

## a panopticon with benefits

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## a panopticon with benefits

by [meriwethersays](#)

### Summary

“What’s this?” Garak picks up the packet from the tray of equipment that Julian has offered him.

“It’s called a condom, 003,” Julian says, throwing heavy emphasis on both syllables.

Garak inspects it as though he’s never seen one. “Does it explode?”

Julian sighs. Garak is clearly enjoying himself. “If you over-fill it.” Behind him, someone chokes on a laugh. “Really, 003, if you don’t know how to use it, you should familiarize yourself. Wouldn’t want His Majesty’s most vital organ to come down with the clap.”

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The James Bond AU where Julian is Q and Garak is 003. Garak decides that the best way to express his feelings to Julian is to...seduce a lot of people. On camera.

### Notes

As you might expect, lots of people have sex in this fic without knowing that they're being watched.

## Chapter 1

Since being promoted from Q Branch agent to the official Q, Julian has been the voice in the ear of many, many different field agents. They like him—he's cool-headed, he's eminently competent. But just as he begins to build a rapport that's more than a simple "Hello," over the earwig, he gets the dubious honor of being promoted. First it's to run 00 missions and then—even more dubiously—to run 003's missions when there's special tech involved. He's developed a program designed to tap into every available camera to track an agent's progress in a given location, which means he can just about follow anything that an operative does. M tells him, quite firmly, that running 003's missions is part of the official Q's duties.

When D comes to give him the news, there's a slight smirk on her face. "You should know," she says, "Garak—003—is even worse than 007 was. He isn't—shy."

"Shy?"

It only takes one mission with Garak for Julian to realize what D meant. In the course of a three-day mission, Garak seduces four different women—or at least, four that Julian knows of because all of the interludes take place within view of a device with some kind of uplink that he's using to monitor the mission. Heaven knows what Garak gets up to when there's nothing around to transmit the video and audio to Julian.

Julian has watched agents have sex on missions before—it comes with the 00 territory—but they usually try to be a little more private about it. Treat it as a necessity, back to the camera, or dim lighting, or something of that sort. Garak, though—the women always seem to end up splayed out over furniture, dresses rucked up to their waists and falling off their shoulders, as they make ecstatic noises. Julian would think it's a coincidence except for the third woman, the target's occasional mistress, who Garak has bent over a table, her shirt open. Julian has resigned himself to what he hopes will be a swift encounter, watching three different security feeds at once, when Garak looks straight up at the camera just as he pushes inside of her. Julian knows it because he knows the expression on her face, that first thrill of it, and Garak kisses her neck and smooths his fingers across her nipple while staring directly into the camera.

Christ. Julian is getting hard watching this. Garak's hips are rolling lazily, one hand between her legs and the other on her breast, and the woman's chest is heaving, her eyes fluttering a little. Julian doesn't know how long it takes before she comes because his eyes are fixed on the lines of Garak's body, but he sees it when she shudders, sees it when Garak mouths at her throat, and—shit, "003, the target is headed your way in 30 seconds," Julian hisses. If his voice cracks, well, he'll blame it on the audio transmission. Garak murmurs something in the woman's ear, something too quiet for the earwig to pick up, and begins to withdraw even as she shakes her head in protest. He's mostly dressed, trousers open just enough for sex, but the video quality is clear enough that Julian can see his cock is wet and still very much hard. It doesn't seem to bother Garak, though, because he opens the door and shoots the target all the same. Behind him, the woman screams.

"The scanner in your belt buckle should show you—" Julian begins, but Garak has already whipped off his sagging belt and is slowly running it along the dead man's arms for the chip embedded under his skin.

"Found it," Garak says shortly.

"Remember to center it properly or you'll damage the chip."

"You know, I've managed to do my job for longer than you've been alive." Garak presses his buckle to the man's shoulder and pushes the triggering device. It punches out a neat circle of flesh, which Garak tucks into a capsule sewn into the lining of his suit jacket.

"Unless you were Britain's most junior 00 agent in history, 003, I very much doubt that." He suddenly doesn't want to know how old Garak thinks that he is. "You have three people headed in your direction, ETA one minute. I recommend that you head for the exit." A little spitefully, he adds, "Unless you'd prefer to finish what you started."

Over the surveillance feed, he sees Garak turn his head briefly to glance at the woman, who's cursing at him now. He threads his belt back through the loops. "The mission is complete," Garak says, and heads for the exit.

Somehow, though, Garak still finds time to catch a flight attendant's eye at the airport and pull her into a supply closet, for no discernible reason. There are no cameras in the closet, but when they emerge fifteen minutes later, her clothes are askew and her lipstick is smudged and Julian closes his eyes in resignation and tries not to think about what they were doing.

Next time Garak comes to him for gear, Julian includes something extra. He's checked Garak's medical file and is unsurprised to discover the vasectomy that went along with his promotion to 00 status—a child would be an unacceptable liability for any 00—but still, considering how Garak jumps from woman to woman, he could be a little more considerate.

"What's this?" Garak picks up the packet from the tray of equipment that Julian has offered him.

"It's called a con-dom, 003," Julian says, throwing heavy emphasis on both syllables.

Garak inspects it as though he's never seen one. "Does it explode?"

Julian sighs. Garak is clearly enjoying himself. "If you over-fill it." Behind him, someone chokes on a laugh. "Really, 003, if you don't know how to use it, you should familiarize yourself. Wouldn't want His Majesty's most vital organ to come down with the clap."

Garak shakes his head with a bit of a smile. "Cheeky." Then he tucks the rubber packet into his suit coat. "I'm sure Medical appreciates your concern."

At first, Julian thinks it might have been a one-time thing—Garak having a little fun at the expense of his fresh-faced new quartermaster. For the first few days of this next mission, Garak is shockingly chaste. He even turns down a blatant invitation from a croupier in a very low-cut

bustier and stockings on the first night that he goes to the casino where the target is laundering money. But the next evening, he strolls back to her table with a stack of chips and says, “Is there room for one more?”

She brings him into the floor master’s office, Garak already unlacing the back of the bustier. He tugs it down enough to free her breasts and then gets his mouth on her nipple. There are three cameras in the floor master’s office, and Garak lifts his head long enough to look into one of them with the slightest smile. It punches a quiet breath out of Julian. He hopes Garak didn’t hear it over the earwig.

Garak lifts her onto the edge of the desk, standing between her spread legs. Julian can see very clearly that she’s not wearing any underwear, only the garter belt to hold up her stockings. She leans back so he can suck at her nipple, one hand cradling her head, and he does it until she’s making breathy little noises that Julian can hear clearly over the audio channel. Everyone outside the floor master’s office appears to be oblivious to what’s happening. Garak switches to her other nipple and pushes three fingers inside her, thumb working on her clit, and she arches with another, louder noise, reaching for his cock.

Garak murmurs something that doesn’t even sound like words and unfastens his suit trousers, his thumb still rubbing against her clit. His shirt and suit coat are still immaculate, though Julian can see his cock bobbing just below the bottom of his shirt. At the last second, Garak plucks the condom packet out of his inner suit pocket, makes hard eye contact with the camera, and tears it open with his teeth. Julian drags in another breath. He wishes he’d remembered to mute the channel. Garak rolls it onto his cock one-handed and thrusts inside, tugging at her nipple with his slick fingers and pulling her hips sharply to him as he does. Julian can see her shaking as Garak fucks her, breasts spilling over the top of the bustier, one nipple pinched between Garak’s fingers. His own nipples are stiff beneath the fabric of his undershirt. He hears Garak’s breathing grow harsh, looking up into the lens of the security camera, and realizes that he’s about to learn what Garak sounds like when he comes.

Garak kisses her as he does. It seems oddly romantic to Julian for a man with Garak’s reputation, a man who has just fucked a woman on her boss’s desk for the primary purpose of accessing the documents inside it, but it doesn’t matter. He’s biting his lip, he realizes. “003,” he says very quietly. “The documents should be in the middle drawer on the left-hand side of the desk.” He’s probably imagining the tiny shiver that crosses Garak’s skin, but then, Garak is still inside her and she’s moving restlessly like she wants him to keep going.

Garak leans close to her ear and whispers, “Close your eyes.” She moans and does—Garak really is very good at this—and Garak replaces his cock with his fingers again, teeth catching her nipple. His other hand, Julian sees, is creeping down the side of the desk.

“That’s it,” Julian says. He hopes Garak can’t hear how hoarse his voice is. “There’s a button next to the drawer handle, Press it twice and then pull the drawer open.” Garak is pumping his fingers in and out of her now, and he pulls back to crouch between her legs and lick her clit so that he can reach further into the drawer. She has one hand gripping the back of his head, holding him in place as she moves against him, and Julian can hear her moaning again. Garak lifts the documents slightly, angling them toward the camera so that Julian can zoom in. “Yes,” Julian says. “Good work, 003. That’s what we need.” Impossibly, Garak tucks the documents into his jacket pocket. “Press the button by the door handle three times when you close it to re-lock it.” Garak does, and then turns his full attention back to the croupier. “I encourage you to exit in due course,” Julian says. “The floor master will return from his break in under five minutes and the guards will have eyes on the door to this office in two.”

Garak sighs against her clit to let Julian know exactly how irritating the knowledge is and flicks his tongue one last time. He twists his fingers as he pushes them back in and she comes again, almost wailing. “I have to go,” Garak tells her, and leaves before she can protest.

When Garak is safely out of the casino, Julian finally looks away from the screen. His pants are very tight across his cock and every inch of his skin feels over-sensitized, as though Garak has been touching him through the screen. He sits very still and tries to breathe evenly and pulls up the most complex schematics he can think of to catalog, and eventually the erection subsides. When he goes home that night, though, he works three fingers inside himself as he thinks of the way that Garak had looked at the camera—at him—as he slid into the woman, remembers Garak’s fingers on her nipple and pinches his own, hard. When he comes, it’s to the not-quite-thought of Garak’s fingers inside him, and he tightens around his own fingers so hard that it’s almost painful.

It takes a great deal of self-control to look Garak in the eye without blushing when he returns. Garak is entirely nonchalant, as though it never happened, and once again, Julian thinks, maybe that was it.

It’s not.

Slowly, Julian grows used to this bizarre new normal—Garak seduces a woman and then makes hard eye contact with Julian through the surveillance camera while he fucks her, Julian sees the mission through and then goes home that night and jerks off to the memory of it. He’s taken to slipping a truly ridiculous number of condoms into a pocket-sized dispenser that he includes with Garak’s equipment requisition every time, and every time that Garak actually pulls one out, it hits Julian somewhere deep. It’s fine. Julian doesn’t have much time to date, only goes to clubs occasionally just long enough to pull someone and go back to theirs, so why should he object to his coworker creating pornography just for him? It’s not as though Julian expects anything else from it.

Then Garak changes things.

The target this time is a man suspected of arms-trading with a particularly nasty cabal of oil barons, a man with an attractive and very bored-looking boyfriend. Julian watches Garak scoping them out at the gala event’s bar and says, “The boyfriend will be an easier target.”

“Oh?” Garak sounds amused. “I don’t think I’ll need that sort of way in tonight,” he says, and it feels strangely like a punch to the gut. It’s not that Julian thinks Garak is actually interested in men, but then, he’s had enthusiastic sex with such a wide array of women in such a variety of ways in full view of Julian that Julian had rather assumed Garak wouldn’t be bothered by a little more variation. “But I do appreciate the opinion, Q.”

“Two of the guards on the north exit are about to get into a fight,” Julian says. They’ve been drinking and the signs of impending conflict are clear. “It should provide you with enough distraction to access his laptop.”

Garak nods almost minutely and they're back in their normal roles. Garak makes his way to the coat-check, where he flashes a grin at the young man who's working and points at a laptop bag. "I believe that's for me," he says. He's got Julian's latest toy tucked up his sleeve.

"Of course." The man hefts the bag and passes it across the counter to Garak, who opens it up just enough to peek at its contents and slip Julian's device—which will copy the laptop's contents and feed them directly into the MI-6 decryption program—inside. Garak is supposed to retrieve it as soon as it's copied the laptop, but given his poor track record of bringing back the toys that Julian gives him, Julian isn't sanguine about that possibility.

"My mistake," Garak says, and he's *handing back the bloody laptop*, "that's not mine after all." He grins at the man and lets their fingers brush, and *what the hell is he doing*—

"No?" The man is returning his smile, and Julian feels a surge of absurd—that cannot possibly be jealousy—as Garak says something more, some of his meaningless lines that always seem to work. "Natalya, I'm going for a smoke," the man says to someone nearby, who waves a hand at him.

Garak takes the man into one of the hotel guest rooms, and there's something hot in Julian's stomach as he accesses the camera on the smart television in the room. Garak flicks his eyes toward it—toward Julian—and then he's pressing the man back against the door with his hips and kissing him. Julian can hear the sound of it through Garak's earwig, the harsh breath and the noise of their mouths. The man clutches at his shoulders, gripping hard at his suit, and Garak pulls back just a little. "Don't wrinkle it," he says.

The man loosens his grasp. "I won't," he promises.

Garak releases him and takes a few steps away. Then he unbuttons his own shirt efficiently, lays it and his jacket across a chair, and says, "Come over here." There's something dark in his voice, something that has Julian wanting to follow his instruction even from halfway around the world, and it works on the man who's in the same room. He goes to Garak and kisses him again, slowly, from his mouth to his collarbone and then down and down, until the man is on his knees in front of Garak, unfastening Garak's trousers.

Julian sees then that Garak has maneuvered the two of them so that they're close to the television, so that Julian will have a clear view. He's still monitoring the other video feeds on his screen because he does have half a brain—the laptop data is uploading as planned—but it's a little hard to breathe as the man draws Garak's trousers down and Julian sees the jut of his bare hip. The man bends his head down and the wet noise is unmistakable, as is the familiar sound of Garak's inhalation—and what a world, that Julian knows how Garak breathes when someone sucks his cock, knows how he breathes when he comes "Your mouth," Garak murmurs, and he's staring straight at the camera. "A man could get distracted looking at your mouth." Julian suddenly goes a little dizzy, watching Garak thread his fingers into the man's dark hair, and realizes that the man bears more than a passing resemblance to him. Garak's breathing is sharp and Julian can see how much restraint it's taking him not to just thrust into the man's mouth. Julian is very hard, here at his desk and it's late at night, no one around to witness his gross lack of professionalism, as he slips the button on his trousers and just—cups himself, as though that will help him get back under control.

"You're wasting time, 003," Julian says into Garak's ear, and he sees the jolt that it sends through Garak. Julian lets himself grip his own cock and he's a mess, leaking at the sight of Garak, but he doesn't want it to stop. Garak reaches down to touch the man's lips where they're stretched around his cock and Julian can't help brushing his fingers across his own lips. This is too much, beyond whatever insane imaginary line there ever was, but when the man grabs Garak's hips, Julian breaks. "He wants you deeper," he tells Garak, and he knows his voice is wrecked. "He wants to wake up tomorrow and still taste you in the back of his throat—"

Halfway around the world, Garak comes almost violently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Garak gets back to London three days later. In that time, Julian decides that this is a good idea (whatever this is), has at least three minor mental breakdowns, decides that this is a bad idea (again, whatever this is), seriously considers hiring someone to perform a spiritual cleansing of his office, debates confronting Garak, and concludes that really he's having the only natural reaction to watching his coworker fuck his doppelganger.

Garak comes to Q Branch not long after his return and says, "Q, I brought you a present."

It takes Julian a second to calibrate his response to Garak's greeting. "Dare I hope it's something I gave you, still intact?"

"I told you I would, one of these days." Garak deposits the laptop scanner on Julian's desk. "Happy birthday."

Julian doesn't bother lying that today isn't his birthday. Of course Garak would know something like that. "I don't think it counts as a gift if you're only returning something, especially if it's rather worse for wear." He lifts it gingerly between two fingers. "This wasn't bent when I gave it to you, 003." Neither were you, his brain supplies unhelpfully.

"Wasn't it? My mistake." Garak turns and strolls away.

Well. If that's how he wants to play it. Julian certainly isn't going to be the one to bring it up. Maybe he'll look into that cleansing after all.

Garak idles around MI-6 for exactly four more days before M sends him out again, none of which involve visiting Julian. Funny, Julian talks more with him over the earwig than he ever has in person. He suspects that Garak prefers it that way. And he's not Garak's handler, to the extent Garak would ever tolerate a handler—only the one to guide him when a mission requires more technical expertise than necessary. He could go months without having to talk to Garak, if needed.

But it's almost a relief, the next time that Garak tucks Julian into his ear on a mission that requires his presence. It's a very fancy high-rise this time, in Paris of all places, with a target meant to be captured (preferably) or killed (only as a last resort). There are security cameras everywhere, too many for even Garak to dodge. It means that Julian spends a great deal of time preparing to loop the footage on any one camera at any time, since Garak has a nasty habit of taking unplanned routes with little warning. The capture itself goes off shockingly

smoothly, well ahead of schedule, and Garak passes the man off to the extraction squad with a night to spare on his hotel reservation. He walks into the hotel bar, ostensibly to ensure that they haven't missed anyone who might notice the target's abrupt absence, and says, "Q, are you still with me?"

"Yes, 003, I haven't expired from shock at the bloodless nature of this mission." Julian swallows. He suspects he knows what will happen next—Garak will select someone, take her somewhere to show off to Julian—and so he dares to say, "At the bar. Blue shirt."

"How thoughtful of you," Garak says. The man at the bar is around Julian's age, with short black hair and dark skin, looking for the world like he doesn't want to be there. For an agonizing minute, Garak doesn't move and Julian begins to feel very stupid. Then Garak walks over and takes the empty seat next to him. "Cynar," he tells the bartender, and then offers the man next to him a slow smile. "It's been a hell of a day."

The man is just as susceptible to Garak's charm as everyone else is, and it's not long at all before he's taking Garak to his hotel room. "I wasn't expecting anyone, so it's—" he starts, as he opens the door to the room.

