

the beast's burden

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the beast's burden

by [meriwethersays](#)

Summary

Garak watches Julian walk away, the movement of the muscles beneath that fragile skin, and tries to ignore the abominable sentiment coursing through him. Another irony of the curse, isn't it—that sentiment should be the only way to break it.

Garak's perspective, [the beast of empok nor](#).

empok nor (part I)

Pain. Pain is the first thing he remembers of his new life. Agony that he hasn't felt since Enabran Tain put the implant in his head. His bones shatter, grow, re-form, framing a new skeleton that's the wrong size for his skin. The flesh grows hard, scaled, and when he tries to touch it, his new claws come away bloody. His uniform doesn't grow with his new body and his armor bursts at the weakest joints. All the while, he can feel Tain's eyes on him—his and the hateful eyes of the Bajoran *pahr* who is the architect of Garak's new form. "Stop," Garak chokes out, and everything in him revolts at the weakness in it.

The *pahr* walks closer to peer at him, and he must know that Garak doesn't have the strength to tear out his throat with these new claws. "Don't worry, Cardassian," he says in a low voice. "You'll know how, if the time ever comes."

They abandon him on Empok Nor. Garak wonders sometimes if he was supposed to die there, but he thinks not. What would be the purpose, after all, of transforming a man into a beast, only for him to die in a few days?

It takes time—more than just a few days—to learn how this lumbering new body works. His hands are the worst, useless for anything but slashing and tearing. If the replicators didn't take voice input, he'd have long since starved to death. Slowly, so slowly, he discovers the new equilibrium, the changed center of gravity, the speed at which he can move. Just in time, too, because the shades that haunt this station begin to emerge, the failed experiments whose only goal, as far as Garak can tell, is to tear him apart.

He loses control of himself for hours at a time. It puzzles him the first time it happens, the first time that he wakes up in a different part of the station and finds deep gouges in the walls and in his own skin. He tries to lock himself in the quarters where he's built a nest, more or less, and in the morning wakes to discover that he's clawed the walls open. After that, he doesn't bother to lock himself up. There's nothing on this station that he's afraid to hurt.

Time passes. It's hard to keep track. He asks the computer for the date periodically, but on a space station with no artificial day and night to keep track, it slips by nonetheless. He does what he can with voice commands, trying to learn what's left here that might be of some use if anyone ever came near enough for him to contact them. He has no illusions about his ability to build some kind of ship, not with these claws, and where would he go even if he did? He looked at himself in a computer-generated mirror once, and once was enough.

It's a Ferengi, of all people, who finally makes contact. A creature with clever eyes who tells Garak, "You and I could do very well together, my friend," and though he winces when Garak laughs, he doesn't terminate the transmission. *Friend* was never a word with much meaning for Garak; there was *useful* and *not useful*, and most people could be made useful in some way by the end. "It seems the Federation is in need of supplies that only you can provide," the creature tells him, the next time he calls. "War is good for business."

"For a price," Garak says, "I'll provide what they need." He looks into the eyes of the Human Gul who commands Terok Nor, listens to the list of requests, and says, "I want a doctor." The *pahr* said that Garak would know how to break the curse, when the time came, but Garak isn't interested in waiting around for the right time.

"We have many trained physicians who can examine you," the commander begins.

"No," Garak tells him. "Send me a doctor to keep. In exchange for the parts." No doctor is going to figure out how to cure him in the course of a single evaluation.

The commander's face is very weary. Garak wonders how long the Federation has been at war, and who they found to go to war with. "I'll see what I can do," he says at last.

Garak doesn't expect the doctor that they send. He'd anticipated a nonhuman—in his experience, the Federation put Human life above others, even as it professed not to—and someone old, a little broken-down, perhaps at the end of their career. A sacrifice. It's what a Cardassian gul would have known to do. But this doctor is young, dark-skinned and dark-eyed with a kind of fiery determination that sets Garak on edge.

"Starfleet does make them pretty, doesn't it," he says, testing, and Doctor Bashir flinches strangely. Not at the halfhearted leering menace of it, but as though something else about it bothers him.

"What should I call you?" Bashir says in Kardasi, easily, as though it's nothing for a Human to speak Kardasi like that.

He gives Bashir all the warnings that he can think to offer, which boil down to: don't go out at night and don't go very far. He'd hate to lose Bashir when it's taken him this long to get someone. The first examination is anticlimactic, the next even moreso. Bashir doesn't try to touch him after the first warning, at least. Garak has gone so long without feeling another person's skin on his own and he doesn't know how he'd react. He certainly doesn't want to risk it because of some incautious touch by Bashir.

But Bashir is never incautious, he discovers. Bashir is methodical and quick and clever and his commander was a fool to let him go. Garak would never let him go if—unless Bashir finds a way to cure him, of course. But even beyond that, the doctor's facility with Kardasi goes from fluent to impeccable, with a vocabulary that suggests he's read and understood much of the medical database (Garak's attempts to make the computer read it aloud to him were more or less useless). He doesn't seem to sleep as long as most Humans—though Garak's perception of time during the hours that they've designated as 'night' is limited at best—and it seems that at every dinner they eat, Bashir has managed to program a new recipe into the replicators. Perhaps they aren't exactly as Bashir wants them, judging from his face, but Garak has never known anyone to experiment in such a manner beyond their assigned field of study.

Still, as fascinating as Bashir himself is, Garak brought him here for a purpose. He can't help the growl of frustration when he sees nothing but the damned medical tricorder next to the examination table. "Nothing to try today, doctor? Not even something preliminary?"

Bashir looks startled. "I'm not going to attempt some kind of preliminary treatment without a full understanding of your condition, Garak," he

says. He looks away from Garak and back at his computer screens full of scans that, Garak suspects, all say the very same thing. Garak forgets himself and reaches over to pick up the tricorder, mostly for something to do with his hands while the doctor ignores him. But the claws—it's always the claws, getting in the way of doing anything useful with his fingers. Tain might as well have cut his fingers off—but perhaps that would have been too merciful for Tain, too. No, he would have wanted Garak to be taunted by all of the things just out of reach. "Garak—one thing," Bashir says. He taps at the screen a few times. "If you'd like, I could remove your claws."

Garak is very good at hiding his emotions, and he's fairly sure that he manages to suppress any outward sign of how desperately he wants such a thing. "What, pull them out? I'm given to understand that many species consider that a form of torture." An unnecessarily messy one, so far as Garak is concerned. *Torture* is not synonymous with *interrogation*, and the former rarely renders the latter more effective. "I realize you are displeased with your situation, doctor, but I hardly think that would accomplish anything productive."

"No—no, I wouldn't do that." Bashir looks mildly horrified. Garak wonders if he's ever been held captive—not captive like this, free to roam, but captive as Garak knows it best. Solitude, darkness, silence. Walls so close that a man can barely lie down. No, he thinks. A doctor familiar with such things would show no horror at the idea of a little physical torment. "No, look." Bashir turns his computer screen to display it to Garak and gestures at the strange broken shape of his new fingers. "It would be very painful, but I could cut them down with a laser scalpel. It would give me enough precision to make them simply—fingernails, and it should cauterize such that any regrowth could be removed easily enough." He hesitates. "It would have substantially increased manual dexterity, at least."

It's like a jolt to Garak's heart, though he refuses to show it. To have his fingers back—to be able to manipulate buttons, to *touch*, to occupy his mind with books or anything else beyond the thirst for revenge—it's almost unimaginable. "I would be substantially less able to defend myself." He thinks of the way that he can tear out the throat of the creatures that still haunt parts of this station with a single swipe. But he's so very tired of fighting.

"I'm not going to attack you," Bashir says, and he sounds genuinely wounded. "Garak, I told you, the circumstances of my presence on this station will never affect my treatment of you." Yes, he had, hadn't he. It's one of those things that Garak's mind rebels at believing because it is so antithetical to his way of thinking. "And even if you were concerned about that, you've quite a few other advantages."

Garak examines the length of his claws. "Not against you, doctor." Garak has every physical advantage and a lifetime's worth of cunning, but he also has the sense to admit when someone's sheer intelligence eclipses his own. "Very well." The desire to have the use of his fingers back overwhelms all else, and that alone should tell him how much damage his isolation on this station has done to him.

Bashir offers him a hypospray. "I'm not sure how this will work with your body chemistry," he admits. "But it should provide at least some localized anesthetic effect."

Garak shivers and is glad that the thick hide of his skin conceals it. "No." After the pain that he experienced in the transformation—pain that should have been captured by the implant—there's little that can sway him now.

"It's going to hurt quite a bit." Bashir clearly knows that the attempt to convince him is futile.

"Go ahead, doctor."

Bashir pulls a rolling tray up to the side of the examination table. "Spread your fingers on the tray," he tells Garak. Garak does his best, and if ever there was a reminder of how important this is, it's his inability to so much as lay his hands flat on a table. "We'll go one finger at a time. I need you to hold very still. If you need the analgesic at any time—"

"Get on with it already," Garak says, and he thinks that he hides the desperate desire in his voice well enough. The pain must be severe because it triggers the implant, which sends endorphins flooding through Garak's body. His breath catches at the near-euphoria that it induces. He knows that it's malfunctioning, giving him this high of a dose when it didn't even work before, but it doesn't matter. Through the haze of it, Garak watches Bashir remake his claw into a fingernail, a stubby thing, and just like that it's a useful finger again. "Doctor, you're worth something after all," he says.

Bashir sets the laser scalpel down. "It would be easier if I could touch your fingers," he says, almost hesitantly. "I have to go very slowly because of the risk that you might flinch. If I hold the finger in place as I work—"

There's something hot and tight under Garak's skin at the idea of it. "I will not *flinch*," he protests, but it's been so long since he felt another person, or at least another living creature not trying to kill him. "My fingers only. Only as long as necessary." And then his body betrays him by flinching badly when Bashir grasps his finger. The implant isn't active at the moment, the nail on his littlest finger only a sharp ache, but his awareness briefly narrows to the coolness of Bashir's fingertips against his skin. "Go ahead, doctor," he says and he knows that his voice sounds wrong.

By the final finger, the combination of Bashir's touch and the implant's endorphins are nearly overwhelming. It's only the thought of how smug Tain would look, to see the great Garak fallen so far, that keeps Garak from doing something very stupid. Still, he wonders what it would be like to have Bashir's hands on the rest of him, and he can't help thinking that maybe it would be even better without the implant's interference. "There," Bashir says. He rubs the pad of his thumb across the blunt shape of each fingernail and Garak swallows down the noise that he wants to make. There's a weight between his legs, an urgency, that takes him a long moment to recognize. It's been so long since he *wanted* someone, didn't even know what it would feel like in this body and certainly couldn't have done anything about it with his fingers the way they were. "At least you've got the use of your fingers back while I work on figuring out the rest of you." Bashir steps back slowly, but he leaves the tray in place. Another small mercy. Garak doesn't know quite what he looks like in this moment, but the last thing that he needs is the doctor to be frightened that Garak will assault him in some fashion.

"Remarkable, my dear doctor." Garak tests his fingers, gripping the edge of the tray, picking up the laser scalpel the way that he couldn't before, touching the rough skin of his own face. "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."

Bashir's face lights up with the same kind of eagerness that Garak saw when he offered to fix Garak's hands. "Is there a library on this station? I—find that I can focus on research better if I read something else sometimes, and I'm running through my own books very quickly."

"It's an extensive collection of Kardasi literature." Garak had gone to visit it longingly a few times, after the transformation, when he thought he might still be able to occupy his mind. "I suppose you read Kardasi well enough to appreciate it."

"I'm happy to trade some of what I brought, in exchange," Bashir offers. "As I said, I think better when I have something non-medical to read as well. And I—" He hesitates. "Well, I don't sleep much, and I do have to lock myself in my room every night."

Ah. The doctor thought that Garak might be personally offended at the reminder of the way that he loses control every night. "Follow me," Garak says, and pushes the tray out of the way to stand. There's the briefest moment of unsteadiness, his body still processing the conflicting sensations flowing through it, but he recovers before Bashir notices.

Garak knows the route well, even though it goes beyond the safe zone that he's established. He plucks a rod from the nearest shelf delicately and revels in the way that it fits between his fingers. "A recommendation, my dear doctor?" When Bashir accepts it, Garak has to remind himself to let go.

"What is it?" Bashir peers at the data rod. "The—Never-Ending Sacrifice?" He says it as though he's sounding it out, as though Garak doesn't know how well he can read Kardasi as well as speak it.

"A classic. The quintessential piece of Cardassian literature, if you've never had the pleasure before. Do tell me what you think of it, when you've finished." He tries not to sound too eager, but he thinks that perhaps he's lost his edge entirely.

Bashir smiles. "Something to talk about at the dinner table."

That hits Garak in the gut, the idea of having a dinner *companion* rather than just someone else at the table, of true conversation and debate, and when Bashir turns his back, Garak takes a copy of it himself.

He spends the evening, until his loss of control, immersing himself in the elegant structure of the novel, the formal nature of it as familiar as a lullaby. When he wakes up, the first thing he checks is that the data rod is still intact, even before he realizes that his fingers are throbbing from what must have been an attempt to claw at the walls again. It's safe, still at the particular section he was reading the night before, and Garak finds equilibrium again in the words. Unlike Bashir, he has nothing more to occupy his days, and he leaves his quarters to find somewhere more pleasant to keep reading. He finishes perhaps fifteen minutes before their appointed dinnertime and is stunned at the satisfaction he feels in it.

At dinner, he can barely contain himself. The fork and knife are clumsy in his hands, but he can't bring himself to care. "Well?" he asks at last. "Have you—had the chance to start it?" This, he realizes, reveals far too much about how desperate he is for the opportunity to discuss it with Bashir. The doctor didn't say that he planned to read it last night, after all, and he may well have gotten a few paragraphs in and given up.

"I read it last night."

Euphoria, and then disappointment, surge through Garak. It's this body, he tells himself, that makes it so hard to contain his emotions. "I didn't intend for you to *skim* it, my dear doctor. Much is lost—"

"No, I read the whole thing," Bashir says, a little carelessly. Then he offers an extremely performative yawn and claims, "I stayed up most of the night, in fact."

He really is extraordinary. "Isn't it superb? Without a doubt, the finest Cardassian novel ever written." The first novel that Garak ever read, in fact, long before he was old enough to understand it beyond the words themselves.

"Really?" There's something doubtful in the doctor's tone that makes Garak bristle.

"The repetitive epic is the most elegant form of Cardassian literature, and *The Never-Ending Sacrifice* is its greatest ideal." There's something he hasn't felt in a very long time beating in his heart, snaking its way through his brain, the thrill of an argument. "I suppose you disliked the emphasis on patriotic sacrifice? I should think that your presence here demonstrates your approval of such sacrifice."

"No," Bashir says, and how Garak wants to hear what he'll have to say next, far more than he should want such a thing. "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."

"You've missed the point, doctor!" This is dangerous, so dangerous. Bashir doesn't know what it means to argue like this. "Your pedestrian misunderstanding—"

"No, let me give you an example of what you mean." It didn't used to affect Garak so strongly, a little bit of literary disagreement, but this is like feeling Bashir's fingers on his skin all over again. "There's a poetic form in English called the *sestina*." It's a Federation Standard word, not some translation through the Universal Translator. "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. *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."

