

the beast of empok nor

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by [meriwethersays](#)

Summary

“Empok Nor is controlled by some kind of—beast. It’s told Quark that it will provide the parts that we need, but in exchange, it requires a doctor.”

How naïve Julian had been. “I’d be happy to assist, sir.”

“No,” Sisko had said. “No, it doesn’t want a doctor’s visit. It wants a doctor.”

Notes

I call this Beauty and the Beast meets Jekyll & Hyde in the middle of the Dominion War.

empok nor (part I)

In retrospect, Sisko's expression really should have been warning enough.

"Dr. Bashir," Sisko had said. "I have something to ask of you that I should never ask."

"That sounds ominous," he'd said. He hadn't fully been paying attention. There was a fresh study on Bajoran epigenetics and the impact of exposure to certain ore refining compounds that was cued up on the padd on his desk in the infirmary, and this meeting was an unfortunate interruption. "What is it that you need?"

Sisko had cleared his throat. "You know that the station was damaged very badly in the recent attack."

Who could miss it? Half the machines in the infirmary weren't working properly. "I thought Miles was working on that."

"I won't bore you with the details," Sisko had said. "We need items that only the Cardassians can provide."

"That sounds like a bit of a challenge." They weren't exactly on good terms with the Cardassians. Or non-shooting terms.

"There's—another station like Deep Space Nine." He'd been able to hear the disgust in Sisko, the way that whatever Sisko wanted to ask was eating at him, and Julian's stomach had clenched a little. "It's called Empok Nor." Julian turns the name over in his mouth as Sisko keeps talking, as though he won't be able to go through with—whatever he's trying to say if Julian interrupts him again. "It has the supplies we need."

"I'm guessing there's a catch." Quite the understatement, there. Julian has always had a gift for that.

"Empok Nor is controlled by some kind of—beast. It's told Quark that it will provide the parts that we need, but in exchange, it requires a doctor."

How naive he'd been. "I'd be happy to assist, sir."

"No," Sisko had said. "No, it doesn't want a doctor's *visit*. It wants a doctor."

* * *

Of course he'd said yes. What else was there to say? More than a thousand people on Deep Space Nine, there at the mouth of the wormhole, against his own personal comfort? Surely, whatever this beast was, he could reason with it. Julian is very good at reasoning with people. And with his own particular—gifts—he's likelier to survive than any other of the station's doctors might be.

Now, watching Empok Nor grow larger in the viewscreen, he's not as sanguine. Cardassian stations are designed to be imposing, and this one is worse than Deep Space Nine for the way that the battle scars stitch across it. A section of the habitat ring is hanging on at a strange angle, certainly depressurized. The entire station is dark inside, devoid of the bustle of ships that Julian associates with Deep Space Nine. Off one of the shuttle bays, he can see some kind of floating bundle. He hopes it's the parts they need. Whatever is about to happen to him, it can't be for nothing.

"We've been targeted by three different weapons systems, and we're being hailed," the Bajoran security officer says. "Audio only."

"This is Chief Miles O'Brien." Miles can't seem to meet Julian's eyes.

"Have you brought my doctor?" The audio is badly distorted, intentionally or not.

"I'm here," Julian says.

"Transport him to the coordinates that I have transmitted," the voice says. "Then I'll release the supplies that you need."

"Miles." Julian clasps his shoulder. "It's all right." He hoists one duffel bag in each hand. "I'm ready."

"Good man." Miles does look at him then, and Julian sees the sorrow in his eyes. "We'll find a way to get you back, Julian." Julian nods, his throat tight. He's doing this for everyone on Deep Space Nine—for everyone battling the Dominion—but it doesn't mean that he likes it.

"Energize," he says at last, to be the author of his own destiny, and the runabout disappears around him.

He re-materializes in a dark cargo bay. "Hello?" he calls. "This is Doctor Bashir." It's shockingly hot inside.

There's no one there with him, but that distorted voice says over the comm system, "I'll be with you momentarily, doctor." It's a very long moment, long enough that he begins to explore the cargo bay. The control console is dead, but when he presses the door control, it opens onto another dim hallway. Quark told them that the stations are identical and Julian believes it as he walks gingerly down the corridor. He can picture this particular spot on Deep Space Nine, though there's a good deal less destruction in this corridor, for all that it's dark. He knows his way to the infirmary from here, and since the creature—whatever it is—demanded a doctor in particular, he assumes that's where he'll be needed. After a few minutes, it occurs to him to say, "Computer, lights," and the lights blaze on around him. It gets warmer and warmer as he walks until he's sweating. His feet carry him to the infirmary, which is—well, it's intact in its Cardassian iteration, which is hardly what he's used to working with. But he's brought everything that he could reasonably carry with him, as well as the replicator formulas for a variety of equipment, and he begins to set up the infirmary. What else is there to do, after all? He chose the frontier, didn't he? Is it any different than all those times that he started over, every time his parents moved them?

Well, yes, it is. Those were only new schools, new classmates who would resent him when he surpassed them. This is some kind of—monster who’s traded away station parts to obtain him, for whatever obtuse purpose. He hears someone enter before they say, “Very industrious, Doctor,” and it’s not at all like the voice over the comm.

When Julian turns, slowly, he expects to see something truly monstrous—something as externally freakish as he is internally. He’s not disappointed. It’s half in shadow, but it looks like the prehistoric forebear to a Cardassian: it’s at least seven feet tall and silver-skinned with an exaggerated scoop-shaped horn in the center of its forehead. Its shoulders are broad and hulking, and the bony ridges running down its forehead and around its eyes are formed out of stiff scales reminiscent of armor; those along its jawline and neck are far thicker than a modern-day Cardassian. One of its hands is visible in the light and Julian sees curved claws.

“You’re the—”

“The Beast of Empok Nor,” it—he?—says with some relish. The crisp voice is at sharp odds with the face from which it issues. “In the flesh.”

Julian steels himself and offers a hand in introduction. “Dr. Julian Bashir,” he says. “I’m—here to help.”

“Help, indeed.” The Beast looks him over from head to toe. “Starfleet does make them pretty, doesn’t it.”

Julian stiffens—and the funny thing is, it’s the word *make* that bothers him far more than *pretty*. He’s confident in his own strength, if he needs it, but the secret that lurks under everything—that’s far more dangerous. “What should I call you?”

“You don’t like ‘Beast’?” There’s amusement somewhere in that dark voice.

“It seems a bit impersonal.” If Julian were anyone else, his heart would be positively rabbiting. “I imagine you have a given name, or had one.”

There’s a long moment of silence, and then Julian sees the gleam of blue eyes in that monstrous face. “Garak. You may call me Garak.”

“Well then, Garak. Pleased to meet you.”

“Come now, Doctor. There’s no need for lies between us. You needn’t pretend to be pleased to meet me, or to be here, not when your people sold you for spare parts.”

Julian bristles at the word ‘sold.’ “I assumed you were in need of medical attention,” he says. “I’m a doctor.”

“Yes, of course, a doctor.” Garak steps closer, out of the shadows, and Julian keeps his breathing even. There’s a set of long scars across Garak’s face, as though something with a great wide handspan clawed him there, and another along the thick ridge that runs directly from his shoulderblade to his neck. In the light, Julian can see that Garak is wearing only a thin pair of pants and a loose white shirt buttoned halfway up his chest; the gaps reveal more scarred slashes.

“What is it you’d like me to do?”

Garak gestures at his body as though it’s the most obvious thing. “Fix me.”

“Fix you.”

“You don’t think I was *born* like this, do you?” Julian can recognize frustration even on this alien face. “No, I don’t know what happened—all I know is that I woke up on this station, alone, like *this*.”

“You’re Cardassian,” Julian ventures. This, he knows—the examination of the patient, the questions to determine etiology of the disease, identify symptoms, and rule out possible diagnoses.

“A brilliant deduction.”

“Do you know how long you’ve been here?”

“No.” Garak doesn’t elaborate.

Julian gestures at the examination table. “I’ll need you to be a little more specific,” he says. “Sit down.” He doesn’t see anything like a medical tricorder, so he rummages in his own bag until he finds one.

Garak flinches away when Julian reaches toward him. “You can scan me, ask me questions, whatever you please, Doctor, so long as you don’t touch me.”

“I’ll certainly endeavor not to.” Garak isn’t the first patient to try to avoid contact. “But I can’t promise that whatever treatment I’m able to devise will be entirely contact-free.”

“Until then.” Garak sits on the table and allows Julian to begin scanning him with the medical tricorder. “I don’t know how long I’ve been here, Doctor. I remember a time before it. But there’s a long blank period—a time without conscious thought that I know existed, when I remembered nothing and didn’t mark the passage of time. Years, perhaps.”

“You know that the Occupation is over.” The medical tricorder doesn’t know what to make of Garak. “Can I access the medical databases on this station? I need to calibrate the tricorder for Cardassian physiology.”

“That terminal there. Yes, I know, though even that I couldn’t tell you if I knew before the—empty time, or only after Quark made contact.”

Julian makes himself busy jury-rigging a connection between his tricorder's data port and the infirmary's terminal so that Garak won't have to look him in the face as he admits all of this. "And after Quark made contact? Do you know how long it's been since that?"

"I suppose you could check the communication logs for the date," Garak says. "The passage of time doesn't have a great deal of meaning to me, here. You're quite the engineer, for a doctor."

"Starfleet Medical extension course." The lie rolls pat off Julian's tongue, though there's no reason he should need to tell it. For all Garak knows, engineering of this kind is part of the standard curriculum. "Now, lie back." Garak is eerily still as Julian scans him from head to toe. The tricorder beeps angrily, over and over, and the picture it paints on the diagnostic screen isn't pretty. "There's—extensive scar tissue. Do you recall receiving these injuries?"

Garak laughs a little and gestures at the scars across his face, his neck, his chest. "I was not always the only terrible thing lurking in the depths of Empok Nor, Doctor."

"And are you now?" Julian realizes how it sounds and doesn't bother to amend it.

"Certain areas are safe. I can't speak for the rest." Garak lifts one clawed hand. "I didn't have the manual dexterity to operate the medical equipment, at the time." He's watching Julian very carefully. They're speaking Kardasi, Julian realizes. They've been speaking Kardasi since he arrived. It's dangerous, this brain of his—he must have understood Garak better in Kardasi than through the Universal Translator, and so he'd switched to Kardasi automatically, without considering what it revealed. "You're a clever creature, aren't you."

Julian's face must have revealed his realization about the language they're speaking. "Second in my class."

"Second?"

"I mistook a pre-ganglionic fiber for a post-ganglionic nerve." An explanation even more familiar than his engineering extension course. "Don't worry, it shouldn't impact my treatment of you. I never make a mistake twice."

Garak's deep-set eyes are hooded. "Naturally."

"What did you do, before you woke up here? It's a standard examination question," Julian says, when Garak hesitates. "I need to know if you might have been exposed to any substances that could have triggered your memory loss, or your—transformation."

"I was a tailor." Julian is intimately familiar with the sound of a lie that's become an article of faith. "On Cardassia Prime. My mother was a housekeeper. My father was a maintenance worker." The housekeeper story, at least, sounds true. "Are you quite finished with your scans?"

"You can sit up." Even seated on the exam table, Garak is a head taller than Julian. "I take it you're not aware of any—Cardassian medical condition that presents this way."

"I'm a tailor," Garak repeats.

"All right." Julian is getting a headache. "All right, I'm done for now. Am I to sleep in the infirmary, or are there quarters that I can use?"

"Quarters. Whichever you want. You can go anywhere in the station," Garak says, "except the west wing."

"The—west wing?" It must be a quirk of Kardasi. He's never heard the station described as having wings before. "Why?"

"It's forbidden."

"Oh, thank you, that clarifies it greatly." Julian is tired and hungry and the headache is getting worse. He hopes there's a replicator in one of the quarters that can replicate something for him to eat. "All right then."

"As for the rest of the station, if a door is locked, it's locked for a reason," Garak warns. He stands again and it brings him close to Julian, close enough that Julian can feel the heat radiating off his body. The medical tricorder had registered his body temperature at nearly 105 degrees, which the database said was just above normal for a Cardassian. Julian has never been this close to any Cardassian, let alone one half-regressed to some primal ancestor.

"I thought you said I could go anywhere."

"Yes," Garak says. "And if you're stupid enough to go through a locked door, you'll probably be staying on the other side of it." He huffs out a short breath. "You should lock your own door at night, too."

"You're not the only terrible thing lurking in the bowels of Empok Nor?"

The look Garak gives him is entirely alien. "What should that have to do with it?"

* * *

Julian chooses the quarters closest to the infirmary, after testing the replicator to confirm that it will, at least, produce some kind of edible substance (he scans it with his tricorder to be sure). There's not much to unpack from his duffel of personal belongings. He slots the data rod with the basic formulas into the replicator—clothes, mostly, as well as pads and basic data input devices. Beyond that, there's the set of data rods containing his favorite literary collections and a few holovideos. It had felt wrong to bring Kukalaka, who he'd left in the infirmary back on Deep Space Nine to keep some of the younger patients company, and there's a sort of sick feeling inside him when he thinks about setting out holo-images of his parents, of himself with Miles or Dax or the particular one at Quark's, when they were all drunker than they should've been, before the wars began, when there was only the new adventure of the station. It's all there, in the replicator patterns—he could produce them if he wanted to. He could decorate this room wall-to-wall with images of the people he's left behind.

But Julian has spent a lifetime training himself out of that kind of sentiment, at least when it's dangerous—and every kind of sentiment seems dangerous here. There's a kind of clever cruelty to Garak, a mercurial nature that Julian knows better than to trust. "Doctor Bashir," Garak says over the comm, and Julian resolutely does not jump. "Please join me for dinner."

Julian considers his answer. He's running on adrenaline now, primarily, adrenaline and the small amount of edible gruel that came out of his replicator, and he's going to crash eventually but it won't be any time soon. "Where?"

It's the replimat, on Deep Space Nine. Here, it's a room with a long table and a single chair at either end. Garak is already sitting at one end, and he growls, "Sit." The light is dim, probably a little too dim for ordinary Human eyes, but Julian can manage fine

"Is someone going to be serving us?"

Garak plants one elbow on either side of the platter in front of him and growls, "Zabu steak." Two thick and very bloody steaks appear.

"Is that a single-source replicator installed in the table?" Julian has heard of them, but they're not exactly standard-issue on reclaimed space stations. "Does it know anything non-Cardassian?"

Garak shrugs. He's dug his claws into one of the steaks and is ripping off bites with his teeth. His incisors are flat, like a Human's, but there's still a feral hint to the way he eats. "Try it."

"*Ovis aries*, rack," Julian says, and then adds, "Medium-rare," because he doesn't fancy the blood dripping down Garak's chin. The rack of lamb that appears is uninspiringly bland-looking. "Dishes of sodium chloride and ground piper nigrum." He doesn't trust words like "salt" and "pepper" in an alien replicator. It duly produces salt and pepper, which he adds abundantly.

"Were you ordered to come here?" Garak is a hulking figure at the other end of the table, hunched over his half-raw steak.

Julian considers his answer. "My commander asked me to, if that's what you mean."

"Could you have said no?" Garak finishes the first steak and fixes his gaze on Julian.

"Someone had to. We needed the supplies."

"Are you the best doctor on your station?"

"Yes," Julian says, unhesitating, and he would be a little more humble elsewhere, but here it's only him and the Beast of Empok Nor, so what's the point in pretense?

"Then it was a waste to send you away. You would have better served your commander by remaining on the station." Garak's hand leaves a red smear on his cup when he takes a drink.

"I disagree. He and I acted under the belief that there was someone here in need of medical attention. As the best doctor, I'm best equipped to treat someone like—you. The obvious hope is to form a longer-lasting mutually-beneficial relationship with the person in control of the station."

Garak's eyes are inscrutable. "And now that you're here?"

"That's still my hope."

"It would be more efficient to kill me," Garak points out.

Julian hesitates for a long time. He isn't going to insult Garak's intelligence again by pretending that that hasn't occurred to him. "That isn't the Federation way of doing things." Then, because he's being honest enough, he says, "And I don't know how to kill you—efficiently."

"Yet."

"Yet," Julian agrees. He looks down at his plate. "I'danian spice pudding," he says hopefully. His plate remains empty.

"The replicator can produce base ingredients fairly well," Garak says. "It's not much good with particular preparations. Unless you brought recipes."

"Only medical ones," Julian says regretfully.

"What a shame."

They lapse into silence. Eventually, Julian asks, "How late is 'night,' exactly? I need to do a great deal of reading from the infirmary database to even begin to analyze what might be wrong with you."

"In a hurry, doctor? I wouldn't get too attached to the passage of time," Garak says. "You'll find it slips away from you here."

"I would think you'd be eager for a cure, and I can't find that until I get the basic understanding of Cardassian physiology that the database provides. At what point, exactly, do I need to have my doors locked?"

"The station is set on a 24-hour cycle," Garak says. That will be a change from Deep Space Nine and its 26-hour Bajoran day—an unwelcome one for Julian, who doesn't need as much sleep as the average human. "From 2300 to 0400, I would say."

"All right." It's only 1900 now. Julian stands from the table. "I have a lot of reading to do." Garak doesn't try to stop him.

The infirmary database is slow going, even for him. He's fluent in Kardasi, but much of the database involves particular technical terminology. Often he has to cross-reference a word with several others to understand what it means, and it wears on even his mind. There are only a few diagrams or anatomical drawings; the rest is all written out in exhaustive detail. Cardassians are largely humanoid, but there are certain substantial differences, and Julian remembers the headaches of learning Klingon anatomy, the way they appeared humanoid but were internally very different from Humans and Vulcans; of the way that human and Klingon anatomy battled it out in human-Klingon hybrids; of the bizarre quirks of which species could cross-reproduce and which could not.

"You should be back in your quarters." Garak looms in the entrance to the infirmary. His voice is thicker now, guttural, not so precise. "It's getting late."

"I have more work—" Julian thinks better of it. He picks up the next two data rods and stuffs them in his pocket. "Fine," he says. "Back to my quarters."

"Lock your door," Garak reminds him.

* * *

"Computer, lock doors," Julian says when he returns to his room. Somehow, it feels less than reassuring. "Computer, remove any overrides that allow access when doors are locked."

"Delete medical override?" The computer sounds doubtful.

"Confirmed."

"Override deleted. Compartment inaccessible without internal release of security lock."

That's something, at least. "Night" has always been a strange feeling to him out in space, when it's always dark and starry outside. He used to spend his excess waking time reading, mostly, not wandering around the station—but being restricted to quarters chafes at him. It would be foolish to test Garak's orders now, on his first night here, but his hand is almost to the door controls when he hears the screams.

They're inhuman—of course they are, Julian is the only Human here, and not much of one—and they set his teeth on edge. It sounds like someone in agony, and there are pounding steps coming closer, heavy footfalls that come with crashes. The doctor in Julian takes over, the part of him that can't allow suffering to continue untended, and he opens the doors and steps into the hallway.

It's pitch-dark, but he can hear heavy breathing—then there's a sound like a body being flung into a wall and another scream of pain. He can see well enough in the dark to see the hulking Cardassian shape of the body, and he goes to it, against all of his better judgment. In a second, he's flat on his back with a clawed hand around his throat. There's no recognition in Garak's eyes, nothing beyond empty instinct, and Garak yells again and draws his other hand back for a killing blow. In the instant between that movement and the next, Julian uses all his strength to fling Garak off and scramble back into his quarters, panting, "Lock doors!"

The noises continue for what seems like hours. There's something terrible about them—about the mindless way that Garak flung his own body against the walls, the screaming, something so far beyond the bounds of the control that he'd displayed earlier. Eventually, when it quiets, Julian lies in bed and closes his eyes and trusts his enhanced senses to wake him if danger approaches. It still takes him a long time to fall asleep.

* * *

He doesn't ask Garak about it. Garak either doesn't remember or isn't interested in discussing the fresh slashes in the wall outside Julian's room. Garak doesn't insist on breakfast or lunch together, and dinner is often painfully quiet. What is there to talk about, really? Garak won't say anything more about his life before Empok Nor, beyond his eminently preposterous claim that he was a tailor. Julian doesn't feel like talking about the war, and wants even less to talk about himself. No, his mind is focused on a single task: figuring out what has triggered this transformation. If he can figure that out, he can begin the process of reversing it.

Julian spends the first week taking extremely detailed scans of Garak and more or less memorizing the entire medical database on Cardassian physiology and the rarer illnesses, and Garak is clearly unhappy with his lack of progress. "Only more scans today, doctor? Nothing to try?" He tries to pick up the tricorder, but the sharp curve of his claws makes his grasp clumsy.

Julian pulls up the scan of his hands and examines it. "One thing," he says. "If you'd like. I could remove the claws."

There's the briefest unguarded moment of surprise, and then Garak's face is a mask again. "What, pull them out? I imagine that would be quite painful, and I'm not sure what it would accomplish."

"No." Julian turns the screen so Garak can see the scan. "It would be painful, but with a laser scalpel, I could cut them down until they're simply—fingernails. You would have substantially increased manual dexterity, at least."

"And substantially less ability to defend myself." Garak shifts just slightly on the examination table, just enough that Julian can see that he's nervous.

"I'm not going to attack you." Julian is a little hurt. He's done nothing to warrant distrust. "And you've quite a few other advantages."

Garak looks surprised. "Not against you, doctor." He flexes his hands and examines his claws. "Very well. It would be nice to regain more use of my hands."

Julian turns away and rummages through his stack of replicated tools for the laser scalpel to give Garak a moment to compose himself. He replicates a hypospray with the strongest numbing agent he can find and says, "I don't know exactly how strong this will be, in your body, but

it should provide at least *some* localized anesthetic effect.”

“No, thank you,” Garak says.

“It’s going to hurt quite a bit—” Julian would never offer to do this to a patient without any anesthetic.

“I said no, doctor. Go ahead.” There’s a ring of finality in Garak’s voice.