Julian is alone in his office. "Kiss him," Julian says, and his mouth goes dry when Garak just *does* it, pulling the man close and cutting him off with a kiss. The man leans into it and Julian watches the way that Garak's hands roam over his body and tries not to think about the strength of them, the barely-controlled violence that lives under Garak's skin at all times. Garak walks the man backward until they reach the bed and tumble into it. Julian sees the way that the man's hands keep returning to Garak's shoulders where Garak is crouched over him and says, voice low, "He wants you to suck his cock." The words burn in his mouth, even more so when Garak moves down the man's body and unzips his pants and good god, what was Julian thinking? The wet sound of Garak's mouth around the man's cock is loud in Julian's ear and he has one hand in his pants listening to it. "I bet you're good," Julian says. "You're good at everything, aren't you, 003?" The man is swearing in Arabic and when he tries to thrust up into Garak's mouth, Garak pins his hips to the bed. "Do you want to—fuck him?" It's hard to say. He doesn't know if it's an answer to the question he's really asking when Garak sucks harder, when the man arches and comes on the sheets, when Garak encourages him to turn over. He doesn't know if it's an answer when Garak grabs some hotel body lotion, when Garak works one finger inside the man, but Julian has one hand on his cock and the tip of his finger in his ass, the audio left on, and he says, "Go slowly. Your fingers are big," and Garak breathes out a curse that Julian likes to think was aimed at him. The angle of the hotel security camera doesn't let him see exactly what's happening or how fast Garak is going, but he's very close to coming by the time Garak rolls on a condom from Julian's dispenser, lifts the man's hips and slides his cock inside. "Fuck," Julian says, a little brokenly. It's not meant as a command but Garak treats it like one and Julian hears them both groan. "Fuck, fuck," he says, and comes. He doesn't try to stifle the noise of it and Garak doesn't stifle his own noise—he never does—when he comes a few seconds later.

This is a disaster.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian isn't stupid (no one would say that he is). He knows that the world is littered with the hearts—and bodies—of women who believed that Elim Garak had special feelings for them. He suspects, now, that there are men among them too. Julian doesn't doubt that Garak finds him attractive, not after watching Garak fuck two slight, dark-haired men who bear more than a passing resemblance to Julian. The fact that Garak has begun to feature almost exclusively in Julian's masturbatory material is unsurprising and has no bearing on the reality of things.

Garak proceeds to ignore him for nearly a month, until Julian begins to wonder whether the hotel in Paris was only his imagination. But he saved the hotel security footage—they always save the footage from 00 missions, so that they can cross-check for the identity of non-targets if anything happens. He's never let himself watch it for anything other than entirely professional reasons, but Julian decides that his own sanity is a professional necessity. He pulls it up, another of those late nights when he's working at an impossible problem and needs a distraction. He means to watch just enough to confirm that he isn't losing his mind (what an excuse), but he can't seem to turn it off. Now that he isn't speaking to Garak over the earwig, he can see the minute flinches that must mark whenever Julian spoke to him, and, even more clearly, the moment when Julian swore to him, because that's when Garak turns almost frantic.

Julian is very, very close to unzipping his trousers when his office phone rings and breaks his concentration. He snatches it up and tries to steady his voice before he says, "Q here."

"I need to discuss something with you," and fucking hell it's M. "Come to my office in 30 minutes." M hangs up, brusque as ever.

If Julian were someone else, he'd be concerned that M has been watching him somehow and is about to fire him. But he would know if there was a single piece of unauthorized tech in his division and the simple fact is that he's necessary enough to MI-6 to get away with most kinds of deviant behavior. *Not* that he wants to be called to the carpet for this. He takes a shower anyway, a cold one, and at the door to M's office in precisely 30 minutes—only for his stomach to drop at the sight of Garak already inside.

"Come in," M says. Julian obeys. "We have a mission for you, Q."

From the corner of his eye, Julian can see that Garak is statue-still, enough so that Julian almost questions whether he's breathing. "...What sort of mission?" Julian participates in missions all the time and he's never heard that kind of trepidation in M's voice.

"In the field. The United States."

Julian's stomach drops. "Sir," he says, "Given my skills, there's nothing I can do in the field that I can't do from here at MI-6."

Garak speaks for the first time. "The compound we have to access is isolated," he says. "Completely off the grid. Independently powered, not connected to any network. There's nothing for you to hack into."

"Everything is connected to *some* network," Julian protests. His entire body is going numb at the thought of boarding a plane. "Besides, if that's the case, we can simply send you in with something to plug in that will give me access from here—I have a few options—"

"This isn't up for debate." There's no room for argument in M's tone. "The mission is too important and there are too many unknowns to risk

that 003 will get into the compound and be unable to connect to you. You have twenty-four hours to prepare.”

“Twenty-four hours?” Julian tries to contain the squawk, but it escapes anyway. “I don’t even have the parameters, let alone the time to develop whatever I might need—”

“We’re on a clock.” M’s voice is crisp. “003 will fill you in on your way to the airport. I’ve already authorized Medical to prepare something for you for the flight.” Julian isn’t usually embarrassed by his very natural and reasonable fear of flying, but something inside him squirms at having it discussed in front of Garak. M checks his watch. “I’ll let you begin your preparations.”

Julian leaves his office in a daze, so much so that he doesn’t realize Garak has followed him into the elevator. “I’ll minimize the risk,” Garak says. “You won’t be in any danger.”

“I’ve heard about your piloting skills, 003.” Julian hates how high-pitched his voice has gotten. “You don’t tend to leave airplanes or helicopters intact. And I know what you did to that gyrocopter that my predecessor gave you—”

Garak huffs out the tiniest laugh. “I don’t mean on the airplane.”

Julian waves a hand vaguely. “I’m sure I’ll feel appropriately apprehensive about the *mission* once we arrive at whatever hellish location—”

“—northern Montana—”

“—whatever hellish location is our destination, but for now, it’s not my primary concern.” Christ, northern Montana? That’s going to be at least four flights, if Julian recalls correctly—London to some place on America’s eastern coast, then another to a western hub, then another on a smaller plane to whatever the primary airport in Montana is, and then likely another *even smaller* plane to the bleak hellscape of northern Montana. Montana in January, lovely. At least they’ll freeze to death quickly if the plane crash doesn’t kill them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Medical makes good on their promise, with a cocktail of drugs that leaves Julian feeling oddly disconnected from his brain. It’s an unsettling feeling, but it’s better than the sheer terror that an airplane flight causes. Garak steers him to their first-class seats and buckles him in. “Flying is quite safe,” Garak tells him.

“I know. I can read,” Julian says acidly. Drugged stupid as he is, he’ll die in the crash before he can reach an emergency exit.

“You will not.” Garak’s voice is firm, and Julian realizes he’s saying his thoughts aloud. “I don’t lose people.”

That’s so patently absurd that Julian laughs a little through the incipient hysteria. “No, no one has ever died on your watch,” and it’s a cruel thing to say to Garak, but there’s no visible reaction. “Do you know why I’m afraid of flying?”

“I can guess.” Garak’s voice is even. “M always said that orphans make the best—employees.” They’re supposed to be ordinary people for this. Julian is struggling with the idea of calling Garak anything but 003 out loud.

“I was 14,” Julian admits. “It was an executive jet, nearly 20 people.” He closes his eyes as the plane begins to trundle toward the runway.

“How long?”

“Search and rescue found me after a week.” It’s good that Julian is so disconnected. He doesn’t talk about this, not ever. He’s not sure he’s ever said it aloud, not in those endless therapy sessions. “They didn’t all die at once.” Thank god his parents were dead before he’d even crawled out of the wreckage. Better to see them like that than slowly bleeding to death or feverish with infection. “I was the only one anyone ever found alive. The doctors spent a good deal of time putting me back together.” There’s a strange warm pressure on his forearm and he realizes that Garak has gripped his arm in some kind of attempt at comfort. He likes it. He hopes he didn’t say that out loud. “It was quite some time ago,” he adds. It’s dark behind his eyelids. There’s a great roaring in his ears and his stomach drops as the plane leaps into the air, and he digs his fingernails into the armrest. Garak’s grip on his arm is so tight it’s almost painful and Julian hopes to god that Garak won’t take his hand away. So much for the drugs. He tries to breathe evenly.

“Q, open your eyes,” Garak says, and it’s the warm breath against his ear, more than anything else, that makes him obey. When he turns his head a little to look at Garak, their faces are very close together and Julian wonders what would happen if he leaned a little further forward. Would Garak accept it as part of his 003 duties? Push Julian away firmly and tell him it’s only the drugs? Christ, he hopes he’s not saying any of this out loud. He’s saved from his thoughts by a flight attendant with the drinks trolley.

“Three vodkas,” he tells the woman.

“Nervous flier?” She smiles gently and hands him three little bottles of vodka, cold from the refrigerator.

“Rather more a fear of dying than of flying,” Julian confides, already cracking the seal on one of the bottles.

“Nothing for me,” Garak says, which is more of a shock than anything else that’s happened. Once she’s walked away, he adds, “You’re going to regret that, with all the drugs you’re on.”

“I’ll regret having a heart attack on this plane a great deal more than a splitting headache in a few hours.” Julian doesn’t drink to excess often, but if ever a circumstance demands it, it’s an eight-hour flight followed by a four-hour flight followed by a flight he doesn’t want to begin to contemplate. “You know, general anesthesia is a great deal safer these days than it used to be. I would have been amenable.” He downs the second bottle in a single swallow and coughs when the last few drops catch in his throat. When he turns to look at Garak again, Garak is watching his mouth and Julian licks his lips automatically, then grimaces at the taste of the vodka. He offers the third bottle to Garak.

“No,” Garak says. “Thank you.”

Julian shrugs and tosses back the third bottle, tilting his head so it barely touches his tongue. It burns in the back of his throat. "Suit yourself." Garak releases his arm. Julian immediately misses his hand. The plane hits a pocket of turbulence and Julian braces automatically, pressing himself back against his seat. He's conscious enough to know that no one else is reacting the way that he is. How he detests this weakness. He's arranged his career to avoid revealing how deep it reaches, has traveled through Europe by boat and train and automobile but never boarded an airplane since the crash, and how can anyone trust him to run Q Branch—to keep them alive in the field—after seeing this? "It was more than a decade ago," Julian says unwillingly, more to himself than to Garak.

Garak wiggles his fingers in front of Julian's face to display a crooked pinky. "I broke that when I was a child. Almost *four* decades ago."

Julian knows what he's trying to say, but it almost makes it worse. "And yet the finger still works." Unlike this particular traumatized corner of his mind. "I appreciate the effort, 00—Garak," he says. His voice cracks on *Garak* and Garak looks momentarily poleaxed before visibly tucking the expression away. "I think I'll try to sleep." The alcohol is warm in his blood. He doesn't doubt that he'll be vomiting up what little he managed to eat in a few hours, but for now it's a little better.

"All right." Garak doesn't touch his arm again. "I'll wake you if need be."

Julian's dreams are dark fragmented things, the smell of burnt skin and metal and spilt fuel thick in his lungs. When Garak wakes him, they're at the gate in New York and Julian barely makes it to an airport toilet before he's hunched over, emptying his stomach. Garak does him the kindness of not following him inside, which means that Julian can retch in the relative privacy of the stall. He emerges to splash cold water on his face and drag one wet hand through his hair before walking out into the frenzied rush of the international terminal at Kennedy.

"We'll take a train from Denver," Garak tells him. "There's one leaving an hour after we arrive. With the layover and transfer, it will only be a few hours longer than a flight." Julian wants to protest, to argue that no, he can do this, but the words won't come out of his mouth.

He holds grimly to the seat for the entire four-hour flight from New York to Denver. When he steps off the plane, his muscles cramp from sitting tense for so long and he staggers a little, but recovers before Garak can catch him. The torture of flying is over now, which means he can resume his role as a useful human. Garak is entirely business, and they travel in relative silence. Julian rereads the mission briefing—likely a bioweapons facility, get in, access the computers and figure out what to do next, most likely take the data and blow the place to hell—now that he's functional again. In Billings, there's a car waiting and Julian looks around at the snow that covers everything and wonders miserably why, if he had to board a plane, the mission couldn't have at least been in Majorca or something.

The next piece of the nightmare falls into place when Garak says, "We'll have to camp for the night."

"What." Julian isn't afraid of camping, but he doesn't particularly like the woods, he doesn't like snow, and he doesn't like tents.

"The compound is in an isolated area," Garak tells him. "No hotels. Believe me, I had Money Penny check extensively. If we'd arrived earlier, we might have made it today, but—"

But Julian is terrified of flying and has thrown the entire mission off-track. "Of course," he says, because why not, why shouldn't this mission become increasingly hellish. "I hope you know how to set up a tent, 003." Now that they're alone, there's no reason to call him anything else.

"I know how to do a great deal of things," Garak says, and there's a little curl of innuendo in his voice. Julian knows better than to take anything from it beyond some attempt at distraction. Sometimes he thinks that flirting is Garak's natural language and he must spend a great deal of time trying to just speak in ordinary English. "Including pitch a tent."

A tent. A small tent, it turns out, because a two-man tent means large enough for two small men to lie side-by-side with their shoulders touching, and Garak is not a small man. Julian had feared that the tent would be too cold, out in the snow, but they discard their heavy coats by their feet and zip the sleeping bags together, something that Julian only ever did once on a camping trip with a boy he liked under the guise of sharing body heat. The size of the tent means that they're both lying on their sides to fit, Garak pressed all along Julian's back in the darkness. When Julian shifts too many times, Garak lays a flat hand on his stomach, crooked pinky just dipping into his waistband, and says "Lie still" against his ear.

"Right," Julian says. "Excellent chance of sleep."

"Good night, Q." Garak's voice is firm.

"Good night, 003."

\* \* \* \* \*

He wakes from another nightmare in the dark and struggles against the arm that holds him fast. Someone is saying "Q" in a stern voice, and then there's a burst of pain on his earlobe.

"You bit me!" At least it brings him back to reality.

"You were having a nightmare. Shaking the entire tent."

"My mistake," Julian says acidly. "I'm having a smidge of trouble sleeping out here."

Garak's hand shifts on his stomach. "If you need help sleeping, there are ways to do that," he says, and his breath is hot on Julian's neck. Julian realizes in not-quite-surprise that Garak is hardening against him, and it would be like this, wouldn't it, the one time (and he has no doubt it will only be once).

Julian rolls his hips just slightly, just enough to get Garak's hand a little lower. Garak obliges, until his fingertips are brushing through the coarse hair at the base of Julian's cock, and suddenly it all seems so inevitable. Julian rolls his hips again, a little harder, to feel the press of

Garak's cock against his ass, and when Garak closes his fingers around Julian's cock he doesn't try to stifle the moan. Then Garak releases him and slides his hand lower to cup Julian's balls. Forget subtlety, Julian shoves his pants down around his thighs to relieve some of the pressure. Garak takes his hand away entirely, just for a moment, and Julian hears the rustle of cloth before Garak's cock presses against the bare skin of his ass, thick and hot. Garak brings his hand to Julian's mouth and Julian sucks at his fingers, curls his tongue around each one, so that they're wet when Garak wraps his hand around Julian again. There's no sound but their harsh breaths and the curious stillness of snow outside. Garak's cock wedges between his cheeks as Julian thrusts into the circle of his fingers, and Garak kisses his neck with the slightest bit of teeth. Julian has nothing to do with his hands but reach back and grip Garak's bare hip, then lower, to get an awkward hand on Garak's cock. He can hear the way that Garak's breathing has turned ragged, and he readjusts the path of Garak's cock so that the head is sliding across his hole with every thrust.

"I want you to fuck me," Julian says, and it shatters the silence. "I want you to—open me up and hold me down and fuck all the other thoughts out of me—" Garak won't, not here with nothing but saliva, but Julian can say it all the same. "003—"

Garak bites at his neck, harder this time. "My name." His voice is gravelly and his hand tightens on Julian's cock.

"Garak—"

Garak makes an animal kind of noise and gets his other arm beneath Julian's head to put two fingers in his mouth even as he jerks Julian with the other hand. Julian sucks them like he would Garak's cock, wet and desperate, and Garak says, "You were watching every time, weren't you," and Julian sucks harder, licks between the seam of his two fingers. His breath catches and he pulls his fingers out, sets them lightly against Julian's lower lip. "Tell me."

"Every time," Julian says. This is disastrous but he doesn't care, doesn't care about anything but Garak's hand and cock and is beginning to think that maybe he could take Garak's cock anyway with how much he wants it. "I would—I'd watch in my office and try not to touch myself at first—Garak—" Garak gives a wounded groan at that. "And then more and more I would just watch, and think about how your hands would feel—your mouth, your cock—I was fingering myself when you were fucking him in Paris, *Garak*—"

"*Fuck*," Garak says, and comes with the head of his cock pressed to Julian's rim. Julian feels the heat of it and grabs wildly at Garak's hand to lift it off his cock and drag it through the mess. Garak gets the idea quickly and begins to work one finger into Julian's hole, pushing the come inside as he does, and Julian spreads his legs wider. He wasn't wrong when he told Garak that his fingers are big, and Julian ducks his head to suck those two fingers at his lip back into his mouth. He puts his own hand on his cock and this, this is incredible, Garak in his mouth and his ass and he's squeezing the base of his cock to keep from coming because he knows that when he does, this will be over. "You have no idea," Garak says, his voice ragged. "I knew you had to be watching—you'd never look away, not if it might put me at risk—" He works a second finger into Julian. Julian moans a little and clenches tight around him, too much and nothing like enough. "I knew you'd be blushing—you'd be biting your lip, I wanted to fuck your mouth open—" Julian hums around his fingers and flicks his tongue at the seam again. "I knew you wanted to see me fuck a man—knew you'd be imagining me doing it to you—" He twists his fingers in Julian's ass and Julian would yell when Garak hits just the right spot if his mouth weren't full. "I want to *ruin* you," Garak says into his ear like some kind of admission. That's it, that's all Julian can take, and he's fucking into his fist and back onto Garak's fingers. When he comes it rolls through him like thunder.