A *villanelle*. There's a symmetry of syllables in the word itself that Garak likes. "Go on."

"A *villanelle* repeats not only words, but lines, and rhyme schemes." Bashir has begun gesturing with his hands, and Garak is a little hypnotized by the movements. "Do you speak Federation Standard?"

Of course, he's told Bashir that he's nothing but a tailor. What use would a tailor have for Federation Standard? "I do. "If you'd like to share one to demonstrate how your repetitive Federation poetry is superior to the Cardassian repetitive epic." How the heat seethes under his skin at the argument.

"I didn't say that," Bashir 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." He recites the villanelle, an overly emotional bit of what Garak has to admit is an elegant structure. "You see—for me, a repetitive epic would be strongest with that level of variation added."

"Maudlin," Garak protests, because that's part of the structure of such a conversation, too. "Sentimental." Retreat, riposte, invite Bashir's next attack. He aches to hear it.

Bashir doesn't disappoint, sighing in faux annoyance. "The structure is what matters to my argument, not the subject matter. Certainly, characters in novels may fall prey to the same failings that their parents did, perhaps even moreso. My point is only that there's no variation at all in *The Never-Ending Sacrifice*. It's right there in the title, Garak! It's a tragedy, certainly—"

"A tragedy!" Laughable, and yet Garak can't help but feel some ring of truth to it. "It's a—a demonstration of the Cardassian ideal, that to which every Cardassian should aspire. It is a form, not a children's story!" He makes good use of his new fingers to stab his dinner with a fork. When he looks up, there's something hot in Bashir's eyes and Garak can feel the way he wants to respond to it. A Cardassian—but no, Bashir isn't Cardassian. He's Human, and he has no idea what it means to argue like this, what it does to Garak.

"I look forward to whatever you'll say about my selection," Bashir says. Garak thinks maybe he says something in response, but he's too busy anticipating the sweet torment of more dinners like this, of the arguments they'll have, the way that Bashir will wind him higher and higher—

"You might as well give it to me tonight," Garak hears himself saying, and he's still allowing himself to behave as though Bashir is Cardassian too. As though this will end the way he's realizing that he desperately wants it to. He follows Bashir back to his quarters, and he's never found Humans particularly attractive, but Bashir's eyes are bright with excitement and he's flushed and his hair is a mess because he's shoved his hand through it to punctuate his outrage a few times. Garak doesn't want to hurt him, but how he wants to pin Bashir against the wall and see how he'd react—how he wants to test the limits of his new fingers beneath Bashir's clothing. He has some vague half-remembered idea that perhaps Bashir is stronger than he looks. But he can't, he can't, and so he forces himself to stand in the doorway and accept Bashir's offering of another poem. He's saved from any further temptation by the computer's warning of the time.

Garak retreats to his room to await the change. As he sits there, though, something horrible creeps into the back of his mind. "*You'll know how, if the time ever comes.*" His thoughts are full of Julian—Bashir—*Julian*, smoothing a thumb over his fingernails, explaining why a villanelle is a more suitable form for the repetitive epic, and just before the change hits him, Garak realizes with dread that yes, he does know how to break the curse. He wonders if this is some fresh infliction of the curse, to know exactly how to break and to know just how impossible it is.

* * * * *

When he comes back to himself, in what passes for morning, Garak narrows his focus to *The Odyssey*, to the lilting rhythms in translation, to the mournful symmetries of the man ripped from home. There is nothing else to think about, he tells himself. The anticipation that he feels at the thought of discussing it with Julian—certainly, there's a particularly Cardassian flavor of desire to it, but nothing more. There is—it has nothing to do with the curse. He was mistaken last night to think there was any way to break the curse now, let alone with Julian—

"Garak, would you mind coming to the infirmary when you have a moment? I'd like to check your nails."

The words drag him out of the poem as Odysseus's men open the bag of winds with petty greed in their hearts. Garak takes a moment to compose himself. "Certainly, doctor." Julian is always scrupulously polite about interrupting Garak from his total lack of occupation.

Garak feels as though Julian should look different, somehow, after last night's crushing realization. There should be some special light playing across his face, some glow, something to tell Garak whether he's right or wrong to think that Julian might be the answer to his curse in a very different way than he'd first hoped. But Julian is as much himself as ever under the harsh light of the infirmary. He scans each of Garak's fingers with a tricorder, and Garak remembers the way it felt when Julian ran his fingers across the newly-blunted nails. He wishes Julian would do it again. But what is he supposed to say? "Never mind about the not touching, feel free to use your hands as much as you'd like?"

"I could help with that," Julian says, and Garak realizes that Julian is pointing at the skin of his shoulder. He twists to look at it and sees a bloody scrape, hardly the worst of the injuries he's given himself since his transformation, but it seems to make Julian unhappy.

"If you like." He supposes that it stings, but he hasn't noticed.

Julian selects a new tool and shows it to Garak. "This is a dermal regenerator," he tells Garak very earnestly, as though Garak grew up farming dirt on Bajor and has never been to a proper hospital in his life. "It shouldn't hurt."

Garak laughs at that. "Pain is inevitable, my dear doctor. Suffering is a choice." It's a mantra he's heard repeated often enough in his life—one of Tain's favorites, from when he was a little boy and first injured himself. Tain had his variations on it, but something was always inevitable and something more—suffering, misery, terror—was always a choice. A choice made by a weak man.

Julian looks mildly horrified as he begins the repair. "Don't tell me that's straight out of a Cardassian primary school lesson book."

Garak never attended ordinary primary school. It's only recently, in these last months, that he's begun to understand the role that Enabran Tain played in shaping him from a very young age. "What's wrong with the regenerator?" he asks, instead of answering. The flesh that's reappearing looks bizarre, and it takes him a moment to realize that it's because it doesn't match the armored hide he's trapped in. It's thin Cardassian skin. "Well," he says, "I suppose as a last resort, you could flay me." Julian looks at him, startled, and Garak realizes with some delight that Julian *did* contemplate it—not flaying, as such, but the kind of gruesome surgical readjustments that would correct his monstrous

form. “My dear doctor, I am joking,” Garak adds, though they both know he wasn’t. He wants Julian to touch that new skin—he *burns* for it. He wants to find out what it feels like, if it’s more sensitive, if Julian’s cool fingers will draw the same reaction that they did before.

They argue over the Oydsey at dinner, and that same rush of energy and delight fills Garak. “Odysseus could scarcely go ten lines without being driven by his emotions,” he says, and oh, if Cardassians prayed to gods, the gods would be laughing at the irony of that now.

“We’ll have to agree to disagree,” Julian says.

Garak shivers. “Happily, my dear doctor.” Julian can’t possibly know what kind of promise that would mean, coming from another Cardassian.

Julian leaves dinner for the infirmary, to while away more hours in search of a cure that Garak suspects will never come, and Garak goes back to his west wing and sits on his bed. He stares at his hands. He hasn’t engaged in any form of masturbation since waking in his new body—his body has felt no such interest and his mind has been too absorbed, and in any event, his claws would have posed too much of an obstacle. Now, though—his cock is heavy between his legs, has been ever since they began dinner, and he touches it for the first time in this form. The skin is thicker, takes a little more pressure to achieve the same level of sensation, but oh, when he does—his mind is full of Julian’s fingers on his, of the column of Julian’s neck, of the shape of Julian’s mouth, and then things that have never happened, of Julian’s lithe body restless, breathless, arching beneath his own rough hands, of Julian’s voice—Humans have never held any kind of physical interest for Garak before, but now his mind is full of Julian— When he comes, it hits him like a rogue shuttle and he half-roars as the feeling rolls through him. He shakes almost violently. It’s terrifying, the power that Julian has over him now.

He avoids Julian for the next few days. Julian asks, once, “Would you like to have dinner tonight?”

“Not tonight,” Garak tells him. He doesn’t invent an excuse, because what excuse *could* he invent? Julian knows well enough that Garak has no kind of occupation here. He practices trying to control the change that takes him every night, tries to prolong the period before the madness for even a minute, perhaps two. He returns to the video recording whenever he comes back to himself and watches the change happen against the chronometer. Every time it happens, his hands go first to his face, dragging across it along the scars, then trying to dig into the thick skin as though he could simply peel it away.

Usually he has no memory, no consciousness, during the time, but this time he smells someone else’s blood and feels a warm strength propping him up, then laying him down onto the floor, and then he loses himself again.

Garak awakes on a bed in the infirmary, staring at Julian’s still form in a chair. Julian is covered in blood. “Julian?” His voice is too sharp, he knows, for someone who isn’t supposed to care. “What happened? You’re injured?”

Julian starts awake and blinks at him. “I’m not injured, you’re injured.”

Now that he mentions it, Garak feels a certain awareness of—discomfort—in various parts of his body. “You’re covered in blood,” he says. Julian is shirtless, blood splashed across that broad expanse of bare skin, but Garak can’t see a wound.

“All yours, I’m afraid. I was in the library and was attacked by several skeleton monsters—you might have mentioned that’s why the doors were locked!”

“I killed them?” Garak frowns. That doesn’t feel right. “How many?”

“Four. I helped you get here and treated your injuries.” Julian is flushed beneath the smears of blood, his breath coming a little quicker.

Garak doesn’t see a point in calling him a liar, not now. “I take it I’ll survive?” He’s having a good deal of trouble looking away from Julian, even though he suspects his eyes are revealing too much. “I didn’t hurt you?”

Julian hesitates. “You must have known I was your best chance at survival.”

Garak can’t stop himself from reaching out and taking hold of Julian’s wrist. What a revelation, to touch someone else’s skin again. “Thank you. You realize that if you’d left me to die, you would have control of Empok Nor now—you’d be free now.”

It’s hard to look at Julian’s eyes. “I’m a doctor. You’re my patient.” Garak hisses in a breath and releases Julian’s wrist. Yes, that’s the agreement, isn’t it? Doctor and patient, nothing more. “Are you in pain?”

“I’m not suffering.” Garak has to add *physically* in his mind to keep it true.

Julian looks down at his own body as Garak finally tears his eyes away. “I’m going to wash up. I’ll want to check your wounds when I get back.”

Garak watches him walk away, the movement of the muscles beneath that fragile skin, and tries to ignore the abominable sentiment coursing through him. Another irony of the pahr’s curse, isn’t it—that sentiment should be the only way to break it. This body is weaker now than it’s ever been, alarmingly so. He must have felt a great deal of adrenaline to fight off four of those monsters, suffer such wounds and nevertheless make his way to the infirmary.

He’s managed to sit up by the time Julian returns—in nothing but an undershirt and pants, as though he doesn’t mind the way Garak’s eyes rove across his body. “Please be careful. The dermal regenerator had a hard enough time healing your wounds. I don’t want to stress it further if they re-open. May I check?”

May I check, as though Garak wants anything in the world more than he wants Julian to touch him. “By all means.” Julian’s body is objectively cooler than Garak’s own, so there’s no reason that Garak should feel a spike of heat when Julian leans in close to lift the bandage on Garak’s shoulder. “Incidentally, given my injuries, it is odd that you should have remained entirely unscathed after being attacked all

alone.”

“You saved me before they could touch me,” Julian says, his voice even, but Garak feels the tiny tremor as Julian smooths the bandage back down. When Garak fixes him with a suspicious look, Julian says, “Sure, Garak, you got me—I fought them all off myself, let them stab you a few times, and then killed them all.” The sarcasm is heavy in his voice, too heavy.

“More than zero, I think.”

Like this, Julian’s face is very close to his own. There’s a tense moment, and then Julian laughs and says, “I’m afraid not.” His check of the leg bandage is perfunctory. “One more and we’re done.” Garak leans back a little to prop himself up on his elbows and allow Julian to examine the bandage on his abdomen, but Julian says, “No, don’t pull at your shoulder, lie back.”

Garak wonders if Julian knows what he’s asking, to tell Garak to expose the most vulnerable part of this body to his hands. It’s where the cursed skin is thinnest, tenderest, and he’d never allow it of anyone else. Still Garak does it almost helplessly. “Go on, then.” He can hear the roughness in his voice, closer to the animal roar than his ordinary timbre, and he can’t stop a little noise in his throat when Julian rests his hand on Garak’s skin.

“I’m sorry,” Julian says. “I didn’t mean—” He stops, and Garak dreads to think what Julian can see in his eyes.

“Whatever you need to do.” Julian’s fingers are agony as they trail across his skin, and Garak has to fight hard to stay still, not to push up against Julian’s hands, let alone grab Julian and crush him close to Garak’s body. Julian is fragile, Garak reminds himself, Human and fragile, even if he’s holding Garak there with only the lightest of touches. He can only hope that Julian doesn’t take it into his head to stroke Garak’s legs, because it would be disastrous. But Julian seems content to explore his torso, the ridges of his ribs and chest plate, along Garak’s neck—every instinct except one screams *danger* at that touch—and finally Garak croaks, “Stop.” Julian stops, though he doesn’t lift his hands, and just this touch is enough to feel like Julian is pressed along his entire body. “Do you know, I can’t remember the last time another person initiated unnecessary physical contact with me.” How unnecessary it is, too, entirely self-indulgent to allow—to *ask* for this.

Julian moves his hands to the armored caps of Garak’s shoulders, as though that’s safer. “I thought you were a tailor.”

Garak can barely speak with how badly he wants Julian to keep touching him, to look down at him with unbridled affection instead of careful curiosity. “Sizing scanner,” he manages to say.

“You must have had—”

“Not in this form. I think it is safe to say that you are the only person who has ever touched me, in this shape.” He covers Julian’s hand where it rests on his own shoulder, as though it might change something. It might be only the second time that he’s reached out and touched Julian himself.

“This is—in the course of medical treatment.” Julian winces, and they both know it’s a lie.

“Don’t let me stop you, my dear doctor.” Dearest—no. He releases Julian’s hand from beneath his own and tilts his chin down and closes his eyes so that Julian can’t see what’s in them.

Julian’s breath catches in his throat. Garak can almost sense him reaching out before Julian begins to trace the ridges around his eyes, and he can’t help the way that his lips part a little. Julian runs his fingers across the shape of Garak’s horn—obscene, in Cardassian culture—and Garak wishes that Julian would touch his lips, would push a finger in his mouth and stroke the heat of his tongue, even as he knows how devastating it would be. It’s all devastating already, even when Julian only rests his hand on Garak’s cheek. “I think—” Julian says, and it’s some little hope that his voice is raspy. “I think that’s everything I need to know.”

Small miracles, Julian leaves Garak mostly alone to rest as he conducts his research, only interrupting with a few questions here and there—but the questions are always ones that leave Garak reeling. Garak admits to the existence, to the function, of his implant, as though it’s nothing to tell a Starfleet officer. He peers over Julian’s shoulder until the damnable weakness starts to take him, and Julian half-catches him.

“You should be back in bed,” Julian says firmly, and lets Garak lean all of his weight on him as they shuffle toward the bed. Garak wants desperately to grab hold of him—Julian presses ankle to hip to shoulder against Garak’s near-naked body and it would be the easiest thing in the world to turn toward Julian, to pull him close, to see if Humans kiss the same way that Cardassians do.