“We’ll go one finger at a time,” he says. At least that way there will be time for Garak to change his mind. “Lean forward and set the heels of your hands on the tray. Spread your fingers.” Garak splays out his fingers. The claws keep him from laying his hands flat, and Julian can’t imagine what a struggle it must be to accomplish anything day-to-day with those claws. “Hold very still, please.” He adjusts the setting on the laser scalpel to cut through keratin—and nerve—only, not skin, though he doesn’t know how the scalpel will register proto-Cardassian hide. He’ll have to be extremely careful. “If you want the analgesic at any time, please tell me and I’ll give it to you immediately.”

“Yes, yes,” Garak says. “Get on with it already.”

It’s a long, delicate process, made worse by Julian’s awareness of the pain Garak must be suffering. He begins with Garak’s right pinky, shearing off the length of the claw and then reshaping the chunk left behind until it’s only slightly curved, like an ordinary fingernail. Garak’s lack of reaction makes Julian wonder if he misread the scans, if perhaps there’s no quick at all in those claws. He seals the shape into place, so that it won’t grow further. “Doctor.” Garak sounds almost pleased. “You’re worth something after all.”

The note of surprised pleasure in his voice gives Julian the courage to say, “It would be easier if I could touch your fingers. I have to go very slowly because of the risk that you might flinch, and if I hold the finger in place as I work—”

“I will not *flinch*.” Garak hesitates infinitesimally. “Very well. My fingers only, and only as long as necessary for each claw.”

For all his bluster, Garak does flinch when Julian gently grasps his next finger at what would be the distal phalanx on a human. “Any discomfort?” Julian keeps his hold soft, as guidance rather than grip. Garak’s skin is hot beneath his hands and surprisingly tender. The sheen of sweat is the only indication that Garak feels anything at all.

“No.” Garak’s voice is regressing to that alarming guttural tone that Julian hears sometimes, when he begins to lose control, but he makes no aggressive moves. “Go ahead.”

It’s oddly intimate, holding each finger in place as Julian turns it from a weapon back into something good for much more—and how strange, to think of this kind of contact, with a beast holding him captive, in that way. He keeps his head bent close so that he can’t see Garak’s face, though his vision is good enough that there’s no need, and moves methodically. He rubs his thumb across each fresh fingernail to ensure that it’s smooth and even, and he can hear the way that Garak’s breath catches slightly each time. “How does that feel?”

Garak flexes his hand again, his fingers, and then runs his fingernails along the ridge at his jawline. Then he presses his fingertips against the metal examination table. “Remarkable.” His blue eyes are very bright as he looks at Julian, and he offers his other hand.

This hand goes faster now that Julian has a feel for the correct shape and pressure. When he finally finishes, he releases Garak’s left pinky and steps back so that Garak can stand up without coming too close. “There,” Julian says. “At least you’ve got the use of your fingers back while I work on figuring out the rest of you.”

“Remarkable, my dear doctor,” Garak repeats, and Julian isn’t sure how he feels about being called ‘my dear doctor.’ “Do you know, I haven’t been able to pick up a data rod to read a book since I first woke up here. I’ll have to hope that I haven’t forgotten how to read as part of this—transformation.”

“Is there a library on this station?” At the rate his medical research is going, Julian is going to run through a re-read of every book he brought long before he finds a way to cure Garak.

“An extensive collection of Kardasi literature, I believe,” Garak says. Then he frowns. “It seems I remember that, if nothing else.”

“Would you show me? A man can’t survive on reading medical texts alone, Garak.” At Garak’s hesitation, Julian adds, “I’m happy to trade some of what I brought.”

“Oh?” Julian can’t help but be struck by the incongruity of Garak’s voice coming from that hulking body of ropy muscle and bone. “You thought you would have a great deal of time for reading?”

Julian sighs. “I don’t sleep that much, and I have to lock myself in my room every night,” he points out.

“All right. Follow me.” Garak leads the way through the scarred hallway of the promenade—what would be the promenade, on Deep Space Nine—and through one of the locked doors that he’s warned Julian against, down to an expansive storeroom. Julian has never been to this area at home, but he makes note of the route that they take. The room is full of shelves and shelves of data rods, each labeled in printed Kardasi, as well as a stack of readers.

“This is—incredible.” Some of the weight on Julian’s shoulders lifts, knowing that at the very least there will be this escape from drudgery. He loves medicine more than almost anything (perhaps just as much as tennis) but his mind has always craved variety, ever since (and perhaps before) his parents redesigned the Human that was Julian Bashir. “Thank you, Garak.”

“A fitting trade for the use of my hands, my dear doctor.” Garak plucks one of the rods from the nearest shelf. “If you’ll accept a recommendation?” He offers it to Julian, though when Julian takes it, Garak holds on for just a little too long—testing his newly revealed fingertips, Julian thinks.

“What is it?”

“A classic. *The Never-Ending Sacrifice*. A good introduction to Cardassian literature, if you’ve never had the pleasure before.” There’s something a little eager in Garak’s eyes. “Do tell me what you think of it, when you’ve finished it.”

“Something to talk about at the dinner table,” Julian says.

* * *

If someone had asked him to guess what a Cardassian novel might be like, he would have said patriotic, perhaps highly structured, and *The Never-Ending Sacrifice* does not disappoint. “Well?” Garak asks at dinner. “Have you had the chance to start it?” He’s eating with silverware for the first time. Julian tactfully does not comment on his awkwardness maneuvering the fork and knife.

“I read it last night.”

“What, all of it?” Garak looks startled. Julian is getting better and better at reading the expressions on his face, even beneath the sharp ridges and protrusions. “I do hope you don’t mean that you *skimmed* it, my dear doctor. Much would be lost—”

“No, I read the whole thing. I stayed up most of the night, in fact.” Julian fakes a yawn, realizing belatedly that he’s revealing too much about his reading speed.

“Isn’t it superb? Without a doubt, the finest Cardassian novel ever written.”

“Do you really think so?” Julian keeps his tone light, not accusatory.

“The repetitive epic is the most elegant form of Cardassian literature, and *The Never-Ending Sacrifice* is its greatest ideal.” Garak takes a bite of some sort of Cardassian casserole-type dish. “I suppose you disliked the emphasis on patriotic sacrifice? I should think that your presence here demonstrates your approval of such sacrifice.”

Julian considers how best to put it. “I found it repetitive without enough variation. I mean the author’s supposed to be chronicling seven generations of a single family, but he tells the same story over and over again. All of his characters lead selfless lives of duty to the state, grow old and die. Then the next generation comes along and does it all over again.”

“But that’s exactly the point, doctor!” There’s the hint of a growl in Garak’s tone. “Your pedestrian misunderstanding—”

“No, let me give you an example of what I mean.” Julian has forgotten his food. “There’s a poetic form in English called the sestina.” Garak actually allows him to continue. “Thirty-nine lines long, and each line must end with one of six words, in a particular order. It forces the poet to be creative within a particular structure, and it keeps the repetition and the theme while allowing variation. Do you see? *The Never-Ending Sacrifice* could have been much more powerful that way. Or perhaps—maybe a villanelle is a better example? It’s even more strictly structured with greater repetition.”

Garak turns the word *villanelle* over in his mouth. “Go on.”

“It requires—repeating not only words, but lines, and then also rhyming some of the lines. I can—do you speak Federation Standard?” An example isn’t going to make a lot of sense to him if it’s garbled through Julian’s off-the-cuff attempt to translate it, let alone the Universal Translator.

“I do.” There’s a hint of humor in Garak’s voice. “If you’d like to share one to demonstrate how your repetitive Federation poetry is superior to the Cardassian repetitive epic.”

“I didn’t say that,” Julian protests. “Only that I would have found the novel more compelling if the author had introduced greater variation into each repetition.” Garak looks skeptical. “All right, here’s one.

“Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

He thinks there’s a sudden flash of sorrow in Garak’s eyes.

“Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.”

It’s not even one of his particular favorites—a little maudlin—but only one that he’s always remembered.

“Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

“Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

“Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Garak's face is tight with some emotion that Julian has never seen there before.

"And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

He clears his throat. "You see, how the poet—it's Dylan Thomas, an Earth poet from the 20th century—he begins and ends with the same refrain, he rhymes the first line of each new stanza with one of the lines of the refrain, he rhymes the second line of each new stanza with the next. The lines change and grow and return to their original form. For me, a repetitive epic would be strongest if it worked the same way."

"Maudlin," Garak pronounces, as though he can read Julian's mind. "A great deal of unnecessary sentiment."

Julian huffs out a breath. "You know very well that I'm not talking about the subject matter, Garak. A person could write a dreadful villanelle or a beautiful one, as they could anything. I'm not even saying that characters in novels shouldn't all fall prey to the same failings that their parents did." He wonders if *This be the verse* might be a bit much to introduce into the conversation now. *They fill you with the faults they had/And add some extra, just for you.* "My point is that in *The Never-Ending Sacrifice*, there's no variation at all. It's a tragedy, certainly—"

"It is *not* a tragedy!" Garak sounds outraged. "It's a—a demonstration of the Cardassian ideal, that to which every Cardassian should aspire."

"Really," Julian says. "Where are the tailors in it? The housekeepers, the garbagemen?"

"It is a *form*," Garak hisses. "Not a children's story!" He picks up his fork and jabs it into his dinner.

Julian's ears are hot and his heart is pounding and he doesn't know what's just happened, exactly, other than that it's intoxicating. "I look forward to whatever you'll have to say about my selection."

"Your selection?"

"It's only fair." Julian takes a bite of his stew, now cold. He's been gradually experimenting with the replicator to find the closest Cardassian ingredients to the foods of his childhood, but tonight he's been lazy. "I'll pick something that you'll like."

"I *highly* doubt that," Garak says, but Julian thinks there's a smile lurking on his face. "You might as well give it to me tonight so that I can get this torment over with."

After dinner, he follows Julian back to his quarters. Julian sees his eyes alight on the fresh gouges in the wall, and Garak flexes his fingers a little, almost unconsciously. "Doors," Julian says, and Garak doesn't follow him in. "Any particular requests?"

"You seem to be greatly enamored of poetry. If you have anything less sentimental—"

Maybe it's the wrong choice. Julian glances back at Garak, who's leaning carelessly against the door and keeping it from closing, and says, "I don't know if you'll find it less sentimental, but there's a great deal more adventure in it." He plucks a data rod from his collection and hands it to Garak. Garak takes it delicately between two fingers. "It's a translation into English, but it maintains much of the poetic structure of the original. I've—never read it in the original language."

Garak raises an eyebrow. "I admit to some disappointment, my dear doctor. I should think that you, of all people—"

"If you enjoy it, we can teach ourselves ancient Greek and read it together." There's that startled hint of a smile on Garak's face again. He seems about to say something when the computer announces, "It is 22:45."

The smile disappears from Garak's face. "Lock your doors," he reminds Julian, and then he's gone.

The noises are quieter that night, but they're still pained, and Julian can almost envision Garak flinging himself against the walls. The next morning, Garak is very quiet as Julian scans his hands—the claws haven't grown back, which is a good sign—and Julian sees a large, bloody scrape blooming across Garak's shoulder. "I could help with that," he says, gesturing.

"What? Oh, this?" Garak glances down at his shoulder absent-mindedly. "I suppose."

Julian fetches the dermal regenerator, which he's calibrated to include Cardassian specifications. "It shouldn't hurt."

Garak raises an eyebrow. "Pain is inevitable, my dear doctor. Suffering is a choice."

"What a dreadful thought." Julian holds the dermal regenerator close to Garak's skin. The skin is slow to knit back together, and it returns only to the thinner hide of an ordinary Cardassian, not the thick armor that covers Garak's body—like the way that his nails have remained ordinary, in fact. "I suppose it's not going to heal any further."

"Lovely," Garak says. "If you flay me, at least my skin will return to normal." At Julian's look of horror, he clarifies, "My dear doctor, I am joking."

"Of course." It's not that it hasn't crossed Julian's mind ever since he cut off Garak's claws, the idea of returning him to a Cardassian form through a series of surgeries. But they're not the sort of surgeries he would risk performing without at least two nurses for assistance, and certainly not with hand tools and dubiously functional Cardassian medical technology. "Have you had a chance to start on the *Odyssey*?"

"Yes." Garak twists his body stiffly, then prods at the healed skin with two fingertips. "I expect to have finished it by dinnertime. Don't you have work to do?"

“Yes. I have everything I need from you today, so you’re free of the infirmary for now.” Garak nods abruptly at him and walks out of the infirmary, and Julian settles in for another day of trying to understand what could have happened to an ordinary Cardassian body that would turn it into this. The memory loss—well, there are portions of Garak’s brain that look *wrong*, as though chunks have been dug out of them and replaced by something that doesn’t belong there, and he doesn’t have the faintest idea where to start. But Garak is unpredictable and Julian doesn’t know how he would react to news like that, so he continues to focus on the physical instead.

At dinner, Julian manages to replicate himself a reasonable Cardassian facsimile of a stir-fry and then looks at Garak. “I finished it,” Garak says, and then hesitates.

“Sentimental twaddle?”

“It was—” Garak looks acutely uncomfortable. “Extremely frustrating. If Odysseus had only kept better control over his men, they could all have reached home very quickly.”

“I suppose so,” Julian says. “That’s not really what it’s about, though.”

“No? It seems like a cautionary tale. He’s insufficiently strict with his men and makes the mistake of leaving his home unguarded, risking the safety of his wife and child.” Garak frowns. “The family—children—are extremely important in Cardassian culture.”

“I saw that in *The Never-Ending Sacrifice*.” Julian shakes his head. “It’s not a—cautionary tale, or a parable. It’s about—grief, and loneliness, and searching for the place where you belong. And how you can never really go home again after war, not really.”

There’s one of Garak’s tiny flinches. “A very fanciful way to say all of that.”

“Well, it’s a story, not a technical manual.”

“A story with some truly overwrought poetical writing.” Garak wrinkles his nose. “Those endless similes—”

“You’re arguing for the sake of argument!” Julian is enjoying it, too much. “*Like the spear is formed in a mold, then sharpened to a keen edge so that it may draw the blood for which it thirsts in battle, so Rugal’s father formed his sons—you’re telling me the author of *The Never-Ending Sacrifice* didn’t bother with similes?*”

“That was different,” Garak insists. “It was necessary to make clear the way that there was no room for individuality within the Cardassian ideal; each man made from the same pure core stuff, honed in the same way.”

“Go on, then, tell me that this doesn’t tell you what’s happened to Penelope’s suitors more effectively than ‘Odysseus killed them all’:

“Like fish which, in the meshes of a net, sailors
have pulled from the gray sea up on the curving beach,
lying piled up on the sand, longing for sea waves,
while the bright sun drains away their life—that is how
the suitors were heaped up, piled on one another.”

Garak takes a delicate bite. “That one, perhaps, does paint a very different picture. I suppose it improved the book. But I would hardly say that they were all necessary.”

“Literary devices don’t have to be *necessary*. A book exists to do more than—convey an idea as efficiently as possible.”

Garak shakes his head, but there’s a smile playing on his lips. “Neither should it be a constant expression of sentiment. Odysseus could scarcely go ten lines without being driven by his emotions.”

A small part of Julian thrills at the argument. “We’ll have to agree to disagree.”

“Happily, my dear doctor,” Garak says.

* * * * *

Julian spends four days focused exclusively on research before he gives in to temptation. He knows the way to the library now, and he’s impatient to find another book. True, Garak told him that locked doors were locked for a reason, but Julian was watchful when they first walked to the library. And too, he isn’t an average Human, not nearly as fragile as even some of the stronger men he knows. Beyond that, he’s feeling a certain claustrophobia, and the library is one place that can provide some respite.

The path to the library is still and dark, and he doesn’t disturb that. His feet are nearly silent on the floor, all of his senses on high alert, and there’s no motion in the shadows. When he reaches the library, he increases the light only slightly, just enough that it’s no strain on his eyes to peer at the titles of each of the data rods. The reader lets him find out what each one is—repetitive epic, enigma tale, war drama—and he finds himself collecting a handful, tucking them into a pouch to choose between later.

Then comes the noise in the shadows, and Julian says “Lights” because whatever it is already knows he’s there. There are four of them, wraithlike Cardassians that are barely more than skeletons, their necks too elongated and their empty eyes too wide. Two have spears, two have curved knives that Julian has never seen before, and he takes it in in an instant and considers his options. He has no weapon—stupid, to go wandering without one—and they’re between him and the door. “Garak,” he says into the comm, and there’s no response but a distant roar. It’s too late at night. No help there.

When they attack, he ducks low and grabs the haft of a spear, just below the head, and yanks it from the creature’s grasp. A staff is an equalizer and he uses it that way, blocking the other spear with it and dodging to the side to chop at what should be tendons behind the

creature's knee. It goes down and he finishes it, but the two with knives are upon him—he has one by the wrist, desperately blocking the blow, but the other is inevitable, and he won't close his eyes even as he knows what's coming—

The roar is louder now, and Garak's monstrous shape thunders into the room. He rips the attacking creatures free of Julian and tries to claw at it with his missing claws, and the three remaining turn their attention from Julian to him. Garak howls in pain as a knife sinks deep into his side, a spear into his shoulder. That gives Julian time to strike as hard as he can at the spinal cord of one of them, and as it collapses it manages to stab Garak again. Garak isn't fighting anymore but thrashing, trying to escape, like a dog with its paw caught in a bear trap, and his flailing knocks the other two creatures to the ground. Julian gets to them before they can rise and cuts what little throats they have, one after another. They fall still.

For a moment, the only noise is Julian and Garak's harsh breathing. The creatures all appear to be dead, thankfully, but there's a lot of blood everywhere, and as far as Julian can tell, it all belongs to Garak. He approaches Garak's hunched body slowly and says, "Garak." The muscles in Garak's back clench, as though preparing for a blow. "Garak," he says again. "I have to get you to the infirmary, but I can't help you and fight you off at the same time." He carefully lays down the spear so that Garak can turn his head and see empty hands. "Will you come with me?"

The wounded noise that Garak makes is probably the best that he's going to get. "Computer, emergency medical transport."

"Operation unavailable," the computer says, and Julian curses whoever it was that saw fit to disable emergency medical transport.

"Garak," he says. "I'm going to touch you, all right? You can lean on me, but we're going to have to walk to the infirmary." He tries to help Garak stand, half-lifting him onto his feet. It would be better if he could bandage the wounds first, but Garak is barely tolerating his touch. He wants to pump some heavy sedatives into Garak before he starts trying to treat them.

The walk back to the infirmary is agonizing. Garak leans more and more on him, and if not for Julian's own inhuman strength, they would both collapse. Julian listens hard for any more of those creatures and wishes that he still had the spear just in case, but Garak's reactions make quite clear that he would never have come with Julian armed. Twice he tries to shove away, staggers, and allows Julian to lift him again.

The lights of the infirmary are very bright after the gloom of the station's depths. "Computer, lock doors," he says, even though he knows Garak is the thing he's been locking doors against. Garak either can't or won't get onto the examination table and Julian isn't going to try to lift him as he's bleeding out; instead, he lays Garak out on the floor. An ordinary hypospray wouldn't penetrate his thick hide, so Julian has to put it on that soft patch of skin on his shoulder. The combination of sedative and analgesic is a potent one. Garak's body finally relaxes, enough that Julian can cut away his shirt and pants to find the sources of all the blood. There's only the one dermal regenerator and three deep wounds, so Julian holds the regenerator in the crook of his arm and points it at the worst wound while he wads up Garak's clothing into a pad and presses it to the second wound. Then he pulls off his own bloody, sweaty shirt to apply to the third wound, and they're all filthy, but better to staunch the bleeding now than worry about an easily-treated infection in the future.

It's very slow going. The dermal regenerator isn't meant for wounds this deep, which means that it takes a long time to knit the layers of skin together and will still only heal it to the point of ordinary Cardassian skin. Julian switches to the second wound, and thankfully Garak's breathing is even, no blood on his lips that would suggest damage to his lungs or major organs. When the third wound is nominally closed, Julian drops the bloody, dirty clothing into the medical recycler, sanitizes his hands, and replicates a very strong antibiotic hypospray. He gives it to Garak, just in case. After some internal debate, he applies regenerative patches to each of the three wounds; the fresh skin should hold, but the wounds were deep and once again, he lacks the medical technology that he would typically use to treat wounds like this efficiently.

Julian knows it will test his strength to lift Garak's limp body for any length of time, but he doesn't want to leave Garak sprawled out on the floor. He brings a bed over next to where Garak is lying, crouches, says a lot of expletives, and then heaves Garak up onto the bed. Garak looks strangely vulnerable like this, those four patches of plain unprotected skin a stark contrast with the rest of his body. Julian uses a biohazard sponge to clean away the rest of the blood on Garak's body and then tosses it onto the bloody patch on the floor, whatever good that will do. He's so exhausted that he barely manages to push Garak's bed back into the proper area of the infirmary before he collapses into the next bed over. If Garak wakes up before the nighttime madness has worn off, well, Julian will probably die before he wakes up.

* * *

"What happened?" Garak's voice is nothing more than a croak. "You're injured?"

Julian opens his eyes to find that Garak has rolled onto one side and is staring at him. "I'm not injured, you're injured."

"You're covered in blood."

Yes, that particular grubby stickiness is making itself felt now. "It's all your blood. Mostly, anyway. I was in the library. There were—things—"

"You shouldn't have gone to the library alone," Garak says. "I told you the doors were locked—"

"Yes, for a reason, I know. You didn't mention that that reason was several mutant Cardassian—skeleton monsters!"

"I killed them? How many?"

"Four." By his count, Garak didn't kill any, but there are four dead monsters and no need for further questions about how Julian survived. "Then we—walked here and I treated your injuries."

Garak's face says plainly that he doesn't believe Julian. "I take it I'm going to survive?" His gaze drifts down from Julian's face to his chest, which Julian remembers is bare. It's too hot in this infirmary—it's always too hot.

"That's the plan."

"I didn't—hurt you?" Garak looks puzzled.

"I think you knew I was your best chance at survival."

Garak reaches across the space between them, his big hand closing gently around Julian's wrist. "Thank you." His voice is hesitant. "You know, if you'd left me to die, you would have control of Empok Nor now."

Oh, Julian knows it. "I'm a doctor," he says. "You're my—patient." Of all the words. Captor. *Enemy*, Miles would say. None of those seems quite right. "Are you in pain?"

"I'm not suffering."

Right. "I'm going to—wash up. You might as well try to sleep a little more. I'll want to check your wounds when I get back."