They don't say anything more—Garak kisses Julian's neck as he pulls his fingers out gently and finds some cloth to wipe up the mess, and he was right, Julian is already drifting off to sleep.

He wakes to early morning light, Garak still pressed close along his back. There's still some madness left in him, and he tells himself that it's all one encounter if it all happens in the tent. Julian eases out of Garak's hold—Garak is awake, but allows it—and readjusts their bodies so that he can lean down and take Garak's half-hard cock in his mouth. Julian has always loved this, the power that it gives him over another person, the reactions that he can drag out of them, and Garak is no exception. His hands fist in the fabric of the sleeping bag, and then, when Julian looks up through his eyelashes and takes Garak a little deeper, one hand finds its way into his hair. Garak's eyes are hectic and very bright blue, so bright that Julian drops his gaze again. Garak isn't quiet as Julian sucks him, but none of his noises are words, only half-formed syllables and strangled breaths. Julian gets his hands beneath Garak's hips to squeeze the muscles of his ass and urge him on, and when Garak doesn't get the message, Julian pulls off entirely. "You can," he says. "I want you to," and then swallows Garak's cock again.

Garak's breath is explosive as his fingers tighten in Julian's hair. He thrusts experimentally and swears when his cock hits the back of Julian's throat, and Julian looks up at Garak again. His cock is thick in Julian's mouth as he thrusts again, hand holding Julian's head in place, and Julian hums around it and grips his ass hard again. Garak almost looks like he's in pain as he fucks Julian's mouth, his breath coming fast, and he reaches down to touch Julian's lower lip where it's stretched around his cock.

He comes without warning, thrusting deep into Julian's throat, and Julian swallows around him and sucks him through it as he shudders. Only when he's soft does Julian release him. For an instant, Julian thinks he sees a kind of terror on Garak's face, and then it's gone just as quickly.

"We should get going," Julian says, and his voice is hoarse. He can taste Garak in the back of his throat. He's very hard but he doesn't think he could take it if Garak touched him now. They've flung the sleeping bag back and the tent is chilly; it'll deal with his erection quickly enough.

"Yes." Garak looks dizzy as he glances at his watch. "Yes, we should."

They take down the tent in near-silence, shoving it into the trunk of the car. Julian hopes fervently that they won't have to camp again. He feels sticky and grimy and entirely off-balance.

When they reach the outskirts of the compound, they leave the car behind a snowbank and Garak leads him inside. Julian isn't prideful enough to think that he knows how to do this part better than Garak; he steps where Garak does, matches his speed as best he can, ever-mindful of the equipment in his pack. They surprise three guards when they turn a corner in the hallway and Garak kills all three before one can draw a gun. Julian has seen him kill many, many people over surveillance cameras and hacked cell phones and spy satellites, but it's very different to be here beside Garak as he does it. Garak doesn't hesitate for even a breath. Perhaps it should disturb Julian, but somehow it makes him feel strangely safer.



Finally, Julian finds a place to plug in and the compound yields all its secrets to him. He pulls up the security feeds almost absently so that he can guide Garak through to set charges and then begins examining the data in their private server. There are terrifying formulas in there, documentation of horrific testing, and it's not his job to pick and choose what data to bring home but it doesn't matter. He refuses to bring this back. It's a matter of a few keystrokes to wipe some of it away—not the names of anyone involved, not the suppliers, not even the compound schematics. But he irreversibly corrupts the biological data as he copies the entire server and uploads it to the satellite that the Americans are so kindly sharing. At the same time, he's steering Garak to the most vulnerable spots in the compound, spotting guard patrols and looping surveillance footage, and no, he couldn't have done this from London, he has to admit it.

He's not perfect, though. He misses a hidden alarm as Garak progresses through the compound and "Shit, shit, 003, you need to get out of there," he says, and for all his attention to stealth, he's spoken too loud. Something strikes his head and everything goes dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian wakes up very cold in the backseat of their car. Through the window, he can see the snowy landscape whipping past, and when he twists a little, it's just in time to see a series of massive explosions behind them. "Ow," he says stupidly. When he touches the back of his head, his hand comes away sticky with blood. His senses return slowly, one at a time, and when he can hear again he realizes that that's gunfire. There's a terrific crash as the rear window shatters and Julian turns his face away just in time.

"Stay down." Garak's voice is terse as he accelerates further. Julian feels the car fishtailing and wishes he'd been able to send one of his own cars ahead for them to use instead.

"I don't suppose this car has any special features?" Julian's tongue feels thick as he speaks. Probably a concussion. Lying across the seat isn't helping.

"No."

"Right." There's a weapons bag in the footwell. Julian leans further down, though it makes his head pound, and rummages through it. His hands close on the cold shape of grenades, and he knows this kind because he made them. Not so much grenades as miniature heat-seeking missiles that detect heavy weaponry; if he throws one through the now-empty rear window, it'll find whoever is shooting at them and detonate. "Brace yourself, 003," he tells Garak, and before Garak can protest, he hurls two outside with all his strength.

"Q—"

Something slams him against the back of the driver's seat, and he struggles back onto the rear bench. For a moment, nothing happens. Then the grenades detonate one after another with a greedy roar and the gunfire just—stops. "Well," Julian says. "That was even better than in the testing phase." There's a strange agony beginning in his side and when he looks down, he sees blood staining his parka. "Oh," he says. "I appear to have been shot."

Garak looks at him in the rearview mirror. "Get your parka off. Fold it up, put pressure on the wound." When Julian is slow to obey, he adds, "Damn it, Q, do what I'm telling you!"

"Don't yell," Julian tells him. "It doesn't help. I think I'm concussed." He struggles out of the parka. There's rather a lot of blood. He folds it into a pad and presses it to the wound, and then for once has the presence of mind to take off his belt and fasten it around his midsection instead to hold the pad in place. "I think I'm going to pass out," he tells Garak, and promptly does.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian wakes up in blessedly familiar surroundings. Dr. Patel says, "Good, you're awake. If this was your idea of a good way to avoid experiencing a flight home, Q, there are better options." She offers a gentle smile.

Julian laughs, but it turns into a pained noise. When he takes stock, his head no longer hurts, but his abdomen aches steadily, a pain that turns sharp when he moves too quickly. "What happened? I remember being shot—"

Her face turns serious. "Yes. The bullet lodged in your spleen. You lost a great deal of blood before 003 was able to get you to a doctor, and I'm afraid their initial surgical intervention was—not of the quality that we expect, which meant that you required further surgery. As soon as you were stabilized, you were transferred back to MI-6. You had some significant brain swelling, but it appears to have subsided now. You've been here for four days."

Yes, Julian's mouth tastes as though he hasn't brushed his teeth in days. "The mission?"

"I'm told it was a success." She smiles a little. "I'm afraid 003 didn't recover your equipment, though."

Julian stifles the noise of outrage. He can't help glancing past Dr. Patel, just for a second, but there's no one else in the room. "Is he—all right?" He hurries to add, "There was quite a lot of gunfire."

"Nothing more than the usual bumps and bruises," she says. "I believe he's already back at it."

"Oh." It's not as though Julian was expecting Garak to be—*waiting* for him, or something absurd like that, but it's been less than a week since the mission and Julian has been in hospital for all this time. Garak might have—well. No, he wouldn't have. "When can I go back to work?"

Dr. Patel sighs. "I'd like to tell you at least a week," she says, "but I suppose you'll tell me that since you work in this building, you'll come to me at the first sign of trouble?"

"You really are an excellent doctor," Julian tells her earnestly. "Now, can someone call D and have her bring me a laptop?"

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

Garak's lips tighten again. "The job got done. That's what matters. Not the equipment."

"Yes, well." Julian is very aware that they're standing out in the open in Q Branch, where everyone can see and hear them. Not exactly the time to say "thanks very much for the shag, wish we could do it again." "I'm afraid I don't have anything to offer you at the moment," he says instead. He means equipment, but it comes out sounding like something very different.

Recovery is bloody maddening. He's always been good at ignoring things like needing to eat or sleep, but now his body *announces* itself to him with pain when he forgets to take his painkillers, which require food, which requires taking time away from work. The couch in his office is a pullout, usually reserved for when matters are very urgent and he needs to catch a few hours of sleep but can't make it home, and he takes to sleeping there. Moneypenny appreciates him enough that she sends a very junior agent to his home to collect a few changes of clothes. Julian more or less moves into Q Branch for the duration.

Garak comes back from his mission nearly two weeks later. Julian finds out only because he's in the midst of lecturing his team about the importance of good documentation in code when Garak walks through the doors of Q Branch. Julian trips over a sentence—just one—and manages to recover and continue lecturing. Garak leans against the wall and watches him until Julian reaches a reasonable stopping point and says, "Now, I want everyone to spend the next hour documenting the code that you just wrote so that other people can bloody well fix it when it breaks and you're off on holiday." He raises an eyebrow at Garak, who approaches him. "What can I do for you, 003?"

"I didn't know you were allowed to live at Q Branch." It might be the first time he's ever commented on Julian's habits, or personal life, or really anything at all.

"I'm not living here," Julian says automatically. "I found it easier to spend the odd night here while recovering than to brave the Tube, if you must know."

"I think MI-6 could have spared the expense to get you a driver for a few days." Garak's voice is even. Julian wishes he could read Garak, even a little, but then there are plenty of people out in the world who've regretted Garak's poker face as they bled to death.

"I was busy," Julian says. "There's a great deal of data to examine and someone seems to have blown up all of my equipment while I was unconscious."

Garak's lips tighten a fraction. A stray thought crosses Julian's mind: he wishes he'd kissed Garak, just once. "Well, Q, it was either carry you out or take the equipment, and you can always build new toys."

"Ah. Yes. My apologies for that. I'm afraid I neglected my surroundings." He wonders if anything in the tent registered for Garak—the admissions, calling him by his first name, any of it. Julian wouldn't think it to look at him.

Garak's lips tighten again. "The job got done. That's what matters. Not the equipment."

"Yes, well." Julian is very aware that they're standing out in the open in Q Branch, where everyone can see and hear them. Not exactly the time to say "thanks very much for the shag, wish we could do it again." "I'm afraid I don't have anything to offer you at the moment," he says instead. He means equipment, but it comes out sounding like something very different.

Garak's eyes are flat; Julian can't discern what emotions, if any, he might be feeling. He only nods once and then turns and leaves. Julian doesn't see him again for a month, and Julian doesn't go looking.

\* \* \* \* \*

The only reason Julian is on Garak's next mission is that it involves one of the names that they discovered on the compound's server. He brings D in as backup, to cross-check anything that Garak finds in real time as Julian instructs him.

Naturally, Garak manages to find someone who has to be seduced to gain access to the target's office. Julian had almost wondered if Garak might refrain, for some reason, but that's absurd. Nothing has changed. Next to him, D sighs in annoyance. "You know, I'd almost forgotten what it's like to run one of his missions," she says. Then she says, "Oh, that's a new one," as Garak guides the man from the hallway into the office next to the target's and pulls his shirt open, popping off the buttons. The man is a little more careful with Garak's clothes—Julian doesn't think he'd stand for having his shirt torn off—but his fingers still make quick work of the buttons. Julian's throat goes dry as the man unbuckles Garak's trousers, waiting for it, and that's it, that's when Garak looks straight into the camera as the man goes to his knees. "Jesus," D says. "Jesus Christ." The man is lavishing kisses along Garak's cock, which means that Julian has an excellent view of it. Garak has angled them so that Julian can watch clearly as he pushes into the man's mouth, can watch the man swallow hard around him, and remember exactly what that was like. D stands up. "Are you kidding me?"

Garak has his hand on the man's head, but he doesn't push; he lets the man set the pace instead. Julian can hear the familiar sounds and it's only D's presence a few feet away that's keeping him sane. Garak is still staring directly at the camera and Julian can see the tension in his muscles, the caught breath in his throat. D has taken her earwig out, apparently disgusted, and Julian dares to say, very low, "Don't come yet." He watches the shiver that passes through Garak, the way that his throat works as he pushes the man's head back off his cock. Garak's cock is stiff and flushed and he holds it tight with one hand. "Use your hand," Julian tells him, and Garak strokes his cock hard and fast. Julian can see

when he's close—very close—and some devil grips his tongue and makes him say, "Not until I tell you." Garak stops, almost shaking, and Julian says, louder, "That's enough, 003. There's an objective to achieve."

Garak stares at the camera and Julian is sure that he won't obey—but he does, says something short and sharp to the man, who leaves, and tucks himself back into his pants with a wince. The shape of his cock is obscene in his trousers as he advances on the target's office. He finds the target's hard drive and looks straight up into the security camera in this room, and if D weren't here—if it were later at night, if he weren't standing in a killer's office—Julian would tell him to finish himself off now. But instead Garak says, "Objective complete. I'm going to eliminate the target. I'll advise if I need guidance," and slinks out of the office.

"What the fuck," D says, "was that."

Julian lets out a long breath to steady his voice. "Just 003 being 003," he says, and he tries to keep his voice casual. "You did warn me that he wasn't shy." He keeps an eye on the monitors as Garak garottes the target.

D stares at him. There's color high in her cheeks. "That's not—there's a difference between not bothering to cover up at all, and—it's like he was *performing for you*."

"I thought—" Julian realizes how stupid it sounds as he says it. "I thought that's what you meant when you said he wasn't shy." He looks at D. "I assumed you and he—?"

D looks somewhere between regretful, insulted, and horrified. "No," she says. "Never. He didn't—he didn't look at the camera, Q. He and I didn't—did he touch you?"

"You make it sound like you're conducting a forensic interview," Julian says, and now *he's* insulted. "I was not—*touched*—by Elim Garak." He supposes that's the lie he'll have to maintain, because 'he got me off after I had nightmares' is embarrassing on many levels.

She clearly doesn't believe him. They're protective of him, here in Q Branch. It doesn't help that he's young, nor that he so clearly looks it. Sometimes they act as though he's never been out in the world. "Q, don't get your heart broken. 003 isn't like normal agents. He's not even like the other 00s. He's a bloody brilliant agent, and everything he touches turns to ash."

Julian sighs. "I appreciate the warning," he says. "I assure you, my heart is entirely safe." On the screen, he sees Garak execute another target with two shots to the head and thinks, yes, he'd never be foolish enough to develop feelings of that sort for Elim Garak.

"All right." D gives him a suspicious look. "If he bothers you, let me know. He may be a 00, but we take care of our own."

"I'm your *boss*," Julian reminds her, his voice plaintive, and D just shakes her head.

With the mission complete, D leaves the command center where they run missions that require more than one Q Branch operative and Julian transfers the video feed and slinks back to his desk in the privacy of his office. His program runs for the entirety of any mission—wheels down to wheels up—but during downtime like this, he usually puts it in a standby mode that's set to alert if there's any hostile movement in the agent's vicinity. Every face is run through facial recognition software, every body shape compared against the shapes of known weapons. It's not foolproof, not by a longshot, but Julian trusts it to be his eyes when his focus is elsewhere.

He expects Garak to go to a bar, perhaps, or invite some local lovely to his room, but Garak goes directly to his hotel room, pours himself a double, and stands at the window looking out over the city. There by the window, he's almost outside the field of vision of their own security camera. He's silent for a very long time—drinking, Julian assumes—and then Julian sees a window curtain billowing and his breath catches in his throat. "003, is everything all right?"

Garak steps back into the camera's field of view. "Just the wind," he says. "Still watching, Q?"

"Someone monitors until the mission is done," Julian says, a little stiffly. "Since I can do it and still be working on three other projects at once, I didn't see the need to task someone else with it."

"No, you wouldn't." There's something tight in Garak's voice. He unbuttons his shirt one-handed, drink in the other. "Everything all right there?"

"I'm afraid you scandalized D with your display earlier." Julian isn't looking at the shadows on his chest as Garak shrugs his shirt off.

Garak chuckles. "I didn't know she was watching. Listening too?"

Julian remembers what he'd said earlier. "No. Not listening." His throat hurts a little. He wants Garak to go down to the hotel bar, find someone and bring them upstairs, finish what he'd started in the office. "I've—I've got quite a lot of work to do, 003. I'll warn you if I detect any threats."

"Of course. I do hope you're not still living at the office."

That startles Julian "No," he says. "No, not until the next time I get shot." The silence stretches between them, and finally Julian says, "Goodnight, 003." The call sign is a comforting reminder of the formality between them.

Admittedly, he sleeps at the office that night, mostly because he forgets to go home until it's late enough that it would be silly to go all the way home and come all the way back, but he does make an effort to leave by 8 p.m. the next night. Julian picks up two curries at the nearby takeaway—one for dinner, one for breakfast—a bottle of wine, because he's feeling a little sorry for himself, and more cat food for the local strays. Carrying it all means that his hands are quite full when he reaches his flat and he grimly wishes that he'd been a little less zealous when he first installed all of his locks on the door. He's contemplating whether he can hold something with his teeth to free up a hand when the door abruptly swings open. "What—003!" He goes from shock to horror to anger in about ten seconds. "What's wrong?" He cranes his neck to see

past Garak. "Did someone break in?" The locks are all intact, but he can't fathom why else Garak would be here.

"Yes," Garak says. "I did."

It dawns on Julian that Garak really has broken into his apartment for no good reason, and he huffs in annoyance and shoulders past Garak. "I'll have to re-randomize all the codes now, I hope you know. You might as well shut that." The curries go on the counter, as does the wine; his laptop bag lives in the small area on the table not populated by stacks of technical manuals. He sets the cat food down by the back door for later distribution and removes his shoes indoors like a civilized person.

Garak watches him do it all with arms crossed and the slightest look of amusement. "Prescient of you to bring me dinner," Garak says.

"Presumptuous," Julian snaps. "That's my breakfast." He shoves it into the refrigerator. "What are you doing here?"

"You lied," Garak says. "You said you weren't sleeping at the office."