He doesn’t change that night. He can’t fathom how it is, but he doesn’t change—or, no, he *wants* to be unable to fathom it, but he thinks it’s that his body simply won’t allow him to risk hurting Julian. His *heart* is too trapped in this now, and it has some kind of control over the rest of him that makes him safe, tame, so long as Julian is involved. Instead he dreams. In his sexual encounters, he’s always been the penetrator, but in his dream Julian invents some kind of excuse, something they both know is patently false, to push inside, and all that Garak can think is that he wants Julian closer, deeper, wants them so inextricably linked that there’s no pulling free.

Julian examines him again in the morning and it hurts how badly he wants Julian to keep touching him. He allows himself to touch Julian when Julian draws away and then says, “If you’re going to keep me trapped here, you have to give me *something* to do.”

Julian returns with a cup of oversweet tea and a reader and presents both to Garak like gifts. Garak snipes at him about the book out of the perverse desire to prompt Julian to flirt back, even as he knows that it carries none of the same meaning for Julian—but it lets him pretend, a little longer, that he might break the curse the old-fashioned way, that he might somehow become something that Julian could love.

It’s very difficult to convince himself—his heart or his body—that Julian feels nothing more than doctor-patient amiability when Julian has offered him such an—explicit piece of literature. “My dear doctor!” he says at last. He hopes Julian is too unfamiliar with Cardassian physiology to see how affected he is by the book. “Is this—behavior what Humans consider *acceptable*?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.” Julian comes and looks over Garak’s shoulder. “*Suffer love! A good epithet! I do suffer love indeed, for I*

love thee against my will!” He says it hotly into Garak’s ear and Garak fights valiantly to tell himself that it means nothing, that Julian means nothing by it.

Garak turns his head a little—not close enough for their mouths to meet, certainly, but close enough that he can delude himself that Julian might wish it. “*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.*”

“Yes, *thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably,*” Julian says, and Garak knows, he *knows*, that Julian doesn’t understand what he’s saying, but the words speak to something deep in him, something as deep and primal as the creature he’s become. He begins to turn further, and then Julian says in a very different tone, “That’s the play in a nutshell. What’s wrong with it?”

It feels like stumbling into a sonic shower turned on high. He tries to keep his voice steady as he explains, “In Cardassian culture, argument is considered the chief form of courtship. Behavior such as that of Beatrice and Benedick is—Cardassian literature would never contain such a blatant display over the course of an entire story.” Cardassians do not blush, as a general rule, but this body seems to.

Julian is also blushing. “Garak—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Garak’s traitor heart sinks. “Don’t worry, my dear doctor.” Those last three words are curiously painful. “I’m well aware that you’re unfamiliar with Cardassian courtship traditions. I have never—misinterpreted our discussions, nor your recommendation of this book.” No, never consciously, at least. “I suppose everyone ends up happily married in the end?”

That brings the usual humor back to Julian’s face. “If you’re too uncomfortable reading it to find out—”

“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 flinches. “Are they bothering you? Let me check.” He looks at one, then says, “I’m going to change all three.”

Why not. Why shouldn’t Garak let Julian touch him again, now that Julian has once more made very clear that he does not reciprocate any kind of feeling that Garak might—there’s no point lying to himself—the very strong feelings that Garak has come to have for him. “Perhaps you might find some clothing for me when you’ve finished re-applying these wholly unnecessary bandages?”

That draws Julian’s gaze to Garak’s body again as he begins to change the bandages. “As soon as I’m finished. It would be easier if you laid back.” He peels away the shoulder, torso, and leg bandages, and Garak has no choice but to strangle any embarrassment an ordinary man might feel at the way Julian can undoubtedly see the shape of him hard through his underwear.

“You’re strangely committed to keeping me alive,” Garak says, because he knows that if Julian were to brush his hand across Garak in the right place, Garak might well come the way that he did in his quarters, entirely uncontrolled, and that would reveal even more than he’s already shown.

“You think it’s so strange?” Julian’s voice sounds a little rougher than usual, but that hardly suggests much in the way of feeling, even if it shows perhaps a little physical desire. “What would you do, if our situations were reversed?”

“If I were the eager young doctor and you’d been transformed into a monster and were keeping me hostage?” Garak struggles to say it with any force. “You’d be long since dead and I’d be on a ship back to Terok Nor.”

“Naturally.” Julian lays a fresh bandage across Garak’s thigh and presses it on firmly, dragging his fingers along the edges of it. He must be able to feel the way that Garak is having to tense his thighs to keep from moving, must see the way that Garak’s hands clench on the edge of the hospital bed. He’s too far away for Garak to feel his breath and yet Garak *does*, the soft air of Julian’s exhalation that makes him shiver. Now is the worst possible time to imagine it—Julian peeling away the rags of his underwear, Julian saying “*oh*” softly and looking wide-eyed at Garak, then leaning down anyway, taking as much of Garak as he could fit into his mouth, and the warmth that would flood through Garak, knowing it was difficult for Julian and yet he did it anyway because he wanted to give Garak pleasure, because he *loved* Garak—

“Clothes, please, doctor,” Garak says abruptly, rolling away and off the bed so that his back is to Julian, and he manages to wait until Julian is out of the room before he comes. With any luck, Julian will think the roar was only a noise of pain.

When Julian returns, he dresses himself and says, “I think I’ll rest further in my quarters.”

It’s harder to see a blush on Julian’s darker skin, but he thinks it’s there. “All right. Don’t hesitate to comm me if you being to feel any worsening of symptoms.”

Garak nods shortly. It’s not a pleasant walk back to his quarters, but he’s beginning to feel like he can’t breathe after so long in close proximity to Julian. He wants to focus on something else, anything else, but his mind refuses to be diverted. It keeps returning to Julian’s surprised pleased face the first time they argued over literature—the intensity of Julian’s gaze over dinner—and things that have never happened, lying comfortably tangled together in the morning and arguing over what to eat for breakfast, what it might be like just to touch his arm without worrying that he’ll use too much force—

That reminds him of something that’s been nagging at him since the fight. “Computer,” he says, once he reaches the terminal in his quarters. “Display surveillance recording, library—begin five minutes before last incident of violence.”

He watches the recording of Julian browsing among the shelves, plucking data rods like flowers with a slight smile on his face. Then Julian stiffens and says, “Lights,” and the four monsters are arrayed between him and the door. Garak knows what they look like, though mostly once dead, but it makes him stiffen too. “Garak,” Julian says into his comm, but there’s no real expectation of rescue on his face. The monsters come at him, and he takes down one before Garak even arrives; Garak’s only contribution to the fight is to knock one down and distract them a little. It’s Julian who kills each of them, dear Julian who trusts Garak not to hurt him and puts down his weapon and beckons Garak to *lean* on

him.

Garak watches himself limp away bleeding, resting most of his weight on Julian, and finds it very difficult to breathe. "Computer," he says roughly, "replay."

empok nor (part II)

Chapter Summary

“For which of your bad parts did I first—?” Garak has yet to find a bad part. “When you told me that The Never-Ending Sacrifice would be better as a villanelle, I suppose.” When Julian read something dear to Garak and looked at it and thought about it and came back with a critique that was clever and well-reasoned— “Or perhaps when you thought to give me back my fingers.” When he gave Garak the means to be something other than the beast that Tain’s curse has reduced him to.

“It’s been weeks,” Julian says softly. How humiliating, that he can look back now on every interaction—every touch, even—and know that Garak has been sickeningly sentimental all this time, through everything. That a curious brush of fingers across his skin in the infirmary, an exploration of a scientific curiosity, was to Garak something very different, something precious and breathless —

Over the next days, Garak searches for something about Julian that will make him like Julian less—some trait that he could use to persuade himself that he isn’t sickeningly in love with the man. But Julian, having learned exactly what comprises Cardassian courtship, appears determined to make Garak miserably more infatuated with him than ever. He chooses terrible works of literature to read, including what, after a three-hour spirited argument, Julian eventually admits is not even one of Earth’s best works on the subject (“Well, yes, *Le Morte d’Arthur* has its problems,” he finally says. “But it was the precursor—”). Julian continues to be physically magnificent, faster and stronger than any Human should be (Garak is now confident). He smiles in delight when Garak says something he hasn’t thought of before, and Garak finds it obnoxiously attractive. When he looks tired from long hours of trying to cure Garak, Garak wishes for the ability to do something that would make him feel better, and is rewarded by Julian’s smile when he makes a particularly outlandish claim about one of the lesser Cardassian works.

In all his repellent sentiment, Garak forgets the very real danger of Julian’s intelligence. Garak is roaming through the station when the computer alerts him that there’s an intruder in his quarters. Garak’s lungs seize for a minute and then he flat-out runs at a speed he could never have managed before. Julian is in his quarters, crouched and peering at Garak’s old badge. “What are you doing here? I told you never to come here!” Garak lunges past him roughly and grabs it harder than he means to in his hurry to hide it from Julian’s quick eyes. Julian knows so little of all the ways in which he’s Garak’s undoing.

“I was only trying to figure out what information I’ve been missing,” Julian says, his voice even as though he’s trying to soothe Garak—Garak, the monster. “If there was anything here that could help me cure you.”

“You—you have no idea.” He’s aware of blood trickling from his hand where the edges of the old badge dig in too deep. “Get out!”

“I’m trying to *help!*” Julian stands his ground. He’s magnificent, even as Garak wants to hate him for inflicting this—devotion on Garak, this fascination that has ruined Garak.

The room is full of the debris of everything that Garak’s destroyed in his nightly fits, and he flings the remnants of a broken chair past Julian. “Get out! Leave this station, go back to your Federation and your losing war—” If he was ever delusional enough to think that Julian could be persuaded somehow to *feel* something, this is the end of it. When he’s forced to reveal that he’s the Obsidian Order agent—

“I’m not going anywhere—I’m a doctor and you’re my patient, and if you’d told me there was an Obsidian Order operative here with you—”

Garak has never been prone to fits of hysteria, but he thinks might justify it. “Here with—oh yes, doctor, there’s been an operative here with me the whole time.” A dangerous operative, lurking there in Garak’s heart, and every day of Garak’s captivity here eats away at it like acid.

Julian doesn’t move. “I don’t understand,” he says, and they both know very well that he does.

“You finally understood what *wast* meant, and you took it upon yourself to come to this dreadful place where I sleep, and yet you can’t fathom what this badge means?” He clenches his fist around it for a moment longer and then drops it. He can feel the blood running freely from his hand.

Julian looks at him with very kind eyes and Garak can’t even find it in himself to hate Julian for it. “You tell me.” Then—oh, then he walks to Garak and puts his hand on Garak’s wrist, cradles his hand so that he can peer closer at it. “I’ll need a dermal regenerator to fix this,” Julian says. He rubs his thumb very gently across the uninjured skin and Garak sucks in a breath before he can stop himself. “Will you come to the infirmary with me?”

“You may as well leave,” Garak tells him again, even though he doesn’t want Julian to so much as release his hand. “You’re never going to fix anything meaningful.” It sounds revoltingly self-pitying, even if it’s also true. If Julian, with all his brilliance, hasn’t taken a single step toward a medical solution, that means the only other option is—to share Garak’s feelings, and he shows no inclination whatsoever in that direction.

“Come to the infirmary so I can fix your hand.” Julian lets Garak’s hand slip from his grasp and takes a step toward the door, as though Garak must be led. “You don’t have to tell me anything.”

Oh, but Garak will, he already knows it. The most dangerous way to trick an answer out of someone is to lure them into fondness, affection, until they spill secrets without concern because they *want* to share, and Julian has done just that without even intending it. He follows Julian to the infirmary. “Perhaps you should carry a dermal regenerator with you at all times,” he remarks as Julian starts to work. The feeling of the dermal regenerator—of skin being knit back together—sends a shudder down his spine. There was a time, in the hands of unskilled

interrogators, when the brief respite of a dermal regenerator was almost worse than pain because it prefigured the return of the knife.

Julian doesn't speak for a long time, until the cut is fully healed and there's nothing but a pale patch where it used to be. "You're a former spy."

Garak laughs without any humor. "Don't you know there's no such thing as a *former* spy?" Tain taught him that lesson often enough.

Julian sets the dermal regenerator down and steps back a little, until he's leaning against the next bed over. His face is very serious. "Let me tell you a story, and you can tell me if it's preposterous."

"All your stories are preposterous." Garak loves that about them.

"Once upon a time," Julian begins, and Garak can't help snorting at that. "*Once upon a time*, there was a brilliant spy for the Obsidian Order who committed some unpardonable offense against the Order, or Central Command, or Cardassia herself. And in punishment, the Order found a way to—transform him into a beast and wipe away his memories to ensure he could never undo it."

"A witch," Garak supplies. "In your fairy stories, it's always a witch who does something like that."

Rage flashes across Julian's face for an instant and he steps further away from Garak. "You *remember*."

If only. "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." He wonders if Julian really will leave after this. Garak would let him go, he thinks. However little it would have bothered him at the outset, to have Julian look at him with disgust, it will be acutely painful now.

"The insult?" Julian walks from one end of the infirmary to the other and then back again. Garak wonders if he knows how perfectly even his stride is or if it's so deeply ingrained that he does it automatically.

"I would imagine that a member of the Obsidian Order who committed such an offense would be executed." Or would self-execute and save the Order the trouble, but that requires a self-defeatist attitude to which Garak has never subscribed. "To be—cast aside, transformed into some *thing* and abandoned to wonder—it must have been a very humiliating mistake that he made." Every day Garak wonders. Every morning that he wakes up, the first thing that he does is search his memory to see if there's some crumb, some faint trace, that's appeared.

Julian walks back to Garak. "Of all the possibilities I've considered, a witch's curse was not one of them. I don't suppose the witch said a helpful incantation aloud that you might perhaps repeat?" He peers at Garak. Curse Julian for being suddenly so equanimous about this revelation.

"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." It's hard to speak evenly with Julian leaning in so close.

"Garak. Do you know how to break the curse?"

Garak's voice is raw when he answers. "No." Is this how the people he's interrogated have felt?

"Damn it, Garak, don't lie to me. 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." Julian's so close that Garak can feel the angry huff of his breath.

Garak tries to imagine saying aloud that all Julian has to do is fall in love with him—him, the spy, the monster—and he'll be returned to his true form, free to carry on. He recoils at the thought of it. Worse, too, what it would reveal about *him* and his own—feelings. Julian just stands there, breathing his air, until Garak says, "I don't know of anything you can do."

"At least—at least I could have been reading about Cardassian folklore instead of staring at interminable cell cultures."

That startles Garak so badly that he says, "Bajoran. The witch was Bajoran—a *pahr*, they call them." The idea that Julian might continue helping him, to transfer his intellect from one impossible problem to another, is not helping Garak tamp down the sentiment that's suffocating him.

"Fine, then, Bajoran folklore." He wonders if Julian knows how breathtaking his expression of intensity is. "I need to use the external communications system."

Garak is growing tired of feeling as though his heart is tumbling end-over-end in some kind of wavefront. "Calling for retrieval?"

"Shut up." Julian is so close that the words have some percussive force to them. "I assume the control room is located in the same place here as on all Cardassian stations?"