The infirmary's sonic shower is harsh. They all seem to be, here on Empok Nor. Julian's skin feels raw when he steps out of it. He replicates himself some fresh clothes, but after he's pulled on the undershirt, he looks at the shirt and contemplates putting it on and sweating through it and thinks, why bother? There's no one but him and Garak here.

Garak is sitting up when he returns. "Careful," Julian tells him. "The dermal regenerator barely held up through healing your wounds, I don't want you opening any of them again. May I check?" He holds out his open palms as if to show that there's no danger.

"By all means, my dear doctor." Julian lifts the first bandage, on Garak's shoulder, very carefully as Garak says, "Incidentally, it seems odd that you would be entirely unscathed after being attacked while all alone."

"I called your name," Julian says. He keeps his voice even. "You saved me before they could do any damage."

"Really." Garak squints at him. "That seems—unlikely."

"Sure, Garak, you're right, I fought them all off myself, then let them stab you a few times, and then killed them all." He pours the sarcasm into his voice.

Garak tilts his head. "Perhaps not all. But more, I think, than zero."

To say 'I thought you didn't remember anything from your nights' would be to tell Garak that he's right. Instead, Julian laughs, and even that sounds forced. "I'm afraid not." He moves to the leg bandage. The skin beneath is still whole, though also still soft. "One more and we're done, and then I'll force you to rest more if I have to sedate you myself." When Garak leans back and moves to prop himself on his elbows, Julian says, "No, don't pull at your shoulder, lie back." He realizes a moment later what he's asked of Garak, to expose his belly—his wounded torso—to Julian.

"Go on, then." Garak's voice is guttural in a different way than just before he goes feral, and Julian can see the muscles of his abdomen tensing. Julian lifts the edge of the bandage very lightly and then smooths it back into place, and finds that his hand is resting on Garak's bare skin. Garak makes a kind of small hurt noise.

Julian meets his eyes to apologize and sees a kind of terrible longing there. "I'm sorry," Julian says.

"Whatever you need to do." There's a lie somewhere in those words, like perhaps Garak knows that Julian doesn't need to touch him any more than he already has, and perhaps Garak doesn't want him to stop.

In the old days, Julian knows, a medical examination involved significant physical contact. Palpating, manipulating, all to reveal the things that a tricorder will tell him now. Still, the texture of Garak's skin beneath his fingers is unique, and he explores it very gently. The ridges that rise from beneath his skin are as hard as rebar, the skin covering them almost metallic in its unyielding nature. Between the ridges, his skin is thick but clearly not nerveless; Julian can feel Garak shift or draw in uneven breaths beneath his fingers. He keeps his touch slow, gentle, up that armored chest and even slower along the ridges of Garak's neck.

When his fingers reach Garak's chin, though, Garak says, "Stop." Julian halts with his hands on Garak's neck, the heat seeping from Garak's skin into his own. "Do you know," Garak says, "I can't remember the last time another person initiated—unnecessary physical contact with me."

Julian can feel the vibration of Garak's vocal cords beneath his fingers. He doesn't lift his hands away. He's struck with the strangest desire to keep exploring, but he won't, not when Garak has told him to stop. Garak's lack of physical contact—even when Julian is single, there's always the camaraderie-fueled incidental contact on the station, whether it's bumping shoulders with Miles or an affectionate shove from Dax or the occasional approving hand on his forearm from Kira. It's not as though they all walk around hugging each other, but— He drops his hands to Garak's bare shoulders, to the firm shape of them beneath his palms. "I thought you were a tailor," he says.

"Sizing scanner." Garak's voice has gone a little guttural again.

"You must have had—" Julian swallows back the word 'lovers,' which has always seemed a little silly to him but is the most appropriate word he can think of now.

"Not in this form," Garak says. "I think it is safe to say that you are the only person who has ever touched me, in this shape."

Julian looks at the stark contrast of his own dark hands against the silvery paleness of Garak's skin. Garak brings one of his own hands up and lays it over Julian's, almost curiously, as though something might happen when their hands meet. "This is—" He can't quite bring himself to say *necessary*. "In the course of medical treatment."

"Of course." Garak lifts his hand away from Julian's. "Don't let me stop you, my dear doctor." He tilts his chin down a little, and Julian

doesn't know what this is, what exactly is happening, but he touches Garak's face very lightly with one hand—traces the hard ridges around his eyes, strokes his thumb into the dip of that spoon-shaped horn, and Garak's breathing is harsh now. What would it be like, Julian wonders, and is horrified at himself. The way that Garak is breathing, he thinks it would be cruel to touch his lips, to see if they're as feverishly hot as the rest of him. Instead, he cups his hand gently on Garak's cheek and then withdraws.

"I think that's everything I need to know," he says, because Garak is too much to be careless with. It's too damned warm in here.

Garak clears his throat. "Don't let me keep you, doctor," he says again. "I imagine you've a great deal of work to do."

"Curing you and all? Yes, I suppose so." Julian wonders, as he often does, who Garak will be if these last few years of his memory ever return—if, somehow, Julian can reconstruct the portions of his brain that have been replaced with biomechanical implants, or if his brain has always been like this, and it's only the programming in those implants that's been wiped. "For now, I want you to stay there and rest. I'll just be in the next room." It's a sign of how exhausted Garak must be that he doesn't even argue.

Julian loses himself in the research—he's been experimenting with applying various types of radiation to cellular tissue that he's taken from Garak to see if that will flip some genetic switch, but so far all it's done is caused the tissue to decay rapidly. Perhaps Garak was changed into this shape via radiation, but he certainly doesn't seem to be amenable to changing back. When Julian's stomach growls, he replicates a sandwich for himself and swallows it down without paying attention, absorbed in tracking his results. It's an unfortunate thing to think, but if he had more patients like Garak, he would have a better chance at finding a cure. With so little data from which to extrapolate—well, they might both be here for years, and that idea is—unthinkable. The Dominion might win the war and he would never know it until the day they showed up at the station.

"That's a dreadful face." Garak's voice startles Julian so much that he nearly falls over backward in his chair—so much for his situational awareness. There are three different pads on the desk in front of him, each tracking different sets of results, and a collection of carefully labeled dead cell cultures, and his own notes half-entered in the data terminal. "No progress?" Garak leans gingerly against the wall at the threshold of Julian's office.

"I wish I had some kind of news for you," Julian says.

"Surely you can come up with good-sounding news."

Julian considers. "I do not plan to bombard you with alpha, beta, gamma, or delta particles."

"Well, that's something."

"I haven't ruled out axion or graviphoton, if that helps."

Garak grimaces. "What you're saying is that you've spent days contemplating what kind of radiation might fix me, and you have yet to come up with anything."

"Which is more important to you?" Julian has never asked him this. "If I could only fix one, your body or your mind?"

Garak freezes. "My—body, I suppose."

Julian is surprised to hear it. He's focused on Garak's body because the amnesia is much harder to begin to figure out, but, "I'd have guessed the opposite."

"Really." Garak examines his fingernails, the one part of his body that Julian has been able to affect. "It's the body that traps me here, after all. Like this, I am—obvious. Vulnerable." An interesting way to describe being a seven-foot-tall man with an armored hide. "Memory—will return or it won't. It's dangerous, not knowing why I'm here, or who did this to me, but at least if I looked ordinary again, I could seek out just a few more avenues to discover the answers."

"You're very certain that someone did it to you," Julian says. "Make many enemies as a tailor, did you?"

"Come now, don't be tedious. I suppose you learned to sever spines at Starfleet Academy?"

Oh. "Luck," Julian tries. "Medical school." It sounds weak. He should've denied it altogether.

"You mean that you're extraordinary, which is a matter of luck?" In other words: there's no need to push each other too hard about their respective backgrounds.

"Garak, your brain—do you already know about the biomechanical implants?"

Garak stiffens. "Yes," he says. "One of them, at least."

"The one in your parietal lobe?" Unlike whatever else has been done to his brain, which appears to be fresh, there's extensive scarring around that one. "I'd like to remove it."

That prompts a harsh laugh from Garak. "Remove it? Doctor, it would kill me if you touched it." Julian stays silent, in the hope that Garak will say more, and maybe Garak is just tired of lying. "It is designed to—keep me from yielding to torture. If such a situation occurred, it was designed to stimulate the pleasure centers of my brain to trigger the production of vast amounts of natural endorphins."

"Make you immune to pain?" It would explain the lack of his reaction to the claw removal, but— "I hear you—screaming at night, Garak. In the hallways. It sounds very much like you're being tortured." If Julian had ever believed the tailor story, he certainly doesn't believe it now.

Garak looks as though he's just tasted something very bitter. "Yes, it does appear to have stopped working. I suspect my—nighttime

experiences are due to its malfunction. But you can't remove it. If it were easily removed, it would be useless."

"Are there any other traps waiting in your mind?"

"An excellent question, my dear doctor. I promise you, none that I remember."

Julian tries not to sound too frustrated. "I'm not about to give up, but—Garak, I can't find anything resembling what's happened to you in any of the medical databases to which I have access, including this station's database. Physical regression to an earlier evolutionary state, occasionally, but never of this magnitude, and never so persistently. If you were exposed to some kind of—space phenomenon, or some chemical that my scans can't detect, I suppose that could have done it, but without knowing, I can't exactly arrange to re-expose you."

Garak's lips tighten. "I have faith in your abilities, doctor." He's starting to list heavily to one side.

"You should be back in bed!" Julian stands and walks to him, and then takes one of Garak's arms and puts it over his shoulder. "Come on, I'll get you back there." Garak is an overwhelming line of heat pressed against Julian's body, the ridges of his fever-hot body rubbing against Julian through Julian's undershirt. Julian hasn't replicated clothes for Garak yet to replace those that were destroyed in the fight and so Garak is down to whatever passes for Cardassian underwear. His arm is heavy on Julian's shoulders, and Julian can tell that he's fighting hard not to grab Julian's upper arm too tightly from the way his fingers grip and release. The pads of his fingers are searing on Julian's skin.

When Julian deposits Garak back into his bed, he sees the wince. "I'm going to lose my mind lying in bed here," Garak complains.

"It's—nearly 2300," Julian says. He keeps his voice even as he adds, "You should get more rest."

Garak blanches. "I should go back—"

"I'll shoot you full of sedatives if you try to attack me." Julian says it with more confidence than he feels, but Garak was less violent when Julian brought him to the infirmary, and he's still injured. Julian could stop him, if necessary. "I can shoot you full of sedatives now, if you prefer."

"No," Garak says. "I'll rest, if I can. But at the slightest hint that I'm a threat, doctor—"

"You'll be unconscious before you get within three meters," Julian promises. "Go lie back down." It's a good thing that *he* doesn't need very much sleep, because he doesn't think he's going to get much over the next five hours.

There's no roar when 2300 strikes, no crash of a heavy body against the wall. Only a series of quiet pained noises, and if they were screams Julian would intervene, but he has his own nightmares and he would never want someone to see him when he's just woken from them, so he leaves Garak alone. He putters around instead, tidies up the infirmary, and finally sits down to stare blearily at his notes. By 0400, Julian is yawning, and the last thing he notices is the chronometer's soothing numbers before he falls asleep in his chair.

* * * * *

"Doctor!"

Julian startles awake to find Garak very close, frowning at him. "What?" His neck twinges and he barely swallows the "bloody—"

"You fell asleep!"

"Yes, even I have to do that sometimes." Julian glances at the chronometer. 0800.

"I might have hurt you!" Garak thrusts a mug of something at him, and Julian accepts it automatically.

Julian yawns and takes a sip. It's steaming and spicy, almost floral, and the surge of warmth in his body is certainly only due to the heat of the tea. "I waited to fall asleep until 0400, don't worry."

Garak looks mollified, if only slightly. "It was irresponsible."

"It would've been more irresponsible to let you leave," Julian says. "Let me see your wounds." He makes Garak sit on the examination table. If Garak's breath quickens when his hands brush against Garak's skin, well. It's been a long time since anyone touched Garak.

They eat breakfast there in the infirmary, scrambled eggs that are certainly not chicken eggs. Finally, Garak puts a hand on his wrist and says, "If you're going to keep me trapped here, you have to give me *something* to do."

"I suppose I could get you a book." Julian doesn't think a holo-video is really Garak's speed.

Garak's hand tightens on his wrist. "I don't want you to go to the library alone again. I don't know how many more of those things there are."

"Then I suppose there's only one solution." Julian can feel the smile threatening to escape, and Garak's expression changes from concern to suspicion. "You'll have to suffer through another of my sentimental Human books."

"I—suppose if it's a choice between clawing my face off in boredom and reading one of your books, I'll take the latter," Garak says. "Particularly since I don't have much of claws anymore." He looks down at his fingers again, as though he still can't quite believe that the claws are gone.

"I could use a few minutes outside of the infirmary. Promise me that you won't try to stand up again while I'm gone."

Garak grimaces. "Only if death is otherwise imminent." He releases Julian's wrist and Julian watches the marks of his fingerprints fade.

Julian leaves the infirmary almost *whistling*, to his horror, which makes no sense given that he's still trapped on a half-dead space station bashing his head against a potentially unsolvable medical problem. Out of some unexamined desire to devil Garak, he selects his favorite of Shakespeare's comedies, inserts the data rod into a reader, and replicates the closest thing to Tarkalean tea that he's been able to concoct in the replicator. When he returns to the infirmary with a reader in one hand and tea in the other, Garak has found the bed controls and lifted himself into more-or-less a sitting position with a tray table in front of himself. "You've been busy."

"Not really." Garak sounds extremely put-upon. "What is *that*?"

"Tarkalean tea, or as close as I could get with these replicators. It's my fav—I find it relaxing." It is, in fact, his favorite, but it feels strange to tell Garak that. "Though I did enjoy the tea you gave me."

Garak accepts the tea and sniffs it, then takes a delicate sip. "It's not dreadful," he pronounces. "Though I can't imagine why these Tarkaleans would make their tea so sweet. Do they require a great deal of sugar to function?"

Julian takes the mug from him and sips it as well. "No," he said. "No, I suppose I just—replicated it the way that I usually make my own. I have a very high metabolism." Why did he do that? He hands the mug back to Garak and watches him put his lips just where Julian's were, and Julian doesn't examine too closely why that makes him feel a kind of satisfaction. "Here's the book."

"Don't tell me, it's a romantic comedy." Garak's exaggerated dread is hilarious.

"I suppose you got that from the title?"

"Why do you only give me old Human books to read? Don't you have anything more recent, or beyond the narrow Human experience?" Garak frowns at him. "Don't tell me you believe that Humans produce superior literature."

"Not at all." Julian should really get back to his samples, but he'd rather stay here and talk to Garak. "I didn't bring the greatest literature of the Federation with me, Garak. I brought—those books that I loved when I was young, and I was introduced to Human literature—to what they call the classics—before anything else."

"*The Odyssey* is three thousand years old."

Interesting, the station database must have some amount of information about alien literature. "This one is only eight hundred years old."

"And it's not even a novel," Garak points out. "You've given me an epic poem and now a play. Do Humans not produce novels?"

"Excuse me, we have a long and proud tradition of novels. I'm demonstrating the historical *development* of Human fiction." Not that there aren't pre-17th century novels, but he chose this play on purpose, to see how outraged Garak will become about it. "And I'm guessing that you don't read Arabic or Chinese."

"Very well," Garak says. "I'll drink your sweet tea and read your silly play and tell you precisely how ridiculous it all is in a few hours." Julian doesn't really want to stop talking, but Garak seems to be done with the conversation. He sighs and returns to hunching over his research. It's tedious, which means he's easily distracted by Garak's periodic huffs of outrage. "My dear doctor!" Garak sounds positively scandalized. "Is this—behavior what Humans consider *acceptable*?"

"You'll have to be more specific." Julian abandons his work again and goes to look over Garak's shoulder. "What? *Suffer love! A good epithet! I do suffer love indeed, for I love thee against my will!*"

"Yes, and this." Garak speaks almost hesitantly. "*In spite of your heart, I think. Alas, poor heart, if you spite it for my sake, I will spite it for yours, for I will never love that which my friend hates.*"

"*Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably.* That's the play in a nutshell," Julian says. "What's wrong with it?"

Garak almost looks like he's blushing. "Doctor, do you recall in *The Never-Ending Sacrifice*, when Rugal and Savela first meet?"

"What, the one spark of individuality in the entire novel?"

"They—argue a great deal." Garak says it very delicately. "In Cardassian culture, argument is considered the chief form of courtship. Behavior such as that of Beatrice and Benedick is—" He's definitely blushing. What a bizarre thing to happen to someone who looks like he does.

"Obscene?" Julian thinks he might be starting to blush as well, which is ridiculous.

"A single conversation, no, but the course of the book—Cardassian literature would never contain such a blatant display over the course of an entire story." Garak shifts a little in the infirmary bed.

"Oh. I didn't realize it would be so—stimulating."

"That is not to say that it has literary merit," Garak adds quickly. "The circumstances are preposterous, the situations manufactured. The choice of language is, perhaps, inoffensive, but it is in service of—"

"Wit? Humor? Don't tell me there's no comedy in the Cardassian literary canon." The back of Julian's neck is very hot. The book must seem like a—a proposition. "Garak, I didn't mean—"

"Don't worry, my dear doctor. I'm well aware that you're unfamiliar with Cardassian courtship traditions." Garak is very stiff. "I have not—misinterpreted our discussions, nor your recommendation of this book."

"I see." That shouldn't feel—almost disappointing to Julian, but he thinks of the immense satisfaction he derives from his arguments with

Garak, the only real satisfaction that he gets from anything on this station. “You don’t have to finish reading it.”

“I suppose all the confusion is resolved and everyone ends up married in the end?”

“If you’re too uncomfortable reading it to find out—”

Garak looks insulted, though the blush hasn’t faded. “Uncomfortable! My dear doctor, I sit here with several large wounds that you stuffed with filthy rags and you worry that a vulgar play will make me *uncomfortable*?”

Julian walks to him, all joking set aside. “Are they bothering you?” Stupid of Julian not to notice that the bandage on Garak’s shoulder has developed a broad pinkish patch since he last looked. “Let me check.”

“I hardly think that’s necessary—” Garak doesn’t flinch away, though, when Julian touches the edge of the bandage and peels it up very carefully. The new skin over the wound is still intact, but clearly it’s seeped something into the bandage.

“I’m going to change all three,” he tells Garak. “Since, as you pointed out, I stuffed them with filthy rags while I was trying to keep you from bleeding out. Move the table out of the way while I get fresh ones, please.”

When he returns, Garak is sitting exposed on the bed. “Perhaps you might find some clothing for me when you’ve finished re-applying these wholly unnecessary bandages? I realize the temperature in here is above your comfortable threshold, but I prefer to be at least nominally clothed.”

“Right. As soon as I’ve finished.” Julian actually finds Garak’s body somewhat mesmerizing, the shadows created by the ridges in the silvery dips of skin between them, the shape of unfamiliar muscles beneath his hide. “It would be easier if you laid back.” Garak obliges, and he peels away the shoulder bandage entirely and drops it into the medical waste recycler. He does the same with the bandages on Garak’s torso and leg, and how distracted he must have been when he’d first applied the leg bandage, not to notice the strength of the leg beneath that wound.

“Is this an accepted medical practice, my dear doctor? Exposure to infirmary air, with whatever other biologics might be floating around?”

“It’s not as though there’s an outbreak of Rigellian flu,” Julian says, a little snippily. He’s never felt so unsettled around Garak as he does now, not even when he thought Garak might chop him up and eat him as rare steaks for dinner. “You don’t really even need new regenerative bandages.”

“I suspect you’re going to apply them anyway.” Garak lifts his head a little to watch Julian’s hands. “You’re strangely committed to keeping me alive.”

“You think it’s so strange? What would you do, if our situations were reversed?” His tongue feels a little thick as he asks it.

“If I were the eager young doctor and you’d been transformed into a monster and were keeping me hostage?” Garak hesitates for too long, far too long, before he laughs lightly and says, “You’d be long since dead and I’d be on a ship back to Terok Nor.”

“Naturally.” Julian smooths the edges of the fresh bandage on Garak’s thigh. He’s not—unaware of what his touch is triggering in Garak. He can admit, to himself, that he’s letting his fingers drag further than they need to, apply a little more pressure than necessary, and he’s learned enough about Cardassian biology in the last two weeks to know that they’re very like Humans in certain ways. He knows nothing of Cardassian *societal* attitudes, other than that the family is paramount, but he can’t exactly extrapolate further from a few of Garak’s isolated statements and a single novel.

empok nor (part II)

Chapter Summary

“Once upon a time, there was a brilliant spy for the Obsidian Order.” He hears Garak’s huff at the introduction, but Garak doesn’t look away. “He committed—some unpardonable offense against the Order, or against Central Command. Put poison in the wrong cup, gave a crust of bread to a starving Bajoran, framed the Romulans instead of the Klingons. And so the Order transformed him into a beast, somehow, and then used their mind-control technology to wipe away his memory so he could never undo it.”

“A witch,” Garak says.

“What?”

“In your fairy stories. It’s always a witch who does something like that.”

“Garak, I think I can manage a walk to the library myself,” Julian says. “Come on, you must be tired of discussing Human literature.” *Le Morte d’Arthur* was less of a success than *Much Ado About Nothing* in provoking spirited debate, and he suspects that Garak would find زینب more sentimental than either one. Besides, he wants to see more of this new side of Cardassia, and he wants to argue about it with Garak.

“I won’t be able to come to your rescue if you’re attacked.” Garak’s voice is very dry. Then it softens as he says, “I would rather that you not die.”

“Not before I cure you, anyway,” Julian says, and Garak looks hurt. “I’ll take a weapon with me.” Looking around for inspiration, he finds the laser scalpel. “Look, I’ll set it to cut through flesh and bone, all right?”

Garak still looks unhappy, but he yields, as much as a seven-foot man on an infirmary bed can be said to yield to anything. “Shoggoth,” he says. “His first enigma tale, *Malice Sought*. It should be sufficiently flimsy for your taste.” The barbs feel different now, after Garak’s revelation about Cardassian courtship—Julian has enjoyed them since the beginning, but now he almost basks in them, says ridiculous things just to see what Garak will come up with in response.