Julian is too incensed to consider the implications of what Garak is saying. "In point of fact, 003, I told you that I wasn't *living* at the office, which I am not. As you can see from the fact that I am here, in my own flat, preparing to eat my own dinner, alone."

"You weren't here this morning." His voice is light, even, as though this is a normal kind of thing to say.

"*Garak.*" Julian is on the verge of wringing his neck and realizes he's misspoken. "003. Please tell me that you have not been at my flat since this morning."

"No," Garak says. His face is unreadable. He walks further into the kitchen, until he's almost crowding Julian against the counter. "How's the wound?" When Julian gapes at him, Garak reaches down and actually lifts his shirt to examine it, fingertips not even brushing his skin.

"It's been two months, it's bloody well fine by now," and Julian wants to say *no thanks to you*, but it quite literally is thanks to Garak. "I suppose I should thank you for saving my life."

Garak leaves off staring at the ugly pink scar and lifts his blue eyes to Julian's. They're a cold unearthly color, those eyes. "I suppose I did." His face is very close, here in the bright light of Julian's tiny kitchen. Julian thinks he'll go cross-eyed if he stands here much longer. When he starts to slip away, though, Garak puts a hand on the counter and presses him back against it until their hips are almost touching.

"What do you want, 003?" Julian knows what he'd like, but he also knows it would probably be a very bad idea.

Garak leans forward, until his mouth is very close to Julian's ear, and says, "I want you to tell me." The heat of his breath makes Julian shiver.

"Tell you what?"

Garak's voice is very gravelly. "You said not to come until you told me."

That sends a bolt of white-hot heat through Julian that almost makes him stagger. "Didn't think you'd listen," he says, and if his voice is a little high-pitched, well, Garak is mouthing at his neck, somewhere between a kiss and a scrape of teeth, his other hand dropping firmly to Julian's hip. "You're not—known for being—particularly good at following orders—!"

"I did," Garak mumbles against his neck. "I did, and I want you to tell me." His fingers creep under Julian's shirt, then hook into the waist of Julian's trousers.

Christ, Julian thinks he's having a heart attack. "Kiss me," Julian says. He doesn't know what's going on, but he wants that at least—and Garak does, presses him firmly against the counter and catches his mouth almost hungrily. Julian's seen this a hundred times on surveillance footage but it's no wonder they drop their panties and spill their secrets. Garak kisses like he wants to consume a person, like there's no need for breath, and Julian doesn't care if this is the thousandth time Garak has done it because everything he says is the best kind of lie. "All right," Julian says at last, gasping in a breath. "All right." If Garak is going to offer this to him, Julian is going to take it. One more time, what's one more time? "You're going to—you're going to fuck me, and you're not going to come until I tell you."

The words sound a lot more authoritative in his head than they do when he says them aloud in the light of the kitchen, but Garak says, "All right," in his ear and nearly drags Julian the four steps that it takes to reach his bedroom.

Garak's hands are everywhere, pulling his jumper up over his head and discarding it on the floor, yanking at the buttons on his shirt until Julian races to undo them just to protect them, dragging Julian's trousers down and his pants with them, until Julian is entirely naked and lying, a little stunned, on the bed. Garak strips down with a kind of brutal efficiency that does something to Julian. He's been hard almost ever since Garak said he'd been waiting for Julian's permission, and when Garak presses him down into the mattress with another devouring kiss, his cock brushes heavy against Julian's thigh. Julian gropes in the direction of his bedside table for lube, because now that it's in front of him, he feels like he's been desperate for this since the tent.

Garak is ruthless opening him up, just this side of too fast. Julian shoves his hips up against Garak's fingers and makes noises against his mouth that he would never admit. "Garak," he says, and Garak swallows it down with another kiss, his fingers relentless and searching. He moves his mouth to Julian's abdomen, just to the side of the scar, and his lips are so light that Julian can barely feel them in contrast with his fingers. When he finds the right spot, he has Julian arching off the mattress with it, coming with his cock untouched. It feels like Garak is a firestorm that's going to burn Julian alive and he wants it desperately. "Another—finger," he says, even as his legs are a little jellylike. Garak's gaze is hungry, catching on his mouth, the line of his throat, the streaks of come on his stomach, down to where he's stretched around Garak's fingers, and Julian says, "Do it." Garak feels huge inside him as he bottoms out and Julian can't quite seem to catch his breath. He cants his hips up because he can't manage words and Garak wraps his hands around Julian's hips and sets up a rhythm that's so good Julian's starting to harden again. "Fuck," he pants, and Garak's hips snap forward and make Julian light up behind his eyes.

“Tell me,” Garak says against Julian's mouth. “Tell me—”

“You can—you can come—Garak—”

The noise Garak makes as he comes is something wild and inhuman. He keeps thrusting as he does, and the friction of his sweat-slick skin against Julian's cock has Julian coming again, desperately. Garak's eyes are preternaturally blue as he stares down at Julian, who is still panting for air. When Garak pulls out, Julian feels the absence keenly. Garak half-collapses onto his back next to Julian, who glances at him from the corner of his eyes. Garak's chest rises and falls evenly, as though he's just had a mild workout. Whatever desperation was on his face is gone now, replaced by an even kind of blankness.

“I have no idea what the fuck is happening,” Julian says. He regrets it as soon as he does, because Garak stands almost instantly and begins to reassemble his clothing. Julian props himself on his elbows for a moment to watch, but he can't bring himself to say anything more. Garak's movements are brusque and efficient, and he doesn't look at Julian. There's a weight settling on Julian's chest. He lets himself fall back onto the bed. “Lock the front door behind you,” he says to the ceiling. It's not as though he expected Garak to spend the night—though why shouldn't he, Garak is the one who came here, he didn't ask for this—but there could have been a shower together, at least. Julian would even have ceded the second curry. He hears the door shut behind Garak and the cheery jingle of the electronic locks re-engaging and thinks, well, fuck.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian goes into work the next morning a little sore, his stomach grumbling over the mediocre tikka masala that he gulped down for breakfast. When D sees him, she blanches and grabs something out of her purse, then drags him into the bathroom.

“Good morning?” Julian sees the tube in her hand. “Oh, shit.” There's a brilliant mark just above his collar that's a truly impressive shade of purple.

“Tell me you went out last night and met someone nice,” D says. She dabs the cover-up on the mark. It's not quite the right shade, but at least it's something. “Someone sweet and age-appropriate.”

Julian heaves a sigh. “D, I'm twenty-six years old. I'm not a child.” She pokes a little too hard at the mark, and Julian winces. “Yes, we watched a Disney film and then ate ice cream.” He catches her eyes in the mirror. “Leave it, D.”

“All right,” she says, though he knows very well that she won't.

Worse luck him, Garak is gearing up for a new mission and Julian has to introduce him to his latest darling, a heavily modified DB11. Garak arrives at his workshop beneath Q Branch at 10 AM sharp, impeccable as always. Julian is very conscious of the fact that he didn't quite roll his sleeves up far enough to avoid a smear of engine lubricant. When Garak arrives, his eyes flick infinitesimally to Julian's neck and then past him to the Aston. “What do you have for me today?”

Julian has always prided himself on being able to keep things casual, but there's casual and then there's not fucking acknowledging that anything happened at all. “Good morning, 003,” he says. “Meet your new car. If you leave this one in pieces, or at the bottom of a ravine, or on fire, I will be displeased.”

“Your pleasure is always foremost in my mind,” Garak says, and it rings so false that it makes Julian's spine crawl.

Julian shows off the new features—exploding caltrops, front and rear undercarriage-mounted guns that can fire up to 100 rounds per second, ejectors for both the driver and passenger seats with optional reusable parachutes, depending on whether Garak wants the ejected person to survive—before finishing with, “And, of course, I've reinforced the bulletproofing of both the windows and body. Nothing short of a mine is going to penetrate the car.” He realizes that he's pressing his hand to his scar and runs it through his hair instead. “Any questions?”

“Next time, I'd like a remote control too.”

That's almost a smile, Julian thinks. He scoffs. “If it makes you feel better, 003, I can tell you that there are enough electronics in this car that I could drive it halfway around the world from right here in Q Branch.”

Garak does smile, a quick tug of one corner of his mouth. “I'd settle for being able to drive it myself from down the street.”

“Next time,” Julian promises. The only real obstacle will be coming up with a simple enough interface for Garak to use from a smartphone—or, knowing Garak's propensity for losing things not attached to him, from a watch. “Any questions, 003?”

“I'll try to bring it back intact.” Garak meets his eyes, and for the barest second, Julian thinks he's going to say something else. He doesn't.

All right, then. “See that you do,” Julian says weakly, and passes Garak the keys.

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Summary

Julian takes a deep breath and sets his shoulders. He's Jules Hammersmith now (thank you, Moneypenny), sent down from Eton for cheating just for fun, Franks' chief buyer and cutter, longtime number one man, faultlessly loyal because he's never been presented with a better opportunity. The frame of his glasses conceals a set of lockpicks and he's wearing a single gaudy diamond earring, because Jules is the kind of man who makes up for his slight stature with obvious wealth, and because if the setting is twisted just right, it will open to reveal a tiny needle laced with enough sedative to stop an elephant. Julian will be damned if he walks into this situation with anything less than everything he could possibly use to rescue Garak.

Garak makes it from London to Ljubana in an appalling 10 hours. Julian watches the tiny dot that marks the car traveling on the motorway at eye-watering speeds. Garak is an excellent driver, but even so, Julian is unwilling to do anything but occasionally say, "Police patrol in half a kilometer" for fear of distracting him. He passes off the majority of the supervision duties onto Stevens, an eager-to-please junior Q Branch agent, once Garak is well on his way. Julian focuses on accessing the available camera systems in the old castle where Garak's target is staying. It's a newly-installed system with plenty of custom modifications, and if Julian were anyone else, it might give him pause. But Julian is Q, so he's into the underlying program within ten minutes and begins mapping out the interior, identifying the blind spots, so that he can upload a complete map to Garak's phone by the time he arrives. Fortunately, the castle's owners are paranoid enough that their network of surveillance stretches through nearly the entire structure and its outbuildings, including the guest rooms and the gardens. It's comforting to Julian—he doesn't like to run missions in places where he can't keep an eye on what's happening. Tracking an audio signal isn't the same, particularly not when he's trying to keep one particular signal safe from all the others.

"You should have the map now, 003," he says when Garak arrives. "Be aware that the grounds are extensively bugged. Someone will be able to hear anything that you say."

"Aren't they always," Garak mutters, and then bestows a smile on the woman who welcomes him. "*Zdravo*," he tells her. When she asks for his name, he offers his latest alias, "Peter Franks," and flashes two thick gold-and-diamond bands on his fingers as he signs the register. His shady diamond-dealer alias is one that the division has carefully maintained for nearly six years now, one of the better ones (in Julian's opinion).

If not for the strangeness of whatever is between them right now, Julian wouldn't have minded accompanying Garak on this mission, notwithstanding his injuries the last time he ventured into the field. The target, Dr. Andrej Krajnc, is a scientist who's grown to fancy himself a weapons designer. He's preparing to auction off a prototype of his latest high-powered laser—a laser that happens to require very precisely cut diamonds to operate at peak efficiency. Julian has been hacking into his files for six months now to gather information and he'd like to see the prototype in person. "You'll need to get my scanner within two meters of Krajnc's computer and remain at that distance for five minutes, minimum, to get me in," Julian reminds Garak. "Before the auction begins, if at all possible. Do try not to bend the scanner this time, at least not until it's done its job." He remembers the last time Garak used an earlier version of the scanner and suppresses the slight shiver that threatens him.

"I do know how it works, Q."

Julian examines the surveillance in Krajnc's room, and in the room next to it. "Krajnc's computer is against the west wall of his room, roughly three meters from the entrance. If you access the room next door, you should be able to put the scanner at the same location on the east wall to download it."

"Whose room is that?"

Julian consults the registry. "Savannah Sweet. American scientist with a chemical company. I'm sending her photo to your mobile now." He runs a comparison of her image with the surveillance feed footage. "She's presently in the south garden. You should be able to get to her room without attracting attention—"

"I know what to do," Garak says abruptly, and turns in the direction of the south garden. Julian's heart sinks a little, certainly only because this is less efficient. Trust Garak to go for a seduction when a little break-in would be just as effective.

He stays silent while Garak finds Savannah Sweet, silent when Garak persuades her to take him up to her room. Garak starts kissing her before they're even through the door, and Julian has to mentally congratulate him—it looks entirely unintentional when Garak pulls her with him until his back hits the wall just next to where Krajnc's computer is set up. Savannah pushes his coat off his shoulders and Julian watches it fall. It's perfectly situated, and Julian doesn't doubt that Garak can manage to spend another five minutes in this room with Savannah. Sure enough, Garak's eyes flash up to where the hidden camera sits as he kisses Savannah and Julian remembers viscerally what that feels like. He realizes that he's holding his breath and exhales slowly. Garak's gaze snaps away from the camera and he spins them, lifting Savannah bodily so that she wraps her legs around his hips. Julian watches his hand snake between their bodies, watches the way that Savannah's eyes flutter closed and hears Garak murmur something about how wet she is. She says something back, high-pitched, and then there's the clink of a belt buckle being undone and Garak's trousers are around his thighs. Julian watches the muscles of Garak's ass as he slides inside and thinks, it was so much easier before he knew exactly how this feels.

The proximity alarm on Julian's system goes off and he sees three heavily-armed men making their way toward Savannah's room. "003," Julian starts, and then watches horrified, as Garak pulls the earwig out of his ear almost violently and shoves it down into his pocket. It feels like Garak has slapped him across the face. "003—Garak!" There's no point yelling, not when Garak isn't wearing his comm, but Julian can't

help doing it anyway. The men are getting closer, nearly to the door, and Julian can't reach Garak so he does the next-best thing—he sets off the fire alarm.

It shrieks through the hotel, accompanied by a loud voice instructing guests to exit in an orderly fashion in English, French, and Slovenian. Garak flinches and pulls out of Savannah, who's already scrambling for her underwear, and he's just lifting his own trousers when the men burst into the room, guns drawn. Garak has his own gun out just an instant slower, but he's too late—Savannah shrieks and tases him. Garak goes down hard, twitching from the electricity, and the men are on him before he can struggle back up.

"Someone get M on the phone for me," Julian snaps. He's incandescent with rage, at himself and at Garak—mostly at Garak, for starting this stupid game in the first place and then taking out his bloody earwig for some reason when it's Julian's *job* to do exactly what he was about to do—and he watches helplessly as the men drag Garak through the hallways and down into the cellars, which are, naturally, the only place without any fucking cameras at all. He scans quickly, but there's not even a single cell phone camera, nothing at all that he can piggyback on. He has to settle for audio alone. He skips from one channel to another until he finds the three men carrying Garak into what sounds like a small room with stone walls, from the echoes. There's a dull thud as they dump him on the floor. Julian winces in sympathy. It sounds like they're wearing earwigs rather than carrying radios, so Julian takes a chance and sends a surge of high-pitched static through one. Its wearer curses and must yank it out of his ear, because Julian hears it fall to the ground.

It sounds like two of the men leave the room. The third remains and begins the sort of tired interrogation that comprises demanding answers from Garak—who they keep calling Franks, which means his cover is secure—and then the meaty smack of a fist on flesh. Garak has the sense to keep playing Franks, stammering and begging them not to hurt him. It's jarring how easily Garak slips in and out of the role. Julian should know well enough that he's always been a chameleon.

"I have M." Someone passes him a telephone. Julian doesn't take his eyes off the cameras on the entrances into the cellars.

"003 went and got himself captured," Julian says. He wouldn't usually bother M, but given the situation and the questions that they're asking, he thinks that he knows where this is going. "He's being interrogated now—I don't have eyes on him, but I can hear it and I believe they're going to demand that he produce a substantial quantity of diamonds within 48 hours or so, to operate the prototype. I suspect he'll be held as collateral."

"What are you asking, Q?" M sounds exhausted.

"Sir—I believe I'll need to be the one to go in." Julian is prepared with the explanation—he's the only one who fully grasps how the prototype operates with the diamonds, the only one who knows how precisely the facets need to be polished, the only one with extensive enough knowledge to adapt if the technical situation changes—but M doesn't even ask for it.

"I'll authorize it. We'll send you as soon as someone calls the cover contact number. And, Q—"

"Yes." Julian knows it means an airplane flight. With the timeline that he can hear them discussing, there's no comparison between what should be a seventeen-hour drive and a 2-hour flight. "The plane will be ready?"

"I'll send 009 to accompany you. Good luck, Q."

Julian hears the interrogation stop and hangs up on M. It sounds as though they've left the earwig in the room where Garak is being held. He can't risk speaking through it, not when there are bugs everywhere, but he turns up the static and sets a repeating pattern: - - \* -, - - \* -. If Garak can hear it, he'll know that Julian is coming.

The call comes two hours later from a number at the castle. Julian answers the phone. "Mr. Franks? You haven't been answering your mobile \_\_\_"

It's Garak's voice on the other line. Julian knew he wasn't dead, but it's a relief to hear him speak directly to Julian all the same. "Mr. Hammersmith." Garak's voice is rough, and it sounds like his lip is swollen. His voice quavers, but Julian knows that's part of the pretense. "I'm at the conference. I'll need you to bring me—250 grams of D-grade diamonds, flawless, at least two carats each. And cutting and polishing tools. You have—24 hours."

"I'll bring them myself," Julian says. He hesitates, then asks, "Is everything all right, Mr. Franks?" He's contemplated how Peter Franks' lead employee would react to a request for diamonds and decided that Franks is shady enough that Jules Hammersmith would be relatively unfazed, but curious nevertheless.

"Do you job," Garak snaps. "Don't be late." The connection terminates. Over the hacked audio surveillance, he says, "You'll have the diamonds, I promise," and he's dragged back to his cell.