Garak reaches out and grips Julian's shoulder unthinkingly. His grasp must be almost painfully tight, but Julian doesn't falter. He only stands there, spine straight despite the weight of Garak's hand, and it's a long time before Garak can make himself release Julian. "Yes," he says.

He stays in the infirmary after Julian goes to call Terok Nor. He has so little to occupy himself here—he must have been half crazy when Julian arrived, he thinks. After who knows how long as nothing more than a beast, nothing to do but roam the station and kill the other monsters who live here—it's a wonder he was capable of sensible speech when the Ferengi called. He spends a long time scrolling through Julian's notes, which are at times incomprehensible medical shorthand and at times are cryptic field observations. *Stoics? Christie/cozies? will complain insuff var follows var 3.279 no react, var 3.280 no react, var 3.281 toxic react which follows skin UTS MPa compare Dasypodidae/Pholidota, need control lib samples insuff.* He wonders what Julian will do with it all when he returns to Terok Nor. Set it aside for a journal article, perhaps, and return to the war effort.

It's at least an hour before he hears Julian's footsteps and moves rapidly away from the console. "I assume your compatriots will be here to

pick you up shortly?”

Julian looks startled, when anyone sensible would have seized the opportunity to leave. “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 pahr so that I can start over.”

Garak should be revolted by the unnecessary nobility or—friendship, or worse, pity—that drives Julian to stay, but instead he’s only glad to keep Julian for a little longer. “It was entirely reasonable to think that you might find a medical solution, my dear doctor.” The endearment slips past his lips before he can stop it. He adjusts his tone to be a little more acidic and adds, “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—I’m simply broadening the search.” Julian goes to the console and begins transferring data to a padd. “If you don’t mind, I have a great deal of reading to do.”

Garak wonders how long he’ll be able to let Julian pursue this futile course of research. It isn’t as though *Garak* is unsure about the curse—only that he doesn’t have the power to reverse it. “Of course. I’ll return to—” He doesn’t really have anything to return to. Finding the next book to share with Julian, perhaps. “I’ll leave you to your work.”

He comes to regret having let slip that a pahr was involved. Julian sinks deep into Bajoran folklore, a topic in which Garak has very little interest, and skips dinner two nights in a row. Garak doesn’t like how painful—how uncomfortable it is, losing those hours of companionship. It will be very difficult when Julian leaves, he knows, and Julian *will* leave, sooner or later. When Julian does rejoin him for dinner, he recounts various Bajoran children’s stories and questions Garak further about the circumstances of his transformation—dangles out the slightest hope that perhaps killing the pahr would end the curse entirely, then scrambles to come up with some nonsense about how that wouldn’t do it.

“Well, I suppose it’s for the best,” Garak says. “The Bajorans look more or less the same to me. Who’s to say I would kill the right one?”

Julian has been gesturing with his fork and has eaten very little of his food, but now he frowns at Garak. “Why do you bother lying to me anymore? I’m genuinely curious, Garak—I can tell when you’re lying, so why do it?”

What rich irony, from a man who conceals his extraordinary talents. “What’s a lie, really?” They’re all just stories with more or less reality in them, and reality itself can be understood so many ways. Garak takes a last bite of shepherd’s pie—overly rich, like so much of the food Julian replicates, in a way that makes a man crave it abominably—and sets his fork down.

Julian fixes his eyes on Garak. “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.”

Garak has never met someone like Julian and he cannot fathom that soon he will lose this. “Perhaps not as well as *you* remember every single thing, doctor,” he says, and watches Julian’s face change. “Do you think it has escaped my notice, the speed at which you consume the written word? Do you know how long it takes an ordinary Cardassian—a highly-educated Cardassian—to read *The Never-Ending Sacrifice*?” Julian’s face is an extraordinary mix of denial and eagerness—the eagerness to be known, Garak supposes. The desire to share a secret too-long kept. So Julian feels some of it too, at least. “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? Do you think that I haven’t watched the surveillance video of the fight in the library, over and over again?” His voice is thick as he admits that. Expressions of *admiration* render a relationship unbalanced. “You, doctor, are something very special, however you might try to hide it.” He wants desperately for Julian to admit it, to unburden himself fully.

Julian exhales slowly. “I was so careful before,” he says, as though he’s pleading with Garak not to think less of him for having exposed himself. “There was no video of me doing anything unusual. I never would have made that mistake.” Garak is hungry for whatever Julian will share. “I didn’t exactly—have people whose entire focus was on my reading speed.” That reveals too much of where Garak’s focus lies, these days, but Julian is too absorbed in his admission and he slumps back a little. “I am something different, anyway.”

“You have no—” Garak cannot fathom how anyone has overlooked it. “They *should* have been watching you. They never should have allowed *you* to come here, of all people. What a terrible waste.” Undoubtedly there is some reason for Julian’s deception not entirely clear to Garak, but whatever the reason, it’s obscene that he should have been sent here.

It’s disastrous when Julian leans forward and puts a hand on Garak’s arm. Garak remembers, vividly, the feeling of Julian’s fingers on his skin in the infirmary, exploring him—Julian’s fascinated look—and remembers just as vividly his own thoughts of it later in his quarters. “I’m going to figure out how to break the curse,” he says earnestly. “I won’t leave until I do, I promise.”

“But then you will leave.” Somehow Garak is gripping his hand again, the skin cool and the bones fragile, and he has to remind himself not to hold on too hard.

“You could come with me,” Julian says. “You could come to Deep Space Nine, if you don’t want to go back to Cardassia.”

Back to Cardassia. No, Garak can’t imagine ever doing that. He forces himself to release Julian’s hand, lifting one finger away at a time. He clasps his own hands together to keep from reaching out again and finds himself running the pad of one thumb across the stubby fingernail of the other. “And what if you figure out how to break it and you aren’t willing to do it?”

“What do you mean?” It seems it has never occurred to Julian that the cure might be distasteful.

“Suppose the only way to break it is to—drink the blood of a child, or to burn the pahr alive.” Julian recoils a little. “You wouldn’t help me do either of those—you would try to stop me if I tried, I think, and you might even be able to.” It would be a thing to see, Julian stopping him. It sends a shiver down Garak’s spine, despite the misery of the rest of what he’s saying. “Would you stay here, after you knew what the cure

was, once you knew that you couldn't do it?"

"I think that's highly unlikely."

"Do you." He wonders how many things Julian has ever believed to be truly impossible. Julian, he thinks, is accustomed to being brilliant enough, good enough, to accomplish almost anything. He's watching Garak so intently, as though he'll divine some secret meaning in Garak's words. "Promise me something, doctor."

"What?" Julian's eyes are hot. "What do you want me to promise?"

This is the least self-interested thing Garak has ever said, which makes it appalling. "Promise me that if you discover the cure and you know that you can't do whatever is required, you will leave." No, everything sensible in him says. No, keep him until he loves you—

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

He insists on making it so much worse. "*Doctor*. Promise me."

Julian's mouth turns down in a stubborn frown. Garak wonders how long he really would remain here, trying to find a cure—how long he would have kept working on a medical cure if not for Garak's revelation. "All right. If there's no way to break the curse but to do something horrific, and you tell me to leave, I'll leave."

"Good." The word hurts Garak's throat.

* * *

Julian seems to take Garak's extraction of the promise as a personal challenge. He expands his campaign of research into Cardassian folklore as well, questioning Garak intently about any transformation narrative in Cardassian storytelling, and Garak—Garak can't bring himself to recite the particular one that he's living. It's simply too humiliating, and it would help nothing for Julian to *know* that all—all!—he has to do is fall in love with Garak. Julian talks incessantly about them, writes out what must be considerable literary criticism analyzing tales that were only ever meant to amuse children. He puts it aside for a few dinner conversations, at least, so that Garak can come up with cutting remarks about John Milton's tedious *Paradise Lost* and Julian can squawk in outrage at Garak's dismissal of this classic subversive narrative of the Human creation story. Garak watches Julian wave his fork as he explains vehemently exactly why Milton's poetic techniques are worthy of respect, if not awe, and Garak's heart twists at the thought that soon, he will lose this—this fragile thing he has never found, not quite like this, with anyone else. "There's no need for you to waste your time on all your research into pahr when we could be addressing your severe deficiencies in literary understanding. Sooner or later, you can give up and leave."

"Waste—" Julian freezes, and cold sweeps through Garak at his expression. "You know how to break the curse, don't you. How long have you known?" His voice is very steady and his eyes are terrifying as he places his fork perfectly on the table.

"My dear doctor—" If Garak didn't feel as though he'd just opened a door onto open space, he might have caught the *dear* before it slipped out. "No, I suppose it's past the time for denial, 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, Garak?"

How Garak hates that flatness in Julian's voice. He'd much rather have the passion in it, whether it was Julian yelling about books or shouting at Garak in anger.

"During the time that you've been here," Garak says. "A week or two in. Time is difficult for me." It was difficult for him before Julian arrived, anyway. Now, he marks time by his interactions with Julian, one meal to the next, one unnecessary visit to the infirmary to the next, wishing that Julian would invent some new excuse to run his hands over Garak's skin again.

"You mean to tell me that we could have broken it then. All this time I've spent here has been a waste, while people are dying out there in the war." Julian has barely moved since he set his fork down, unnaturally still.

Garak thinks that might be laughter starting to bubble in his throat. "Oh, no, doctor. I'm afraid that while I knew how to break the curse not long after you arrived, it's not the sort of thing I can accomplish on my own." Even if a man could break such a curse with some kind of self-love, Garak has the self-awareness to be entirely incapable of such a feeling.

Julian's voice betrays frustration for the first time. "That's what I'm here for."

He swallows back whatever emotion it is that's trying to escape him. "No. 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. *La belle et la bête*." They stopped using the Universal Translator not long after Julian first arrived and Garak can infer the meaning of the words.

He wishes Julian would simply jump ahead. The answer must be clear to him, with all his intelligence, by now. But he seems determined to drag every aching piece of it from Garak. "How is the curse broken in your story?"

There, on Julian's face, is the comprehension. "A beautiful young woman falls in love with him, and he with her."

"Yes," Garak says. The revelation of this secret, unlike the others, carries no relief. "Apparently it's a universal story."

Julian's laugh cuts through the air. "Is that why you had me brought here? To be your beautiful young love?" The ridicule in his voice *hurts*

even though of course that's not why.

"I brought you to cure me the modern way, with science," Garak says stiffly. "But then—" This is awful. He would peel off great strips of his own skin one at a time rather than feel this way.

"And you've kept me here ever since in the hope that I would—fall in love with you? In between the sullen dinners and the monster clawing at my door?" There's a horrible realization dawning on Julian's face. "And you—"

Yes, that's the worst of it, isn't it. He thinks of Benedick and Beatrice, of the careful trickery required for each to admit feeling. "For which of your bad parts did I first—?" He has yet to find a bad part. "When you told me that The Never-Ending Sacrifice would be better as a villanelle, I suppose." When Julian read something dear to Garak and looked at it and thought about it and came back with a critique that was clever and well-reasoned— "Or perhaps when you thought to give me back my fingers." When he gave Garak the means to be something other than the beast that Tain's curse has reduced him to.

"It's been weeks," Julian says softly. How humiliating, that he can look back now on every interaction—every touch, even—and know that Garak has been sickeningly sentimental all this time, through everything. That a curious brush of fingers across his skin in the infirmary, an exploration of a scientific curiosity, was to Garak something very different, something precious and breathless—

"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." How badly he wants Julian to refuse again. To be noble and self-sacrificing one more time, whether it's to try to—reciprocate Garak's feelings or only to return to his medical research.

"What?"

Garak forces himself to shrug. His whole body feels numb. Julian will not insist on staying, not this time, however much Garak wants it. "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?" Julian has already made up his mind—as he should, as anyone sensible would, because who would remain under such circumstances?

"Perhaps—perhaps I'll be able to lure a Cardassian here. Someone more like me, who will be amenable to breaking the curse that way." Now that he knows Julian will leave—now that Julian has seen this shameful secret of his—he wishes Julian were gone already. Perhaps he has only fooled himself into thinking that he feels this way. Perhaps he would come to feel this way about anyone who came to this station, anyone with whom he shared meals and conversation and—

There is something that might be grief on Julian's face. "I'm sorry that I can't be who you need me to be."

"As am I." The words scrape at Garak's throat as he says them. "You should go call Terok Nor. They'll want you back as soon as they can have you."

Julian leaps up from the table as though he's desperate to get out of the room, and when the door has hissed shut behind him and Garak is all alone, he sags back against his chair and draws in a long, miserable breath. How clever of Tain. How much worse it is now, to have glimpsed the cure—worse, to have glimpsed what he could *have*, if the curse was broken—and learn, definitively, that it is out of his grasp. It's crueler now, with this miserable sentiment pounding in his heart.

"They're—they're sending a shuttle for me," Julian says when he returns to the dining area. "It'll be here in about twenty minutes."

"That doesn't leave you long to pack," Garak says. He stands and walks past Julian, because even in this moment, he can't help the urge to give Julian something that will remind Julian of what he's left behind. He selects a few data rods from the library, a few that he had particularly looked forward to sharing, and returns as Julian is walking to the cargo bay.

"I was worried you'd just—gone somewhere else without saying goodbye," Julian says. His voice is uneven now, and Garak flatters himself that, at the very least, Julian has come to consider him a person worthy of bidding farewell.

"Ready to transport at your command," the shuttle pilot comms.

It hurts to smile. "Take care of yourself," Garak says, insipid as it is. "I am reliably informed there's a war over there." Clumsily, he presses the data rods into Julian's hand, one last touch of his fingers to Julian's soft skin, and Julian accepts them. "If you get bored."

Julian leans close to him "Garak—"

For a single panicked moment, Garak thinks that Julian will try to kiss him, just in case, and so he says "Ready to transport," and the golden light of the transport beam steals Julian away.

Garak watches the shuttle begin to move away from Empok Nor, watches it jump to warp. For a long, long, minute, the entire station is silent. Then, the beastly nature that he has suppressed for all these weeks reasserts itself—it first takes his throat in a horrible howl of grief and then seizes his body too. It's a long, long time before he comes back to himself.

terok nor (part I)

Chapter Summary

“Has the doctor spoken much of his time here?” It’s a sound question to ask, Garak tells himself. A perfectly reasonable inquiry. “I understand that he’s very busy back on Terok Nor?”

O’Brien laughs a little. “When’s Julian not busy? Like he never left.”

“Good,” Garak says. “Not—not overworking himself, though, I hope.” He thinks of Julian’s face on the long-range comm, of how tired his eyes looked. “I know he doesn’t—” O’Brien is giving him a strange look. Garak shuts up and gets back to the task at hand.

The cruelest curse of all, after he finally wakes up with his body throbbing and his fingertips bloody, is that Garak can’t lose himself in the beast again. He waits for the transformation at night, the loss of time, but it never comes. Instead, he’s left with even more hours of consciousness—hours to contemplate the completeness of Tain’s revenge, hours to miss Julian with an ache so strong that it’s almost physical. Julian left behind ten data rods with books on them, and Garak reads one before he has to stop himself. When self-pity grows tiresome, he has hours to begin considering what to do next. There is nothing to stop him from contacting Julian, really, except the knowledge that it would prolong this particular misery. So he reads books and he reads the station’s technical manuals and he roams the halls almost hoping that one of the other monsters will attack him, but it seems that Julian may have ended that threat entirely. And, guiltily, sometimes he occupies by imagining things that never happened—Julian sprawled out on a bed, scrambling out of his clothes in his eagerness to touch Garak again, or Julian pinned between Garak and a door or a wall, hands cool and mouth hot on Garak’s skin. He thinks of Julian touching him in the infirmary again, stroking his hands along Garak’s shoulder and chest, following his hands with his mouth—down along Garak’s thigh’s, and then—

He spends altogether too much time on those thoughts, in fact, and tries to convince himself that he never felt any kind of *sentiment* for Julian, only physical desire.