“I’ll be back in—fifteen minutes,” Julian promises. “Maybe twenty if the turbolift is slow.” He’s struck by the absurd desire to brush his mouth across that ridged cheek, and something is starting to feel almost inevitable. He can see where this path that he’s walking will take him, and he doesn’t want to step off it.

He runs all the way to the library, for no reason other than to push his body a little. On Deep Space Nine he played springball, or tennis in the holosuite when he couldn’t find a challenge, but here the only exertion he gets is the strain on his body from sitting in the infirmary chair. He’s a quick runner, the enhanced fast-twitch muscle fibers a part of the genetic package his parents purchased for him, and his senses are good enough that he can hear and see out in front of himself to be sure that there’s nothing lurking in the shadows. He keeps one hand on the laser scalpel anyway.

The library is—well. Julian wishes he’d cleaned up earlier. “Computer,” he says, “transport to the medical stasis chamber.” The computer, for all that it was unwilling to perform an emergency medical transport, sends those four bodies to the medical freezer. Julian doesn’t want to interact with them, but he has so very few specimens of anything that could help him find a cure for Garak. He can’t bring himself to dispose of them just because they’re grisly. The blood has dried on the floor and he steps gingerly over the spatter to locate *Malice Sought*.

The sprint back feels even better for his body, though he’s panting a little and sweating when he returns to the infirmary. “That was—commendably quick,” Garak says when Julian returns. He’s claimed Julian’s chair and is peering into the microscope. “Remarkably, even.”

Julian glances at the chronometer. Seven minutes. He’s forgetting, bit by bit, to be careful, to hide himself away. “Caught the turbolift at the right time.” This is patently ridiculous, since there’s no one else who would be using the turbolift. Julian brandishes the data rod. “Something to occupy me tonight.” That sentence comes out a little different than he intends.

“Oh, you might as well read it now,” Garak says. “I can manage to walk back to my quarters to rest, and it’s not as though a day of delay is going to matter.”

Julian lets him go without protest. Garak may say that the delay doesn’t matter, and it probably doesn’t matter to Julian’s inability to find a cure, but there’s still a war going on outside of Empok Nor.

* * * * *

It takes another two days before it dawns on him, finally, what Garak meant so long ago when he forbade Julian the *west wing* of Empok Nor. He understands it, now that he’s read enough Kardasi literature. In the early years, on Cardassia Prime—before it was called that—the attacks came from a civilization on the western continent. Swarms of rattletrap missiles like biting flies, never strong enough to reach the main cities but enough to frustrate the Minister of Agriculture when they set a field alight. The Cardassian Central Command dealt with it as efficiently as it dealt with everything that came next: they blanketed the western continent in carefully-overlapping nuclear detonations, until it was so thick with radiation that it was uninhabitable for a century. The pioneers who went to settle the empty western continent too early came back dying if they came back at all. Cardassian unification was not a matter of unity, but of annihilation. *That* is what *west* means, outside the context of a cardinal direction. Horror, destruction, death. Julian walks through locked door after locked door and goes to the part of the habitat ring that hangs, perilously connected, to the rest of the station.

Julian should know better than to enter, but he can't help feeling that there's something in here, some key that will help him find the answer to Garak's malady. He knows it was a mistake as soon as the door hisses shut behind him. It's hot here, hotter than anywhere else in the station, and dimly lit, but Julian can see enough. The great gouges clawed out of the walls, leaving conduits exposed. And there, the shredded remains of a Cardassian uniform—something different from the ordinary officer's uniform. A badge glints on the uniform and Julian crouches to look at it. It's shaped like a flat hook, the curve almost reminiscent of a hooded figure, coming to a sharp point at one end. He knows this insignia—not from the database here, but from Odo's security briefing when he'd first arrived at Deep Space Nine. The Obsidian Order. "*The ever-vigilant eyes and ears of the Cardassian Empire...Even the Tal'Shiar cannot compete with them.*"

"What are you doing here?" Garak's roar fills the room. "I told you never to come here!" He lunges past Julian to snatch up the badge, and for the first time, Julian sees fear on Garak's face. Those companionable days in the infirmary are all but forgotten.

"Garak—I was only trying to figure out what information I've been missing—if there was anything here that could help me cure you!"

"You have no idea—" Garak's chest is heaving and his hand closes so tightly around the badge that Julian sees the blood. "Get out!"

"I'm trying to help—"

Garak picks up a broken chair and hurls it past him. "*Get out!* Leave this station, go back to your Federation and your losing war—"

"I'm not going anywhere, Garak!" Julian stares him down. "I'm a doctor and you're my patient, and if you'd told me there was an Obsidian Order operative here with you—"

"Here with—" Garak's expression is somewhere between despair and hysteria. "Here with me! Oh, yes, doctor, there's been an Obsidian Order operative here with me the whole time!"

"I don't understand." Julian stays perfectly still. They're on the verge of something, and he suspects he does understand what Garak means, but he wants Garak to say it—to *admit* it, finally.

"Really, doctor. You finally understood what *west* meant and you came here, to this dreadful place where I still sleep, and you can't understand what this badge means?" Garak flings it back against the wall and it clinks to the ground. His hand is bleeding badly.

"You tell me." When Garak says nothing, Julian walks slowly toward him, the way he would an injured animal, and takes his wrist gingerly. The cut on his hand is deep. "I'll need a dermal regenerator to fix this," he says softly.

Garak's laugh is miserable. "You might as well leave, doctor. You're never going to fix anything meaningful." He doesn't resist, though, when Julian brings him to the infirmary and sits him down on the familiar infirmary bed.

"You were a member of the Order," Julian says at last. The skin is knitting slowly back together under the beam of the dermal regenerator. "You're a former spy."

"Don't be ridiculous. Don't you know, doctor, there's no such thing as a *former* spy?"

Julian sighs and sets the regenerator down, then leans back against the next bed. "All right, then, Garak, let me tell you a story, and you can tell me if it's—preposterous."

"All your stories are preposterous," Garak mutters, but he doesn't object.

"Once upon a time, there was a brilliant spy for the Obsidian Order." He hears Garak's huff at the introduction, but Garak doesn't look away. "He committed—some unpardonable offense against the Order, or against Central Command. Put poison in the wrong cup, gave a crust of bread to a starving Bajoran, framed the Romulans instead of the Klingons. And so the Order transformed him into a beast, somehow, and then used their mind-control technology to wipe away his memory so he could never undo it."

"A witch," Garak says.

"What?"

"In your fairy stories. It's always a witch who does something like that." There's something in Garak's eyes that says it's not just the stories.

Rage surges in Julian and he has to take a few steps away to stem it. "You remember?"

"Perhaps the Obsidian Order erased his memory of the events first, so that he could torture himself wondering what he could have done to earn the insult of a punishment like this."

Julian can't quite make himself stand near Garak again, so he paces instead, counting the steps from one end of the infirmary to the other. "The insult?"

"From what I understand. A member of the Obsidian Order who failed in his duties would traditionally be—executed. To be cast aside like this—to be turned into some *thing* and left behind—it must have been a very humiliating mistake that he made."

"Of all the possibilities I've considered, a *witch's curse* was not one of them." Julian isn't silly enough to say there's no such thing as witches. "I don't suppose the witch said a helpful incantation aloud that you might perhaps repeat?"

Garak looks shifty. Has he always been this easy for Julian to read? "If there had been a witch, and if he had said anything at all, it would have been some nonsense about knowing how to break the curse when the time came."

"Garak." Julian walks back to him and leans in, until their faces are quite close. With Garak sitting on the bed, they're almost of a height. "Do

you know how to break the curse?"

A series of emotions flash through Garak's pale blue eyes. "No."

"You don't have to lie to me." Julian tries to keep the rage—the frustration—from his voice. "You can—damn it, Garak, I've spent weeks here trying to cure you. At least tell me whatever it is that you do know. Don't make me keep fumbling in the dark."

Garak opens his mouth and for a long moment, almost an eternity, he seems ready to say something real. In the end, though, all he says is, "I don't know of anything that you can do."

Julian wants to scream. "At the *very* least, I could have been—reading about Cardassian folklore all this time instead of poking at dead cell cultures!"

"Bajoran."

"What?"

"The witch was Bajoran. A *pahr*, I believe they're called." The Bajoran word sounds strange coming from Garak's Cardassian mouth.

"Fine, then, Bajoran folklore. I don't suppose the Occupation saw fit to store any information about Bajoran culture here?" Garak's expression is answer enough. "I need to use the external communications system."

"Calling for retrieval? I know there's a dearth of functioning shuttlecraft on this station, but with your brain, I suspect you could cobble something together."

"Shut up," Julian says, because he's rapidly losing patience. "I assume the control room is in the same place here as it is on all Cardassian stations?"

Garak gives him a long, assessing look, and Julian realizes he's still only centimeters from Garak's face. "Yes," he says at last, and he squeezes Julian's shoulder like it's a lifeline before releasing him.

* * * * *

"Julian!" Miles beams broadly at him over the video screen. "You're alive! We thought you must have—"

Something wrenches at Julian's heart. He misses these people, misses them terribly, and yet he can't abandon Garak. "I'm all right, Miles. I'll be fine. But I need something from you—from Major Kira, in fact—as quickly as possible."

"What's that, then?"

"I need everything that she can access regarding Bajoran pahrs."

He can see Miles turning the word over in his mouth. "I'll see what we can do. You're sure you're all right? Surviving on Cardie food?"

"You'd be proud. I've been reprogramming the replicators a bit," Julian says. "You can't imagine what I'd give for a cup of raktajino in the morning, though."

"When you come home, Quark will serve you anything you want, for as long as you want, on us." Miles's smile wavers a little.

"Are you all right?" That's the real question, the one he's been too afraid to ask.

"Holding our own," Miles says. "You should know, the parts we got from Empok Nor—the Dominion hit us a few days later with some Jem'Hadar ships. If we hadn't had those parts, the station would've fallen."

"Just be glad he wanted a doctor instead of an engineer," Julian teases. For a second, it feels like old times. "Without you, there'd be no Deep Space Nine at all."

Miles is somber. "We'll get you back, Julian, I promise."

"I'll come back when I'm done here. Send me those files as soon as you can, will you? It's urgent. A secure databurst, if the signal won't degrade too much." He hesitates. "And—say hello to everyone for me, will you? Tell them I'm all right, that they shouldn't worry?" His voice is a little hoarse.

Miles nods. "I'll tell them. We'll send you the data as soon as it's ready."

When the transmission ends, Julian stays sitting in the chair at the comm station for a little longer. Most of the time, he's very good at compartmentalizing his life on Deep Space Nine safely away from his life here on Empok Nor—the closest he gets is thinking about what a room on Empok Nor looks like on the station. While he's here, he can't think about the others—about Miles or Dax or the rest of them—or he'll get distracted.

He considers going back to the infirmary instead of waiting here. Garak will be there, probably poking at the thin skin re-grown on his palm. A spy for the Obsidian Order—Julian has invented a hundred backstories for Garak, but somehow that was never one of them, despite how obvious it is now. What a strange way to punish a spy, though, to turn him into a beast and abandon him on an out-of-the-way station whose only strategic importance at this point is as a collection of spare parts.

"Julian?" Kira appears on the video screen in front of him. "Miles told me what you need. I told him where to find the data, and he's

compressing it for you.” She doesn’t ask, but he knows she’s wondering.

“Do you believe in them? Their power?”

Kira doesn’t talk much about her religion, not unless someone asks. “The Tears of the Prophets are very powerful. Different people experience that power—and react to that power—in different ways. I’ve never met a pahr, but I’ve certainly heard stories of them. In the old days, the Vedek Assembly had an explicit ban on pahrs, but the Occupation put all of that into the past. You think you’ve encountered one?”

Julian isn’t sure how much he wants to say. “I think a pahr might have been—involved in creating the situation here. If I learn enough about them, I might be able to undo it.”

Kira glances over her shoulder, out of view, and then back at him. “Miles is sending the transmission now,” she says. “Be careful, all right? We want you back.”

“I will,” Julian promises. The size of the data transmission interrupts the video, and he downloads it all into the station’s memory banks. There are a few replicator recipes included in it, and there’s a slight lump in his throat at the fact that Miles bothered to send over a taste of home.

When he returns to the infirmary, Garak raises an eyebrow. “I assume your compatriots will be here to pick you up shortly?”

He catches Julian wrong-footed. “No. I’ve told you, I’m not leaving until we’ve found a cure for you. We’ve wasted—weeks, now, but at least now I have a starting point. I was getting more information about pahrs so that I can start over.”

“It was entirely reasonable to think that you might find a medical solution, my dear doctor,” Garak says. “If I’d thought that the solution was more Bajoran mysticism, I would have traded for a vedek, not a doctor.”

“I’m not giving up on a medical solution.” Julian sits down at the familiar console instead of returning to the bed next to Garak and transfers the data onto a padd. “I’m simply broadening the search. Now, if you don’t mind, I have a great deal of reading to do.” He feels topsy-turvy, as though he’s on a shuttle that’s lost gravitational control and he’s being buffeted from one wall to the other as it spins.

“Of course, doctor. I’ll return to—” Garak breaks off. “I’ll leave you to your work.”

* * * * *

There’s a particular intensity with which Julian immerses himself in an entirely new subject, a haze that envelops him and makes it hard to think of anything else. It dissipates after a few days, but he loves the half-displaced feeling of it as his brain pulls it all together and makes sense of every piece. Learning about the stories of pahrs is no exception.

“The reports disagree about whether pahrs draw their power from the Prophets or the Pah-wraiths,” Julian says over dinner. The dinner table is smaller now, only the size of an ordinary dining table, and he doesn’t know if that’s because Garak did something or because the program is breaking down. “Probably because they seem to use their power for a lot of different purposes.

“Oh? Like transforming unsuspecting Cardassians into beasts?” Garak’s tone is acidic.

“Some are more of the helpful type—performing minor miracles like curing injuries or illnesses, helping the trees or the crops grow, that kind of thing. During the Occupation, some were—guardians, almost like patron saints or fairy godmothers, for various refugee camps.” Garak mutters something under his breath that Julian suspects was highly offensive. “Others, yes, they transform people to punish them, or to force them to learn a lesson, or punish someone else in turn.”

“That sounds like the type I encountered.” Garak takes a bite of shepherd’s pie, one of the replicator recipes that Miles provided, and gives an extremely performative grimace, the kind that means he secretly likes it. “If this is representative of the Human replicator programming—”

“Oh, don’t worry. They sent over plenty more recipes, and most of them aren’t Human.” Privately, he’s tempted to order *gagh* for dinner tomorrow and see what Garak does. “In the reports, there’s almost always a way to reverse the transformation. It just—” He breaks off.

“Let me guess,” Garak says. “It just involves some kind of connection to the initial trigger.”

“...The one you can’t remember. Yes.”

“If I have to list all of the—misdeeds—that might have inspired a Bajoran pahr to punish me with this transformation, we’ll be here for quite some time.” Garak’s tone is falsely light, and Julian looks at him sharply.

“Are there a few at the top of your list, Garak?”

“My dear doctor.” Garak takes another bite of shepherd’s pie and closes his eyes briefly. “I leave it to you to dream up what sort of offense I might have committed that would have led to such outrage that a Bajoran pahr and the Obsidian Order would *work together* to do this.”

“Ah. Yes.” That’s quite the question. The pahr could have been a collaborator, he supposes, but that’s almost worse when it comes to trying to come up with a—counter-curse, for lack of a better word. “So you have no idea at all? No memory of anything that he said?”

“Nothing,” Garak says. “Nothing at all. I don’t suppose there’s any other way to break a pahr’s curse?”

“Well, there’s always killing him,” Julian says, because his brain is deep in the lore and he’s not thinking about how Garak will take his words. “No—no, we’re not going to do that.”

“No?” There’s a hint of the growl back in Garak’s throat. “Why not? If I remember what he looks like, why not?”

“Some—some curses don’t end when the pahr dies,” Julian says, scrambling. “Sometimes they become permanent, so that what would have broken them won’t work anymore. Very common with transformations.” “Very common” is an overstatement for anything to do with pahrs, frankly. It’s not as though there have been scientific studies done, or anything at all beyond the fragmented narratives and fairy stories collected that Kira sent him. Most of the narratives are the sort of nonsense that was recited centuries ago at witch trials on Earth, poking a pin in a doll to cause a pain in the side, kicking a cat and seeing the witch limping the next day, that sort of thing. He’s scraping for anything, anything at all.

“I see.” Garak’s momentary eagerness dissipates. “Well, I suppose it’s for the best. The Bajorans look more or less the same to me. I don’t know that I could tell them apart.”

“Why do you bother lying to me anymore?” Julian asks. “I’m genuinely curious, Garak—I can tell when you’re lying, so why do it?”

Garak sets his fork down. “Who’s to say what’s a lie, really?”

“I don’t believe for a second that you would have difficulty remembering the face of any Bajoran you’ve ever met,” Julian says. “I believe that you’ve lost—some portion of your memory, at least. That the Obsidian Order stole it. But beyond that, I think you remember every single thing.”

“Perhaps not as well as *you* remember every single thing, doctor,” Garak chides. “Do you think it’s escaped my notice, the speed at which you consume the written word? Do you know how long it takes an ordinary Cardassian to read *The Never-Ending Sacrifice*? Do you think I don’t know the distance between the infirmary and the library, and how long it should have taken you to travel between them?” He shakes his head. “Do you think that I haven’t watched the surveillance video of the fight in the library, over and over again? You’re—something special, doctor, however you might try to hide it.”

Julian hears glee and pleading and admiration all together in Garak’s voice, and when he looks at Garak across the table, Garak’s eyes are very bright. “I was—so careful on DS9,” he says finally. Maybe, if he’s honest (or at least a little more honest), Garak will be a little more honest with him. “There was no video of me doing anything—unusual. I never would have made that mistake.” There’s some relief in revealing it. “I didn’t exactly have people whose entire focus was on my reading speed.” He sits back in his chair. “I am—something different, anyway.”

“You have no—” Garak’s voice is frustrated. “They should have been,” he says. “They *should* have been watching you. They never should have let *you* come here. What a waste.”

Julian leans forward, reaches across the table, and touches Garak’s arm. “I’m going to figure out how to break the curse,” he says. “I won’t leave until I do.”

Garak laughs a little desperately, and he suddenly grasps Julian’s hand in his own. “And when you do, you’ll leave,” he says.

“There’s no need for you to stay here either, once we’ve broken it. You could come to Deep Space Nine, if you don’t have somewhere else that you want to go.”

Garak releases Julian’s hand, but the phantom feeling of his skin remains. “What if you do figure out how to break it and it’s not something you’re willing to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Suppose the only way to break it is to—drink the blood of a child, or to burn the pahr alive. You wouldn’t help me do either of those. You would try to stop me, I think, if I tried, and you might even be able to. Would you stay here, after you knew what the cure was, once you knew that you couldn’t do it?”

Julian feels like he’s missing something important. “I think that’s highly unlikely,” he says at last.

“Do you.” Garak’s eyes never leave his. “Promise me something, doctor.”

Anything, he wants to say, and he doesn’t know where that came from. “What?”

“Promise me that if that happens—if you discover the cure and you know you can’t do whatever is required—promise me that then you’ll leave.” Garak’s voice is steady and still it feels like he’s saying something that Julian can’t quite hear.

“If we identify a solution that requires—unacceptable sacrifices, there’s no reason to think we couldn’t identify another—”

“*Doctor.*” There’s an undertone of desperation now. “Promise me.”

Julian hesitates, but finally says, “If there’s no way to break the curse but to do something horrific, and you tell me to leave, I’ll leave.”

“Good,” Garak says, and his face says something entirely different.

* * * * *

It takes Julian one week. One more week of reading everything he can, of searching deep in Cardassian folklore, such as it is, to learn about their version of witches and see if there’s any link to the Bajoran narratives, of taking painstaking notes and writing out analyses that run the length of a dissertation. And, after all of that, all it takes is a throwaway comment from Garak at the dinner table for him to realize the truth.

A kind of cold calm descends on Julian. “How long have you known how to break the curse?” He sets his fork down very carefully.

“My dear doctor,” Garak begins, and then stops. “No, I suppose it’s past the time for that, isn’t it. I told you, the pahr told me that I would know how to break the curse, when the time came.”

“And when was that time?” All the hours spent learning years’ worth of Cardassian medicine, and then all those pointless cell cultures and experiments—“When was that time, Garak?”

“During the time that you’ve been here,” Garak says. “A week or two in. Time is difficult for me.”

“You mean to tell me that we could have broken it then. That all this time I’ve spent here, while the war has been going on out there, was a waste.” He feels almost divorced from his body, which is a good thing, because there’s anger deep inside there and he can’t let it get to the surface.

“Oh, no, not at all.” Garak is the picture of sincerity as he looks at Julian, and Julian almost believes it. “No, doctor, I’m afraid that while I knew how to break the curse not long after, it’s not the sort of thing I can accomplish on my own.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“No.” Garak speaks as though it hurts his lips to form the words. “The Bajorans have a rather disturbing folktale—you must have come across it in your studies. A young man is cruel to an ugly traveler in need of refuge, and as punishment she transforms him into a hideous—”

“Beast,” Julian murmurs. “Yes. We have a version of that story.”

“And in your story, how is the curse broken?”

“A beautiful young woman falls in love with him, and he with her.” The anger is turning to a strange humming in his body.

“Yes,” Garak says. “Apparently it’s a universal story.”

Julian can’t help his laugh, and Garak flinches. “Is that why you had me brought here? To be your—*beautiful young love*?”

“No. I brought you to cure me the less old-fashioned way, with science.” He looks miserable. “But then—”

“You’ve kept me here in the hope that I would—fall in love with you? In between the sullen dinners and the monster clawing at my door?” Neither of those is true anymore, though. “And you—”

“For which of your bad parts did I first—?” Julian thinks that, for all Garak’s armored skin, he would burn if Julian touched him now. “When you told me that *The Never-Ending Sacrifice* would be better as a villanelle, I suppose. Or perhaps when you thought to give me back my fingers.”

“It’s been weeks,” Julian murmurs.

“You did promise me that you would leave, if you discovered the cure to the curse and couldn’t accomplish it,” Garak reminds him. “I can see how much you want—need—to go back to Terok Nor. You might as well.”