Don't be late, with millions of dollars worth of diamonds gathered in twenty-four hours not counting travel time. It's an absurd request for anyone with resources less than those of the entire British government and, more specifically, their off-the-books diamond production laboratory. Fortunately, they've been assembling the collection since Julian first figured out what was going to be demanded, and ten hours later, Julian is boarding a private jet registered to Peter Franks with a briefcase of diamonds. 009 is standing just inside the hatch. She's a tall woman with an imposing face that turns very kind when she smiles. "All right, Q?" 009's voice is gentle and Julian wishes it weren't. A plane this size is his worst fear, every teenage nightmare come true.

"Fine," he says shortly.

She nods. "Belt in and we'll go," she tells him. Then she closes the door to the cockpit.

Julian has taken the bare minimum of anxiety medication for this flight. He can't afford to be the slightest bit muzzy-headed when he arrives, not with millions of dollars' worth of diamonds in one hand and Garak's life in the other. 009 is backup, but he knows better than to hope she'll be allowed to stay with him the entire time. Krajnc's men won't let a bodyguard near where they're holding Garak, not if they have any

sense; it'll be Julian, and Julian alone, who makes it into a room with him.

He has the uploaded data from Krajnc's computer on his laptop and he tries to distract himself from the sheer terror of the flight by reading eagerly through it. The laser is a marvel, tiny with extraordinary destructive power, the sort of thing that Julian himself would try to fit into a watch or a pen to send along with Garak. But it's a hungry weapon, and its use wears hard on the diamonds that focus it. Five seconds of continuous use will crack the diamond that it uses as a primary focusing lens, making it a wildly expensive tool.

"We're landing shortly," 009 says over the radio. If Julian is honest, this is the part he's been dreading most—the moment when the plane rattles and begins to descend. He digs his fingers into his palms and focuses on the pain of it, chews at his lip until it's swollen, tries to keep his breathing even. When they land, the force of it expels all of Julian's breath at once and he barely swallows back his hasty lunch. There's a limousine waiting for them at the airstrip and 009 slides into the driver's seat. Julian handcuffs the briefcase to his hand and pulls the sleeve of his coat lower to try to conceal the cuff. The inside of his mouth is sour, his heart is rabbiting in his ears. "I'll have your back," 009 tells him as they pull up to the castle.

Julian takes a deep breath and sets his shoulders. He's Jules Hammersmith now (thank you, Moneypenny), sent down from Eton for cheating just for fun, Franks' chief buyer and cutter, longtime number one man, faultlessly loyal because he's never been presented with a better opportunity. The frame of his glasses conceals a set of lockpicks and he's wearing a single gaudy diamond earring, because Jules is the kind of man who makes up for his slight stature with obvious wealth, and because if the setting is twisted just right, it will open to reveal a tiny needle laced with enough sedative to stop an elephant. Julian will be damned if he walks into this situation with anything less than everything he could possibly use to rescue Garak.

"Jules Hammersmith," he snaps at the woman who greets him. He nods shortly at 009, who's carrying a single suitcase of clothing; he has the diamonds and a satchel full of equipment. "I've had a hell of a flight and I had bloody well better be expected." Jules Hammersmith has no reason to think that anything is out of the ordinary.

Her smile is tight and looks very much like she wants to strangle him. "I will inform Dr. Krajnc," she says. "You will be escorted downstairs. Your woman may take your bag to your room."

009's eyes flick to his, and Julian nods slightly. He'd hoped to keep her with him a little longer, but the men approaching don't look like the matter is up for discussion. She can monitor both his and Garak's vital signs and locate them with her mobile; if things go very wrong, he trusts her to make the right call.

Naturally, they take him down into the cellars and pat him down thoroughly. They don't notice his earring or his glasses, though, which is one point in Julian's favor. "Where's Mr. Franks?" he asks.

"Did you bring the diamonds?" He recognizes the man as one of the ones who took Garak, and from his voice, he's the one who conducted the interrogation, such as it was.

Julian lifts the briefcase slightly. "I should warn you," he says, "all of our diamond transport briefcases are protected with an explosive compound that will detonate unless disarmed with a code, only half of which each of us knows." He smiles flintily. "Where is Mr. Franks?"

The man looks like he wouldn't mind blowing off Julian's hand and taking his chances with the briefcase, but someone must give him an order because he touches his ear and grimaces. "This way." He leads Julian to a windowless room—locked, Julian notes—that is a much grimmer version of the hotel rooms up above. There are two beds and not much else. Garak is lying on one of the beds, unmoving.

"Mr. Franks!" When Julian steps inside, the man shuts the door behind him. Julian hears it lock—a physical lock, not electronic. Excellent.

"Jules." Garak sits up gingerly, and that doesn't look fake. Julian swallows back an exclamation. One of Garak's eyes is swollen shut, and there are bruises on his cheekbone, along his jawline, around his neck as though someone grabbed it and squeezed. There's dried blood from a split in his eyebrow.

"Are you all right?" Julian taps his ear to indicate the presence of bugs, then touches his eye and shakes his head to tell Garak that there are no cameras.

"Just—a misunderstanding about a business arrangement," Garak says. He touches his ribs once—bruised or cracked, then, but not broken. "Did you bring the diamonds?"

"Yes. And my tools. I explained that the suitcase requires a code from each of us to open. Haufiku took my luggage to my room, though I don't suppose I'll be sleeping there," he says ruefully.

"I don't expect any trouble once the deal is complete," Garak says, which means the exact opposite. He glances down at the handcuff and Julian spots a tiny smile. "Really, isn't the handcuff a bit dramatic? I don't think you're at risk of purse-snatching." Julian's fingers itch to run over Garak's ribs and confirm that nothing is broken, to lift his shirt and check for the bruising that is almost certainly there. His eyes light on the earring. "What have I told you about wearing tacky jewelry like that?"

"That it becomes me?" Franks and Jules have a good relationship, Julian has decided. Franks is conscious of his position as the boss, but he doesn't mind a bit of banter as long as Jules remembers his place. Julian preens a little and gestures to it with his free hand. "Brand new. Mitzy threw it in as a bonus when I picked up the diamonds you asked for."

Mitzy, Garak mouths, and that's genuine amusement in his eyes. "It's tacky."

"We can't all afford rings like these," Julian says, and he reaches out to run his finger over one of the diamond-studded signet rings that Garak is wearing. They both have the same sedative in them that Julian's earring does. They're intact; if Garak hasn't seen fit to use it yet, that's a good sign. Julian tells himself that he's touching the rings only to make sure Garak understands what his own earring is for, but his thumb brushes the bare skin of Garak's knuckle. That scrap of heat is comforting, even if it makes Julian want to clutch at Garak's hand like some



kind of—but that’s not what they are, or what they’ll ever be. That, of all things, reminds him abruptly that he’s unspeakably angry at Garak for his carelessness, and he snatches his hand back and walks to the opposite side of the room.

“Jules?” Garak’s voice is cautious.

“You know this has—caused several significant deals to follow through,” Julian says. “I had to withdraw at least three sale offers to come up with the necessary amount of diamonds,” and he lets the anger show in his voice, because their informal relationship extends to Jules expressing discontent. After all, better if the guards think that Jules is a little insubordinate, maybe even questioning how far he’ll ever advance while Franks is still in the picture. Better if they think that Franks and Jules don’t care about each other’s safety so that they don’t try to use one as leverage against the other. He doesn’t think Garak would sacrifice him—not out of any emotional attachment, but because Julian is, objectively, less replaceable than a 00. And he doesn’t know if he has it in him to sacrifice Garak. “I don’t understand how you could forget that you’d need such a significant quantity of diamonds on such short notice. It’s irresponsible—”

“*Mind your tongue,*” Garak snaps, and he strides across the room in three steps to grip Julian’s collar and shove Julian against the wall one-handed. The shove itself doesn’t hurt—Julian expected some reaction like it when he let his anger show too honestly, particularly given the number of people who are probably listening—but Julian loses his grasp on the handle of the briefcase and it jerks the handcuff sharply against his wrist as it falls. Julian can’t stop a small noise of pain (Jules wouldn’t stop it, he thinks) and Garak snatches the handle of the briefcase before the handcuff can dig into Julian’s skin again. “Be careful with those,” he says harshly, even as he lifts both Julian’s hand and the briefcase to inspect them. Julian’s wrist is barely bleeding where the handcuff cut into it. “Don’t ever speak to me that way again.”

“I’m sorry,” Julian says, and pretends that the waver in his voice is from fear instead of from the intensity of Garak’s eyes, from the ghosting touch of his thumb as he wipes away the few drops of blood. The adrenaline that’s been pounding through him since Garak was first taken is hot inside him and the pressure of Garak’s body isn’t helping. He licks his lips almost reflexively and Garak’s eyes drop to his mouth. The heat inside him is almost blinding. If not for the situation—

“Just don’t do it again.” Garak’s voice is rough from something that isn’t anger. If he leaned in a few inches, he could kiss Julian—but the audio surveillance would pick that up. Instead, he presses his thumb to Julian’s lower lip and Julian can’t help but touch the tip of his tongue to it. Garak’s eyes lift from Julian’s mouth to his eyes and then he seems to remember where they are. He steps back abruptly. “When is the deal happening?”

It takes Julian a long moment to steady himself. He hates that Garak has this effect on him so easily. “I wasn’t given that information,” he says.

Krajnc’s men prove just how closely they’ve been listening by opening the door then. “Now,” the lead man says. “Follow me.”

“I procured the diamonds,” Garak protests as they follow the man. “We haven’t discussed payment—”

The man deposits them in another windowless room, where Krajnc is sitting at a table already with another guard and the prototype laser. Julian’s stomach jumps in professional admiration when he sees it. “That’s incredible,” he gushes, and Krajnc preens a little. Classic—a man dipping a toe into the world of illegal weapons sales, convinced of his own brilliance and happy to hear it reinforced. “Is that what the diamonds are for? Can I see how it works?” Jules is a little careless, he thinks. Jules lacks the guile to take Franks’ place.

“Shut up, Jules. Open the case.” When Julian looks to Garak, he sees that Garak is rotating one of his rings gently with his thumb, apparently casual. There’s only one guard accompanying Krajnc, looking a little too comfortable with the idea that he’s the only man carrying in the room. Julian inclines his head a little and twines a lock of hair around his finger so that he can brush his finger across the diamond stud.

“It needs your half of the code first, Mr. Franks.” He offers the keypad to Garak. “The six-digit one.” It doesn’t really matter what Garak enters. He passes it back to Julian, who types in the code that arms the flash grenade beneath the diamonds. As long as the briefcase is aimed in the proper direction, he and Garak should be relatively protected from it. Julian opens the briefcase, unlocking the cuff from his wrist with the same code. “It’s all there,” Julian says. When Krajnc and the guard peer inside, Julian shut his eyes tightly and hits the trigger on the cuff. The brilliant flash of light is red on the inside of his eyelids before it fades. Krajnc cries out once and Julian scrambles across the table to inject the man with his earring; from the corner of his eye, he sees Garak doing the same to the guard.

“A brilliant idea,” Garak says.

Julian stifles an eyeroll at the halfhearted joke. He snatches up the laser prototype and slides it into the case, then shuts the entire thing. “I take it we’re bringing the doctor with us?”

“If we can.” Garak has already retrieved the guard’s firearms—a pistol and an M12—and he passes the pistol to Julian before tucking the guard’s sheathed tactical knife into his waistband. “How long will the sedative last?”

Julian has been cycling through radio channels trying to find 009. When his series of clicks is returned in kind, he says, “009, I have 003. We’re in the cellar with Krajnc and a guard, both unconscious.” When Garak gestures, Julian passes the radio to him. He’s under no illusions that, under these circumstances, he should do anything but put his entire faith in the 00s. “The sedative is good for an hour, give or take. Depending on individual physiology,” he says, before Garak can make a comment about the lack of accuracy.

“I’ve been tracking you both,” 009 says over the radio. “You’re not far from what looks like an exit to the east garden. Can you get there?”

Julian compares his mental map of the cellars to his memory of the map of the grounds. He nods to Garak. “Yes,” Garak says. “There may be a bit of noise.”

‘A bit’ is an understatement. Garak kills four guards with short bursts of fire from an M12, then helps Julian hoist Krajnc’s limp form as they make for the exit. Bullets zip past their heads as they shove their way through an old door—Julian has never been so glad to see 009 standing on the other side of a door. “Let’s get out of here,” 009 says, and hoists Krajnc’s body over her shoulder. “The car is close.” They tumble into

the backseat of the DB11, where Garak zip-ties Krajnc's hands and feet. Julian is almost surprised at the lack of enemy vehicles pursuing them, but 009 is an efficient—and less terrifying than Garak—driver and has them to the airfield in a matter of minutes. She steps out of the limousine while Julian's heart is still pounding and telephones someone.

"Well," Julian says, "there was a good deal less blood on this mission than my last with you." Even Krajnc, neatly trussed and still unconscious on the seat, is unbloodied.

"Get on the plane," Garak tells him. "009 and I will secure Krajnc in the hold." And Julian can't really say no, he'd rather not get on the plane, perhaps he could take the train back instead—

Somehow, Julian had imagined that after everything that's happened, the jet wouldn't be so bad. After all, he walked more or less alone into a mad scientist's lair with a briefcase full of diamonds and managed to emerge with the diamonds, a prototype miniature laser, and Elim Garak; after that, a two-hour flight on a luxury private jet should be nothing.

It's not nothing. He should have brought some bloody opiates along for the trip home. He settles for a large glass of Scotch, which he grips so tightly that he worries he might break it. They've been in the air for half an hour, sitting across from each other and staring out their respective windows, when the plane hits a pocket of turbulence. Julian drops his glass and says "*Fuck*" in a pitch that's closer to a yell than a scream. The world is blurring a little in front of his eyes and he's struggling to breathe when a warm weight presses hard against his shoulder. Julian manages to catch a breath and focus his eyes as the plane smoothes out, and he realizes Garak has crossed to sit next to him.

"I'll tell M that you deserve hazard pay for flying," Garak says, and Julian stifles a miserable laugh. Garak lays a hand on his forearm, but it isn't quite enough.

"The plane was only—a little bigger than this," he manages to say. It was a little better flying to Ljubljana; at least then he'd had an urgent purpose. "I could use a distraction." He only means that he wants Garak to talk to him, but Garak's hand drops from his arm to his thigh, and then creeps up his thigh.

"I can manage that," Garak says, and forestalls Julian's next objection by draping a blanket across his lap. Julian should tell him to stop, but there are ninety minutes left on this flight and this sort of distraction was very effective the last time Garak employed it.

Garak hesitates, hand on the button of Julian's trousers, until Julian says, "Yes, all right." Julian wasn't anywhere near hard before, but when he shimmies his trousers down a little to give Garak better access, Garak grasps his cock and Julian nearly cries out. He's suddenly very grateful that 009 is the only other person here and is shut firmly in the cockpit. He expects Garak to go quickly, but Garak's touch is light, almost teasing, all along the length of his cock, until Julian is trying to push into his hand. Garak's fingers reach the head of his cock, slipping across where he's already leaking, and Julian bites his lip hard to keep from making a noise.

"Don't," Garak tells him, and closes his fingers around his cock. The pressure is better, but Garak is still maddeningly slow and Julian can't bear to look at him. Garak lifts his hand and kisses the place where the handcuff cut into his wrist, already purpling into a bruise. Julian can't stop a noise then, and when he turns his head, Garak catches his mouth in the kiss that Julian has wanted since he found him. He bites Julian's lower lip very gently and speeds up his strokes, and Julian whines into his mouth. He's close, very close, when the plane hits turbulence again—just one hard bump—and it jolts him out of the glorious feeling that had begun to creep through him. He breaks the kiss, breathing too fast, and Garak says, "It's all right." He unbuckles his own seat belt and lifts the blanket off Julian's lap, and before Julian can protest, Garak is kneeling in front of him to suck his cock.

Julian almost yells, catching himself at the last second. He slams his head back against the seat at the feeling of it, tugs at Garak's hair until he remembers himself and loosens his fingers. He should care about how openly this is happening—god forbid there should be cameras in the plane, he's pretty sure that there are—but there's nothing but Garak's mouth, and *fuck* when Garak looks up at him with those eyes, Julian has to close his eyes because he can't do it. He doesn't know why Garak is offering this, whether it's gratitude or a passing desire or some measure of human kindness, but he'll take everything offered. It's at once more and less intense with his eyes closed, easier without having to look into Garak's eyes. If the plane hits turbulence again, he doesn't feel it because there's nothing beyond the heat of Garak's mouth. When he comes, he bites his lip so hard that it nearly bleeds and he still makes a noise so loud that 009 must hear it up in the cockpit.

Garak sucks him gently until he's oversensitive and squirming. The air of the plane is cool on his wet skin when Garak releases him and sits back down, wincing. It takes Julian a moment to gather the wherewithal to close up his trousers, and then he realizes that Garak did all that with cracked ribs. "Fuck," he says. Exhaustion is hitting him as the adrenaline ebbs. "I'm sorry." Julian lets out a long breath.

"Don't," Garak tells him, and fuck his throat sounds rough from Julian's cock. This is going to destroy Julian.

"You can't go off comms like that," Julian says. "G—003, you can't. I wasn't going to—" Embarrassment floods him, remembering exactly when Garak had ripped out the earwig. "I wasn't going to—give you instructions. I was trying to warn you—" He takes another deep breath. "I have to be able to alert you if you're in danger. That's the whole point. Whatever happened between—" He wishes Garak would interrupt him so he wouldn't have to finish one of these sentences. "I won't talk to you during—encounters like that, except to warn you." He knows he sounds a little plaintive but he can't help adding, "Just—don't look at the camera like that, if you don't want me to—"

"All right," Garak says. "I won't look at the camera if I don't want to hear you."

Christ, but Julian hates him sometimes. This entire mess is Garak's fault, from the first time that Julian got hard watching him to this humiliating blowjob on a company jet that someone from Q Branch is probably watching right now. "You know," Julian says bitterly, "death in a fiery crash is beginning to seem better and better."