Then he gets an alert that he’s receiving a long-range comm. It takes Garak a few minutes to get to a console that can receive it, and when he answers, he blames the run on the way that Julian’s face leaves him breathless. “My dear doctor,” he says, and curses his traitor tongue. “I admit, this is unexpected.”

“I wanted to see how you were getting on. And I read Shoggoth’s third enigma tale.”

“Oh? You’re made time for Kardasi reading, there on *Deep Space Nine*?” Garak particularly wanted to hear Julian rant about the third enigma tale. It’s a favorite of Garak’s, to the extent that he would ever admit to having favorites. He wonders if Julian is calling out of pity or misplaced kindness or if he misses Garak half as terribly as Garak misses him.

“It’s not every minute that someone is coming in with a severed limb,” Julian says, his tone arch, and then he must receive an emergency comm because he says, “I’m sorry—I have to go—” and terminates the communication. It leaves Garak reeling, this tantalizing moment snatched away from him, and it only makes things worse.

Garak—Garak would be embarrassed to admit it, but there is no one to see the fact that for the next few hours, he stays in easy distance of a console. He has moved out of the depressing nest in what he called the west wing, into what used to be Julian’s quarters, and he’s there when Julian comms again. It’s terrible—he should tell Julian it’s terrible, it’s only making things worse—but Julian looks dreadful when Garak answers. “Did you reattach the severed limb?” He’s fairly confident about the answer.

“No.” Julian’s eyes are tired and his hair looks as though he’s been shoving his hand through it. “No, it was too late. Septicemia had already set in. The others too. I just—” He hesitates. “I just wanted—”

Garak can’t stand the way he’s fumbling for words or the haunted expression on his face. “To express an undoubtedly uninformed perspective on Shoggoth’s literary abilities? Dazzle me, doctor.” It’s a near thing, but he manages not to say *my dear*.

It’s easy to sink back into the familiar give-and-take of an argument with Julian, though they never used to involve a clear view into Julian’s quarters, or Julian sitting on his bed as they speak. It feels dreadfully intimate. Then, of all things, Julian says, “I wish you were here.”

It leaves Garak speechless for a moment. Eventually, Garak manages to say, “Do you?” *Yes*, he wants Julian to say. *Yes, as dreadfully as you wish you were here.*

“There are all kinds of people here,” Julian says instead. “You wouldn’t—”

“I’m not exactly safe.” He is, though, isn’t he. A tame beast.

“We could take steps, if we needed to.” Every word Julian says feels as though it’s an offer of something Garak already knows he can’t have, and yet—and yet he doesn’t have the willpower to say no, not after seeing what life with Julian was like.

“Tomorrow,” Garak says finally. “I will speak to Captain Sisko. Perhaps I will have an offer to make him.” This station—he’s read a great deal, in all his time, about this station’s capabilities. It might be of use to Sisko, or the Federation. Useful enough to barter passage to Terok Nor.

“Good.” The relief in Julian’s voice is a torment.

“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 wishes he were these with Julian, wishes he could touch a hand to Julian’s face the way that he never has before.. “You should sleep. There will—be time yet, to see the error of your literary ways.”

Captain Benjamin Sisko makes clear from the beginning that he sees Garak as a means to an end—that end being winning the war—and Garak likes him more for his clear-eyed recognition of his own circumstances than if he had tried to flatter Garak. Sisko looks unsurprised when he first sees Garak, and Garak wonders if he watched recordings of Garak’s communication with Quark—with Julian—to prepare himself.

“I propose an exchange,” Garak says. “I find myself in search of a new residence, perhaps even a place of business. I understand that you had great need of parts from this station before, and will undoubtedly need more.”

“You’re offering scavenging rights?”

“Oh, no, Captain. I’m offering the station itself.”

“We don’t have the personnel—”

Garak waves off Sisko’s objection. “I propose to bring Empok Nor to guard the wormhole alongside Terok Nor. You will be free to take whatever you need, whenever you need, without diverting one of your warships, and you’ll have the added bonus of a secondary weapons installation—which, I would guess, you sorely need.”

“You’re not exactly next door, as the crow flies.” Sisko wants it, though, he can see it. As any sensible man would.

“I’m familiar with this station’s systems and current capabilities, and I suspect that you have your own engineers and equipment who will be capable of making it happen.”

Sisko doesn’t agree immediately. “You know I know that you’re the only one on the station,” he says. “Julian reported on his activities there. It wouldn’t take a large group to take the station as it is from you.”

Garak hopes, foolishly, that Julian didn’t report on the particulars of their own encounters, but he must have. At least enough for Sisko to know that Garak is very alone there, and perhaps much more. “You sent Dr. Bashir to me, instead of any one of hundreds or thousands of less valuable doctors,” he says. “I suspect that the Federation is too honorable to do something like that.” He suspects that they will be less honorable as the war proceeds, or at least he hopes.

Sisko doesn’t answer that. “Given our experience with Terok Nor, I think having your assistance in bringing Empok Nor will be crucial,” he says instead. “Yes, you’ll have quarters, even commercial space on the promenade, if you want it, in exchange for helping to bring the station here.”

The detachment of Federation engineers arrives almost immediately. Foremost among them is Chief O’Brien, a big blustery man who turns out to be as brilliant as Julian in a few very specific ways. He’s stiff with dislike for Garak at first, though he does manage to thank Garak for his translations and conversions and interfacing with the various systems. “You should’ve seen the way we had to hack together the system when we first got to Deep Space Nine,” O’Brien says. “Damn Cardies left it—” He clears his throat. “This place is in better shape in some ways.”

“Yes,” Garak says simply, because most of Empok Nor was perfectly functional before it was left to the monsters, as far as he knows. “I imagine you’ll want to detach from some of the less structurally-sound portions of the station before transporting it,” he says, and gestures to the digital map of the station on the console in front of them. “Here, and here—particularly weak points.”

“All right. I’ll get my men on it.” O’Brien looks around. “I don’t suppose the replicators here produce anything that a Human’d eat?”

“I believe Julian—I believe the doctor left them all programmed with a range of recipes suited to his tastes. Shepherd’s pie, perhaps?” He thinks he recalls Julian saying something about O’Brien’s recipe when he forced Garak to eat it.

O’Brien looks startled. “What, through the whole station?”

“Has he spoken much of his time here?” It’s a sound question to ask, Garak tells himself. A perfectly reasonable inquiry. “I understand that he’s very busy back on Terok Nor?”

O’Brien laughs a little. “When’s Julian not busy? Like he never left.”

“Good,” Garak says. “Not—not overworking himself, though, I hope.” He thinks of Julian’s face on the long-range comm, of how tired his eyes looked. “I know he doesn’t—” O’Brien is giving him a strange look. Garak shuts up and gets back to the task at hand.

They work feverishly for the better part of two weeks. The engineers take shifts, so that someone always seems to be working, and Garak watches the map of the station change as they remove the areas too tenuously attached with carefully-arranged detonations. Away goes the dreadful little area where Garak used to live, the environmental controls modified; the library, though, stays protected. Garak only allows himself the luxury of one long-range comm with Julian, all too aware that every bit of power is being conserved, every act supervised.

“Garak!” Julian looks better, not quite as haunted, and Garak wants to touch him very badly. “I’ve heard the strangest stories about what you’re doing.”

“All true, of course,” Garak says. “In a few weeks, I will be a respectable businessman on Terok Nor’s commercial promenade and your Federation will have all the spare parts it could want.” He wants to ask Julian if he’s doing well, if he misses Garak anywhere near as achingly as Garak misses him, but instead he only says, “There’s really quite a lot to do, I’m afraid.”

“We’ll have dinner after you get here.” Julian’s voice is eager. “Like we used to. I’ve been thinking what you might like to read—a proper mystery, not one of these rubbish enigma tales you inflict on me—”

“I have to go,” Garak says, “they’re about to test the power,” and ends the comm. It’s too much, thinking about it, Julian dangling a return to form in front of him, even as he wants it dreadfully.

The transportation of Empok Nor to stand next to its sister station is, against all odds and yet unsurprisingly, a magnificent success. There’s a small explosion at one point—Garak notices it absently from where he stands on the bridge of one of Starfleet’s warships, next to an exceedingly uncomfortable security ensign—but Empok Nor stops just where it should and Garak is transported onto Terok Nor just where he means to go. Julian isn’t there where he arrives. Garak resents how much that affects him. He’d assumed—perhaps he’d *hoped*, even, that Julian would be eager to see him again. Instead, the odious Odo is there to sweep him away for some kind of security scan. Yes, Garak remembers Odo, even if Odo doesn’t recognize him in this form. Odo never liked him and Garak always rather envied Odo his shapeshifting ability. What a magnificent gift for a spy, wasted on a security chief. Garak’s skin tingles oddly.

It’s nearly ten hours later, when Garak is blessedly alone in his new storefront and beginning to sort through the mess that Starfleet has made transporting all of Empok Nor’s library, that he finally sees Julian in the flesh again. Garak could use all kinds of nonsensical adjectives to describe the way that Julian looks, but he’s most aware of the danger in how *he* responds to seeing Julian again. Garak gathers all of his training, all of his particular talents, and crushes that response ruthlessly down into a tiny hard lump, then tucks it away. “My dear doctor.”

“Garak! So glad you’re finally here!” Julian’s effusiveness seems almost performative. He extends a hand, and Garak takes it gently, notes the softness of the skin beneath his fingers as he shakes it.

“Indeed I am.” He tells Julian about his plans for the bookshop, for the discussion area, to demonstrate that Garak understands such argument never meant anything more than intellectual stimulation.

“Garak—this is remarkable.” It’s dangerous when Julian looks at him in such frank admiration. “You organized all of this in the last two weeks?”

“It was fairly simple, my dear doctor.” Garak can work at containing the rest of his feelings, but those three words, that little endearment, refuses to be kept in. He reaches into one of the crates and lifts out the box he found to hold Julian’s books. “You left your books behind when you departed.”

“I left them for you.” Garak has to turn away at that as soon as Julian has taken the box, or he’s afraid that Julian will see the terrible longing on his face. “Did you read any of them while I was gone?”

“One or two.” Garak busies himself with trying to arrange the collections of data rods into some semblance of order without the shelves that he ordered. He’s a little dizzy, but he assumes it’s from Julian’s presence. “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’s voice is strange and Garak doesn’t allow himself to turn. “Yes, would you like—” When Garak gives in and looks at him, he can’t read the expression on Julian’s face. “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 finally manages to catch that errant *dear* and stuff it away with the rest of the sentiment.

* * *

Standing in the replimat feels like double vision. On Empok Nor, this is the room where he and Julian shared their meals at a smaller and smaller table. Here, it’s a large, busy, brightly-lit space full of people carrying trays of food, and the noise echoes painfully in his ears. Garak shapes himself into the harmless persona he used to adopt, smiles guilelessly at everyone he sees, and then, desperate to avoid sharing a meal with Julian one-on-one again in this place, addresses the first person that he recognizes. “Lieutenant Dax!” They exchanged pleasantries on one of the ships during the last checks before transporting Empok Nor. “Won’t you join us for dinner? Dr. Bashir is introducing me to the foods of the Federation.” As though Julian hasn’t been doing it ever since he came to Empok Nor. Lieutenant Dax looks to Julian, as though he’s Garak’s keeper, and Julian smiles uncomfortably and repeats the invitation. When they’re settled at the table, Garak says, “Lieutenant, I’ve been looking forward to the opportunity to converse more with someone whose outlook is not so entirely Human.”

She laughs. It is, he supposes, a nice laugh. Engaging, even. Garak has spent the last two weeks looking at every person he meets to determine whether they, instead, might be the person with whom he can fall in love who will reciprocate, but he dismissed her as he has everyone else.

“Julian isn’t exactly an ordinary Human.” Dax’s glance at Julian is fond, but Garak sees the tiny flinch.

“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!” How Garak has missed that expression on Julian’s face. “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—” Julian makes a glorious noise of outrage and Garak basks in it “—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—”

Julian is flushed and his eyes bright as he demands, “Repetition? May I remind you that you’re the man who claims that the repetitive epic is the highest form—”

Dax laughs at them both and Garak realizes how badly he has erred in how much he revealed in this brief conversation. “Not much room for a third in this conversation, is there?”

She’s too close to the truth. Garak lifts his fork carefully and tastes his meal, though there’s little that can compare to the sight of Julian when he gets truly worked up in an argument. “The discussions at my bookshop will be significantly more decorous. 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.” He can’t seem to stop slipping, saying *dear doctor* and *Julian* aloud when he should say neither. It’s distressing.

Garak does his best to avoid Julian for the next few days as he prepares to open his bookshop, and Julian makes it easier, as far as Garak can tell, by avoiding him as well. Though Julian has real responsibilities, so Garak may be ascribing motive to his action where none exists. Still, when Garak opens the doors of his bookshop to the public and sees the throngs—Julian among them—he can’t help the genuine smile that slips onto his face. Terok Nor seems to be infecting him with sincerity. Truly, it feels like an infection—Garak’s skin keeps feeling more peculiar, almost itchy, and he’s still having dizzy spells, but he assumes they’ll stop soon.

There are not so many Cardassians on this station that Garak would overlook a single one, and certainly not the pretty young woman lingering by the wall. He knows who she is by rumor—Tora Ziyal, half-breed daughter of Gul Dukat and one of his many Bajoran concubines—and he thinks, of all people, here is one who might be persuaded to love him. “Are you looking for something in particular, my dear?”

“Oh!” She blushes more than a full Cardassian would. It’s a little reminiscent of Julian, almost, when he’s particularly excited. “Just—”

“Tora, nice to see you here.” Julian interrupts, and Garak doesn’t know whether he’s glad to have the opportunity to talk to Julian, or resentful given his particular circumstances.

“Oh!” Tora says again. “Doctor Bashir—you can call me Ziyal, everyone does. I’m excited to have Cardassian books. My—my father talked about a few books, sometimes, but I never had a chance to read any of them.”

Hardly a shock, given her regrettable parentage. “Count yourself lucky, my dear. Gul Dukat is not known for his literary taste.” He smiles at her and marvels at the way she melts a little. “But I’m sure I can recommend something of quality that you might enjoy.” It’s been a long time since he put any effort into a seduction of this kind, a delicate thing. His feelings for Julian are such a stunning blunt thing that they’ve overcome any attempt at that kind of thing. But Ziyal—Ziyal appreciates the attention, it seems.

Of course, then Julian has to go and say, “Garak has very strong opinions about books,” and smile at him in a way that makes Garak a little breathless. And then he adds, “And very specific tastes,” and that—no, Garak is determined.