“What?”

Garak shrugs, and there’s misery etched in the shape of his shoulders. “I think we both know, doctor, that you’re not going to find some kind of medical cure, and you’re not going to break the curse yourself. So you might as well go.”

“And—what? Leave you here, like this? Until you find someone else, or die?”

“Perhaps I’ll be able to lure a Cardassian here,” Garak says, with false cheer. “Someone—more like me. And we’ll break the curse that way.”

There’s a strange pain in Julian’s chest at that. “I’m sorry.” He swallows hard. “I’m sorry that I can’t be—who you need me to be.”

“As am I.” Garak’s voice is very hoarse. “You should go call Terok Nor. They’ll want you back as soon as they can have you.”

Garak isn’t wrong. Sisko promises to send a runabout for him immediately. DS9 is only three light-years away. The runabout takes only thirty minutes to arrive. When the pilot radios, “Ready to transport at your command,” Garak gives Julian a sad, slow smile.

“Take care of yourself,” he says. “I hear there’s a war over there.” He presses a few data rods into Julian’s hand. “If you get bored.”

“Garak—” Julian doesn’t know what he would have said, because Garak tells the pilot to transport and Julian is very suddenly in the chilly space of the runabout.

terok nor (part I)

Chapter Summary

“I wish you were here.” The words escape Julian’s mouth, and he blames the fact that he’s tired and heartsick after those deaths and somehow lonely in this place full of people he likes, because it’s a terrible thing to say after leaving Garak behind. “Sorry.”

Garak hesitates. “Do you?”

“There are all kinds of people here,” Julian says. He knows it’s not quite an answer. “Coming and going all the time. You wouldn’t—” It would be a lie to say *stand out*, but he wants to.

Deep Space Nine feels different when he returns. Of course, there’s a war on, and it’s more battered in parts than he’d remembered. But after Empok Nor, it feels chilly, and the lights always seem just a little too bright. There are so many *people* around. He hadn’t realized how accustomed he’d grown to solitude and quiet until he came—home.

Certainly, there are many benefits. There’s far more variety at the replimat here. But meals with Miles feel lacking, somehow. After he’s been back for a week, he meets Miles for lunch, and halfway through, he says, “I mean, if you ask me, modern theater has been on the decline since the late twenty-third century. Just look at the plays to have come out of Earth in the last fifty years and compare them to the works of Willemheld, or Barton or Chow-yun.” Miles points at a roll on his plate and raises an eyebrow. “Yes, yes,” Julian says, and Miles takes it. “Modern playwrights have become obsessed with writing human interpretations of alien theatrical works instead of embracing the alien nature wholeheartedly—are you listening to me?”

Miles looks startled. “What? I heard every word you said.”

“And what do you think?”

“About what?”

“Any of it.” He’s been waving his spoon in the air, but he sets it down into his soup now.

Miles shakes his head. “I don’t know. Look, what do you want me to say?”

“Say you agree. Say you disagree. Say you hate theater! Just say *something*.” He’s hungry for something and he’s beginning to realize that the food isn’t the problem.

“Look, Julian, you said you wanted to have lunch. We’re having lunch. My mother taught me that if you combine eating and talking, you’ll end up doing neither very well.” Miles takes a pointed bite of Julian’s roll.

“Right.” Meals with Garak weren’t like this. Meals with Garak were—a sort of arena for philosophical debate, for literary critique, for arguing about anything and everything they could come up with. There’s no one here to do that with. “Of course.”

He returns to the infirmary, hoping for something interesting and non-fatal to occupy his attention. For once, though, the station’s residents appear to be keeping themselves intact, and even the longer-term patients are entirely stable. There’s nothing to keep him from thinking, from considering, perhaps even obsessing. Finally, Julian gives in and sends a long-range comm to Empok Nor. At first, it goes unanswered, and there’s a moment where Julian feels a spike of fear. Then, after a few long minutes, Garak comes into view. He’s a little ruffled, his wild hair messy. “My dear doctor,” he says. “I admit, this is unexpected.”

“I wanted to—see how you were getting on,” Julian says lamely. Then he clears his throat and braces himself. “I read Shoggoth’s third enigma tale.”

“Oh?” Garak’s tone is arch. “You’ve made time for Kardasi reading, there on DS9?”

“It’s not every minute that someone is coming in with a severed limb,” Julian begins, thus dooming himself to the immediate arrival of such a patient. “I’m sorry—I have to go—” If Garak responds, he doesn’t hear it.

The next time he has a minute to think—more than a minute—it’s 2255, and he’s cutting it fine but he hopes Garak has stayed stable and he wants to hear his voice. “Doctor,” Garak answers, when he comms. “Did you reattach the severed limb?”

“No,” Julian says shortly. “No, it was too late. Septicemia had already set in. The others too.” She’d only been the first of four patients like her, and they’d all slipped away from him. “I just—” Why is he talking to Garak, instead of one of the nurses? “I just wanted—”

“To express an undoubtedly uninformed perspective on Shoggoth’s literary abilities?” Garak’s words are careful, and Julian wonders just how bad he looks over the video screen. “Dazzle me, doctor.”

Julian musters his energy. “I can’t imagine that Cardassian detective work is particularly interesting,” he says. “The suspects are all always guilty.”

“Yes, but of what? The search is for the one who committed the particular crime, set against the obvious fact that everyone is guilty of *something*.”

“But they all end up dead by the end,” Julian says. He’s collapsed onto his bed, more or less in a sitting position, facing the video screen. Usually he would never make a holo-call in his bedroom, but it isn’t a usual day. “So what’s the victory?”

“It’s a puzzle,” Garak insists. “Come now, doctor, there are all sorts of logic puzzles in the galaxy, and it’s rare that the answer to any one of them should *matter* except as an abstract accomplishment. Why should it be any different in an enigma tale?”

“I’m going to make you read a mystery,” Julian threatens. “A proper mystery. Where no one knows anything about anybody.”

There’s a strange expression on Garak’s craggy face. “I suspect, doctor, that you didn’t deduce who was guilty of the murder in the enigma tale, and that’s why you’re complaining.”

“There were no clues! At the end of a proper mystery, the reader should be able to look back and see how all the pieces fit together.” This, this is familiar, almost comforting. “There was nothing to suggest that Fedal had committed it—”

“Nonsense,” Garak says. “You simply don’t know enough. The tarry substance at the crime scene was clearly the gum used to caulk faulty seams in illicit art museums. Fedal expressed his interest in Cardassian sculpture several times in the tale. It was almost laughably obvious.”

“Well, yes, I didn’t know what Cardassians use for construction in cheap art museums!”

Garak looks unimpressed. “Is an enigma tale only worthwhile if it’s accessible to anyone unfamiliar with Cardassian history or culture? Would your mystery novels fit together for me, when I came to the end?”

“Yes, yes, the experience of art is subjective and depends on context, I know,” Julian says, and he sees that hint of a smile on Garak’s lips. “I read ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ as a tragic poem, and you read it as a patriotic paean worthy of Cardassia until the last few lines.”

“And both of us depend on the history that we have learned, not only what we’ve experienced personally, to gain any meaning from it,” Garak points out.

“I wish you were here.” The words escape Julian’s mouth, and he blames the fact that he’s tired and heartsick after those deaths and somehow lonely in this place full of people he likes, because it’s a terrible thing to say after leaving Garak behind. “Sorry.”

Garak hesitates. “Do you?”

“There are all kinds of people here,” Julian says. He knows it’s not quite an answer. “Coming and going all the time. You wouldn’t—” It would be a lie to say *stand out*, but he wants to.

“I’m not exactly safe.”

Julian checks his chronometer—it’s 2305 there, and Garak is still talking to him. “We could—take steps. If we needed to.” He’s trying not to promise anything to Garak, anything beyond a place less isolated than Empok Nor, but he knows every word that he says is telling Garak something else.

“And the fact that I held a Starfleet officer captive for weeks?”

“What, my special medical research program?”

“I suppose you learned a great deal about Cardassian physiology,” Garak says slowly. “Information that I assume was erased from the Terok Nor database before the Cardassian withdrawal.” Julian nods. “Tomorrow,” Garak says. “I’ll speak to Captain Sisko. I may have an offer to make him.”

“Good.” Julian never expected him to agree, but there’s something incredibly relieved in him, like the feeling of sinking into bed after a long day. Of all the absurd things, he remembers a particularly self-indulgent speech in one of the novels of his childhood—“*It is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapped; and then I’ve a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly.*”

“And you, my dear doctor, do not look like you’re in any condition to offer your thoughts, ill-informed as they may be, at the moment.” Garak’s voice turns gentle. “You should sleep. There will—be time yet, to see the error of your literary ways.”

* * * * *

Garak’s offer to Sisko turns out to be *bringing Empok Nor* to the Bajoran system, where it will be something between a parts shop and a second weapons platform. Miles, when he hears it, turns purple at the idea of trying to merge the warp fields of multiple starships around an entire space station, that particularly excited purple that means it’s just the impossible task for him. If the Trivas system was more than three light-years away, or if a good portion of the fleet wasn’t in a holding pattern nearby, or if the need for a secondary defense was just a little less urgent—then there would have been no chance of it happening.

Instead, Julian joins the crush of people on the upper level of the promenade, watching the rather extraordinary sight of fifteen starships coming out of warp with a space station in tow. Garak is on one of those ships, Julian knows. There’s an empty storefront on the promenade that Sisko has promised to Garak, and quarters in the habitat ring near Julian’s own. There hasn’t been time for the two of them to talk much—certainly not to discuss literature—but Julian can imagine it so clearly it almost feels real.

Julian wants to be there to greet Garak when he arrives, to guide him through the gawkers, but there’s an explosion on one of the ships as it releases Empok Nor and three engineers appear in the infirmary, their skin half-melted together. The smell is unspeakable, their agony deafening, and Julian loses all track of time as he and his team work to save them. In the end, they survive, or at least stabilize, and Julian

stands in the infirmary's sonic shower until his pores are scoured clean before he puts on a fresh uniform.

When he steps onto the promenade, he sees the knot of spectators outside of Garak's new storefront and finds himself drawn there inexorably. They have their faces pressed to the windows, but no one has stepped inside yet. Garak is methodically unloading crates, but he looks up when Julian walks in and breaks into a smile. "My dear doctor!" There's a hint of a question beneath it.

"Garak!" He throws more energy into his greeting than he feels, for the benefit of the gawkers. "So glad you're finally here!" That's a little too honest, so he thrusts out a hand for Garak to shake. Garak takes Julian's hand in his own larger one, clasps it gently, and shakes twice before releasing Julian.

"Indeed I am," Garak says. "Your Federation has their second station, and I have my book shop." He gestures around him. "How do you like it?"

"A bit bare so far." It's warm, but nothing like the heat of Empok Nor, and a little dimmer than the rest of DS9. With the right decorating, it might even seem cozy. He'd wondered what Garak would do with this space. "I take it you have plans?"

Garak waves one hand enthusiastically. "Oh, yes. The rare selections in this area, the drivel here, perhaps a featured new holo-novel or two to draw in the customers at first, and then some sort of—discussion area."

"Discussion area?"

"I've arranged to have a replicator installed with limited beverage programming," Garak says. He continues removing racks of data rods from the crates. "Coffee, raktajino, tea—the usual beverages that accompany literary debate. Perhaps there will be—book clubs," and the words sound so strange in his mouth that Julian really does grin.

"Book clubs."

"There has to be *some* entertainment on this station that doesn't involve holosuites and overpriced alcoholic beverages," Garak says. "Though I've arranged the use of Mr. Quark's holosuites for brief previews of holonovels."

"Garak." He's at a loss. "This is remarkable. You organized all of this in the last two weeks?"

Garak looks at him wide-eyed and lies, "It was fairly simple, my dear doctor." Somehow those last three words feel different when Garak says them now. "After all, there was already the entire Cardassian library on Empok Nor. As for the rest of it, well—even with the war, publishers are eager to get their books into the hands of visitors. What better place than a space station?" He takes out a small box, made of some kind of unfamiliar wood, and offers it to Julian. "You left your books behind when you departed."

"For you," Julian says, but he accepts the box. It's heavier than he would expect, given the number of books that he brought with him. "Did you read any of them, while I was gone?"

"Oh, one or two." Garak turns away. "I'm afraid there's been some delay in the arrival of shelving, which will delay my opening, but the rest of the furniture should be here soon. I think you'll be impressed when it's finished."

"Yes," Julian says. He runs his fingers over the shape of the box. "Yes. Would you like—" He hesitates. Garak looks at him sharply, and Julian plows on. "When you take a break, if I'm not up to my arms in someone's viscera, I'd be happy to introduce you to the wonders of our replimat."

"That sounds delightful, doctor." Garak's voice is all cheer, none of the sentiment beneath it that Julian has heard over the last weeks. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"1900, or thereabouts? Just come by the infirmary."

"Very well." Garak turns away from him. "Until then."

* * * * *

It takes Julian the span of their walk from the infirmary to the replimat to realize that the replimat was a poor choice for their first dinner together since he left Empok Nor. It's the busiest place to eat on the station, and quite bright, and Garak hasn't experienced either since before he went to Empok Nor. But Empok Nor's matching space was the site of all their dinners together, and Julian hadn't had the—guts to suggest that they eat in his quarters, and he had a sense that such a suggestion might be taken the wrong way, whatever the wrong way was. So here they are in the replimat, where people are staring.

Garak, for his part, acts as though he's a longstanding customer. He smiles at the people who stare at him, even greets Jadzia, who stares at them with some suspicion, and actually says, "Lieutenant Dax, won't you join us for dinner?" He gestures with his tray a little. "Dr. Bashir is introducing me to the foods of the Federation."

Julian ruthlessly tamps down a curl of disappointment. He was looking forward to dinner alone with Garak, or as alone as they could be in this busy cafeteria. Jadzia looks at him, a little uncertain, and Julian forces a smile. "Yes, Dax, please do." Everyone loves Dax. If she sits with Garak, it will go a long way toward dispelling suspicion of him.

"Lieutenant," Garak says, when they're seated, "I've been looking forward to the opportunity to converse with someone whose outlook is not so entirely Human."

Dax laughs at that. "Julian isn't exactly an ordinary Human," she says, and Julian freezes minutely, just enough for Garak to notice.

"I've found his philosophical and literary understanding quite valuable, but his perspective is necessarily limited by his own experiences."

“Now, wait just a minute!” Julian can’t help interrupting, even though he knows Garak is just teasing him. “This from the man who thought that Milton was ‘tedious’? Your interpretation was extremely limited, based on your own experience—”

“Oh, no,” Garak says. “Fantastical religious narratives are universal. My objections have nothing to do with a lack of perspective, only Mr. Milton’s melodramatic recitation of Lucifer’s fall—”

“It—you think everything is melodramatic, Garak. *The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven. What matter where, if I be still the same?* That’s not melodrama, it’s insight—”

“My dear doctor, you’ve plucked a single phrase out of a poem that rivals the *Odyssey* for repetition—” He ignores Julian’s outraged noise “—as though it can be removed from the context that surrounds it. You conveniently ignore what comes just before it, *Farewell, happy fields where joy forever dwells: hail horrors, hail infernal word, and thou profoundest hell receive thy new possessor.* The melodramatic nature—”

“*Repetition?* May I remind you that you’re the man who claims that the repetitive epic is the highest form—”

Jadzia laughs again, and Julian remembers that they’re in the middle of the reprimand shouting at each other about *Paradise Lost*. “Not much room for a third in this conversation, is there?”

Julian knows he’s blushing and hates it. Garak picks up his fork and takes a delicate bite of the blazingly hot green curry he’d insisted on trying. “The discussions at my bookshop will be significantly more decorous,” Garak assures her. “Please excuse my table manners—it’s been some time since I ate with someone other than Julian, and I’m afraid we grew accustomed to poor behavior.”

“Oh, no,” Dax says. “Don’t stop on my account.” She props her chin on both hands with, Julian thinks, a rather Cheshire-cat smile.

“No, no.” Garak clearly likes the green curry. Funny, given how bland the food was that came out of the replicators on Empok Nor. “Please, tell me more about what to expect on this station. Is the war substantially affecting it, day-to-day?”

Dax’s face darkens, and she sits back in her chair. “Sometimes nothing happens for weeks,” she says in a low voice. “Sometimes it feels like we’re under siege. Everyone’s a bit—on edge, all the time.”

“I see.” Garak does see, of course. Julian knows that Garak sees everything. For all that Julian’s genetically-enhanced brain gives him perfect recall, Garak seems to have an instinctive feel for the tensions, the danger points, the weaknesses, in people. “Well, I intend to host a grand opening for my bookshop in two days, assuming the furniture is ready. If the Dominion has the courtesy not to attack during that time, I would welcome your attendance.” *And that of everyone else you can muster* is implicit.

“I’d be delighted.”

“Excellent! Now, please excuse me, I’ve a great deal to get done before then.” Garak stands, nods a farewell, and walks away. Julian snags the half-full plate of curry from his tray before he leaves.

“*Julian,*” Dax hisses. “What was that?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” He doesn’t even sound convincing to himself.

“Is that what you’re like together, all the time?”

“Not always,” Julian says. He hadn’t thought what it would be like to have other people around them. He takes a bite of the curry. It’s really quite good. “Sometimes we talk about things other than literature. It’s less heated then,” and what an unfortunate choice of words, remembering what Garak told him while reading *Much Ado About Nothing*. “He’ll come to fit in here. Maybe I’ll even find a cure.”

Jadzia shakes her head. “I’m your friend, Julian. You don’t have to lie to me.”

Startled, he tells her, “I’m not lying.”

She watches him carefully. “Then you’re lying to yourself.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He knows what she’s not saying. “If I felt that way—” If Julian felt that way, Garak wouldn’t still look like he does, because all that has to happen is that Julian has to fall in love with him to break the curse. No, that’s not quite true. All that has to happen is that they have to be in love at the same time.

And so begins a grim few days in which Julian tortures himself with the idea that maybe *he* is in love with Garak but that the curse hasn’t ended because Garak doesn’t feel the same way that he did. He drags his entire medical staff to Garak’s book shop grand opening, persuades all of the senior staff to come as well, even goes to Keiko and says, “You could bring your students to pick out a few books.” He goes to Quark and tells him, “If you let a few of the dabo girls take an hour off and come to the celebration, you know the guests will go directly to Quark’s and to the holosuites when they leave.”

By the time the grand opening comes around, Julian is realizing that he may have gone a little overboard. When Garak opens the doors, he looks stunned for the briefest moment before beaming and waving in the crowd. They stream in, no fear of him, and Julian can see what he thinks is genuine delight in Garak’s eyes.

terok nor (part II)

Chapter Summary

“Doctor Bashir!” Ziyal smiles at him as she and Garak walk past, and there’s no guile in it. “I’m going to find something Tellarite for us to read next.”

“Holosuite 3,” Quark says without looking up. “Two hours.”

“Oh good,” Julian croaks. “Tellarite. Yes.”

“Have a nice night!” Ziyal is almost giddy as she leads Garak upstairs to the holosuite, and Julian has a spectacular medical vocabulary that nevertheless can’t quite capture what’s happening to his insides right now.

Julian lingers as Garak’s guests finally begin to leave, clutching their novels and their mugs of that spicy Cardassian tea. Garak is smiling, an alien expression on that brutal face, and Julian wants to bask in it.

He’s not the only one, though. He recognizes the young woman across the room, though he knows Tora Ziyal only as Dukat’s quiet daughter and Kira’s project. Their paths rarely cross. But she’s starry-eyed looking at Garak, and worse, there’s an expression on her face that Julian recognizes all too well—that bone-deep longing to find someone who understands. *Perhaps I’ll be able to lure a Cardassian here*, he remembers Garak saying. *Someone more like me*. Her smile is wide and a little uncertain and Julian says, “Tora, nice to see you here.”

“Oh!” She breaks out of her reverie. “Doctor Bashir!” She looks a little embarrassed to have been caught staring. “You can call me Ziyal, everyone does. I’m excited to have Cardassian books. My—” Ziyal hesitates, then pushes forward. “My father talked about a few books, sometimes, but I never had a chance to read any of them.”

“Count yourself lucky, my dear,” Garak says. Funny that a seven-foot-tall man should be able to sneak up on them, especially on Julian. “Gul Dukat is not known for his literary taste.” He softens the words a little with a smile. “But I’m sure I can recommend something of quality that you might enjoy.”

Someone more like me. “Garak has very strong opinions about books,” Julian says, and he smiles a little helplessly at Garak. “And very specific tastes.”

“As does the doctor.” Garak’s tone is arch. “I’m afraid some of the niceties of Cardassian literature are lost on him. Perhaps you will appreciate them more,” he tells Ziyal.

“Don’t let Garak fool you,” Julian says. “There’s so much out there to read—Cardassian literature is fascinating, but you’ll appreciate it more with a firm grounding in galactic classics.”

“Galactic classics, are they? Three thousand years of Earth literature? You have yet to so much as recommend something Vulcan, my dear doctor.”

“I beg your pardon,” Julian protests, “but the last time you said that, I told you that I would suffer through *Falor’s Journey* or *Clash on the Fire Plains*, and you told me that you would prefer to—” To have Julian remove all of his fingernails again, Garak had said.

“Ah. I suppose I did. Andorian, then. You’ve recommended nothing Andorian, let alone anything beyond the Federation’s founding membership—”

“I’d love to read something Andorian,” Ziyal says, a little hesitantly. “Their painting style is very—passionate. I imagine the literature would be similarly dramatic.”

Julian had almost forgotten that she was there, so absorbed was he in the familiar give-and-take with Garak. “Yes,” he says, temporarily wrong-footed. “Yes, Andorian literature is—” He hesitates. “I suspect Garak would call it *melodramatic*.”

“Perhaps Ziyal would like to select something that all three of us could read,” Garak says, and Julian can’t tell if he’s imagining the spark in Garak’s eyes. “Given her apparently greater familiarity with Andorian culture.”

“Oh!” Ziyal looks startled. “I’ve only heard of *The Shran Saga*, but we could start there—”

“Certainly,” Garak says. That’s a real smile on his face, Julian thinks. “I believe I can locate a copy tonight. Shall we have lunch the day after tomorrow to discuss? Here in the shop?”