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Summary

“What were you hoping I would do with your watch?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll think of something,” Garak says, and he smiles. His eyes are a bright blue in the harsh light of Julian’s workshop. “A miniature laser, perhaps. A sleeping gas. An electromagnetic pulse, even.”

“I’m not putting the diamond laser in your watch,” Julian tells him sternly, even though his fingers are itching to do just that. He knows where his set of jeweler’s screwdrivers are without looking, and he lifts the case out of its slot on his workbench and pops it open one-handed as he inspects the watch. “Given the rate at which you lose your possessions, you’d cost the section a fortune before you even turned it on.”

He gets a lot of looks when he returns to Q Branch after debriefing. 009’s face was entirely impassive as they deplaned, but Q Branch operatives aren’t trained in the same kind of subtlety as 00s. He can only assume that he’s behaving in such a manner that everyone can guess, more or less, at what happened. He divides the looks into roughly three categories: (1) pity, because who would be stupid enough to get involved with 003; (2) envy, because who wouldn’t want to have sex, in any form, with 003; and (3) near hysteria at the entire situation.

Garak spends two weeks removed from active rotation by Medical. He doesn’t come to Q Branch a single time. Julian can’t help but feel like a lot of the looks are turning into (1). Julian is well aware that he could find Garak if he wanted to, but he sees no reason to humiliate himself further. He spends his time disassembling the laser prototype to see if he can find a way to reduce the speed at which the diamonds in it deteriorate. D gives him a few worried glances and he’s careful to make a great show of sleeping at home, which people seem to find comforting.

Garak gets the usual array of tech on his next mission. Julian tucks the condom dispenser away next to the latest iteration of Garak’s Walther PPK and hands the tray to Garak with what he thinks is a good attempt at his usual acid wit. He’s not sure how well he succeeds. Garak has sex with two women in one day and carefully avoids making eye contact with the camera. Julian watches it all with a sick feeling in his stomach, monitoring the surrounding surveillance cameras for any activity, and only interrupts once to warn Garak that there are two local police officers approaching his hotel. When Garak is done, Julian gives him careful, clipped instructions to escape with the chip he’s been sent to retrieve intact. At the end of the active operation, Julian carefully removes his headset. “I think I’ll call it a night,” he says. “Stevens, please monitor for anything out of the ordinary.” Stevens, who hasn’t earned a letter designation yet but is more than up to the task of babysitting Garak’s comms, turns pink and bobs his head in a nod, scrambling to pull on a headset. D shoots Julian a look of concern as he leaves and he smiles at her.

Julian had been planning to just go home and feel a little self-pitying, but instead he secures his laptop at home, musses his hair in some attempt at fashion, and goes out. It turns out to be a Friday night—who knew?—and Julian finds a blue-eyed dark-haired man with broad shoulders to buy him a drink. When the man—Davey—goes to the bathroom, Julian scans his fingerprint on his drinks glass and runs it through his system just to be safe. He comes back flagged for turnstile-jumping a few years ago and fines at two different libraries, which makes Julian relax a little. He doesn’t trust people without any public record of minor wrongdoing. This one was a rugby star at uni, now an NHS worker—perfect. When Davey returns, Julian grins at him and says, “I live just up the way.”

It’s good. Julian thought it would be, from the way he smiled and danced and the few stories he told. He’s eager, generous, apologizes when he scrapes his teeth across Julian’s skin hard enough to leave a mark and then, when Julian says, “No, I like it,” takes the initiative to leave more. This is what normal people do, Julian reminds himself, as he digs his fingernails into Davey’s shoulders. Moneypenny has a boyfriend. People spend the night with someone who will look them in the eye in the morning. When he comes, Davey doesn’t scramble out of bed; he yawns and says, “I’m knackered, mind if I spend the night?”

Why not, Julian thinks. “All right,” he says, and lets Davey kiss him again. The alarm system is fully armed, and it would’ve warned him when they came in if Davey had a weapon or any one of a number of standard chemical compounds. He squirms his way out of Davey’s grasp to sleep and thinks, right, this is what normal people do.

The alarm triggers at five in the morning, setting off a terrific racket. Julian flails awake in the predawn light, snatching the taser from its holster beneath his bed, and finds Davey wide-eyed next to him in bed. “Stay here,” Julian tells him. He pads barefoot into the kitchen, taser in hand. He almost hopes he’ll find a knife-wielding madman, but there’s—nothing at all. He checks the door and finds it securely locked. His flat isn’t big enough for someone to be hiding effectively. When he checks the footage from his security cameras on the front and back doors, there’s a brief blur of motion, but he can’t see it well enough to tell who—or what—it is. Julian resets the alarm and climbs back into bed with Davey. “Sorry,” he says. “Malfunction.” Davey is already asleep again. Julian wonders how a person manages to do that, just put something like an intruder alarm out of his head and fall asleep in a matter of minutes. He supposes that Davey doesn’t have a lot of people who might like to kidnap him. He fetches his laptop and sits at the kitchen table in a robe, drinking tea and playing with a few modifications to the remote controls for 003’s miraculously still-intact car.

Two hours later, he sends Davey on his way with a kiss and a promise that Julian will call him, and thinks that maybe he will. He buys an exceedingly expensive cup of lapsang souchong on his way to work, which he drinks only when he’s in a good mood, and D wrinkles her nose at the smell of it when he walks in. “Ugh,” she says. “No one likes a morning person.” Then she squints at him. “You look *cheerful*.”

Julian stifles a smile. “Not in the slightest—” He breaks off his sentence when Garak walks through the doors of Q Branch with two mugs in his hand. “Um.” Julian glances around, but D is the only other person here and she’s abruptly very focused on her computer. “Hello, 003. Did

you—need something?” He doesn’t mean to sound accusatory, but as far as he knows, Garak has never entered Q Branch except to pick up his mission tech.

“I’m having trouble with my watch,” Garak says, and gestures a little with his wrist. It’s not a Q Branch watch. “I thought you might take a look. Perhaps upgrade it.” He doesn’t sound like he’s lying, but then, Garak never sounds like he’s lying.

“Well. I was going to work on your car, but I suppose I can save that.” Julian extends his free hand, but Garak gives him one of the mugs instead.

“An incentive,” Garak says.

It’s almost painfully hot when Julian’s knuckles brush against the porcelain. He can smell his favorite brand of double bergamot Earl Grey, heavily sweetened, the kind he drinks when he needs a particular boost to his attention. Julian hasn’t quite finished his present cup of tea, but he sets it down on the nearest desk. “Very well. Follow me.”

Julian leads Garak back into his workshop and finds a safe place for the mug. When he looks at Garak expectantly, Garak holds out his arm for Julian to remove the watch and takes a pointed sip of his own mug, as though to demonstrate why he can’t take it off himself. “Is that coffee?” His fingers make quick work of the watch clasp, and it falls loose around Garak’s wrist. As Julian pulls it off, his fingers graze Garak’s palm and Garak twitches almost imperceptibly. It’s the first time he’s touched Garak since the airplane, he realizes. “What were you hoping I would do with your watch?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll think of something,” Garak says, and he smiles. His eyes are a bright blue in the harsh light of Julian’s workshop. “A miniature laser, perhaps. A sleeping gas. An electromagnetic pulse, even.”

“I’m not putting the diamond laser in your watch,” Julian tells him sternly, even though his fingers are itching to do just that. He knows where his set of jeweler’s screwdrivers are without looking, and he lifts the case out of its slot on his workbench and pops it open one-handed as he inspects the watch. “Given the rate at which you lose your possessions, you’d cost the section a fortune before you even turned it on.”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t got a diamond lab stashed away somewhere, running day and night,” Garak says. He’s watching Julian’s fingers as Julian unscrews the watch’s backing to inspect the mechanism. “And that your process isn’t a good deal faster than any of the ordinary ones.”

Julian scowls, though Garak doesn’t see it. “I suppose I could replace the jewel in the movement with a diamond,” he says. “And modify the oscillating weight to power the laser. But I’m not going to be able to put an EMP in here too.” He plucks a jeweler’s loupe out of the case where he keeps his screwdriver and holds it up to the watch. “Any sleeping gas would have to be highly compressed—perhaps in a canister attached to the back of the watch? But it would be one shot only, and the watch would have to be very close to someone’s face for it to be effective. You’re more likely to gas yourself than a target.”

“In that case, let’s avoid a poison,” Garak says. When Julian looks up from the watch mechanism, Garak is smiling again. “If you don’t mind.”

“I’m not going to *poison* you.” Julian is insulted. “After all the trouble that I put into retrieving you from Krajnc—”

“Tell the truth, you were really in it for the laser.” There’s something the slightest bit uncomfortable in Garak’s voice, like he wants Julian to agree.

Julian sets the watch and the parts he’s removed onto a tray. “Perhaps I just wanted to see what it feels like to carry millions of dollars in diamonds,” he says. He sets the tray in the area of his workbench reserved for delicate projects, safely separated from the area where he tinkers with car parts. He can’t help asking, “Did you get my message?”

“The Morse code, in the cell?” Garak is watching his face now. “Yes. I should’ve known you would find a way to be listening in.”

“Maybe I’ll put an audio receiver in the watch,” Julian muses. “Or perhaps a vibration—just enough to pass a warning without someone else hearing it.” He frowns and types a few notes onto his design computer. “You know, this would be much easier if I simply built a watch from scratch.”

Garak smiles at that. “I’m less likely to lose this one.”

“Very well.” Julian picks up his mug. It’s quite cool now, but he takes a sip anyway. “You know, there are mugs in the Q Branch kitchen that will maintain temperature.” It’s perfectly sweetened.

Garak raises an eyebrow. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He checks his bare wrist automatically, then shakes his head a little. “Goodbye, Q. I’ll be back for the watch tomorrow.”

Julian stifles his huff of outrage—tomorrow, as though he has nothing else to do!—and says, “Goodbye, 003.”

He spends far too much time on the watch that day, and that night. Little toys are always more of a challenge—pens, jewelry, makeup cases, that sort of thing—because there’s so little room for anything and so much higher a risk of accidental triggering. It’s one reason that he prefers to start with his own design and build into that, rather than working with an object that someone else designed. But he enjoys the puzzle of trying to fit as much as he can into Garak’s old watch, and it’s nearly 9 PM when he realizes that he’s been working steadily for hours and has eaten—hmm. He can’t recall having eaten anything.

Julian stretches out his shoulders, sore from his dreadful tendency to hunch over the bench or at his computer, and wanders into the Q Branch kitchen. The contents of the refrigerator usually range from bland to disturbing, but he has low standards at the moment. Stevens often forgets his lunches in there, and anything left behind over the weekend is fair game. When he opens the door, bracing himself, his breath catches in his throat.

There, tucked between a wrinkled old apple that's been living in the fridge for at least two weeks and tinfoil-covered half-eaten cup noodles, is a fresh takeout container from the takeaway near Julian's flat. It's full of what looks like tikka masala and two now-soggy samosas, and is labeled **Q** in a slashing kind of script. "I have no fucking idea what's going on," Julian says to the empty kitchen, and sticks the entire container in the microwave. He runs simulations on his computer as he eats, and debates whether he can fit in another hour of work before it's unreasonably late to go home.

The universe decides that for him. As he tests the second of four possible firing mechanisms for a sedative gas, he realizes that he's neglected to wear the proper mask for this type of gas, and naturally—

The headache when he wakes up is made even more embarrassing by the very obvious bruise on his forehead. He says fuck it to crowding onto the Night Tube with all the drunk revelers out on a Saturday night, decides that he doesn't have a concussion, and goes to sleep for a few extremely grumpy hours in his office.

\* \* \* \* \*

He wakes to the sound of Garak's voice, lightly amused. "The watch wasn't so urgent that you needed to sleep here, Q." Julian sighs and sits up on his pullout, snatching his glasses off the side table, and sets them on his nose in time to see Garak's face darken. "What happened?"

Julian stands up, very conscious that he's down to his undershirt and a pair of sweatpants. "There was a bit of an accident," he says. "I blame you."

Garak puts a mug down on Julian's desk and grips his chin with a very warm hand, brushing his hair back with the other. Julian really isn't prepared to be this close to Garak, half-dressed, only a minute after waking up. "Tell me no one broke into Q Branch."

"Don't be absurd." The skin of Garak's fingers is rough, with calluses that catch at the very beginning of stubble along Julian's jawline, but he's very gentle when he touches Julian's forehead just beside the bruise. "I was—testing firing mechanisms for highly compressed sedative gas." Garak stares at him for a minute and then laughs. Julian doesn't think he's ever heard Garak laugh like this, unrestrained. "I'm glad my suffering for my country causes you such joy," he says stiffly.

Garak shakes his head and releases Julian. "I brought you tea," he says, and presses the mug into Julian's hands.

Julian takes it automatically. When he sips it, it's just the right temperature. Garak must have retrieved one of Q Branch's mugs when he was tucking curry into the refrigerator. "Well. I suppose I can show you what I've done so far." He considers dressing fully, but it's a Sunday morning and even Q Branch tends to be fairly deserted if there's no op in progress. "Come along."

There's something about Garak's presence that makes Julian feel as though he's only a few inches away, even when he's at a respectable distance. Julian puts the workbench between them and pulls out his tray. "I've ruled out the EMP," he tells Garak gravely. "You'll have to be satisfied with the laser, gas, and communications."

"Is that all." Garak's eyes are smiling.

Julian assumes it will be a strictly weekend event, but on Monday morning Garak is there again, another mug of heavily-sweetened double bergamot Earl Grey in his hand, and every single person in Q Branch is surreptitiously staring. "You know, 003," Julian says, "It rather lessens the gesture when I know that you're making these mugs of tea out of my own personal supply."

Garak brings the mug to his own mouth and takes a long drink of it, inhaling deeply. "You do have good taste."

He passes the mug to Julian before Julian can squawk in outrage, and Julian takes it and says, "Oh, come along, I'll show you what I'm doing now." Seventeen pairs of eyes follow them as they walk back into Julian's workshop.

Garak visits him every single one of the next seven days—to inquire about the watch's progress, to harass Julian about installing a remote driving system, to generally distract Julian from work that he actually needs to do. Julian should tell him to go away, but each time he brings Garak into his workshop instead. He's growing to *like* Garak, which is quite the problem. It was one thing when there was only 003, the man on the other side of a camera. That was—well, it was still confusing, but at least Julian knew that he was safe from the risk of—of *falling* into some sort of feelings for Garak, never mind a few orgasms one way or the other. But Julian is discovering that he also enjoys Garak's company—likes his short sarcastic remarks, likes the way that Garak appreciates his work, likes the tea that Garak brings him and the food that he sneaks into the refrigerator—and that's a terrible danger, isn't it. It's dangerous to grow to look forward to seeing Garak in the morning, when it could disappear any day.

Julian has the watch fully ready for Garak when he comes for his kit for the next mission. "Pay attention to the different controls," Julian warns him. "There's a safety mechanism for the gas, but you'll regret it if you make a mistake. Turn the watch face to send a message in Morse code—there's no audio receiver, so it shouldn't show up on a scan for bugs."

"Thank you, Q," Garak says, and it's so sincere that it throws Julian. He begins to push the tray of equipment across the table to Garak, but Garak extends his wrist. Julian stares at it for a moment before he realizes that Garak wants him to put the watch on.

"It's not a complicated clasp," Julian tells him, but he slides the watch over Garak's hand and flicks the clasp closed.

For a moment, Garak grips his forearm, and Julian looks up into his eyes for any hint of what he's thinking. Garak releases him quickly and takes the tray with the usual assortment of equipment. "I'll try to bring some of it back," he promises, and leaves. Julian can still feel the warmth of his grasp. Fuck.

It's a retrieval mission, not an assassination, which always tends to require greater participation by Julian. Stevens tracks the progress of Garak's flight to Buenos Aires, then hands the surveillance over to Julian once Garak is on the ground. "Don't overcomplicate it, 003," Julian warns when he sees Garak's eyes begin to drift across the art in the Palacio de Bellas Artes. "The chip is hidden in the frame of [La Nymphe](#)

*surprise*. It should be just to the left of the—oh.” His heart sinks as he sees the empty spot.

“Removed for cleaning,” Garak says, as though Julian can’t read Spanish. “On site, I assume?”

“Bloody—” This wasn’t scheduled. Something must have happened. “Most likely,” Julian says, scanning through surveillance feeds. “Yes—I see it in the art restoration office. You’ll need to make your way inside.” He doesn’t even need to look at the screen to know what Garak’s face looks like. “Do try to be efficient about it, 003.” It’s the most that he dares to say, now that they’re not doing whatever strange dance they used to do over hundreds of miles.

“I always am,” Garak says. True to his word, he locates a pretty assistant in a matter of minutes and convinces her to take him somewhere private, and the closest place just happens to be the restoration office. When she leads him into the office, Garak undresses her agonizingly slowly. Julian doesn’t quite avert his gaze, but he focuses on the rest of the cameras, checking for the progress of the security guards. Then he glances back to Garak’s square on his screen and his breath catches in his throat. Garak has the assistant spread out on a desk, face between her legs—and his eyes are fixed on the camera.

“Fuck,” Julian breathes. He sees Garak react, his fingers tightening just a little on her thighs. His mind goes blank for a moment, for too long, until he sees her come and watches Garak begin to slide his cock inside her. “No,” Julian says very quietly, and Garak freezes. The assistant rolls her hips a little, trying to pull him inside, and a muscle twitches in Garak’s cheek. “No, don’t—your fingers and your mouth only,” he says, throat raw. Fuck, he’s hard just like that. “Don’t come.” He has to clear his throat to be able to say, even softer, “Not until you’re in my flat, Garak,” and Garak stiffens like he’s been shocked. Julian is sure he won’t obey, but Garak’s eyes are nearly burning on the other side of the camera, and Julian watches him back up minutely and replace his cock with his fingers. Julian switches off his mic and says, “Fuck, fuck, what am I doing,” as the pretty assistant comes again on Garak’s fingers. While she’s still catching her breath, eyes closed, Garak plucks the chip out from between the painting and its frame and tucks it into his pocket. He murmurs something to the assistant and zips up his trousers. “You’re clear to leave,” Julian says. “No guards for two minutes.” He watches Garak slip out the door and back into the public area of the museum.

