When Garak turns, Julian is standing in his underwear again. "I should have brought a formal shirt," he says. "It didn't occur to me."

"That's all right." Garak is a little breathless, looking at him. "Here, let me help you. Be careful, the stitching is only preliminary." He stands behind Julian with the jacket so that Julian can slide both arms in at once, to avoid stressing the fabric. Then Garak settles the fabric into place carefully, smoothing his hands over the shoulders. He remembers vividly the first time that he introduced himself to Julian, the way that the doctor's shoulders had felt beneath his hands. He moves a little closer, for no reason that he could articulate, and moves his hands to Julian's sides, tugging at the jacket as though trying to correct the fit. Then he slides them further around Julian, pulls the jacket closed—his fingers brush Julian's bare skin as he does it—and buttons it. Julian draws in a quick breath. "How is that?" Garak asks. He says it into the nape of Julian's neck and sees the slight shiver. "Comfortable?" He slips his hands further up the jacket, finds the place where Julian's nipples are hard beneath the fabric and rubs his fingers back and forth a few times to feel them harden further. Garak wants to fit himself against Julian's hips, stop pretending that this is about the suit. This is so much easier than trying to say any of what he needs to say to Julian.

"Yes," Julian says, his voice hoarse. "Yes, it feels—good."

Garak allows himself to rest his forehead against the back of Julian's head and inhale deeply. He unbuttons the jacket again, slowly, so that he can drag his fingers up and down the edges of it. Then he says, "All right. You can take it off," and helps Julian out of it. He can see the flush on Julian's skin. Garak is horrified to discover that his hands are shaking a little. "The pants next." He walks to the wall where they're hanging and unclips the pants, passes them to Julian without looking too closely and busies himself re-hanging the jacket as Julian pulls the pants on. "How do they—" He turns and his breath catches. The pants fit perfectly except where they're open at the front, where Julian is visibly hard and hasn't bothered to close them, and Garak has to walk to him then. Has to step close to him, put one hand on Julian's hip, and the heat of him is searing beneath Garak's hand.

"Garak—"

"I do still mean it all, now that I'm a little less under the influence of kanar, my dear doctor." Garak says it against Julian's neck.

Julian is steady, motionless, but Garak can almost feel his heartbeat. "And which of the things you said last night did you mean? That you have feelings for me? That it would be a weakness for both of us to act on them?"

"Yes," Garak says, and then he pulls back a little, just enough that he can look Julian in the eyes. "But I've considered it, and I am willing to—accept the risks of that weakness."

"Oh?" Julian is so close that Garak can feel his breath on his own lips.

"I would like to—begin a more intimate relationship. A more permanent one." There's a certain warmth in Julian's eyes as Garak speaks. When he's finished, Garak gives Julian a moment to respond and then leans in to kiss him. Julian grips the back of his neck and pulls him in, strokes the smooth skin there as he licks into Garak's mouth. Garak puts his hand on Julian's other hip and pulls their bodies together and this is the most dangerous thing in the galaxy, the way he feels about Julian. Julian pops open the hidden fastenings of Garak's shirt, pulls them apart and gets his hands on Garak's bare skin and Garak hisses and pushes into the heat of them. "I take it—you're still amenable—"

"I am—" Julian's voice catches when Garak bites at his neck and gets a hand between the two of them. "Garak—" He arches up against Garak's hand. "Is this—"

"I locked the shop," Garak says, and he marvels at how delicate Julian's skin is beneath his hand, the little hitches in his breathing, the way he clutches at Garak's arm as Garak touches him, the way he suddenly shudders and groans into Garak's mouth and then sags against him for a moment.

“Oh—oh good,” Julian says finally. “Oh good.” Garak likes to hear him talk, but he likes him this way too. “I should—I should get back to the infirmary. I’m not—” He catches his breath. “I’m not supposed to be off shift until 1900. I just didn’t want to wait.” He blushes and it’s lovely on him. “Not that I’m not happy to reciprocate—”

“My dear doctor. For once in my life, let me be entirely truthful with you and say that I look forward to it.” Garak touches his cheek. “Shall we have dinner, in that case? Perhaps in your quarters?”

Julian traces the ridge around Garak’s left eye and then gives him a lingering kiss. “Dinner it is.”

## Chapter 9

“Cardassian poetry?” Julian accepts the tube from him and sits back against the couch. “I didn’t realize there was Cardassian poetry.”

“My dear Julian!” Garak’s outrage is half-feigned. “That is one of the most close-minded things I’ve ever heard you say. Of *course* we have poetry. Cardassian culture is extensive and varied.”

Julian grins at him. “I’m sure it is. Novels about patriotism. Sculptures of patriots. Paintings of patriots. Patriotic ballets—”

“Well, yes, we do have those. Naturally.”

“Patriotic ballets?” Julian grins again and darts forward on the couch to kiss Garak before he can answer, then retreats. “I can only imagine.”

“The *point*, my dear, is that there is a great range of Cardassian culture that I plan to introduce you to. I take it you know some Cardassian?”

Now Julian looks insulted. “I learned it when you gave me that first novel, Garak. I didn’t want to read it in translation. I consider myself quite fluent, at this point.”

There’s been something unfurling in Garak’s heart for quite some time now—filling it, even—and the realization that Julian bothered to learn Cardassian years ago only speeds it. “Well. I imagine it didn’t take you very long,” he says acidly. “What with your genetically-enhanced brain.” At Julian’s guilty look, he adds, “Perhaps you had a little head start?”

“I—did learn to speak it before I arrived on the station,” Julian admits. “But only modern Cardassian! I taught myself the expanded literary vocabulary for *The Never-Ending Sacrifice* and Middle Era Cardassian for *Severance and Solitude*.”

“Well,” Garak says, mollified. “I suppose that’s all right. That should be adequate, for modern poetry. You’ll need some more vocabulary to fully grasp the beauty of the classics.”

“I’m sure you can help me through it. I’m a fast learner, you know.” There’s a little bit of innuendo in his voice.

Garak pulls him closer on the couch. “After that, maybe you can teach me something.”

“Oh, yes, I’ll introduce you to the *ghazal* poetic form, you’ll have to learn—”

“That’s not exactly what I had in mind,” Garak says, and stops his mouth with a kiss.

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