“Excellent.” Julian wants to stay and hear Garak’s acid commentary about the books that everyone has purchased, but he doesn’t have it in him to stand in Ziyal’s way, not when she’s so plainly more suited to Garak’s particular situation than he is. After all, if he and Garak felt the same way about each other, Garak would be cured. Ziyal is a much better chance for Garak. “I—should get back to the infirmary,” he lies. “Just—leave the book for me and I’ll pick it up to read.” It won’t take him long. It never does.

“Certainly, my dear doctor.” There’s something in Garak’s eyes that he can’t quite decipher. “Good night.”

He goes back to the infirmary, because there’s always something more that can be done there. He’s been organizing all of the medical

information drawn from Empok Nor's computers, most of it Cardassian, some of it Bajoran that must have been derived from appalling experimentation. Julian is determined that some good should come out of whatever was done to the Bajorans, and Bajor is already struggling through waves of illnesses that it's ill-equipped to handle.

It's hard to focus, though. Sometimes his throat hurts with how much he wants to be around Garak. There are people here who are Julian's intellectual equal in many ways, who are brilliant in their own fields, but there are very few he can *talk* to in the same way. Julian doesn't have to hold himself back with Garak. He doesn't have to pretend that he read something more slowly than he did or that he struggled to grasp a concept. There are no secrets between them, save for Julian's inconvenient too-late development of whatever these feelings are—and, of course, the entirety of Garak's past. All right, there are secrets, but they don't hamper the kinds of discussions that Julian loves to have, the arguments and the thought-experiments and the increasingly ridiculous hypotheticals just to see how Garak will react. There's no one else here like that.

* * * * *

"Twaddle," Garak declares. "Sentimental, melodramatic, without a compelling formal structure—at least *The Odyssey* had some poetic merit—"

"I thought it was lovely," Ziyal interrupts. "The writing might not be as—technically sophisticated, but the stories are compelling and the prose itself would be distracting if it were—"

"Of higher quality? I agree," Julian says, just to bedevil Garak. "Beautiful writing for the sake of beauty is all well and good for poetry, but when it comes to action, sometimes simplicity is better."

"I see." The bitterness in Garak's voice is obviously feigned. "I thought to find an ally in Ziyal, but it seems that you're both easily seduced by fantastical tales."

"There's nothing wrong with reading something enjoyable," Julian says. "It doesn't have to all be formalistic misery." His sandwich is long since forgotten on the tray he's stolen from the replimat. "It's an effective use of short sentences with percussive word choice—"

"Indeed, I suspect that all of Shran's words were percussive." Garak's mouth twitches toward a smile when Ziyal laughs at his statement. "Come now, by your standards the *Odyssey* told stories of action and adventure in a sophisticated form, and *Much Ado About Nothing*—"

A flush surges through Julian. Yes, he remembers their discussion of the play. "There's more than one way to write a funny fast-paced narrative," he argues. "Ziyal, surely you agree. Books would be dreadfully boring if all of the writing had to be exactly the same."

"Certainly," Ziyal says. "Garak, I'm afraid you're outnumbered."

"Perhaps I am, my dear." Julian gapes at Garak for a moment before he remembers to shut his mouth. "Nevertheless, the quantity of your collective opinions can't substitute for the quality of my own."

"I think you've both dismissed the structural flourishes a little too quickly," Julian says. "The organization of the stories isn't chronological, it's thematic—"

"Yes, a heavy-handed attempt—"

"Now you're only arguing to be argumentative," Ziyal interrupts.

"One of Garak's preferred pastimes." Julian can't help smiling as he says it.

"It makes for a very popular holo-novel." Garak's voice drips with disdain, but it doesn't match his eyes as he looks at Julian. "Experienced that way, I don't doubt it's compelling. But the prose is workmanlike at best and the narratives preposterous."

"It's based on Shran's life!" Julian has to stifle his laugh. "If you find it preposterous, that's a failure of imagination on your part."

"Or, perhaps, the result of an exaggeration on the author's part. Unless you're telling me that Shran, alone, rescued his infant daughter from an Orion slaver syndicate, stole a ship, and discovered that its hold was full of latinum? And no, doctor, don't recite that 'truth is stranger than fiction' nonsense that you turn to whenever I question a plot—"

"No, you're taking that out of context," Ziyal says. "You don't see the parallel between the structure of that story and the structure of the first story? Rescuing his future wife's brother from being enslaved by the Romulans? Every story in the saga has the same themes, even if they're more or less strongly expressed."

"Indeed," Garak says slowly. "Indeed, my dear."

* * * * *

He sees Garak two nights later in Quark's. Garak is sipping a glass of kanar at the bar and Julian can't stop himself from sliding into the empty seat between Garak and Morn. "Morn," he says, with a quick nod, and then turns away before Morn can trap him into a long conversation. "Hello, Garak."

"My dear doctor." Garak shifts in his seat and sets his glass down. "Finished in the infirmary already?"

"Shockingly quiet today," Julian says, and raps his knuckles against the bartop to ward off the bad luck of saying such a thing. Garak's size means that he takes up an unexpected amount of space at the bar, and he's distractingly close now, heat radiating off his Cardassian skin. "I'm meeting Miles for darts in a bit, but we could have a drink before then."

"I believe we are already." Garak gestures at the glass of whiskey that's appeared at Julian's elbow.

"Well. Yes." Julian says it a little stupidly. He means that they could sit at a table, the two of them, and Garak could regale him with the latest stories of the bookshop and ask pointed questions about Julian's latest research while strongly implying that his time could be better spent. Julian hasn't mentioned that he's still trying to find a way to restore Garak's memories. "I—"

"Excuse me, doctor," Garak says, and stands. Julian's breath catches for a moment as Garak looms over him, and then stays caught in his throat as he watches Garak walk over to greet Ziyal with a smile.

"Doctor Bashir!" She smiles at him as they walk past, and there's no guile in it. "I'm going to find something Tellarite for us to read next."

"Holosuite 3," Quark says without looking up. "Two hours."

"Oh good," Julian croaks. "Tellarite. Yes."

"Have a nice night!" She's almost giddy as she leads Garak upstairs to the holosuite, and Julian has a spectacular medical vocabulary that nevertheless can't quite capture what's happening to his insides right now.

"She makes me feel old," he mutters, to no one in particular.

"I think she makes Garak feel young," Quark says, in that particularly lecherous tone that he's perfected, and Julian's gut twists at the idea. "Another Scotch, doctor?"

By the time Miles arrives, Julian isn't quite bosky, but he's certainly feeling less pain. Miles raises an eyebrow. "Long day?" he asks.

"Yes," Julian says, and he must sound bad enough that Miles doesn't press him further. "But I can still beat you."

"In your dreams. Maybe I'll be kind and let you stand a few feet closer," Miles says.

Julian scoffs and accepts the darts. He's been careful, ever since they started playing, to modulate his performance. Always just good enough to give Miles a challenge, to keep them vying and trading the lead. And really, he's playing to the best of his ability, it's only that he's playing a different game than Miles is.

He's not paying attention to the time—really, he isn't—but he can't help but be aware when two hours have passed. Garak emerges from the holosuite, his skin flushed and hair a little mussed, with Ziyal a step behind him. The sight of them startles Julian so badly that he forgets himself and throws a bullseye that leaves Miles gaping. "That was a bloody impossible shot," Miles protests.

Julian remembers to look and sees that he's landed his dart perfectly between two of Miles's. "I'm due for a lucky streak," he says through numb lips. Shouldn't Garak's curse have been broken, then? Garak catches him watching and Julian forces himself to look away. He doesn't want to think too carefully about what, exactly, Garak and Ziyal were doing in the holosuite, but—whatever it was, it didn't break the curse. He doesn't know what that means.

He knows when Garak comes up behind him, hears the particular weight of his steps and smells sun-baked stone and the Denobulan fiber clothing that Garak bought a few days ago. "Impressive performance, doctor," Garak says from just over his shoulder.

"Lucky," Julian repeats. When he turns, Garak is close enough that he has to tilt his head back a little to meet his eyes.

"I've got to get going," Miles says, after he throws. His gaze skips over Garak, with whom he shares an uneasy peace. "Molly needs her bedtime story."

Julian smiles at that. "Really, Miles, there's no need to invent an excuse to escape simply because I'm performing well," he teases. He knows that Molly is tyrannical when it comes to enforcing storytime. "Say hello to Keiko for me."

Miles rolls his eyes. "Computer, we're finished with the dartboard," he says, and the darts and dartboard disappear. "Unless the two of you wanted to play...?"

"The doctor has done marvelous work restoring my fine motor function, but I don't think it's advisable to test it with sharp objects around so many people." Garak flexes his thick fingers. "I do appreciate the offer."

Miles looks uncomfortable and not entirely certain what he's offered. "G'night, Julian, Garak," he says, and leaves.

"I should," Julian starts to say, but he doesn't have an end to that sentence.

"Doctor, I'm afraid that I'm feeling a bit—out of the ordinary." Garak lets the statement sit until Julian realizes how he's supposed to respond.

"I should run a scan just to be safe," he says. "I know you're not a fan of the infirmary, but—" as though that isn't precisely what Garak was suggesting.

Garak heaves a very put-upon sigh, and Julian wonders who they're supposed to be performing for. "Make it quick, doctor."

The infirmary is still quiet. The doctor on shift is accustomed to Julian showing up outside of scheduled hours and nods briefly in greeting, but doesn't offer to handle whatever medical issue Garak might have. Garak is seen as firmly within Julian's expertise, and no one else's. When Garak is seated on the examination table and Julian has lowered it enough that he could look Garak in the eye, if he dared, he begins a slow tricorder scan. "I have your previous scans," he says, and looks for any marks on Garak's neck, anything that would suggest vigorous physical contact with Ziyal. "I'll compare them and see if anything significant has changed. Can you tell me—" He swallows. "Can you tell me what you were doing when you first began to feel odd?"

"I was in the holosuite," Garak says, as though Julian didn't know that. His hand is steady as he moves the tricorder, but his fingers itch to touch Garak's skin. "Engaged in a—"

The tricorder beeps. "That's strange." Julian examines the computer screen. "It's as though your cellular structure has begun to—degrade internally, but without any visible exterior changes." His throat is tight. "Would you mind removing your shirt?"

Garak turns his head sharply and their eyes meet. "And what, my dear doctor, do you hope to discover beneath my shirt that your tricorder can't reveal?"

That startles Julian. Garak is the one who volunteered for an examination. "I won't touch you," he assures Garak, as though it's the early days on Empok Nor again. "The scan will show anything that it recognizes as medically significant, but considering the etiology of your particular physiological problems, I'm unwilling to trust that it will capture every possible sign of what might be happening."

"Very well." Grudgingly, Garak waits for Julian to step backward and then unzips a hidden zipper that releases his shirt.

No buttons, Julian notices. "Are you having problems with dexterity?"

Garak folds his shirt and sets it beside him. Then he flexes the fingers of one hand again. "Only that which comes of having these—blunt instruments for fingers. Nothing new, doctor."

"Ah." The expanse of Garak's silvery skin is unmarked, unchanged, the scale shapes still shifting—except for the areas where he's been injured. If anything, they look more vulnerable. The patches across his shoulder and abdomen are almost pinkish, and Julian suspects that his leg looks the same. "Was it like this before the holosuite?" Julian gestures to his abdomen and stops his fingers just in time a few millimeters from Garak's skin.

"I believe the weakening began when I arrived here on Terok Nor," Garak says carefully.

"Any pain?" He catches himself. "Any tenderness or—heightened sensation?"

Garak sighs. Julian watches the rise and fall of his chest. "I suppose you'll have to test it for me."

Julian's breath catches a little. "Tell me if it hurts," he says absurdly, as though Garak would ever admit to pain. He lays two fingers very gently against the soft patch of skin. "Anything?"

"It may be—more sensitive than it has been." Garak's voice is grudging, his breathing steady beneath Julian's fingers. Too steady, Julian thinks. No natural breathing is that even.

Julian frowns. "The skin is hotter there—I would usually suspect an infection, but the scan didn't show anything."

"It was a Cardassian sauna program," Garak says. Julian lifts his fingers away and touches them to Garak's shoulder, and Garak hisses in a breath. "The holosuite—it was quite warm."

"Your skin was exposed?" Julian has no idea what a Cardassian sauna is like. A Vulcan sauna is fully clothed, naturally, with robes buttoned tight up the throat to increase the heat. A Risan sauna is—barely a euphemism.

"Yes." Garak turns his head to look at Julian. "It was. I would imagine the heat is—from the program." There's something in his eyes that Julian doesn't understand. He tries not to think about Garak and Ziyal half-naked—or worse—in the holosuite.

"Well." Julian drops his hand to his side and steps back. "I can't say that I know what's happening to you, but it appears that we should perform more frequent examinations. And—you should tell me if anything changes. Sooner. It's not as though we don't see each other."

"Daily, it seems," Garak says.

Julian can't tell if that's meant to be a jibe or a simple statement of fact. All right, he does go into the bookshop most days, and they often end up eating a meal together, but—"I read very quickly." It comes out a little defensive. "I like to have something new to read, after a long day in the infirmary."

"Doctor, if every person on this station read at the prodigious rate that you do—" Julian stiffens. Garak probably doesn't mean anything by the choice of word, but then, Garak chooses his words carefully. "If they read as *swiftly* as you do, with the same level of comprehension, I could have a veritable empire of bookshops. One on every starbase, Federation or not."

Julian relaxes a little. "I'm familiar with your opinion of my reading comprehension."

"Nevertheless." Garak reaches for his shirt and pulls it back on. "Despite your lamentable taste, your grasp of literature surpasses that of anyone *else* on this station." He stands, and he's breathlessly close to Julian again.

"Careful, Garak. That almost sounded like a compliment." It sends an absurd shiver through Julian. He saves Garak's latest scans into his file on Garak.

Garak must see something on the screen as he does it, because he inhales sharply. "You're still—investigating remedies for my memory loss?" Of course Garak would spot any notation that was even slightly unusual in a medical file.

"Yes." Julian feels unaccountably embarrassed. "I know we were focused on finding a solution for your physical change, but it seems like you'll probably break the curse soon anyway, and unless you're holding back more information, the memory loss doesn't seem to be linked to the pahr's curse."

“Oh? You expect that the curse will be broken, doctor?”

Julian busies himself putting the tricorder in precisely the right spot. “Ziyal is in love with you.” He hopes Garak can’t hear the roughness in his voice, but of course Garak can.

Garak is quiet for a long moment. “Yes,” he says. “I suppose she is.”

“And you’re—” Damn. It shouldn’t be hard to say. However he feels about Garak, he should be pleased that Garak will have the opportunity to return to his true form.

“Thank you, doctor.” In his peripheral vision, he sees Garak walk to the infirmary door. “For your—diagnosis.” Garak leaves, and Julian can suddenly breathe normally again.

* * * * *

The Defiant comes limping back from an encounter with the Jem’Hadar and beams seventeen casualties into the infirmary, including its own doctor and two nurses who were already treating casualties when the Jem’Hadar ship plowed into sickbay. Julian abandons his half-eaten breakfast when the call comes in and he thinks about nothing but trying to keep them alive for nearly a week.

The first dies as she materializes on the infirmary bed. He loses three engineers almost simultaneously, the smell of their plasma-burnt skin nauseating in the filtered air. Most of the bones in Dr. Talek’s body are shattered and she never wakes before she dies. He thinks it might be better that way. He loses them, one after another, even as he works frantically to save the next one. Someone tries to interrupt him as he tries to patch together two segments of Chief Davreen’s brainstem and he snarls something that makes them leave him alone. His body can work through it—not happily, not pleasantly, but it doesn’t fail him. His vision never blurs, even as his eyes burn, and his hands never shake or cramp.

By the end of the week, there are only five still alive. Roxleigh’s fingers are beyond saving and the damage to Varma’s eyes is irreparable, but they’re stable. Stable enough that Julian finally cedes their care to the other medical staff, at least. He promises that he’ll go to his quarters and rest—Nurse Jabara looks horrified when she realizes how long he’s been there—and he’s steady on his feet even if he can barely breathe from the sheer weight of those deaths.

In his quarters, Julian sits on his bed and stares at his hands, scoured clean of any biological materials. His clothing is damp and sticky against his skin, but he can’t seem to make himself remove it. “Computer,” he says, and he barely recognizes his voice.

When he doesn’t speak further, the computer prompts him, “Please state your query.”

There’s something howling in the back of his head and he can’t bear to think about it. “Garak,” he says. “Where is Garak? Medical override,” he adds, before the computer can complain. “Authorization Bashir omega one.”

“Garak is in his assigned quarters.” The computer sounds a little sulky. Julian comms him before he can think too hard about it.

“Doctor,” Garak says over the comm. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Julian closes his eyes and tries not to see broken bodies on the insides of his eyelids. “If you have a moment, would you stop by my quarters?” He just needs—noise, noise that he can’t turn off. When the door chimes a few minutes later, he says, “Come in.”

“Doctor,” Garak says, and then, in an entirely different tone, “You look dreadful.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“What do you need?”

“If you could—talk to me, that would be helpful.”

Garak looks oddly uncertain. “If you’d like to talk to someone, I’m sure Lieutenant Dax or Miles—”

“I don’t want to *talk to someone*,” Julian bites out. “They’ll tell me that I did my best, that I went above and beyond and that I shouldn’t blame myself. I don’t want that. Talk about anything, Garak. I only need something to keep me out of my head for a little longer.” He meets Garak’s eyes. “My body metabolizes sedatives very quickly or I would just take one.”

“Surely you’ve had patients die before. You’ve been a doctor for some years now.”

“Yes,” Julian says tightly. “Indeed. I have a marvelous memory, Garak. I remember every one of them. Quite vividly.” He remembers every *patient* he’s ever had, not just the ones who died, but those are fixed most clearly in his mind.

“Yes. I would imagine so.” Garak settles on the couch across from Julian and Julian feels the couch shift beneath them.

“Would you please just—”

“I don’t believe we ever finished our discussion of Shoggoth,” Garak says. “You expressed some undoubtedly ill-informed opinions based on your failure to identify the correct guilty party.”

Yes. This is what he needs. “Shoggoth. Did it—” He falters. His mind, usually so ready to supply the give-and-take with Garak, is still reeling. Julian’s hand clenches tight on the frame of the couch. “Tell me why it’s superior to the mystery novels I’ve given you.”

Garak is, for once, irritatingly solicitous. “Have you eaten anything, my dear doctor? You really do look—”

"I know what I look like." Julian can't help snapping at him. "Garak, I didn't ask you to come here to play this role. My mind needs a little time to process everything that's happened and I would prefer to be focused on something else while it does so."

"Is this what you've done in the past?" Garak is apparently determined to be difficult. "Summoned someone and ordered them to chatter?"

"Sometimes." Sometimes they'd found other ways to distract him, more pleasant ways that occupied his body and were diverting enough to draw his focus. "In the first few years of my residency, we—the residents—all did it for each other." He hesitates. "You have no idea," Julian says abruptly, "how much time and energy I put into appearing—*less* than I am." There's a sick feeling growing in the pit of his stomach.

"Oh?" Garak's eyes fix on him.

"You should have seen me when I first arrived. Tripping over my feet, flailing, jumping at every noise and throwing myself at Jadzia. I purposely came second in my class at Starfleet Medical, just so that no one would look too closely. I aim for the wrong places on the dartboard and I wait for other people to answer questions and I pretend that I can't remember things, all to—playact mediocrity."

"You're the chief medical officer on this station. I would hardly call that mediocrity." Garak's tone is just a little dismissive, which means he's not being dismissive at all.

Julian shakes his head. "In everything but medicine. But I've always known that someday—someday there would be a patient that an ordinary doctor, or even a great doctor, couldn't save, but that *I* could, and that I'd have to decide then, whether to keep my own secret or save their life."

Garak doesn't stiffen, but he's carefully still. "Is that what happened this time?"

The sick feeling is advancing through Julian's body. "I don't know," he says, and his mouth is sour. "Certainly not consciously. I would have saved them, as many of them as I could, if I'd known how. But maybe I've spent so long trying to appear ordinary that I've—held back unconsciously. Maybe I could have saved them if I didn't have my mother's voice in the back of my head warning me not to let anyone see."

"You could tell someone, if you can't take the secret any longer." Garak doesn't sound sanguine about the possibility.

Julian shakes his head. "There's no justification for it, not the kind that Starfleet would accept. It's not a cultural practice, my family was never persecuted, nor was I severely ill. Only that I wasn't good enough and my parents wanted me to be *better* than I was." He swallows hard against the bile rising in his throat. "And, selfishly, I suppose I must think that me being here is—worth whatever cost there might be to other people—"

Garak reaches out and closes one hand around Julian's wrist. Julian startles at the shock of it, but Garak doesn't release him. "Don't be ridiculous," Garak says, and the strength of his grip belies the lightness in his voice. "My dear Julian, you have been awake for more than seven days. I cannot fathom why someone did not forcibly remove you from the infirmary days ago." Julian thinks someone might have tried. He remembers shaking off a hand. "Your choice plainly reveals that you are not an ordinary human." When Julian starts to speak, Garak adds, "As you are undoubtedly aware, people have a talent for rationalizing or minimizing events that conflict with their own experience of the world. No one will believe that you were there, and working, for every minute of the last week." Garak's fingers loosen on his wrist just enough to drop to Julian's hand, and Julian grabs his hand almost convulsively. It's an anchor, proof against the battered faces and broken limbs crowding into his memory. Garak lets him sit there, quiet, for a long time before saying, "Since you're clearly unable to engage in a meaningful discussion of enigma tales, I will have to provide you with an explanation of the nuances myself. I trust you'll be better informed by the next time we discuss one." He launches into a lecture about Shoggoth's pioneering techniques in the seeding of clues and Julian closes his eyes and lets the words wash over him.

terok nor (part III)

Chapter Summary

“I need to know the location of a Cardassian.”

“No trouble,” Quark tells him. “What are you offering?”

Julian meets his eyes squarely and doesn't let him look away. “Ten strips of latinum.”

Quark frowns. “Who's the Cardassian?”

“Enabran Tain.”