“Don’t sleep at the office tonight,” Garak tells him, his voice rough.

Julian closes his eyes briefly and tries to let out an even breath. “No. No, I won’t,” he promises.

“003 just bought a seat on a flight this afternoon,” D calls from outside his office. The purchase receipt appears on one of his screens.

“Yes, that’s all right. He’s got the chip.”

He hears D stand up. She walks into his office and he’s very grateful for the opaque desk between them. “That was quick,” she says blandly. “I thought we’d arranged two nights for him at the Palacio Duhau.”

“I told him to be efficient.” Julian can hear the crack in his own voice. “You know how 003 is.”

“Yes.” D watches him. “You do too.”

Fuck.

He means to go home early, maybe pick up the flat a little, but there’s a crisis with 009’s tracking device and Julian loses track of time working with his team to get 009 a replacement to salvage the month-long operation. It’s past two AM when he looks at his watch and swears feelingly. Garak’s plane will have landed by now. In the ordinary course of things, he would just sleep here. But there’s a wild thing beating in his chest and he wants to see Garak very badly.

His flat is dark when he walks inside. “Lights,” he says, and has the barest second to register Garak sitting at his kitchen table before Garak has him pinned against the door and is kissing him hungrily. For a moment, Julian’s mind is wiped clean of anything but the heat of Garak’s body against his, the flavor of whiskey on Garak’s tongue and the strength of Garak’s hands on his hips. Garak breaks away from his mouth to leave a series of biting kisses down his neck and Julian grips the back of his head and arches into it.

“You’re late,” Garak says against his neck. He lifts Julian’s hips so that Julian can wrap his legs around Garak’s waist and Julian feels the hot press of Garak’s cock through both their clothes.

“Busy saving the world and—whatnot—” Julian loses the thread a little as Garak unfastens his trousers one-handed. “You know—you had two nights at a very nice—hotel—” Garak pulls his cock out and Julian can’t suppress a whine at the feeling of his hand.

“Two nights of thinking about your voice in my ear.” Garak’s voice is thick as he grips Julian’s hips with both hands again, leaving Julian’s cock bare between them. “Of you telling me—” He bites Julian’s lower lip, not quite painfully, and then sucks at it as Julian tries to cant his hips up. Julian is scrabbling at his shirt, why is he wearing a bloody pullover, and then it feels as though the world falls away as Garak *carries him into the bedroom*, their bodies still flush. They collapse onto the bed, Garak sprawled atop him. Like this, Julian can peel Garak’s shirt over his head before Garak returns to his mouth, touch the planes of his bare chest and feel Garak’s heart pounding beneath his hand. “If you don’t unbutton your shirt,” Garak almost growls, “I’m going to tear it open.”

“Don’t you—dare—” Julian fumbles at the buttons of his shirt and gets them open just in time. Garak shoves his undershirt out of the way and sets one hand over the scar on his side as he kisses Julian again. Garak’s other hand plays roughly across his nipples, and Julian presses up into it desperately. It’s been weeks since Garak touched him like this and every touch is searing, like Garak is leaving his fingerprints all over Julian’s body. His cock skids against Garak’s stomach, leaking. Julian shoves his pants down further and frantically kicks off his shoes as Garak rolls one nipple between two fingers. “Get your pants off,” he gasps, and it comes out a lot more like a plea than an order. He’s never seen anything more beautiful than Garak in nothing but briefs, the length of his cock distorting their shape. Julian remembers viscerally the feeling of Garak’s cock in his mouth—in his ass—and he wants it again, again and again for the rest of his life but he’ll settle for tonight. “Don’t come until I tell you,” he manages, and Garak’s eyes are hungry when their bare cocks slide together. “Christ, roll over, let me—” He

takes Garak's cock nearly to the back of his throat in one long motion. Garak grips his shoulders painfully hard at that first touch, and then almost convulsively again when Julian begins to suck.

"You have no idea," Garak says, his voice strangled. "You have no idea the things I want to do to you—the way you look—" Julian swallows around the head of his cock and Garak almost shouts. "When you're in my ear—" His legs are planted wide, every muscle tensed, as though that will help him restrain himself.

Julian grips his cock in one hand and pulls off it with a long, sloppy lick. "I know what you look like when you're about to come," Julian tells him, and lets the head of Garak's cock bump against his lower lip. Garak looks like he's almost in pain. "I've seen it. Don't."

"Q—" Garak's cock is leaking, and when Julian licks across the head, he swears. "Just—"

"You won't," Julian tells him, squeezing the base of his cock a little even as Garak tries to thrust into his hand. He runs his tongue around the head of Garak's cock. "I'm going to—I'm going to suck you as long as I want," and he doesn't know who this person is that takes control of his mouth but Garak groans. "As long as I want, and then I'm going to ride you until I come, and then—" Garak groans again, longer, and his cock jumps in Julian's hand. "Then you can."

"Yes," Garak says helplessly, and Julian takes him all the way down again. He keeps one hand firm around the base of Garak's cock as he does it, just to be sure, and Garak's fingers play through his hair as though he's lost the ability to do anything more complex. Julian takes his time, speeding up, slowing down, until his jaw is sore and his lips are a little numb, just for the hot pleasure of the noises that Garak makes as he falls apart. Garak's hands roam to his cheeks, his mouth, back to his hair, and Garak's breaths are little shocky things like he can't get enough air into his lungs.

When Julian finally pulls off for the last time, he leans across Garak to reach the lube and brushes his nipple across the tip of Garak's cock. Garak exhales syllables that aren't quite words and Julian tells him, "Not yet, 003," though all he wants is to feel it as Garak comes inside him. He opens himself up, and Garak's blue eyes drop to where Julian's fingers meet his body. When Julian sinks down onto Garak's cock, he's not sure which of them moans louder. "Not until I come," he says again, because Garak twitches every time he says it, and then rides him in earnest, thrusting down in long rolls of his hips. "You said—I have no idea—what you want to do to me—" There's pleasure bursting all through his body and he would come if he touched his cock, but he searches for just the right angle instead as Garak's noises become more desperate. "*Garak*—what—what do you want to do?" When he finds the perfect angle, his mind shorts out and he chases the feeling, fucking himself harder on Garak's cock until he comes across Garak's chest.

Garak groans, "I want to *keep* you," and comes.

Julian stays there, Garak still inside him and stares down as his brain catches up with his body. Garak's eyes are already going from hazy to sharp, the tension creeping back into his shoulders, and so Julian leans down and presses his mouth to Garak's in the best approximation of a kiss that he can manage right now. Then he lets Garak slip from his body and collapses next to him. There's a druggy kind of satisfaction lapping through his body right now, and it feels so good that when Garak stirs and starts to get up, Julian catches his wrist. "Stay."

Garak looks at him with—is that fear? "All right," he says. If Julian didn't know better, he'd think that Garak sounded almost uncertain. When Julian comes back to bed after cleaning up a bit, Garak pulls him close firmly, stickiness be damned, and Julian stares out into the darkness of his bedroom and thinks, what am I doing?

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Summary

Julian laughs. “You don’t have much of an informant.” When Dukat raises an eyebrow, Julian adds, “It’s 003. He doesn’t get *attached*.” As far as Julian knows, Garak has only ever cared about two people—Palandine and Mila—and they’re both dead now. “Do you think it means anything that—he fucks me?” He’s intentionally crude because it hurts down deep to say what he already knows. “You must know how many people he’s left for dead who were stupid enough to think that he cared.”

In the morning—which is to say, four hours later—Julian wakes to the smell of buttered toast. He gropes around for a robe and shuffles into the kitchen, where there’s a mug of tea and a plate of fried eggs perched precariously on the one clear edge of his kitchen table. Garak is leaning against the counter, wearing a clean pair of Julian’s briefs and wolfing down eggs on toast. There are crumbs at the corner of his mouth and butter on his lips and it’s too much for a man to bear, to be confronted with something like that in the morning. “You made breakfast,” Julian says stupidly.

“I took a chance on the eggs. You should keep more food in the house.”

“It only goes bad,” Julian admits. He can cook quite well, but he doesn’t do it much. Hence the table. “I need to get to the office. I don’t know how long the patch job we did on 009’s tracker will hold.”

“I’ll drive you. Eat.” Garak gestures to the plate and, well, he went to the trouble of making it, so Julian might as well eat it. The rest of Garak’s sentence doesn’t quite register until Julian has scrambled into fresh clothing and Garak is ushering him out the door to—

“You left it *parked* on my street?” There aren’t a lot of Aston Martins in this neighborhood.

It’s amazing how a man as impassive as Garak can manage such a withering expression. “Considering what you’ve done to it, Q, I doubt a local thug could manage to steal it. I armed the anti-theft device.”

“That delivers an electrical shock that’s over 50,000 volts!” Julian swallows and tries to lower his voice. “You’re bloody mad.” Garak’s mouth quirks in amusement. He’s wiped the crumbs away, but his lips are still a little shiny. Once they’re safely in the car, Julian says, “Garak,” and when Garak startles and turns to look, kisses him fiercely. For all he knows, this is the last one he’ll get, and Garak cups his cheek and licks into his mouth. Only when Julian becomes very aware of the gearshift digging into his stomach does he break away and sit back.

Garak drives like a madman. Julian probably isn’t helping by letting him know where the traffic patrols aren’t, but he’d as soon as not get pulled over for dangerous driving. To distract himself, he checks his reflection in the visor mirror. Bad idea. There’s a blush high on his cheeks, his hair is askew, and there’s a mark on his neck just below his chin. If this keeps up, Julian is going to have to learn to do his own makeup.

It doesn’t quite hit him until they pull into the underground garage exactly how it will look to be driving in together, particularly when Q Branch knows that Garak only got back from Argentina around 2 AM. It’s been a real morning full of realizations, and it’s not even eight o’clock. When Julian gets off the elevator, he has a moment of horror thinking that Garak will kiss him, but Garak only glances very briefly at his neck and says, “Have a good morning, Q,” before the elevator doors close.

Unfortunately, Moneypenny is walking toward Q Branch just as Julian gets off the elevator. She stares at him. “What,” she says.

“Good morning, Moneypenny.” Perhaps the best strategy is to brazen it out. “Any news on 009?”

At least Moneypenny is dependably professional. “As of this morning, the operation appears to be back on track. M asked me to tell you specifically that you did good work.”

It’s a little terrifying that M felt the need to compliment Julian “I’m an adult,” Julian tells her. “Fully capable of making my own mistakes. Feel free to remind others of that fact.” He glares a little to emphasize it.

Moneypenny almost laughs at him, but she contains it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Either Julian’s towering glare works or Moneypenny told D who told everyone else to leave Julian alone, but he has a wonderfully productive day. Admittedly, he hides in his workshop and builds most of the remote-control system for Garak’s car—not just for Garak’s car, it will have all kinds of applications, it could even be expanded to light aircraft—and assumes that anyone will come inside if they actually need to find him.

He’s making excellent progress when Garak’s shadow falls across his keyboard. “I’m rather busy, 003—” He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to act, so he settles for nonchalant.

“You know, I’m reliably informed that many people leave the office well before this hour.” When Julian gapes at him, Garak tilts the face of his watch so that Julian can see the time. It’s only 6:30.

“I have work to do.” This is uncertain ground. “Do you need something?”



Garak stares at him. It's rather intimidating. "I'll drive you home."

Julian's finger slips and the code that he was in the midst of debugging flashes a red !REF ERROR message at him. "What?"

"It takes you forty-five minutes on the Tube." Garak says it patiently, as though Julian might not have realized that fact. "I can do it in fifteen." He reaches across the desk and brushes his fingers along Julian's jawline, down to the mark on his neck.

Garak wants to drive him home. Garak appears to be—acknowledging that they had sex? This is new and somewhat terrifying. It's that, more than anything, that makes Julian agree. "Half an hour," he promises. "Let me just finish this up."

"I'm sending D in to get you at thirty-one minutes," Garak says, as if this is a recurring joke between them—as if they're the kind of people who spend enough time together that Garak has had to spend a lot of time waiting for Julian

"All—right." Julian glances at Garak for a moment, then back at his computer screen. This isn't the sort of thing that happens to him. And yet. He actually sets an alarm for twenty-five minutes so that he can ignore it and still not be late. He saves his progress, packs up his laptop, and emerges into the main area of Q Branch to discover Garak leaning against the door, distracting roughly half of the people who are supposed to be working. "I want an immediate report if anything further happens with 009," he announces. There's a flurry of movement as people turn back to their computers and begin typing.

Garak checks his watch. "I'm impressed."

Julian falls into step with him as they leave Q Branch, though he's having something of an out-of-body experience. Garak is wearing the watch that he asked Julian to make for him. "Tell me that isn't still loaded with sleeping gas."

"I'm afraid I used it," Garak tells him. "But I haven't had a chance to try out the laser yet."

"Good. Don't try it out. It will only run so many times on the diamond I've put in there. I'd hate to see you get tied down and be unable to escape because the laser has run out."

"Would you," Garak says softly, and it makes Julian shiver a little. He knows Garak means it as innuendo, but—

"Yes. I spend enough time watching bad things happen to you—to all the agents under my watch. If my tech fails you when you need it—" He'll never shake the memories of the dead agents, of the destruction that's been rained down on MI-6 when Q Branch fails.

Garak puts a heavy hand on Julian's shoulder and doesn't say anything. Of all people, Julian thinks, he's probably one of the few who understand that. "Come on, Q."

They walk into the elevator with—horrors—M. Julian has, quite likely, never been more terrified of being trapped with two people than he is now. M is engrossed in his tablet; he looks up once, nods an absent hello to both of them, and falls silent. Then, when all three of them get off in the garage, M says, "Q, did you finally get yourself a car?"

The silence that follows is excruciating. "No," Julian says finally. M gives him a very strange look.

"I'm giving Q a ride," Garak says. Nothing more—Julian had hoped he might supply some reason, though Julian is hard-pressed to think of a good reason that Garak would drive him home rather than a junior agent, if he really needed a ride home.

"Ah." M peers at them both, frowning, and then turns abruptly and walks the other direction. Presumably to his car, rather than to escape the escalating awkwardness.

Garak is quiet in the car, the radio tuned to something with violins playing—a sonata, or an etude, or one of those music things. Julian has never been much for classical music. He parks, then walks Julian up to the front door of his flat. "Well," Julian says, "I appreciate the ride—" Garak gives him an odd look and—the rat bastard—enters the door code. He holds it open for Julian, who more or less flounces inside. Julian's complaint dies in his throat.

There is rather more in the flat than there was this morning. Groceries on the shelves. A dish towel that Julian doesn't recognize. A few books tucked up on one of the high bookshelves. "003," Julian says, and he barely knows his own voice. "Have I missed something?"

Garak's body is warm against his back. "You told me to stay."

As if a normal person would consider that an invitation to move in with someone with whom they'd had a few sexual encounters. The part of Julian's brain that would attempt to understand this gives up and shuts down. "I was—going to work a bit more," he says, though he finds himself tipping his head back a little to give Garak better access to kiss his neck. "Just—" His laptop bag drops none-too-gently to the floor as Garak slides a hand under his shirt. "Really, 003—"

Almost insultingly, they don't even have sex. Garak kisses him until he's dizzy for lack of oxygen and then says, "I picked up some groceries," and begins making dinner.

Julian sits at the kitchen table, pretending to work on his laptop but mostly just staring at Garak as he chops an onion and hums something Julian doesn't recognize, and his hips move a little like he's almost dancing. Julian can't help feeling a bit like a mark on one of Garak's missions, as though Garak has determined that playacting at being a boyfriend is the correct approach. And yet, he's suckered in just like all the rest of them are when Garak presents him with an omelette and moves a stack of papers to the floor to open another spot on the table. "I hesitate to ask this," Julian says, and does indeed hesitate before saying, "but do you—live here now?"

"I don't live anywhere much of the time," Garak points out.

That strikes Julian as unutterably sad. He may spend a few nights at the office here and there, but this flat is still *home*. He wonders where

Garak stayed—or perhaps, where Garak used to keep his possessions—before now. “Right,” Julian says. “But when you do live somewhere, is it here, now?”

Christ, Garak’s gaze is uncomfortable when he doesn’t bother to temper it. “I thought I might keep a few things here. A few clothes.” Julian remembers the morning, Garak wearing his briefs and nothing else, and swallows hard.

“That’s fine,” Julian says. “I really do have to work a bit more.” He’s never lived with someone before. He has no idea what he’s supposed to do to entertain Garak, or if he’s supposed to at all.

“All right.” Garak clears their plates and begins to wash up, and Julian forces his gaze back to his laptop. In a world of uncertainties, work is a comforting constant for Julian. There is always something new to figure out, some problem that requires a more efficient solution, and it’s easy for him to lose himself in it. He loses track of everything else, registering only the most basic of sounds—the running water of the sink, the quiet clink of dishes, Garak’s footsteps. “I heard a noise outside,” Garak says. “I’m going to check on it.”

“Oh, will you refill the cat feeders?” He gestures at the bag of dry food. It takes a moment for Julian’s brain to catch up and realize that Garak means he’s going to look for danger, not that he thinks one of the feral cats that Julian’s been trying to lure in for neutering may have finally stumbled into a trap. “Or—not.”

Garak looks momentarily surprised, but he picks up the bag. “I’ll try not to throw it at anyone unless I lose my gun.”

It’s at once unsettling and comforting to know that Garak is prowling around outside. He starts the shower automatically and steps in. He’s just washed the shampoo out of his hair when he hears a noise in the bathroom, and then Garak pulls back the shower curtain just enough to climb in behind him. Julian fumbles the bottle of conditioner at the first touch of Garak’s hand to his shoulder and Garak plucks the bottle out of the air as though Julian had never dropped it at all. The end of a toothbrush is sticking out of his mouth.