“As does the doctor,” he tells Ziyal, carefully not looking at Julian. “I’m afraid some of the niceties of Cardassian literature are lost on him. Perhaps you will appreciate them more.” He smiles at Ziyal again.

Julian baits him again, baits him into saying *my dear doctor* again, like Julian wants to hear him say it, and he falls into the familiar banter, until Ziyal saves him again. Even then—even after they agree to a peculiar three-person book group, which will be an absurdly painful exercise—Garak can’t help saying, “Goodnight, my dear doctor,” as Julian leaves. Then he looks to Ziyal. “While I may have agreed to this Andorian nonsense with Doctor Bashir, I believe that I promised you something Cardassian.”

“Yes,” Ziyal says. “You did.” For all her blushes, there’s a strength to her that Garak appreciates. It must come from her mother. “Where do you think I should start?”

Garak begins to recommend the Never-Ending Sacrifice automatically and then thinks, perhaps he should take a different approach to her. “What do you enjoy?”

She looks startled. “In literature?”

“No, more generally. It will help me recommend something.” And provide him with useful information, such as what she’s willing to admit to liking.

“Painting, mostly. Art.” She looks embarrassed. “I’d like to study art, but I know that isn’t—”

“Don’t allow anyone to convince you that Cardassia lacks art,” Garak says, too sharply. He tempers his tone before he continues. “We have a long history of artistic forms—literary, oral, and visual.” He allows his gaze to linger on her for a minute. “I suggest you begin with *Shades of Cardassia*—one of the great poetic narratives that describes the life of an artist cast out of the central art academy. Here, follow me.” He leads her into the shelves and locates the correct data rod. When he offers it to her, she brushes her fingertips against his almost hesitantly. Her skin is hotter than Julian’s.

“My—my father gave me a Cardassian sauna holoprogram,” she says, and meets his eyes. “He said it was very accurate. Perhaps we could discuss the book there, once I’ve read it?”

“Yes.” Garak feels almost as though he’s standing outside his body. “Yes, I would be delighted.”

Julian seems to stop by the bookshop every day after that—looking through the selection, drinking a cup of raktajino before going to the infirmary, teasing Garak about the prominence of certain books over others—and more often than not, they end up arguing over at least one meal, sometimes two. It leaves Garak dizzy with fondness for him every time. He wonders if Julian can see it on his face, if all of his carefully-crafted facades have collapsed. He hopes not.

His discussion of the Shran Saga with Julian and Ziyal is very nearly a disaster. He has to remind himself, over and over, to bring Ziyal into the discussion. If he does not, he and Julian readily exclude her, nearly shouting at each other over their opinions, and he feels the insistent thrum of desire for Julian that he has worked so hard to suppress. When Julian is finally paged to the infirmary for yet another catastrophe—really, they should arrange for another doctor—he looks at Ziyal and says, “How are you enjoying *Shades of Cardassia*?”

“Very much,” Ziyal says. “I should be finished in a day or two. Would you like to try the sauna program then?”

“Very much,” Garak answers. His mouth is dry.

* * * * *

Garak is sipping at a glass of kanar in Quark’s as he waits for Ziyal when Julian shows up. “Hello, Garak,” Julian says, and slips into the empty seat next to Garak. His elbow very nearly brushes Garak’s.

“My dear doctor.” There’s that damnable *dear* again. “Finished in the infirmary already?”

Julian knocks his knuckles against the bar, a curious Human custom that’s never been satisfactorily explained to Garak. “Shockingly quiet today,” he says. Given Garak’s size and the placement of the bar stools, Garak can almost feel his closeness. “I’m meeting Miles for darts in a bit, but we could have a drink before then.”

A drink, Garak thinks bitterly. It isn’t Julian’s fault, not really. Garak has made clear, over and over, how much he desires Julian’s company despite how Julian feels—or does not feel—about him, so how can he blame Julian for offering his friendship? “I believe we are already.” Quark has set a glass of whiskey next to Julian’s elbow. Ziyal walks into the bar, her hair carefully ornamented and beaded, as though prepared for some kind of—assignation. “Excuse me, doctor.” There, at least, he manages to suppress *my dear*. He walks to Ziyal. “My dear.” He offers her his hand. “It’s a pleasure.”

Ziyal beams at Julian as they walk past. “Doctor Bashir! I’m going to find something Tellarite for us to read next.”

“Oh good.” Garak flatters himself that he hears some discomfort in Julian’s voice. “Tellarite, yes.”

“Have a nice night!” Ziyal is nearly beaming as she leads him into the holosuite. Garak feels the blast of heat first, a welcome blanket across his skin, and removes his clothing to the bounds of propriety as Ziyal does the same. “Is it like Cardassia?”

“Yes,” Garak manages to say. It is very like the Cardassian saunas he has visited—great flat rocks, heat everywhere and sun overhead, to allow basking. Ziyal stretches out on one of the rocks, her face turned up to the false sun, and he contemplates whether he is willing to show his belly.

“Are you—” Her eyes land on the patch of weak skin where his belly wound has healed. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Garak says wearily. The skin has begun to degrade visibly. He doesn’t like to contemplate what it might mean. “No, my dear, merely the curse that keeps me in this shape.”

“Do you know how to break it?”

Garak looks at her sharply, but her eyes are guileless. How dreadful, he thinks, to have been raised in the slavery to which Dukat consigned his daughter, only to be brought to yet another place where she is very much alone. “I believe so,” he says. “But it will take great effort and I am not prepared for the task.” He should find some way to cut loose this inconvenient sentiment he feels for Julian—dig it out at the root, even—so that he might focus his attention on Ziyal. “Tell me what you thought of the novel, my dear.” He luxuriates in the heat, murmuring a few comments in response to Ziyal’s thoughts. He wonders if she knows enough of Cardassian custom to realize that his answers are not flirtatious, but cannot find it in him to flirt as he should. The heat sinks deep into his skin, into his core, until he is finally, finally warm. When the holoprogram signals that they have only a few minutes remaining, Garak stands reluctantly.

“I hope you enjoyed it,” Ziyal says. She draws close, close enough that she’s nearly touching him, and tilts her face up toward his for a kiss. Garak leans down to kiss her even as some dispassionate part of himself remains standing straight, watching him act. Ziyal’s lips are the correct temperature, her scent pleasant, her skin softer than a Cardassian’s but firmer than a Human’s beneath his hands. He allows her to kiss him—allows himself to kiss her—for the last minutes of the program. A wave of dizziness swamps him, and for the briefest second he thinks perhaps this is it, perhaps all it took was someone like Ziyal loving him. Then it passes and he is still himself, the beast.

“Thank you, my dear.” He leans down to brush his horn against her forehead, an outrageous declaration in any other circumstances. Then he leads the way out of the holosuite and his stomach sinks. Julian is playing darts with O’Brien, and he is as magnificent holding back as he is in full glory. He throws a beautiful bullseye that leaves O’Brien complaining, and Garak can’t help but come up behind him and murmur, “Impressive performance, doctor.”

“Lucky.” Julian turns and tilts his head back enough to meet Garak’s eyes, and Garak thinks how easy it would be to lean down and fit his mouth to Julian’s as he did Ziyal’s. “I should—”

Garak doesn’t know where Ziyal has gone and he finds that he doesn’t much care. All that he wants is Julian’s continued attention. “I’m afraid that I’m feeling a bit—out of the ordinary.” He wills Julian to take the bait.

“I should run a scan just to be safe,” Julian says. He leads Garak to the infirmary and has him sit on the examination table, lowered enough that he would be eye-level if he would only look at Garak. Instead, Julian peers very closely at Garak’s neck and runs a tricorder along it. “I have your previous scans,” he says. “I’ll compare them and see if anything significant has changed. Can you tell me—” It almost sounds like a hitch in his breath. “Can you tell me what you were doing when you first began to feel odd?”

His hand is so steady. “I was in the holosuite, engaged in a—” The tricorder beeps alarmingly.

“That’s strange, it’s as though your cellular structure has begun to—degrade internally, but without any visible exterior changes.” Julian’s voice is very tight. “Would you mind removing your shirt?”

Garak can’t help jerking around to look at Julian. He isn’t cruel, so his only purpose in asking can be medical, but he sounds so hesitant—Garak almost wants to reassure him that he’s well aware of Julian’s lack of romantic interest in him and will take nothing from the request. “And what, my dear doctor, do you hope to discover beneath my shirt that your tricorder can’t reveal?” There’s that damn *my dear* again.

“I won’t touch you,” Julian says, as though Garak needs further reassurance of his lack of interest. “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.”

Of course. Julian is, undoubtedly, better than any machine could be at understanding what’s wrong with Garak, but— “Very well.” Julian steps back and Garak undoes the zipper that will release his shirt.

“Are you having trouble with dexterity?”

Garak looks from Julian’s face to his own fingers and flexes them experimentally. How vividly he remembers the day that Julian gave him back dexterity. Maybe that’s all it is, he thinks desperately. Maybe he’s only *grateful* to Julian, and as time passes, Ziyal will supplant Julian, or someone else. “Only that which comes of having these blunt instruments for fingers.”

“Ah.” He hears Julian’s breath catch sharply as he looks at Garak, and Garak knows what he sees. Julian reaches out as though to touch the patch of skin on his abdomen and then stops, so close that Garak thinks if he closed his eyes, he would be able to feel it. “Was it like this before the holosuite?”

“I believe it began when I arrived here.” Most likely it means that his time is running out. He wonders if returning to Empok Nor would slow the progression.

“Any pain?” Julian makes a face and corrects himself unprompted. “Any tenderness or heightened sensation?”

Yes, Garak thinks, but he says, “I suppose you’ll have to test it for me,” because Julian’s fingers are so close and he wants very badly to feel them.

“Tell me if it hurts,” Julian says, and touches his fingers very softly to Garak’s skin. “Anything?”

For a bare instant, Garak’s world narrows to the coolness of Julian’s fingers against his skin. He wants to ask Julian to press his hand there, to put both his hands on Garak and stroke his skin—but he steadies his breathing and says only, “It may be more sensitive than it has been.”

Julian strokes his fingers across the skin, then lifts them away. “The skin is hotter there—I would usually suspect an infection, but the tricorder didn’t register anything.”

“It was—” Julian touches his shoulder, and Garak can’t help hissing in a breath. “It was a Cardassian sauna program. The holosuite was quite warm.”

“Your skin was exposed?”

Garak meets Julian’s eyes, and he looks almost unhappy. “Yes, it was. I would imagine the heat is from—the program.” With Julian’s hand on him like this, it’s impossible to imagine that it was some step toward breaking the curse with Ziyal.

“Well.” Julian’s hand is very suddenly gone, and then he takes a step further 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 has to make it sound like he doesn’t care—like it’s funny that Julian should try to see him so often—lest it become clear how much he values each visit.

“I read very quickly!” The outrage in Julian’s voice carries a tinge of fear. “I like to have something new to read, after a long day in the infirmary.”

“Doctor, if every person here read at the prodigious rate that you do—” Julian’s face changes, and Garak recalls that Julian conceals his extraordinary nature here. “If they read as *swiftly* as you do, with the same level of comprehension, I could have a veritable empire of bookshops.”

The tension drains from Julian’s face, and Garak hears the laugh in his voice when he says, “I’m familiar with your opinion of my reading comprehension.”

“Nevertheless, despite your lamentable taste, your grasp of literature surpasses that of anyone else on this station.” When Garak stands, it brings him very close to Julian again. Julian looks up at him, and there—Garak could simply lean down, touch his mouth to Julian’s, and it wouldn’t break the curse but it would be—

“Careful, Garak, that almost sounded like a compliment.” Julian smiles a little and then turns away to enter the new scans into Garak’s file. Garak can see over his shoulder as he does it, and he spots something—

“You’re still investigating remedies for my memory loss?” That sends him reeling. He’d assumed that Julian would give it up entirely when he learned about Garak’s past in the Obsidian Order.

Julian continues looking at his data terminal screen. “Yes. 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."

The blood pounds through Garak's body. "You expect that the curse will be broken, doctor?"

"Ziyal is in love with you," Julian says, and it's gutting to hear from his mouth. He still won't look at Garak, putting away his tools instead.

It takes Garak a long time to compose himself enough to answer. "I suppose she is," he manages to say.

"And you're—"

Garak can't stand to hear him say it. "Thank you, doctor, for your diagnosis," he says abruptly, and leaves.

* * * * *

Garak doesn't think much of it when Julian is called away in the middle of their breakfast to the infirmary—it happens often enough that it's unremarkable, and he finishes Julian's breakfast and goes back to the shop. He expects that Julian will stop by later—tomorrow, even—and they'll pick up their discussion of which poetic forms can be read through the Universal Translator and which require truly comprehending the origin language. But Julian doesn't appear in the shop the next day, or the next, or the next, and when Garak goes looking for him, he catches a glimpse of Julian hurrying back into a sterile field and decides to find him later.

He grows increasingly worried when he hears nothing from Julian over the course of a full week. It's not that he thinks Julian has decided to suddenly cut contact—he spends roughly twelve hours worrying about it, on the third day, and then discards that absurd self-doubt. Julian would never do such a thing, not while he was still concerned over Garak's physical health. Instead, Garak begins to worry about Julian's own health and sanity. An entire week passes before he gets a comm from Julian.

It's almost a physical relief to see his face. "Doctor, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"If you have a moment, would you stop by my quarters?" Julian's voice is very strange, and for a moment, Garak fools himself into thinking—

Then Julian answers the door to his quarters, and Garak's breath catches for an entirely different reason. "You look dreadful."

It's an understatement. Julian's eyes are sunken and bloodshot, his face shaded with six days' growth of beard, his lips chapped dry as though he's been chewing on them. "I don't doubt it." He steps out of the way so that Garak can walk in.

Garak had meant to say any number of things, but he finds himself asking, "What do you need?"

"If you could—talk to me, that would be helpful." Julian turns away from him and walks to the couch in his quarters, then sits.

Garak is poorly suited for conversations that involve—processing emotions. He doesn't want to abandon Julian, but neither does he want to fail to provide what Julian needs. "If you'd like to talk to someone, I'm sure Lieutenant Dax, or Miles—" They both seem suitably empathetic.

"I don't want to *talk to someone*," Julian snaps, and there's violence in his tone. "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 looks at Garak and his eyes are very weary. "My body metabolizes sedatives very quickly or I would just take one."

So that's what it is. "Surely you've had patients die before."

"Indeed," Julian says, and there's the slightest note of hysteria in his voice. "I have a marvelous memory, Garak. I remember every one of them. Quite vividly."

How horrifying that would be. Gaps aside, Garak's memory is excellent, but the passage of time smoothes over everything like water on rock. "Yes, I would imagine so." He sits down on the couch beside Julian, careful to leave space between them.

"Would you please just—" Julian's voice breaks, and Garak can't stand it.

"I don't believe we ever finished our discussion of Shoggoth," Garak says. It's what they began to discuss the last time Julian lost patients, or at least the last time that he recalls. "You expressed some undoubtedly ill-informed opinions based on your failure to identify the correct guilty party."

"Shoggoth. Did it—" He sees Julian struggling for words, watches him grasp the arm of the couch and wishes he knew what to do. "Tell me why it's superior to the mystery novels I've given you."