Quark's smile freezes. “I don't have that kind of connections,” he says. Then he adds “...not for ten strips of latinum.”

Julian sleeps for fourteen hours and wakes abruptly in the middle of the station's night. His heart is pounding and he can't help the pull that drags him back to the infirmary. He feels bruised all over, inside and out, and the light is harsh is against his eyes, but at least here he has some *function*. They're all still alive, Davreen and Roxleigh and Varma and two cadets that Julian hadn't met when their bodies were still intact. Dr. Girani sees him examining their charts and protests, “Doctor Bashir, they're stable—”

“Of course,” he says. Girani is a good doctor. It's not her fault that he doesn't trust anyone to be as good as he is. “I'll just be in my office.” He can bury himself in research and still be close enough to step in when one of the patients inevitably crashes.

“Garak stopped by a few hours ago.” He flinches absurdly. “He asked me to be certain that you ate and drank something. Apparently he didn't trust you to remember that on your own.”

“I will,” Julian promises. He closes his eyes briefly and imagines leaving the infirmary, walking down the promenade to Garak's shop and drinking a raktajino there. With an emergency transport, he could make it back to the infirmary nearly as quickly as he can step out of his office when the inevitable crisis strikes. But he still feels tender, like he might say something dangerous if he came too close to Garak right now. “You're off duty soon anyway.” And there aren't enough doctors on the station to have someone on duty at all times if Julian doesn't stay at the infirmary longer than a standard shift, and the nurses are excellent but they play different roles, and Julian can come up with endless justifications for why he needs to be here.

In deference to Garak's orders, he replicates a cup of gelat and a plate of hasperat and sets both on his desk to ignore for the next few hours. There are autopsy reports to review for the twelve Defiant crew members and he signs each mechanically. There's bile in his mouth and the gelat, when he reaches for it to wash away the taste, has gone stone-cold.

“You know, my dear doctor, when I expressed my concerns to your Bajoran counterpart, I expected a little more follow-through on her part.”

Julian sighs and turns in his chair to face Garak. “Don't blame Girani. I'm fine.”

Garak's expression says very plainly what he thinks of that lie. “Come along, doctor. Undoubtedly you will be summoned back to the infirmary if anything happens, but until then, I require your presence elsewhere.” When Julian is a little too slow to stand, Garak actually walks into his office, curls his fingers under Julian's elbow, and lifts him—gently—from his chair. Julian allows himself to sag against Garak for just a moment, lean into that warm strength, and Garak lets him. He smells like red-leaf tea and the peculiar sharp scent of Cardassian skin, and the fabric of his tailored outfit is silky against Julian's face. “Come along,” Garak says again, and Julian allows himself to be led.

The bookshop is quiet, this early in the morning. The entire Promenade is these days. Quark's is still open, but even the dabo tables are sparsely attended. Most people with anything to do during the designated day hours are in bed. Garak steers Julian to a Risan-style lounge chair in the shop's social area and then gives him a cup of tea and a book. “I'm fine,” Julian tells him.

“I'm quite confident that the beverages produced by the infirmary replicators are inferior to those in my bookshop,” Garak says. “And I'm simply offering an opportunity for you to better understand the principles of Cardassian enigma tale structure that I explained yesterday.” When Julian turns on the reader, he sees that it's a collection of enigma tales—

“Garak, is this a *children's book*?”

“It's an introductory text,” Garak says, with the particular tone that means he's winding Julian up. “Cardassian children are considered capable of reading and understanding literature at a much earlier age than Humans. This is a well-respected collection used in literary education programs.”

“Oh, of course.” Julian's smile is a little weak, but it's there nonetheless. “How good of you to make allowance for my limited grasp of the genre.” Garak only smiles and walks back into the maze of bookshelves, and Julian settles in to read.

* * * * *

Slowly, Julian regains some sense of equilibrium. The five surviving patients are discharged to a recovery facility on Starbase Four, and the shock of losing twelve patients in a week recedes into that particular corner of his memory along with all the others that he's lost. He and Garak settle back into their own give-and-take, arguing about books over lunch or dinner, and sometimes Ziyal is there but less and less. She

comes to the infirmary one day and says, “Is there something wrong with Garak?”

It hasn’t escaped Julian’s notice, the way that sometimes Garak will stop in the midst of a sentence and draw in a harsh breath like he’s just been stabbed, the way that he looks a little thinner from day to day. “He’s—” He doesn’t know how much Garak has told Ziyal about his curse or his memory loss. “He doesn’t look well, does he.”

She shakes her head. “Do you know what’s wrong with him?”

A bland answer of “doctor-patient confidentiality” would only confirm that he does. “I’ll subject him to a few tests the next time that I can lure him to the infirmary,” he says instead. He smiles, and he’s good at comforting smiles. “Don’t worry, Ziyal,” he lies. He only waits a few minutes before calling Garak to the infirmary.

Garak arrives an hour later. “Doctor, no matter what you say, I am not going to suffer through another Bajoran folk epic—”

“There’s no *veto* option, Garak.” Sometimes it sneaks up on him, how much he likes Garak. It makes his throat hurt a little and he says, “I haven’t forgotten about your cellular degeneration, you know. I’d like to check that nothing’s changed.”

Garak heaves a sigh. “If you must, Doctor,” he says, and settles onto the examination bed. He glances around as though to confirm that the infirmary is empty and then unzips his shirt unprompted.

“Garak—” The damaged patches on his shoulder and abdomen have gone from pinkish to dark red and swollen, livid against his silvery skin. “When did this happen?”

“I’m afraid I don’t examine myself in the mirror on a daily basis.” There’s a tightness to Garak’s voice that belies his casual attitude toward all of this. “I have been—” He breaks off, his entire body going rigid for an instant before relaxing. “I have found myself with slightly less energy. Perhaps a mildly reduced ability to focus for long periods of time.”

“Well, that explains your opinions on Preloc’s early work,” Julian teases. “You skimmed all the dull bits.” Very carefully, he lays his hand on Garak’s shoulder a few centimeters away from the wound and scans it with the tricorder. “It’s as though the dermal regeneration is being undone slowly. But your old scars are unchanged, which suggests that the degeneration is linked to the particular function of a dermal regenerator.” Garak shivers minutely when Julian touches him. His skin is cooler to the touch than it should be. The tricorder shows a pulse rate well below normal for a Cardassian. “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?”

Garak hisses out a breath and closes his eyes for a moment, and Julian can feel him stiffen again beneath Julian’s hand. “I have experienced periodic—discomfort.” Heaven forbid that Garak should admit to experiencing *pain*. “Sharp discomfort. In my head.”

Julian winces at that. It must be very bad for Garak to admit anything. “I want to take another set of brain scans,” he says. “If you’ll allow it.”

“You may, doctor, but I suspect that I can tell you what you’ll find.”

“What’s that?” Julian hasn’t lifted his hand away, and he almost thinks that Garak has leaned into it a bit. Even if Garak is too cold, the firm warmth of his body beneath Julian’s hand is a little comforting.

“Do you recall the implant in my parietal lobe?”

“The torture implant?”

Garak laughs humorlessly. “You could call it that. I was perhaps—” He hisses in a breath and stiffens in pain. “I was perhaps imprecise in my description of it.”

“You said it wasn’t working anymore.”

“Did I? Ah, no, my dear doctor, it has worked as well as it could, given that it was never meant for continuous use.”

“Continuous use?”

“When I—came back to myself, on Empok Nor, I still knew about the implant. Living that way was—agony,” and it must take a great deal for Garak to admit that. “I found a way to turn the implant on, whenever I wanted.” He grimaces. “At first, I allowed myself only a few minutes of weakness per day. I told myself that it allowed me mental clarity, when I indulged. But eventually, I simply—turned it on and left it on.”

Julian doesn’t ask how, exactly, Garak discovered how to turn on a device intended to protect him from torture. “How long ago was that?”

“Several years, I believe.” Garak’s voice is tight. “My grasp of the passage of time has not always been exact.”

Julian swallows back the horror, but he’s sure Garak can hear it in his voice. “And now it’s breaking down.” The obvious suggestion—turn it off—seems absurd. After years of constant reliance on a device that provides a stream of endorphins, the withdrawal would be excruciating.

“Yes,” Garak says. “And yes, Doctor, I realize that likely the only option is to cease my use of it.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Julian tells him. “You don’t have to do it alone.”

Garak grasps Julian’s wrist gently, as if to lift Julian’s hand from his shoulder, but instead he only holds on for a long minute. “I appreciate that, my dear doctor, but I would prefer to be alone.” Julian’s heart twists at the thought of that. He’s seen patients—friends—in withdrawal and he knows how terrible it can be. He hates the idea of Garak suffering alone in his quarters.

“I could keep you in the infirmary,” Julian says experimentally.

“Let’s not delude ourselves about your ability to detain me here.” Garak releases his wrist and visibly braces before standing and reclaiming his shirt.

“Comm me if you need anything. Anything—and I’m going to check in on you, all right? When my shift ends.” The station doesn’t have enough doctors to permit his absence except for a medical emergency.

“I don’t doubt it, my dear.” There’s something in Garak’s voice that Julian hears only rarely, something a little choked and regretful. “Until then.”

Julian watches Garak walk stiffly out of the infirmary. “Computer, set medical alert for Garak. Monitor at Cardassian vital sign levels. Medical override, Bashir omega one.” It doesn’t escape him that he mostly uses his medical override for Garak.

“Alert confirmed,” the computer says.

Julian would like a patient—a nice, simple one, perhaps a bruise or a broken finger—to take his mind off of things. Fifteen minutes later, one walks in as though summoned. Julian doesn’t know the Bajoran, but he’s glad to have a distraction. He smiles and says, “New to the station?”

“Yes. I’m afraid I’m having trouble with the air here, after Bajor’s atmosphere.” He’s a slight man, his face ordinary to the point of forgettable, and his earring is strangely tarnished.

Julian gestures to the examination table. “If it’s all right with you, I’ll take a sample of your blood and scan you with my tricorder—it won’t hurt. I’m researching treatments for Bajorans who were affected by the chemicals released during the Occupation, and every data point helps.”

The man nods meekly and allows Julian to press the hypospray to his wrist. He winces a little at the noise of it, but he doesn’t object as Julian sets the hypo aside and begins to scan his lungs with the medical tricorder. “You’re the doctor who brought that monster here, aren’t you?”

Julian stiffens a little. It makes sense that any Bajoran might hate or fear a Cardassian on the station, let alone one who looks like Garak, but it’s hard for him to suppress the instinct to protect Garak. “He runs a bookshop,” Julian says instead, though he has to force the lightness into his voice. “Once you’re settled here, there are any number of people who’d be happy to recommend you a book—”

The man reaches out, faster than Julian would have thought possible, and grips his ear. The world slows around them. “I’m shocked that he ever ventured off Empok Nor,” the man admits. He releases Julian’s ear.

“You’re the pahr,” Julian says. He can see the nurses in the other room moving around as though caught in treacle. “The one who cursed Garak.”

Garak, the pahr mouths, as though he’s trying out the syllables. “Truly,” he says. “You’ve made him almost a tame beast.”

“Why did you do it?” Julian should ask him something else, but it’s the question that’s plagued him since Garak first admitted what happened. “You must have every reason to hate Cardassians, but why him?”

“When Enabran Tain has you dragged out of your house in broad daylight and gives you an order, you don’t ask questions like that.” The pahr’s shrug is casual, but the tightness of his lips says something very different. “You’re wondering how I, with my power, could be forced to do something like that?”

Julian thinks of Kira, and of Kira’s mother. *Enabran Tain*. He remembers the name from Odo’s security briefing. “No,” he says.

The pahr’s mouth twists into a grimace. “I looked into the Orb of Transformation when I was a young boy. I used the power that the Prophets granted me to help my people, to save them when I could. But my powers were never meant to do violence.”

“You turned Garak into a beast, though.” Julian remembers what Garak was like, those nights when he’d first come to Empok Nor. “A monster, you said.”

“That’s what Tain ordered,” the pahr says. “Something grotesque. Something terrible. Something that would never be able to blend into the shadows.”

“Then what—”

“I gave him an *out*,” the pahr hisses. “A chance. To save my own soul, and to save his. All he has to do is break it.”

“How does he break the curse?” Julian knows the answer already, but he can’t help asking, just in case there’s some other way.

“He knows—” the pahr begins, and then stops. “You know too, don’t you, doctor? He’s told you. Such a simple thing, if he were only capable of it.”

Julian’s throat tightens. “He’s dying,” he says, very softly, as though that will make it less true. It’s the first time he’s said it that bluntly. “His body—the body you gave him is breaking down. What was the point of the chance, if you were going to kill him?”

The pahr looks startled at that. “It shouldn’t be,” he says. “Nothing that I did to him would cause something like that.”

A weight settles over Julian’s heart. “Can you undo the curse?” It’s barely worth asking.

“No. And I wouldn’t if I could. Killing me won’t do it either,” he says, like he knows what Garak must have suggested. “The transformation is permanent unless he does what he needs to do.”

* * * * *

Girani comes back to the infirmary exactly twelve hours after she left it and for once he doesn't try to stay. He gathers a few hyposprays and says, "Comm if you need me."

"You'll be with Garak?" Girani's eyes are uncomfortably kind as he nods and leaves.

Julian traverses the distance between the infirmary and the habitat ring in measured steps. When he presses the door chime, Garak doesn't answer. "Garak," he says over his comm. "Let me in." He can hear someone moving inside. "I don't want to override the door controls," he says, "But I can. I just want to see how you're doing." There's a snarl on the other side of the door and it slides open. Julian slips inside before Garak can change his mind.

"You shouldn't have come," Garak says. He's pacing back and forth, and there's violence in the tight control of each step. "Julian—" His voice is strangled. "You should leave." The furniture has been overturned, a lamp smashed. The room is dim and so hot that Julian is already sweating.

"I brought something that might help a little." Julian extracts one of the hyposprays from his bag. It's an all-purpose recovery hypo, saline and analgesic and antiemetic and muscle relaxant all mixed into one, enhanced with a mild sedative to make everything easier. "Will you let me give it to you?"

Garak's answer is something between assent and another snarl, but he comes to stand next to Julian. He's shaking slightly, his fists clenching and then releasing over and over. "You should leave," Garak says again. "I don't want you here."

Julian gives him the hypo and takes out his tricorder. "Let me scan you and then I'll leave, if you really want me to." The tricorder is decisively unhappy about Garak's current physical condition, but that isn't what concerns Julian most. Withdrawal is something he knows how to treat. But there are dark patches on Garak's shirt, and when he lifts the fabric away very carefully, Garak's old wounds are oozing blood and some kind of tarry substance. The tricorder shows rapid erosion in his lymphatic system. "I don't suppose I could persuade you to come to the infirmary." He's very good at camouflaging fear in his voice, he knows, but it's a struggle.

Garak jerks away from him and prowls to a darker corner of the room. "To display myself for the—amusement of all those Bajorans? To watch you wring your hands at how little you can do? Go away, doctor."

"You're my—patient," Julian says. "I'm not going to let you suffer if I can help it." He takes a deep breath. "Your blood chemistry is severely out of balance—"

"Yes, your *patient*." Garak almost spits the word. "Your science project, your little curiosity since the day you came to Empok Nor. And you couldn't leave me there, could you? I told you to leave, and you couldn't leave well enough alone. You had to bring me here—"

"I wouldn't say you were well enough," Julian snaps. He takes a tighter hold of his feelings and stuffs them away. "Garak, I'm trying to save your life."

Garak laughs. "You don't even know who you're trying to save. You have no idea what I was, before this."

"You were in the Obsidian Order." Julian keeps his voice even.

"*In the—I was the protege of Enabran Tain himself;*" Garak hisses. Tain again, Tain who ordered the curse in the first place. "Tain was the Obsidian Order. Not even the Central Command dared challenge him. And I was his right hand. My future was limitless until I threw it away." He laughs harshly again. "You can't possibly understand, Doctor. You chose to hide yourself away and make yourself less than you are, but I was—" He breaks off. "It's pathetic, to think that this is what my life has been reduced to—this lump of flesh—" There's a crash as he flings a book into a table lamp. "You have no idea what I've done."

"I thought you didn't remember," Julian says. "That's all I do, Garak, when I'm not reading the books you give me or talking about them with you—I try to figure out how to restore you to who you were. I'm trying to help—"

"I could tell you anything." Garak advances on him now, and Julian stays very still. "I could tell you that I was cursed because I killed a hundred prisoners. Because I killed my own garrison. Because I freed a prisoner. Because I disobeyed an order from Tain, because I obeyed an order from someone else—and you'd never know the difference."

"You don't have to lie to me," Julian says softly.

"Ah, but what else do I have to entertain myself?" Garak advances again, and Julian has always been aware of Garak's size but it's been a long time since he felt any true threat of violence from Garak. "With the implant turned off, I'm left to live out my days like this, with nothing to look forward to but—but having lunch with you."

Julian knows that Garak is lashing out, but it hurts all the same. "I'm sorry," he says, and he works very hard to keep his voice even. "I thought you enjoyed my company."

The noise that comes from Garak's throat isn't a laugh. "I did." He shoves a chair out of the way and Julian carefully doesn't flinch. "That's the worst part. I can't believe that I actually enjoyed eating mediocre food and staring into at your smug, sanctimonious face." He casts about for something else to grab or break or throw and then snarls, "*I hate this place and I hate you.*"

It's been a very long time since Julian took a punch unprepared, but Garak's words dredge up that last miserable childhood memory before the augmentation, one of his classmates driving a fist into his stomach, and the way he'd gagged and collapsed and gasped for breath. He feels like that now, and he refuses to show it.

"Okay, Garak." He exaggerates each syllable like that will make it easier to say. "That's your prerogative." He doesn't say, did you only think you loved me because of the implant? Did you look at me during one of those surges of endorphins and fool yourself because you wanted to

break the curse? “But you’re my patient, and right now, I really think you should lie down.” He spreads his hands wide to show that he isn’t a threat and inches toward Garak.

“You—get away from me,” Garak snarls, and Julian sees the minute tightening of his muscles the instant before Garak lunges at him. He dodges behind a chair and tries to find some way to subdue Garak without causing more damage, but Garak is almost yelling incoherently now.

“Garak, stop this,” he pleads. “I don’t want to hurt you—” He’s never tried a nerve pinch on a Cardassian before, doesn’t want to experiment with it on Garak now, of all times.

Garak decides the issue for him by collapsing very abruptly, and Julian’s tricorder howls in alarm.

* * * * *

The tricorder readings are unmistakable, as is the substance that continues to ooze out of his old wounds. It reeks of death and makes Julian’s eyes water. He gives Garak another sedative, stronger this time, and then uses every ounce of his enhanced ability to skim through the Cardassian medical files that he downloaded from Empok Nor as fast as he can. There’s nothing to tell him how to fix Garak, only scattered mentions of that tarry substance, *bak’ital*, in a few old files that describe the outcome of particularly gruesome medical experiments. Julian sits back in his chair. His eyes are burning. From all the reading, probably.

Nurse Bandee is taking Garak’s updated vital signs when Julian emerges from his office. “Any change?” he asks.

Her eyes are sympathetic. Everyone on this damn station seems to know that Julian cares too much about Garak. He supposes he’s never tried to hide it. “No improvement,” she says carefully. “I believe we’ve slowed the decline, at least, but there’s no sign that anything we’ve done is working.” There’s not much they know how to do, not with what’s happening, except regular hypospray infusions that do nothing more than mitigate the symptoms.

The answer has been lurking in the back of Julian’s brain for hours now. “I’m going to Quark’s,” he says. “Let me know immediately if anything changes.”

She stares at him, but she doesn’t comment, only nods.

Julian braces himself before crossing the hallway into the din of Quark’s. He finds Rom, who directs him back to Quark’s back room after some persuading. “Ah, Doctor Bashir!” Quark looks a little shifty, but then he always does. “This room is off-limits except to staff, but I’m sure Rom or Leeta would happily mix a drink for you—”

“Quark,” Julian says. “You’ve been on this station quite a while, haven’t you? You were here when it was under Cardassian rule.” It’s not a question.

Quark smiles slowly. “Are you asking if I can—procure something for you, Doctor?”

“I’m confident that you can.”

There must be something in his tone that makes Quark uncomfortable, because the smile wavers for a moment. “I’m always happy to help... for the right price.”

“You know, Quark, I’ve always admired your business acumen,” Julian says. “Your talent for spotting every little corner to cut, every bit of registration that can be forged or fudged. Even Odo doesn’t know the extent of it, does he?”

“I take payment in latinum, not flattery.” Quark says it offhand, as though he doesn’t know what Julian is getting at.

“I need to know the location of a Cardassian.”

“No trouble,” Quark tells him. “What are you offering?”

Julian meets his eyes squarely and doesn’t let him look away. “Ten strips of latinum.”

Quark frowns. “Who’s the Cardassian?”

“Enabran Tain.”

Quark’s smile freezes. “I don’t have that kind of connections,” he says. Then he adds “...not for ten strips of latinum.”

“A bar.” Quark hesitates. “What’s that rule of acquisition? Number 62? ‘The riskier the road, the greater the profit.’”

“Rule 89: ‘It is better to lose some profit and live than lose all profit and die.’” Quark is negotiating now.

“Rule 263: ‘Never allow doubt to tarnish your lust for latinum.’”

“Rule 208: ‘Sometimes, the only thing more dangerous than a question is an answer.’” Quark frowns. “One bar and ten strips.”

“Ten strips for the question,” Julian tells him. “One bar if you get me the right answer.” When Quark hesitates, he adds, “Or I tell Odo about all the nasty little schemes of yours that he’s missed over the years, and Sisko finally decides that anyone could run a bar in this space.”

Quark smiles hastily. “Doctor, we have an agreement.”

“Good.” When Quark makes as if to leave, Julian says, “I need the information now.” Quark opens his mouth to protest and Julian adds, “Rule

290, Quark. "An angry man is an enemy, and a satisfied man is an ally."

"There are already far too many angry men to go around in this deal," Quark grumbles. "Ten minutes, Doctor." Julian plays three rounds of dabo in the ten minutes and wins enough to pay his debt to Quark. Quark emerges from his back room looking very unhappy. "The Arawath colony," he hisses to Julian. "I believe you owe me something."

"My winnings should cover it," Julian tells him. "Thank you, Quark." He leaves before Quark can argue.

Nurse Bandee greets him at the door to the infirmary. "He's starting to wake up."

Julian can't keep himself from asking, "Any improvement?" even though he knows the answer.

She shakes her head. "Shall I sedate him further?"

"No." Julian takes a deep breath. "No, I need to talk to him." He goes to Garak's bedside and sits down, watching as Garak stirs. When Garak opens his eyes at last, he says, "Hello, Garak."

Garak's eyes are cloudy. "Julian?" It feels like a fist clenching around Julian's heart. "What happened?"

"You collapsed," Julian says, for lack of something better to say. "You're deteriorating rapidly."

Garak tries to sit up and can't manage it. "And you haven't found a solution? Really, Doctor, I'm disappointed."

That tiny note of teasing should make Julian feel a little better, but Garak's scans belie the lightness in his voice. "Garak," Julian says helplessly, "You're dying. I can't—" He breaks off. "I don't know how to save you myself."

Garak peers at him and must realize what Julian is really saying, because he hisses, "*No*."

"I'm going to see Enabran Tain," Julian says.

"You are *not*." Garak struggles to rise again and can't quite manage it. "I forbid it—"

"You can't stop me going."

"You can't begin to understand who Enabran Tain is." Garak's voice has turned desperate. "Julian—my dear doctor—once you put yourself in his power, there will be no escape—"

"It's the only way I can think to save your life," Julian says.

"*No*." Garak manages to grip Julian's wrist, so tightly that it's painful. "I'll—if you go, Doctor, I will tell everyone your secret." His words hurt too, even though Julian knows that Garak is only trying to keep him from going. "Starfleet will dismiss you. There will be no place for you to come back to. Surely that isn't worth some harebrained attempt at heroism."

"To save the beast of Empok Nor?" It's hard to smile when Garak looks frantic. Carefully, Julian pulls his wrist from Garak's grasp, and Garak's fingers catch at his own. "Haven't you worked it out, Garak?" Carefully, out of Garak's sight, he picks up a fresh hypospray with his free hand. "I think it is," he says, and leans down to press his lips to the ridges on Garak's forehead. As Garak's breath catches and his fingers tighten on Julian's, Julian lifts the hypospray to his neck. Garak makes a single noise of protest before he collapses back against the bed, unconscious. Julian pulls back and takes a moment to compose himself.

"Doctor Bashir?" Nurse Bandee's voice is too gentle. "Will you be leaving us?"

Julian clears his throat. He wonders how much she overheard. "Yes," he says. "Keep Garak sedated for a few more hours." At least until Julian is off the station and on his way into the heart of Cardassian territory. "If I'm not back in 48 hours—" He hesitates. It's not as though anyone is going to attempt a rescue mission. "If I'm not back in 48 hours, tell Garak that I'm sorry and that it was worth trying."

* * * * *

It's too easy to reach the Arawath colony. Julian knew from the beginning that this mission was—or should be—virtually a suicide mission, what with the inevitable Jem'Hadar ships swarming through Cardassian territory. Julian doesn't trust dumb luck enough to believe that it's responsible for the lack of patrols as he pilots the *Nile* toward Garak's last hope of survival. His suspicions are confirmed when he's hailed as soon as he makes planetary orbit. "I'm here to see Enabran Tain," he tells the Cardassian on the other side of the video screen.

"Transmitting coordinates," the Cardassian says. He doesn't ask who Julian is, or what he's doing there.

He leaves the runabout in orbit, set to bring him back in two hours unless he sends new commands, and beams down to the coordinates given. They transport him directly into someone's living room—Tain's, he can only assume. It's dim, but Julian can see well enough in the limited light to tell that Tain enjoys all the comforts of his former high position.

"Doctor Bashir." The voice comes from over his shoulder, and it's a sign of how good Tain still is that Julian didn't realize he'd entered. "Welcome. Please make yourself at home." Tain gestures to a chair. When Julian doesn't answer quickly enough, he laughs and says, "Well, Doctor, you've come all this way to see me. Aren't you going to say something?"

"You knew that I was coming," Julian says, and it's not quite an accusation. So this is the man who casts such a shadow over Garak's life. There's something magnetic about Tain, something a little hypnotic that draws the eyes. He's a big man, or maybe he just looms large by force of will.

“Information is my business, Doctor. I hope you weren’t greeted too rudely upon entering Cardassian space.”

Julian half-laughs in spite of himself. “Not nearly as rudely as I expected.” That’s a generous way to put it.

“Good. I alerted them that you’d be coming. The military hates surprises. Still, what you did was very brave. I’m impressed.” From the shrewd expression in Tain’s eyes, he’s a little suspicious too. “Can I get you something to drink? Tarkalean tea perhaps?” He doesn’t wait for Julian’s response, but tells the replicator, “One Tarkalean tea, extra sweet, and a glass of kanar.”

“Red-leaf tea, if you don’t mind,” Julian says, and from the way Tain’s gaze goes sharp, Julian has revealed something by saying that. He wonders who Tain’s informant is on the station, that Tain knows he used to drink Tarkalean tea like water and doesn’t know that now it always seems easier to just order two cups of red-leaf tea for himself and Garak.

“Excuse the oversight,” Tain says. “A good host knows the needs of his guests.” He offers Julian a fresh cup. “So, Doctor Bashir. How’s Garak? Has his condition improved at all?”

“You don’t know?” Julian keeps his voice mild. “I suppose I did hear that you were retired.”

Tain’s demeanor is something like a jovial uncle. “Oh, I am. Have been for years. But I try to keep informed on current events. I bet you could tell me all kinds of things I’d like to know, Doctor,” he says slowly. The threat beneath those words is veiled, but Julian hears it loud and clear all the same.

“I’m sure I could. I’ll tell you anything you want to know about medicine, or tennis, or certain eras of Earth literature. Do you want to hear my opinion on Samuel Richardson?” Julian keeps his own voice light. Tain isn’t behaving like a man who wants to capture him for interrogation.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Tain says. He smiles a little.

“Have it your way.” Julian inhales the smell of the red-leaf tea and then takes a sip. He thinks of Persephone and the pomegranate, but it’s a calculated risk.

“Are all the Starfleet doctors as brash as you are?” There’s another question beneath Tain’s words.

“I couldn’t say, though I doubt it.” The teacup is very hot beneath Julian’s fingers. He wonders if this is a test, and how Tain interprets his reaction.

Tain smiles again. “So do I. Tell me, Doctor, how sick is Garak?”

“He’s dying,” Julian says simply. “He’ll die within a few days from what you’ve done to him.”

“And you’re trying to save him.” It’s hard to meet the force of Tain’s gaze. Yes, Julian understands how he’s the only head of the Obsidian Order ever to retire alive.

“I’m a doctor,” Julian says, instead of all the other things that are crowding into his head.

“Strange, I thought you—cared for him.”

“I do.” Julian suspects strongly that Tain cared for Garak once too, in a very different way.

“Then you should let him die. After all, for Garak, the life he’s living is no life at all.”

“Then you should help me save him.” Julian meets his eyes then. “You’re the architect of his misery, after all—the transformation, the things that have been done to his brain. I can’t imagine that after going to all that trouble, instead of simply terminating him, you’d just let him die now.”

Tain barks out a laugh, something more sincere than anything Julian has heard yet. “You are something special, aren’t you, Doctor Bashir. Something very special.” That makes Julian’s skin crawl. In all the time that he’s spent with Garak, he never felt so ill at ease as he does now with Tain, even when Garak had sharp claws and a tendency to roam the halls howling. “What makes you think I can do anything at all about his condition?”

“The molecular structure of Garak’s leukocytes has been disrupted. He’s experiencing *bak’ital* in multiple areas of his body. I need to synthesize new leukocytes to stabilize his condition.”

“Your Kardasi pronunciation is impeccable, Doctor.” Tain looks amused. “And you think I have access to that kind of information?”

“Information is your business. Besides, you’re the one who ordered him to put that implant in his head, aren’t you?”

Tain smiles slowly. “I never had to order Garak to do anything. That’s what made him so special.” He waits a minute for that to sink in, and then says, “So, you’re saying if you don’t get the information, Garak dies?”

“Yes.” That’s what it comes down to, ultimately—either Tain wants Garak to continue to suffer (*to have another chance to break the curse*) or he wants Garak to die.

Tain’s smile is broader this time. He doesn’t keep Julian waiting. “Well, we can’t allow that can we? I’ll see to it that the necessary data is transferred to your ship’s computers before you break orbit.”

The teacup is burning his hand. Julian registers it with that same detached disinterest he felt the last time he was injured. “Thank you.”

Tain laughs heartily, as though he's humoring a child who's just told a joke. "Oh, don't thank me, not on Garak's behalf. I'm not doing Garak any favors. He doesn't deserve a quick death. On the contrary, I want him to live a long, miserable life. I want him to grow old on that station, a monstrosity surrounded by people who hate and fear him, knowing that he'll never come home again."

Julian can't stop himself from saying, "He must have hurt you very deeply."

"I think you should be going, Doctor." Tain really is magnificent. Nothing in his avuncular demeanor has changed, and yet Julian finds himself keenly aware of the danger in this room. "It was a pleasure to meet you. And please, tell Garak that I miss him."

"I'll be sure to give him the message," Julian says, and hopes desperately that Garak will still be alive by the time he returns. He taps his comm. "Computer, one to beam up."

* * * * *

Garak has escaped the infirmary somehow by the time he returns to Deep Space Nine. "He left," Nurse Bandee says. "No one wanted to stand in his way. He's in his quarters," she adds almost defensively. "I checked."

"Of course." Julian scrubs his hand over his face. The replicator produces the base components of the leukocyte replacement almost instantly, but it's going to take time to synthesize the replacements themselves. "Comm me as soon as the leukocytes are ready, all right?" There's a nervous energy surging through him. "I'm going to go check on him."

"Of course." At his sharp look, Nurse Bandee adds, "Of course I'll notify you."

Garak doesn't answer the first time that Julian presses the door chime, nor the second. "Computer, open the door," Julian says. "Medical override, authorization Bashir omega one." The door hisses open.

Garak's quarters are even hotter than before, if possible, but Garak is huddled beneath blankets on his bed. "My dear—doctor," he says, and each word sounds like a struggle. "What a pleasure—to hallucinate you."

Julian is kneeling at his side in an instant, tricorder out. "I got it," he tells Garak, and he can hear the plea in his own voice. "Garak, I got what I needed from Tain—you're going to be all right. You just have to hold on a little longer—"

Garak's hand clenches tight around his, so tightly that Julian has to drop the tricorder. "Don't—go to Tain!" His eyes are wide and almost unseeing, and he stiffens for a moment as though a surge of pain has just shot through his body. "Not worth the risk—"

"I'm fine," Julian says. He gives up on caution and presses his free hand to Garak's cheek. "I went to him and I'm fine, Garak, all right? I got what we need. It'll be worth it if it saves you."

Garak's breath is slow and shallow. "Not—" His head keeps lolling to the side like he doesn't have the strength to hold it steady. "Julian—" He releases Julian's hand as his breath stops.

"Garak!" His head is limp against Julian's hand, and he doesn't respond when Julian squeezes his hand sharply. "Garak!" He snatches up the tricorder again, and it detects no heartbeat. "Damn it, Garak—computer, medical emergency, emergency transport now," and he presses his mouth to Garak's to begin CPR even as the transport beam energizes them. Two breaths, then chest compressions—firm ones, hard enough to break a Cardassian rib if that's what it takes—and then he presses his mouth to Garak's again and it's meant to be breaths but he finds himself kissing Garak, as though he can drag Garak back to life. Dimly he's aware of a nurse administering a hypo to restart Garak's heart, but Garak is still beneath him. "Garak," he says, and he presses his forehead against the strange hard shape of Garak's. "Damn it, Garak, I love you, don't go and die now." When he kisses Garak again, there's a sharp *bang* and Julian is flung backwards across the room so hard that it knocks the wind out of him.

Julian forces himself upright. Two nurses are gaping at the bio-bed where Garak had been lying. Julian's ears are ringing and it takes him a minute to register what's happened when he reaches the bedside. There's a man lying there, a Cardassian man with untidy brown hair and long scars across his face just where Garak's scars were. The man blinks and opens his eyes and they're the same pale blue as Garak's. When the man says "Julian?" his voice is the same as Garak's too.

"Garak?" Julian's throat is thick. Somehow, he's never quite believed that Garak would ever look like anyone but the man whose claws Julian removed months ago.

The man lifts one hand and stares down at it as though he's not quite sure it belongs to him. "In the flesh."

terok nor (part IV)

Chapter Summary

Julian takes refuge in routine questions, as though he'll be able to forget that he apparently healed Garak with a kiss and a declaration of love. He's set that firmly to the side for now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"How—" Julian starts, and stops, because the answer to that is obvious. He's already scanning Garak with his tricorder, and the results are astonishing. "There's no sign of the degeneration, and all of your blood chemistry is back to normal—" Every time he looks away to examine the screen and then back at Garak, it's a fresh shock.

"It seems you've cured me, Doctor." Garak's voice is somewhere between careful and wondering. He flexes his fingers and presses them to his cheeks and then his forehead. "Computer, mirror," he says, and stares wide-eyed into it.

"Let me see your wounds," Julian says, and watches as Garak undoes his shirt with clumsy fingers, as though he's forgotten how they work at this size. The skin is paler, the shape of scales almost invisible except on the ridges that define his body. The wounds that had been leaking *bak'ital* are barely visible now, little more than faded scar tissue. Julian ghosts two fingers across the healed skin, so lightly that it's barely a touch, and yet Garak hisses in—pain? "Does that cause discomfort?" Julian takes refuge in routine questions, as though he'll be able to forget that he apparently healed Garak with a kiss and a declaration of love. He's set that firmly to the side for now.

"No." Garak's chest rises and falls in a quick breath. "My—new—skin appears to be extraordinarily sensitive." He shifts minutely. "After the hide that I used to have, physical contact is—quite different."

Julian snatches his hand back, even though it's not at all what he'd like to do. He's becoming keenly aware of Girani and Nurse Bandee watching from a few meters away. "That's—good to know," he says. "Are you experiencing any other effects of the—change?"

Garak's eyes dart to him and then away. "Doctor, given that I am no longer in imminent danger, I would prefer to leave the infirmary."

"I can complete my examination in your quarters, if you'd like." Julian blushes as he says it because he meant it sincerely but it's a line they used to use on each other in medical school.

"Yes," Garak says.

"Computer, medical transport." He considers this a legitimate use, to transfer a medically fragile patient. Potentially fragile, anyway. And he can't imagine trying to walk Garak through the hallways.

Garak's quarters are still very warm. Garak looks around, startled. "Computer, reduce temperature two degrees." He touches the waistband of his trousers. "Doctor, I take it I will not shock your delicate sensibilities if I remove these? My skin's sensitivity is making them rather unpleasant."

Julian's mouth goes dry. "Not at all." He's very proud of how even his voice sounds as Garak strips off his trousers. "I really do mean to examine you," he says. His voice cracks as he says it. So much for composure.

"I wouldn't dream of stopping you." Garak remains standing, but his eyes keep darting to Julian and then away.

"Are you having trouble with your vision?" Julian steps forward to scan his eyes and is startled to discover that they're of a height now. Garak used to tower over him by nearly half a meter.

Garak smiles wryly. "It's startling to see you from this angle," he says. "Everything seems a little larger now." He looks directly at the tricorder instead of at Julian's face. "Aside from the sensitivity and the new angles, I appear to be entirely functional."

"Good." It's patently absurd to be so skittish around Garak now. "Good," he repeats, and lowers the tricorder.

"Indeed." Garak's eyes focus on him and the force of it leaves Julian almost breathless. "My dear doctor, we could engage in a lengthy dance of avoidance and uncertainty, or we could appreciate the convenience of the rather forceful revelation of your feelings and proceed from there."

Julian knows he's blushing, damn it. "I don't want to—half an hour ago you were nearly dead," he says. "I'm certain that you should be recovering."

"Your—decisive action seems to have taken care of that." Neither of them can seem to name it.

"Indulge me." Julian scans him up and down with the tricorder, and he follows the path of the tricorder very gently with his fingers. He circles behind Garak, trailing his fingertips over Garak's skin, and Garak's breathing is harsh. When Julian dares to brush his lips against the ridge that runs the length of Garak's spinal column, it drags a noise out of Garak that Julian has never heard before.

"You—" Garak exclaims. He turns and takes Julian in his arms and kisses him. It swamps Julian—the shaky newness of it, the rush of

rightness that Julian barely had a chance to feel earlier before Garak's transformation. Garak's breath is hot against his mouth when Julian pulls back just enough to gasp in air, and Julian can't help tracing his thumb along the newly re-shaped ridges on Garak's face. They're softer now, less pronounced. Somehow Garak looks like an entirely new creature, even though Julian has seen his fair share of Cardassians over these last years.

"I thought I'd lost you," Julian admits against his neck. "You were—Garak, you *died*."

Garak half-pulls him down to the uncomfortable Cardassian couch, their shoulders bumping together. If the fabric of Julian's uniform irritates Garak's skin, he doesn't admit it. "Apparently not enough that your kiss and declaration of love couldn't revive me." When Julian shifts a little uncomfortably, Garak's arm tightens around him. "My dear Julian, given that the universe or the Prophets or the pahr have deemed us sufficiently in love with each other to break the curse—"

"Right." Julian turns his head. He can't seem to stop looking at Garak's familiar eyes, as though to remind himself that it's still *Garak* in this new body. "I suppose it's taking me a minute to accept having my private feelings so emphatically revealed. I did think you were dying, you know."

"Yes," Garak says. "I am familiar with the discomfort of being forced to reveal one's feelings."

Julian remembers vividly their confrontation over the dinner table on Empok Nor. "I think I've been in love with you since you came to Deep Space Nine," he admits. "But I thought—that if I felt that way, and you weren't cured, your feelings must have changed. That I was too late."

Garak leans in and kisses Julian again. The vulnerability of his skin is fading a little, firming to that of other Cardassians that Julian has met, but his mouth is still soft and eager. "I suppose the curse demanded something a little more irrevocable." With Garak so close, Julian can't help but notice the expanse of bare skin, scarred as it is, across his arms, his chest, his thighs, and it makes Julian's own skin feel hot and tight beneath his uniform. When he puts one hand gently onto Garak's chest, just below the hard ridge of his sternum, Garak's fingers creep in under the wrist of his uniform to touch his pounding pulse. Garak shifts and tilts his head until the cupped shape of his forehead meets Julian's. "I suspect I'm in little danger of changing back, but to be clear, I—continue to love you."

"Has—anything else come back to you?" Their faces are so close that Julian's lips almost brush Garak's as he asks it. "Your missing memories?"

"No." Garak's answer is just firm enough that Julian believes it. "No—perhaps with time, now that the curse is broken."

"If you do—" Julian hesitates. "I know that you were in the Obsidian Order, and I have some idea of what that entailed. If you remember, I can't promise to understand everything in your past, nor to accept it," he says honestly. "But I promise to try."

He thinks he can feel Garak smile against his lips, a secret kind of smile. "My dear Julian," he says, "I don't doubt that." Garak's fingers creep into the hidden hem of his uniform shirt, blunt knuckles hot against his skin, and Garak draws it up and over Julian's head. He pulls Julian into his lap in almost the same movement, and the heat of him when they're pressed chest-to-chest engulfs Julian. Julian is greedy for it—he wants to touch as much of Garak as he can reach at once—but there's still something cautious about this, something a little new in the way that Garak's cropped fingernails stroke up his Human spine.

"I'm afraid I may have declared my feelings in front of the entire infirmary," Julian says, the next time he comes up for air. "It's possible that some people have suspected for a while." Garak's fingers explore the shape of his ribcage, and Julian can't help a quiet kind of shriek when his touch tickles. Garak abandons his ribs and skates his hands upward, to the knots in the muscles of his neck and shoulders, as though he's making a study of human anatomy. "I might have—" Garak stops him talking by pulling his hips firmly forward with one hand, the other curled around the back of his neck. He swallows whatever noise might come out of Julian's mouth as their bodies slot together.

Julian means to regain his senses enough to get to the bed, at least. But Garak is so enthusiastic beneath him and Julian doesn't want to stop touching him, even long enough to walk a few steps away. The sight of them sliding together in their cupped hands does something devastating to Julian's significant higher brain function. It's only when they're sticky and sprawled sideways on the narrow couch, Garak pulling Julian close to keep him from falling off the couch, that Julian has the wherewithal to say, "I think I'm supposed to be on duty in the infirmary."

Garak allows him to peel himself away and stand. "Considering what's happened over the last few days, my dear, I think your dereliction will be forgiven." When Julian offers him a hand, Garak takes it and allows Julian to pull himself up. "Incidentally, speaking of dereliction, I suspect you never got around to reading the latest book that I recommended?"

"Well—" Julian is about to tell Garak that, in fact, he read the entire thing as a distraction during the dreadful runabout trip to meet Enabran Tain, when he realizes that Garak is probably asking for a specific reason. "No," he lies. "No, I didn't."

Garak smiles. "In that case, perhaps I might recommend something a little more—rarified as my next selection." He strokes his rough fingernails through the hair at the nape of Julian's neck. "Given our new—status, you might appreciate one of Ceveo's repetitive epics."

Julian raises an eyebrow at the name. "New status—*Garak*. Are you recommending that we read *Cardassian pornography*?" Apparently Garak's claim that there was no such thing in Cardassian literature wasn't entirely accurate.

"Anything to make you appreciate the repetitive epic," Garak says innocently. "Since you struggled so greatly with the less purient Cardassian literature. Besides, after *Much Ado About Nothing*—" Garak smiles beatifically.

He does have a point. "I love you," Julian tells him. He thinks he could get used to saying it.

Literary references, most of which I recommend:

[*Do not go gentle into that good night*](#), Dylan Thomas

The Odyssey, Homer (the Robert Fagles translation, which is indisputably the best)

Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare

Le Morte d'Arthur, Thomas Malory

[*Dulce et decorum est*](#), Wilfred Owen

Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë

Paradise Lost, John Milton

Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded, Samuel Richardson

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