Garak would do whatever he thought might help, but he finds himself asking, "Have you eaten anything, my dear doctor?" He doesn't even try to stop *my dear* this time. "You really do look—"

Julian scrubs his hand across his face. "I know how I look, 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 that what you've done in the past? Summoned someone and ordered them to chatter?" Garak can't help but try to bait him into one of their back-and-forths, anything to drive that weary misery from his face.

"Sometimes." Julian looks distant. "In the first few years of my residency, we all did it for each other." Then his entire face twists into an expression of *loathing* that Garak has never seen before. "You have no idea how much time and energy I put into appearing—*less* than I am."

"Oh?" Garak keeps his voice very even. He can't help but feeling as though Julian is cracking his chest open for Garak to see inside.

“You should have seen me when I first arrived. Tripping over my feet, flailing, jumping at every noise and throwing myself at Jadzia.” He laughs a little. “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.”

Even when Julian was freshly on Empok Nor, he never appeared mediocre. “You’re the chief medical officer on this station. I would hardly call that mediocrity.”

“In everything but medicine.” Julian’s knuckles are bloodless from how tightly he grips the arm of the couch and Garak wants very much to take his hand. “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.”

This, Garak thinks, is Julian’s deepest fear, and it terrifies him that Julian would share it with him. “Is that what happened this time?”

Julian looks away, toward the door. “I don’t know.” His voice wavers. “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 mean it seriously. He’s been here long enough to know that Julian would be outcast, possibly even expelled from Starfleet.

“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.” The disgust is evident in his voice. “And, selfishly, I suppose I must think that me being here is—worth whatever cost there might be to other people—”

Garak can’t stand it anymore—he reaches out and takes Julian by the wrist. Julian’s pulse is rapid under his fingers. “Don’t be ridiculous.” He tries to keep his voice light, but the emotion creeps into it anyway. “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. Your choice plainly reveals that you are not an ordinary human.” *My dear Julian.* “And if you are concerned, 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.” There’s a desperate kind of hope on Julian’s face. He slides his hand down to take Julian’s, and Julian clutches it so tightly that, if Garak were anything but what he is, the grip would hurt. They sit like that for a moment, so long that Garak very nearly pulls Julian against him, and then prevents it by 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.”

Julian nods, and Garak speaks for a long time, so long that his throat is nearly hoarse by the time Julian releases his hand and murmurs, “Thank you, Garak.”

“Of course.” Garak walks him to his bed and watches carefully as Julian slides under the covers. “Sleep well.”

* * * * *

Garak sleeps briefly, stops by the infirmary to threaten the doctor on duty as to exactly what Julian should do if he happens to stop by, and then goes to the bookshop. He has no way to track Julian’s movements, but one of the nurses in the infirmary comms him to let him know that Julian has arrived—it’s good to know that some people are still afraid of him—and Garak gives him three hours before he goes to be sure that Julian is behaving as he should. He is not. Garak walks into his office, slides his fingers beneath Julian’s elbow, and lifts him bodily from his chair. Julian leans close, and for a moment Garak holds him there, feeling Julian’s heartbeat against him. Then he leads Julian to the bookshop and makes him sit in a lounge chair. Garak takes his time picking out a book and replicating a cup of red-leaf tea for Julian and then brings both to him.

“I’m fine,” Julian lies.

How Garak wants to cup his cheek for a moment, or stroke his fingers through Julian’s hair—anything to offer the comfort that he suspects Julian needs. But Julian has never suggested that he wants that from Garak—he called Garak to be a distraction only, last night—and so Garak has to content himself with saying, “I’m quite confident that the beverages produced by the infirmary replicators are inferior to those in my bookshop. And I’m simply offering an opportunity for you to better understand the principles of Cardassian enigma tale structure that I explained yesterday.”

“Garak—” Julian looks down at the reader and his face changes. “Is this a *children’s book*?”

There’s the outraged tone that Garak loves so well. “It’s an introductory text. Cardassian children are able to understand literature well before Humans of their age. This is a well-respected collection used in literary education programs—” Julian is smiling, even if his smile is a little weak.

“Of course,” Julian says. “How good of you to make allowance for my limited grasp of the genre.”

“Naturally, my dear doctor.” Garak forces himself to walk away then, before he does something unpardonable like kiss Julian’s forehead.

terok nor (part II)

Chapter Summary

“Garak—you’re dying. I don’t know how to save you myself—”

Garak looks at him and feels a stab of horror as he realizes what Julian means. “No,” he says frantically. “No—I forbid it—” He tries desperately to sit up and can’t.

“I’m going to go see Enabran Tain,” Julian says, “and you can’t stop me going.”

“Julian—” He scrambles for the words that will persuade Julian. “You can’t begin to understand who he is—once you put yourself in his power, there will be no escape—” What Tain would do, to have someone like Julian to take apart—

“It’s the only way I can think to save your life.” Julian’s voice is unsteady as he says it.

Garak watches Julian carefully after that to make sure that he doesn’t slip back into overwork. He dislikes the infirmary, but he makes note of the hours at which he sees Julian coming and going, and occasionally resorts to intimidating a nurse into warning him if Julian is there for too long. He does his best to ensure that Julian actually consumes his meal when the two of them eat together. “My dear doctor,” he says, “while it is superior to most other beverages, a man cannot live on red-leaf tea alone.”

He sees a flash of laughter in Julian’s eyes, an expression that has returned more and more lately. “You know, I managed to feed myself quite well before you began to harass me about it,” Julian says, but he accepts the roll that Garak has offered him and takes a large bite of it.

“Incidentally, I’ve been contemplating your questionable selection of our next novel for discussion,” Garak says. “It’s been quite some time since we read anything Cardassian—”

Julian swallows rapidly, and Garak does not observe the line of his throat. “I see you had an ulterior motive when you suggested that I eat. And it has not, it’s been longer since we read anything Human. I thought we were branching out from our own cultural backgrounds?”

“You must admit, it’s more satisfying to recommend a personal favorite to another person and experience their reaction to it than it is to read something entirely new.”

Julian looks startled. “In some ways, I suppose, but—”

“It makes for a more stimulating discussion, that is. One person’s greater familiarity creates opportunities to identify—themes and techniques that the other has not yet observed, while the fresh perspective of the other allows for new interpretations.”

Julian raises an eyebrow. “You mean you actually listened when I told you that *The Never-Ending Sacrifice* would have been better with a little more poetic variation to it?”

Garak wonders if Julian recalls his admission that that’s when Garak first began to feel—but of course Julian recalls it. Julian recalls everything. “I merely think—”

“I think you’re overlooking the risk of one person becoming overly defensive of the literary merit of a work, or of their individual connection to it,” Julian says. “I’d think that you, of all people, would say that sentimental attachment—”

“Of course.” Garak’s mouth dries, and he has to take a mouthful of tea before he can speak again. “Of course, if a reader is *sentimental* as to the literary work, it prevents clear-eyed debate. I realize that you may struggle with such attachments—”

“An unforgivable insult,” Julian says, and his smile is so warm that Garak finds himself thrown further off balance. Thankfully, he sees Ziyal looking around the replimat for a place to sit and can wave her over to join them.

The headaches are an inconvenience whose significance Garak wishes he could ignore. Certainly, he is accustomed to discomfort, but for so long the worst of it has been dulled by the endorphins that his implant provides him. It’s been a long time—a very long time—since he’s been plagued with the kind of sudden stabbing headache that seems to afflict him now. It doesn’t help that his skin seems to be giving way too, the areas that Julian has healed turning dark and swollen. When they use the Cardassian sauna holoprogram, he catches Ziyal darting glances at his bare skin and she does a very poor job of concealing her reactions. He hasn’t kissed her since the first time in the program, and it seems that she’s come to accept his lack of romantic interest and sees him now only as a fellow exile.

Given Ziyal’s expression after their latest session, he’s unsurprised when Julian comms him shortly thereafter to summon him to the infirmary.

“Doctor.” He pastes a pleasant, mildly uninterested expression on his face. “No matter what you say, I am not going to suffer through another Bajoran folk epic—”

Julian looks inexplicably sad. “There’s no veto option, Garak. I haven’t forgotten about your cellular degeneration, you know. I’d like to check that nothing’s changed.”

How Garak has dreaded this. He can envision the course of the conversation, laid out before it begins, and yet he can’t steer himself away from it. “If you must.” He looks around carefully to ensure there is no one else to see before he removes his shirt.

Julian does a very poor job of stifling a gasp. “Garak! When did this happen?”

Garak avoids his eyes briefly, even though that itself reveals too much. “I don’t examine myself in the mirror on a daily basis,” he says tightly. “I don’t much like what I see in it.” Julian looks curiously embarrassed at that, as though he’d forgotten Garak is monstrous. “I have found myself with slightly less energy,” he admits, and then, because he can feel how closely Julian is watching, he yields and says, “Perhaps a mildly reduced ability to focus for long periods of time.” The idea that it will diminish further terrifies him.

“Well, that explains your opinions on Preloc’s early work—you skimmed all the dull bits.” Julian’s voice is very gentle. He moves with exaggerated slowness, presumably to ensure that Garak can see what he’s doing as he lays a hand on Garak’s shoulder, well clear of the wounded area. Garak can’t stop a shiver at the cool softness of his hand. Julian scans the area with his tricorder and exhales sharply. “It’s as though—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.” Julian shifts his hand on Garak’s shoulder, as though he wants to stroke it. “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?”

Pain lances through Garak’s head, almost blinding. He braces himself against it, as if that will help. “I have experienced periodic discomfort in my head.” When Julian begins to dither about more brain scans, Garak grows impatient. “I suspect that the implant in my parietal lobe is succumbing to—overuse.”

“You said it wasn’t working anymore.” Julian’s hand is still on his shoulder and Garak can’t keep himself from pressing a little closer.

“When I—came back to myself, on Empok Nor, I still knew about the implant. Living that way was—” Unspeakable. Torture worse than any physical suffering. “I found a way to turn the implant on, whenever I wanted. 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.” Weakness. Tain would be disgusted.

“How long ago was that?” Julian’s voice is even, but then, Julian is a doctor and accustomed to hearing all kinds of nastiness from patients.

“My grasp of the passage of time has not always been exact. A year, perhaps two.” The days on Empok Nor, before Julian, are a long steady blur of misery. “I do realize that the only option is to cease my use of it.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Julian says promptly, as though it wouldn’t be all the more humiliating to have *Julian* there while Garak suffers through withdrawal. “You don’t have to do it alone.”

Garak touches Julian’s wrist, and he means to pull away from Julian, but instead he closes his fingers gently around the fragile skin there. “I would prefer to be alone.”

“I could keep you in the infirmary.”

How absurd this must look to anyone else, Garak’s monstrous form clinging to Julian’s wrist desperately. Garak forces himself to let go of Julian, take a deep breath, and stand. “Let’s not delude ourselves about your ability to detain me here.”

Julian looks strangely frantic. “Comm me if you need anything—anything at all, all right? And if you won’t stay in the infirmary, I’m going to come check on you when my shift ends.”

“I don’t doubt it, my dear,” Garak says, and the expression on Julian’s face is almost enough to keep him here

Now that he’s admitted to it, the pain in his head is spreading rapidly, branching along the nerves, and he nearly staggers to the turbolift. The rudimentary device that he created to trigger the implant is in his quarters, and it’s the work of an instant to crush it in his hand. In a single miraculous moment, the pain in his head stops. The relief itself is almost eye-watering, and Garak takes the brief respite to use the sonic shower and drink a little tea. He knows what will come next from the few times he tried to turn off the implant before, and it’s only half an hour or so before the discomfort begins to spread through his entire body. His muscles ache and he can’t seem to stand or sit still. He lies down, deluding himself that he’ll be able to sleep, but the shaking that makes him shudder every so often prevents that. When he tries to read instead to distract himself, the words swim in front of his eyes. The room is cold and too bright, and he turns the lights down and the heat as high as it will go.

He doesn’t know when the anger begins to seep in, only that at a certain point he finds himself swamped with it. He looks down at the broken device, and for a very weak moment, he wonders how long it would take to fix it—then he flings it to the floor in disgust and smashes it beneath one foot. Clumsy—how clumsy he is in this body! He destroys a lamp with a swing of one arm, grips the edge of the table and shoves it hard to see it topple. If he still had his claws, he could rend great slashes in the walls, but Julian has taken those from him, turned him from something dangerous into a tame beast so that he can ape the man he used to be. His door chimes and Garak recoils. Worse, Julian’s voice comes over the comm. Garak doesn’t register his words, only that he’s *there*, and the weakness in him opens the door.

“You shouldn’t have come.” Garak can’t stand still, but at least he can try to keep his lumbering steps even. “Julian—” He uses the name before he remembers he shouldn’t. “You should leave.” Garak can see that Julian is unafraid, and it only makes him angrier. Julian withdraws a hypospray from his bag and gestures with it at Garak. “You should leave,” Garak says again, and then, because he hasn’t said it clearly to either of them yet, “I don’t *want* you here.”

He hears the hiss of the hypo and insistent beeping and realizes that Julian is scanning him. Then Julian peels part of Garak’s shirt away, and Garak snarls and jerks free. “I don’t suppose I could persuade you to come to the infirmary,” Julian says. Garak does hear fear in his voice now. Julian would be a fool not to be frightened of Garak like this.

“To amuse those Bajorans?” Garak stalks to a corner of the room, further from Julian. “To watch you wring your hands at how little you can do? I don’t want you here.”

“You’re my patient,” Julian says.

“Yes, your *patient*—your science project, your little curiosity since the day you came to Empok Nor.” Since the day Garak was foolish enough to think that there was a way out of this curse at all, since he tricked himself into believing that Julian would be his salvation, one way or another. “And you wouldn’t leave well enough alone when I told you to leave—you had to bring me here—” Here, to watch Julian, to spend every day with him and settle for whatever scraps Julian will give him.

“I wouldn’t say you were well enough alone,” Julian says, and it’s as though he’s hooked something sharp into one of Garak’s oozing wounds. “I’m trying to save your life.”

Of all the absurdities. “You don’t even know who you’re trying to save!” Garak finds himself almost laughing at the idea of it. “You have no idea what I was, before this.”

“You were in the Obsidian Order,” Julian says. Julian, who can’t begin to contemplate what that means—Julian, who has never sat in a cell for hours with Garak’s eyes on him, imagining what Garak might be about to do—Julian, whose hands save life instead of stealing it away—

“*In the—I was the protege of Enabran Tain himself;*” Garak snarls, and if Julian had the slightest idea what any of this really meant, he would flinch—no, he would *cower* away at that name. “Tain was the Obsidian Order.” Garak remembers how Tain towered over everyone, over Garak, even after the curse took hold. “Not even the Central Command dared challenge him. And I was his right hand. My future was limitless until I threw it away.” He almost wishes that he could make Julian understand, but— “You, doctor, you chose to hide yourself away and make yourself less than you are, but I was—” He grabs the closest heavy thing at hand, a reader, and throws it as hard as he can. “It’s pathetic to think that this is what my life has been reduced to, this lump of flesh—” He wants to hurt something, *destroy* something. “You have no idea what I’ve done.” He can hear the growl creeping into his voice.

“I thought you didn’t remember,” Julian says softly, and it’s all wrong. “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—”

How Garak hates him for it—not for being unable to love Garak, but for being so revoltingly selfless and giving—for giving himself up to Empok Nor in the first place, for trying to break the curse through science and magic and now, still, trying to patch Garak’s missing mind back together. “I could tell you anything,” Garak says. When he takes a step toward Julian, Julian goes 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.” Garak’s beginning to think he wouldn’t know the difference either.

“You don’t have to lie to me.” Julian’s eyes are still kind, and it’s monstrous that he should look at Garak like that.

“Ah, but what else do I have to entertain myself?” Garak takes another heavy step toward Julian, and another, and still Julian stands there. “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.”

“I’m sorry. I thought you enjoyed my company.”

It almost makes Garak laugh. “I did!” He wishes that Julian would get angry, would snarl back, would do anything to show that he’s affected by Garak’s words. He kicks a chair out of the way, and still Julian doesn’t move. “That’s the worst part. I can’t believe that I actually enjoyed eating mediocre food and staring at your smug, sanctimonious face.” Admiring his clever turns of phrase, his curious little insights, his satisfied little smiles— There’s nothing else at hand to grab, so all he can do is snarl, “I *hate* this place and I—I hate *you!*” He hates Julian for not caring enough to react, for proving again that he’s just the self-sacrificing type, that he’ll flirt with Garak in the way that cuts closest without ever being affected by it when it leaves Garak’s heart pounding.

“Okay, Garak, that’s your prerogative,” Julian says, as though Garak’s a small child. “But you’re my patient, and right now, I really think you should lie down.”

When Julian starts to approach him, Garak loses control. “Get away from me,” he growls, even as he lunges for Julian. “Get away—get out, I don’t want you here!” The words stumble out of his mouth twisted up on themselves, and when Garak lurches toward Julian again, the ground leaps up to meet him.

He wakes slowly. The madness has mostly passed, but now his physical weakness is suffocating. If someone came at him with a knife, he’s not sure he could stop them. What rich irony.

“Hello, Garak.”

“Julian?” He wants to reach for Julian, but his arms are leaden. “What happened?” He recalls shouting at Julian, threatening to attack him—

“You collapsed. You’re deteriorating rapidly.” There’s a dull tone to Julian’s voice that alarms him.

“And you haven’t found a solution? Really, Doctor, I’m disappointed.”

“Garak—you’re dying. I don’t know how to save you myself—”

Garak looks at him and feels a stab of horror as he realizes what Julian means. “*No,*” he says frantically. “No—I forbid it—” He tries desperately to sit up and can’t.

“I’m going to go see Enabran Tain,” Julian says, “and you can’t stop me going.”

“Julian—” He scrambles for the words that will persuade Julian. “You can’t begin to understand who he is—once you put yourself in his power, there will be no escape—” What Tain would do, to have someone like Julian to take apart—

“It’s the only way I can think to save your life.” Julian’s voice is unsteady as he says it.

No, no, Garak refuses to let this happen—he summons all his strength and manages to grip Julian’s wrist. “If you go—” He gropes for a threat that will be enough. “I will tell everyone your secret. Starfleet will dismiss you—there will be no place for you to come back to. Surely that isn’t worth some—harebrained playacting at heroism.” He pleads for Julian to understand, not to throw himself away—Garak is nothing, compared to Tain’s menace, to the threat he will pose to Julian—

“To save the beast of Empok Nor? Haven’t you worked it out yet, Garak?” The sad smile on Julian’s face doesn’t make any sense. He slides his wrist away, until Garak has nothing to hold onto but his fingers. “I think it is,” Julian says, and then—then he touches his mouth to Garak’s forehead and Garak’s ears roar.

Garak is familiar with hallucinations. Enabran Tain is the next to visit him in the infirmary and says, “Elim, I’m surprised at you. The Garak I know would never—” and then melts away into the darkness. Garak gets up and staggers through the corridors to his own quarters, and the corridors are lined with strange faces that hate him. He hallucinates Julian again, the baffling pressure of Julian’s mouth against his skin, Julian’s hand soft on his face. “Stay alive, Garak,” he says. Garak tries to cocoon himself in blankets in his bed and Mila appears, her face sorrowful. “Elim,” she says. “I’ve missed you so much since you disappeared—”

The hallucinations come in many different forms, but Julian is there frequently, urging him to survive. Once, oddly, he comes in through the door to Garak’s quarters instead of simply appearing, and Garak almost laughs. “My dear doctor,” he forces out, “What a pleasure it’s been to hallucinate you.”

“I need—from Tain—” Julian’s voice fades in and out.

Garak grabs his hand and grips it tightly. Under no circumstances— “Don’t—don’t go to Tain!” His muscles spasm as he tries to hold on. “Not worth the risk—” Julian’s starting to fade out in front of him.

“It’ll be worth it if it saves you—”

Garak can’t get air into his lungs, but he clutches Julian’s hand. “Not—” He thinks he can feel Julian’s grasp slackening. “Julian—”

Everything is very dark around him. There’s a strange stillness where his heartbeat should be. Then his blood burns through his body and he hears a voice that sounds like Julian. “Damn it, Garak, I love you—don’t go and die now—”

The darkness turns to blinding light and the shock shoots through Garak’s body, stiffening every muscle for an instant. Agony ripples through his bones as they crack and reshape themselves. The world refocuses itself, and when he opens his eyes, Julian is staring down at him. “Julian?”

“Garak?” Julian looks disbelieving.

Garak’s body feels—wrong. He lifts his hand and it’s too light. When he brings it into his field of vision, it’s smaller, the fingers oddly dextrous. He flexes and the fingers move. “In the flesh.”

Julian snatches up a tricorder. “How—” He keeps glancing away from Garak and then back, as though he can’t believe who the body is in front of him. “There’s no sign of the degeneration, and all of your blood chemistry is back to normal—”

His body still aches from the transformation, but there’s a euphoric near-hysteria creeping through Garak’s body and threatening to emerge from his throat in some way. Garak flexes his fingers again, just to watch the way that they respond, and then brings them very cautiously to his face. There are deep scars there, but the ridges of his cheeks have softened, the horn on his forehead melted back into the scoop shape that belongs there. “It seems you’ve—cured me, doctor,” and *cure* is hard to say. “Computer, mirror.” He recognizes the face that stares back at him, but he can’t help feeling that it belongs to someone else after all this time.

“Let me see your wounds,” Julian says. Garak’s fingers move strangely as he unfastens his shirt, but it’s a relief to remove it from his skin. When Julian touches the scar tissue of his old wound, the contact lights up Garak’s body and he gasps in a breath. “Does that cause discomfort?”

Discomfort is not the word Garak would use to describe his reaction to Julian’s touch. “My skin appears to be extraordinarily sensitive. Physical contact is quite—different.”

Julian snatches his fingers away and Garak regrets saying anything. “Are you experiencing any other effects of the—change?”

Garak is very conscious of the other people standing around them, staring. “Given that I am no longer in imminent danger—”

“I can complete my examination in your quarters, if you’d like.” Julian’s voice has turned a little breathy, and the significance of what has just happened is still dawning in Garak’s mind. He can think of nothing he wants more.

When they rematerialize in his quarters, Garak almost staggers at the sweltering heat. “Computer, reduce temperature two degrees.” He catches Julian staring at him. “Doctor, I take it I will not shock your delicate sensibilities if I remove my trousers?” Julian—blushes? “My skin’s sensitivity makes them rather unpleasant.”

“Not at all,” Julian says. “I really—do mean to examine you.” His eyes are very bright, eager in the way that they are sometimes when he and Garak have been arguing particularly passionately.

“I wouldn’t dream of stopping you.” Garak is hungry for that expression on Julian’s face, but he forces himself to look away, at least until he gives in and has to look back to make sure it’s still there.

Julian steps closer, directly into his field of vision, and holds up the tricorder. “Are you having trouble with your vision?”

Only in controlling its direction, Garak thinks. "It's startling to see you from this angle." Their faces are level now. "Everything seems—a little larger now." He's not sure that's the right word for it. "But I appear to be entirely functional."

"Good." Julian lowers the tricorder and looks almost startled when their eyes meet again. He's most certainly blushing, Garak realizes, and that euphoria threatens to overwhelm him. "Good."

"My dear doctor," Garak says, and he finds that he can't seem to look away again. "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." He takes refuge in the formality of the words, because the fact is that *he* is still grappling with it, with what feels like an echo of a kiss, with the idea that somehow Julian has—

"Half an hour ago, you were nearly dead." Julian's mouth tightens when he says it. "I'm certain that you should be recovering."

Garak has never felt better in his life. "Your—decisive action seems to have dealt with that." He wants to feel Julian's hands on his new skin again, desperately.

"Indulge me," Julian says, and perhaps he intuits what Garak wants so badly. As he scans Garak's body, he trails his fingers in the wake of the tricorder, and the feeling is—Garak can only imagine this is how physical touch always feels to Humans, with their delicate skin, but it's almost painful with how overwhelming it is. His breath comes faster and faster, despite his attempts to slow it, as Julian circles behind him and strokes his hand along Garak's spine. Then—then Garak feels his breath against the ridge at the back of Garak's neck, followed by his lips.

"You—" Garak has cultivated his self-control for years, and it's not enough to keep him from turning, pulling Julian into his arms, and kissing him. Julian's lips are cooler than his own, but his mouth is hot, his tongue soft. Julian wraps one arm around his back, hand on Garak's skin, and even when he breaks away for air, he keeps his forehead pressed to Garak's. Julian runs one finger very gently along the ridges of Garak's face and Garak can't help but turn his face into that touch. Then Julian shifts, hides his face against Garak's neck instead, though he never lets go.

"I thought I'd lost you," Julian says very softly. His lips brush Garak's skin as he speaks. "You were—Garak, you *died*."

Garak wants him closer. He sits down on the couch, pulling Julian with him, and even the roughness of Julian's uniform against his skin is only a reminder that Julian is here, that Julian has returned to him from Tain and made the rather extraordinary decision to fall—in love with him. "Apparently not enough that your kiss and declaration of love couldn't revive me," he says, even though it sounds truly absurd. Julian is apparently struck by the absurdity too, because he shifts against Garak, and Garak leans closer into 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—" Somewhere, Tain is laughing himself sick.

"I suppose it's taking me a minute to accept having my private feelings so emphatically revealed," Julian says. He tilts his head to press his forehead to Garak's again, as though he knows what deep significance that has—and by now, with the Cardassian literary canon that they've consumed, he must. "I did think you were dying, you know."

Garak can't help but smile at that, even as he's luxuriating in the feeling of Julian so close to him. "I am familiar with the discomfort of being forced to reveal one's feelings, my dear."

"I think—I think I've been in love with you since you came to Deep Space Nine," Julian says, and that admission makes Garak's breath catch for a moment. "But I thought that if I felt that way and you weren't cured, your feelings must have changed. That I was—too late."

Irony upon irony, that Garak has spent all of this time watching Julian, longing for Julian, hating the things that have rendered him unlovable. He tilts his head so that he can kiss Julian again. Though his skin is growing a little less sensitive, every touch from Julian feels new. "I suppose the curse demanded something a little more irrevocable." Julian sets his hand on Garak's chest, fingers splayed wide, and Garak grips his wrist very gently. It's hard to gauge how much strength he has, now, but he can feel Julian's pulse hammering beneath the skin. Garak presses his forehead against Julian's again. "I suspect I'm in little danger of changing back, but to be clear, I—continue to love you." The word is easier to say every time.

"Have any of your memories come back to you?" Julian sounds very tentative.

Garak considers for a moment. "No." There's still that infernal blankness surrounding the only thing he truly wants to know. "Perhaps with time, now that the curse is broken."

Julian slides his hand across the span of Garak's chest, narrower now. How strange it is. "I know that you were in the Obsidian Order, and I have some idea of what that entailed. I can't promise to understand everything in your past, nor to accept it. But I promise to try."

Even that promise is remarkable. "I don't doubt that, my dear," Garak murmurs. He wants more of Julian to touch, and he pulls back just long enough to lift Julian's shirt over his head and then tug Julian into his lap. The feeling of Julian's bare skin pressed against his is extraordinary, and he tests the sensitivity of his new fingers as he traces the shape of Julian's spine. Julian shivers against him and kisses him again, and for a long time, Garak loses himself in it. Even when they separate, Garak can't seem to stop touching him, discovering the shape of his bones beneath his skin, the way the muscles shift and tighten.

"I'm afraid I may have declared my feelings in front of the infirmary," Julian says, as though Garak will be embarrassed by this. "But it's possible that—some people have suspected for a while. I might have—" Garak is—Garak has intended to move very slowly, touch no more of Julian than Julian offers first, but his resolve is wearing thin. He puts a hand on Julian's hip and pulls him closer, lifting his own hips to meet him, and catches Julian's groan with his mouth. "Bed," Julian mumbles against his mouth. "There's a bed—" and Garak shudders at the thought of the place where he huddled, sweating and hallucinating. He takes it as permission, though, and undoes Julian's pants. The noise that Julian makes when Garak first touches him there is—extraordinary. Garak suspects he will want to hear it often, as often as possible for as long as they have.

Afterward, Julian curls close to him on the couch and Garak wraps his arm around Julian to keep him there. “I think I’m supposed to be on duty,” Julian mumbles eventually, and moves as though to stand.

“Considering what’s happened, my dear, I think your dereliction will be forgiven,” Garak says. But Julian is insistent, and finally Garak releases him. Julian stands and then offers Garak a hand as well. Garak is sorely tempted to see if he can pull Julian back down instead, perhaps even agree to test out the bed, but instead he stands. “Speaking of dereliction,” he says, and smiles a little, “I suspect you never got around to reading the latest book that I recommended.” Garak’s attempts to reread it during his withdrawal from the implant were unsuccessful, to say the least.

Julian looks insulted at the idea that he would have failed to read a book. “I—” Then he stops and very blatantly lies, “No. No, I didn’t.”

Garak reaches out and slides his fingers along the back of Julian’s neck. He suspects the miracle of being able to touch him like this will take awhile to sink in. “In that case, perhaps I will recommend something a little more—rarified as my next selection.” It’s hard to contain the smile, but he thinks he manages admirably. “Given our new—status, you might appreciate one of Ceveo’s repetitive epics.” How well he remembers the first time he read it, the shock of the words so blatant on the page, the way the narrative built and built—

“Ceveo? Garak—are you recommending that we read Cardassian *pornography*?”

“Anything to increase your appreciation for the repetitive epic,” Garak says in his blandest tone. “I know how you struggle with the—less prurient Cardassian literature. Besides, after the obscenity of that Shakespeare—”

Julian’s smile is nothing short of delighted. “I love you,” he says, and it’s the first time Garak has truly heard him say it. Garak can’t help pulling him closer again, kissing him once more, and Julian says, “I love you,” again, and then begins walking Garak back toward the couch even while saying, “I really should leave—”

“Should you?” Garak goes willingly when Julian pushes him down.

“Perhaps I could spare another fifteen minutes—”

It’s nearly an hour before Julian has actually managed to dress himself again. Garak walks him to the door and says, “Lunch, my dear doctor?”

“I think we missed lunch,” Julian says. “Dinner?”

“Always,” Garak tells him.

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