“It wastes water to brush your teeth in the shower,” Julian tells him primly, and moves out of the way just in time for Garak to spit toothpaste into the drain. Ugh. “Is that my toothbrush?”

Garak rinses off the toothbrush and reaches carefully past Julian to set it on the bathroom counter. “Habit,” he says. “Sorry.”

Julian should find it deeply unattractive, but he finds himself turning his face up to taste Garak’s mouth instead. Garak slides one hand into the mess of Julian’s wet hair and pulls their bodies flush with the other, and all right, Julian isn’t one to object to a bit of fun in the shower. But Garak never *takes* it anywhere, only holds him there and kisses him until the water runs cold and Julian’s hands are slipping ineffectually across his body. “What,” Julian says, when Garak turns the water off and passes him a towel. “Do you realize what a nightmare my hair is going to be?” The part of his brain that considers things like reality, and consequences, and *what the fuck is happening*, has given up.

He wears pyjamas to bed, because he usually wears pyjamas, and expects Garak to peel them off of him as soon as Julian is in bed. But Garak looks exhausted—what a remarkable thing, that Julian can see it, the way that Garak’s body so obviously wants to collapse—and Julian presses himself along Garak’s back and kisses the back of his neck once, gently. He wraps one arm around Garak’s body, lets a hand rest on Garak’s abdomen and he can feel the muscles relaxing minutely. “Go to sleep,” Julian says.

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Garak drives him to work again. Garak takes him home again. Julian blows him in the kitchen while the oven preheats and Garak fingers him open on the kitchen floor like he can’t even wait to get a few feet further into the bedroom and fucks Julian until Julian says, “God, do it,” and bangs his ankle hard against the table leg at the feeling of Garak coming inside him. Garak curls around him when they go to bed and Julian lies very still just to feel Garak’s body relaxing against his.

They talk, when they’re not otherwise occupied. Not excessively—Julian is used to living alone, both physically and in his own head—but enough that Julian comes to appreciate Garak’s grim sense of humor and his terrible puns. He hasn’t thought much about anything but work since he came to MI-6, but he finds himself saving up little tidbits and moments from throughout the day to tell Garak about over dinner. Sometimes he ends up talking for far too long about something obscure that he’s been reading, and Garak always seems to recognize why Julian might be interested in the history of saffron-breeding when he’s considering how to structure a particular sequence of code.

They engage in this surreal dance for a relatively quiet period at MI-6 that lasts a mind-boggling two weeks. Julian knows it can’t possibly last—neither the peace nor whatever this thing is with Garak—and when the first new blip appears on his personal radar, he runs it up to M and can’t help thinking that this is the end.

“I have another mission,” Garak mumbles, in bed the next night. He’s stroking his fingers over Julian’s back, alternating between fingertips and the backs of his knuckles along the decade-old scars where the doctors put him back together after the accident. It’s a little hypnotic, and Julian is starting to drift off to sleep.

“Not one of mine,” Julian manages to say. “Or no one’s told me anything.”

“No.” Garak’s voice is a low rumble. “Ordinary. No need for eyes in the sky. No tech, not at all.”

It sends an uncomfortable spike of fear through Julian’s stomach. He rolls onto his side to face Garak. “The watch, at least,” he says. “I can strip out everything but the emergency signal.”

Garak shakes his head and smooths his hand across Julian’s flank and the single shiny bullet scar, just firm enough not to tickle. “Not even a passive receiver. M says we can’t risk it.”

No, Julian wants to say. No, don’t go without backup. Don’t go where I can’t follow. But that’s silly—Garak has done this a hundred times, gone off into the wild with no backup but a gun. Julian’s participation is the rarity, not the norm. “I’m going to key your gun to your palm print, at least.”

Garak shakes his head again and closes his eyes as though he's very weary. "That doesn't fit with the cover. Leave it, Q." He rolls onto his side, facing away from Julian, and Julian looks at the constellation of scars across Garak's body—no, not just a constellation, a galaxy—from bullets and knives and broken glass and metal tools and thinks, this body is supposed to be expendable. When he dies, there will be another 003 whose body will be fresher, and 003 will stop meaning *Garak*.

"All right," Julian says, and he rolls over too.

Garak says goodbye in the morning wordlessly, waking Julian at 4 AM to stroke him mercilessly until Julian is arching into his hand and making little bitten-off noises. Be careful, Julian can't say. Come back whole, or as whole as you can. "Garak—" he says instead, and Garak kisses him to stop him from saying anything else.

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Garak has been gone for two days when Julian realizes, to his horror, that he *misses* Garak. He misses waking up to another person in his bed, or the smell of whatever tea Garak knows will particularly suit his mood in the morning. He misses the companionable quiet of their drive to work in the morning. Misses knowing that Garak will show up at Q Branch sometime in the early evening and warn Julian that in thirty minutes, Garak is going to drag him out of there, and that Garak can tell the difference between when Julian wants to stay and when he really does need to stay. Misses Garak kissing him up against the counter or the wall or the table as soon as they get home, as though he's been wanting to touch Julian all day, and the way that sometimes they eat dinner at nine or ten o'clock and Garak always seems to know what Julian is working on and has opinions. He lies in bed alone and remembers the desperate way that Garak said "I want to *keep* you," and comes so hard it makes his eyes water.

On the morning of the third day, he wakes up alone and thinks to himself, oh god, what have I done? The Tube is drearier than usual, full of people who don't smell quite right and stand too close, and the tea that he makes for himself in the Q Branch kitchen just doesn't taste right. He spends six hours cloistered in his workshop, scrolling through updates to the code he uses for facial recognition, fixing himself a version of Garak's watch—sans sleeping gas, thank you very much—and hoping that somehow Garak will make contact. By the end of the day, he's feeling particularly glum and irritated at himself for feeling that way—he has no claim on Garak, not just because Garak stays with him and likes to have sex with him—and so he asks for an MI-6 driver to take him home.

More fool him. They're four blocks from headquarters before the driver deviates sharply from the correct route and points a gun at Julian "Are you fucking kidding me." Of all the times for this to happen—but of course, this *would* be the time when it would happen, when Garak is safely far away and entirely out of reach. "Really, you're kidnapping me?"

"Sorry." Julian doesn't know the driver well, Peter or Paul or something. "Nothing personal."

"Nothing—nothing *personal*?" Julian can't help the outrage in his voice. "You're kidnapping the head of Q Branch at random?"

"Look, mate, it's not about you." P—waggles the gun a little when Julian starts to move. "Come on, you know the doors are sealed and if you try to escape, I'll try to shoot you somewhere nonlethal, but that's never certain. You don't want to bleed to death in the back of a company car."

Well. When he puts it that way. "So I'm being kidnapped, but you can't tell me—" P is rolling up a divider between the back and front seats. Julian hears the slight hissing of gas and thinks, of all the bloody things to happen—

In that first moment between consciousness and awareness of his surroundings, Julian hopes fervently that he'll open his eyes to Medical. He'd even take the cold floor of his workshop. Perhaps all of this too has been a dream. Unfortunately, when he opens his eyes, it's to a windowless room with a camera high in one corner. "How are you feeling, Q?" The voice over the camera is unfamiliar, but that doesn't mean anything. There are a thousand ways to camouflage a voice.

"I don't suppose you've got a stash of paracetamol in here," Julian says. He's taking stock of his remaining possessions. He's been searched thoroughly, but his glasses are intact and his watch is blessedly still on its battered leather strap around his wrist. He knows better than to touch it, though; that would indicate some value.

A drawer slides out of the wall. In it, Julian finds a few tablets, a bottle of water, and three operational ration packs. Lovely. "It's harmless," the voice assures him.

The pills could be anything. The water could be laced with anything. The ORPs could be full of anything. A large man could come in here right now and hold Julian down while injecting him full of drugs. Julian takes one of the tablets and washes it down with two swallows of water. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing, yet," the voice says. "Be good and stay quiet. We'll fetch you when we need you."

"How comforting." Julian isn't panicking, but it's a bad situation. He doesn't know how far he is from—well, from anyone. He doesn't know how long he's been unconscious. There's a spot on his left shoulder that aches sharply if he moves wrong, and he suspects they've cut his locator out of him. He could escape from this cell with his watch, but without the slightest sense of where he's being kept, he suspects it would only result in rapid capture and punishment.

He puts a hand to his forehead to play up the headache and lies back down on his cot, pulling the blanket up to his shoulders. Carefully, with the slightest movements that he can manage, he sends his Morse code message with little twitches of the face of his watch: SOS. MI6 DRIVER. CAPTORS AND LOCATION UNKNOWN. LOCATOR REMOVED. NO DEMANDS MADE. LIKELY TRAP. It's the only thing he can think—otherwise they would already have presented him with whatever they wanted, whether it was decryption or programming or building. He can't help thinking that it's no coincidence that this has happened while Garak is off the grid. There's no response, and he tries not to think about why that might be.

When he's counted up 45 minutes, he pretends to wake up muzzy-headed and drinks more water. The ORPs are squashy and unpleasant, but he's hungry enough to eat them with his fingers. Then Julian begins to pace the length and breadth of his cell. He's never been good at being *still*—oh, with something to occupy his mind, he can sit in exactly the same position for hours without realizing it, but without it, there's a kind of nervous energy that bubbles through him. His fingers itch for a keyboard, a pen, anything to keep him busy. People lose their minds from solitary confinement, he knows. Even one night can do significant psychological damage.

As he paces, he tries to distract himself by considering the kind of facility he might be in. The walls are unpainted sheetrock that leaves dust on his hand, which means it's either newer or an older building freshly covered. It's chilly, colder when he puts his hand flat to the wall—an exterior wall? But there's no road noise, or at least not that he can hear from inside. The ceiling is just high enough that he can barely brush it with his fingertips if he stands on the cot, but the lights are recessed too far for him to reach and the video camera is out of his reach. The door is metal, with an electronic lock on it—with the single drawer and the video camera, it's the only indicator of anything electronic in here. The EMP in his watch should be able to take care of all three. If he were going to make a run for it, he'd use the EMP to knock out the camera, use the laser to cut a hole in the exterior(?) wall to assess the situation out there, and then either escape that way or use the picks in his glasses to go through the door.

He'll give it two days. When he isn't drugged, his internal chronometer is excellent. If he's lucky, they'll bring him out of the cell at some point and he'll be able to get a better sense of his surroundings.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alarms go off and lights flash in his cell every hour or so. Sleep-deprivation is a miserable torture technique, but at least it gives him a chance to pull the blanket over his head and keep sending messages. The battery in his watch isn't going to run down anytime soon. They do bring him out after thirty-six hours, presumably after he's been psychologically softened, and Julian does feel like he's been hit all over with hammers. They take him to the tenth floor of what looks like an ordinary office building, though the elevator is an exterior one and he can see that there's a perimeter with concertina wire around the tops of the fences. So much for that, then. A more powerful EMP could take out the railguns that he sees, but the one in his watch doesn't have nearly the radius that he would need.

Still, with his hands zip-tied behind his back, he flexes as though he's trying to get more comfortable and keeps sending messages. He hopes someone is getting them. He wishes and doesn't wish that Garak would be the one to try to rescue him. *I want to keep you.* He's too valuable to MI-6 to be abandoned, and he's no field operative, doesn't even have a cyanide capsule.

His captor turns in his chair. Julian recognizes his face as one of many at Krajnc's abortive auction of the laser. The facial recognition program dismissed him as a small-time weapons dealer, not worth the trouble of extracting along with Krajnc. How Julian regrets that now. "Hello, Q," the man said. He has very pale dishwater-blond hair and a Germanic accent, with a long scar through one empty eye socket. Julian can't see any scars or calluses on his hands when the man props his elbows on the desk and steeples his fingers together.

"What d'you want?" No point to the EMP up here, not unless Julian's looking to kill himself. His tongue is clumsy from the lack of sleep, though, and he hopes it hasn't been affecting his messages to MI-6. He's beginning to think they're not receiving anything though. It's meant to be a two-way communicator and he's not felt a single vibration from MI-6.

"Release his hands," the man orders, and one of the guards snips through the zip ties that have been cutting into his wrists. Julian keeps his hands folded in his lap. This man, he suspects, might notice his watch and decide to take it away. "I am Dukat."

"Why am I here?" Julian is weary, his body sagging back against the chair. "You don't seem to have anything for me to do."

When Dukat smiles, Julian sees a lack of rationality in his eyes that's terrifying. "You're here because I would like to speak to Elim Garak, in person, and I'm reliably informed that he is—attached to you." He nods to one of the guards and Julian sees that there's a camera recording him. There's a video screen next to it, and it's eerie to see himself in it. His eyes are red-rimmed from lack of sleep, a faint shadow of stubble along his jawline.

Julian laughs. "You don't have much of an informant." When Dukat raises an eyebrow, Julian adds, "It's 003. He doesn't get *attached*." As far as Julian knows, Garak has only ever cared about two people—Palandine and Mila—and they're both dead now. "Do you think it means anything that—he fucks me?" He's intentionally crude because it hurts down deep to say what he already knows. "You must know how many people he's left for dead who were stupid enough to think that he cared." T-R-A-P G-A-, he taps out on his watch, and he's too sloppy about it because Dukat sees the motion of it. Dukat nods to the guard, who yanks Julian's arm up and smashes the watch against his cheekbone. Julian's head snaps to the side with the force of it. An impact won't set off the laser or the EMP, but the watch tumbles to the ground and Julian feels the blood trickling down his face.

"You think someone will come for you," Dukat says. "I think it will be Elim Garak. You think it will be someone else? We will see." He nods to the guard, who punches Julian across the face and sets his head ringing. Julian tries not to show the pain, but he's no field agent and it fucking hurts. He barely has time to try to stuff it down, though, before the guard has wrapped a meaty hand around his throat. It's visceral, reflexive, to dig his fingers into the man's wrist, to flail against his chair and kick at nothing. His vision is going dark when the guard finally releases him. Julian gasps for air. There's a moment when he stares straight at the camera and he remembers the way that Garak's eyes had looked every time on the other side of the lens.

"Don't," he tells the camera, and his voice is hoarse. "Don't—" The guard punches him again, so vicious that it knocks him from the chair and he falls hard on one shoulder and wrist. He manages to grab the fallen watch beneath him, though, and shoves it into the waistband of his pants. When the guard hauls him back into the chair, Julian sees himself in the video screen and shudders. If the goal is to lure a 00 agent out here, Julian's appearance will work wonders.

"Get him out of here," Dukat snaps. "Shut that off."

They take him back to his cell. His face and neck and shoulder are all throbbing distractingly, and his wrist is agony when he tries to move it. He thinks it's broken. He wonders how long it will be before someone at MI-6 sees the recording. He curls up on the cot, blanket pulled up

over his head, and pulls one of the lockpicks out of the slot in the earpiece of his glasses. It doubles as a jeweler's screwdriver, even if he can't see very well through one eye, and he goes to work one-handed determining what parts of the watch still function. Two hours of careful exploration later—interrupted by the periodic sirens to ensure he can't sleep—he thinks that he has both the miniature EMP and the laser working, at least well enough for a single use. The Morse communicator—well, he doesn't know if it's ever worked, given the lack of response. But he taps out TRAP FOR GA003 and realizes that he's starting to lose focus.

His captors leave him in the cell for long hours after that, though they never let him sleep. He begins to hallucinate—first it's just flashes out of the corners of his eyes, even when the lights aren't flashing, and then they turn much more vivid.

One of the neighborhood stray cats wanders in and digs its claws into his face.

M sits on his cot and says, "I'm disappointed in you, Q. I rather thought you were made of sterner stuff."

Once, when the lights are flashing unbearably, he tries to use the EMP. He doesn't know if it fails or if it works and he just can't recognize it. The laser won't work either—so much for that.

He thinks he hears gunfire in the corridors. Garak walks in with a smile and an outstretched hand and says, "I want to keep you."

No one comes for him,

D stands in the doorway and tells him, "This is what comes of falling for Elim Garak," and when Julian tries to argue that he hasn't fallen for anyone, she disappears.

The door opens and Garak walks in. "Q," he says, "Stand up."

Julian's legs aren't very steady. He doesn't think he's been eating a lot. He tries to lurch to his feet and almost collapses when he props himself against the wall with his bad wrist. Garak catches him, and that's new, a corporeal hallucination. "Can you walk?"

"I'm sorry," Julian mumbles. "Didn't mean to fall in love with you, but—I think I did—" His head lolls against the wonderful firmness of Garak's shoulder.

He feels Garak inhale sharply. "Come on." Garak grabs his uninjured wrist and for all Julian knows this is all just another hallucination, Garak leading him out the door of his cell and then out of a large hole blown in the wall.

"My watch was s'posed to do that," Julian says.

"They broke it. Come on."

Julian doesn't track what happens next very well. Garak pulls him into a run. Once or twice he trips. He hears bullets and feels a stinging track of fire along one arm. Then he's in the copilot's seat of a helicopter and they're swooping terribly and he laughs and says, "Always knew I'd die in a crash."

"Shut up," the Garak hallucination says.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Summary

“It’ll happen again,” Garak says. “There will always be someone.”

“Undoubtedly.” Julian puts a finger to Garak’s lips to keep him from speaking. “But—and I say this with the correct amount of ego—I am far more likely to be attacked or kidnapped for my role as Q, rather than for my occasional roll in bed with you.” Ha, he thinks grimly. A pun worthy of Garak.

This time, when he opens his eyes, some measure of clarity has returned to his brain. “Ow,” he says automatically, and then realizes that actually his body doesn’t hurt at all. He can barely feel it, in fact, beyond a warm narcotic haze. He can’t see very well through one eye, and his wrist, when he tries to move it out of some perverse desire to check if it still works, is immobilized in a cast. Julian lifts his head a little and sees Garak in a chair next to his bed. “Guess I’m still hallucinating,” he says. His voice sounds terrible, like maybe he’s been screaming.

Garak’s head jerks up. “No.” He stands and walks to Julian’s bedside. “No, you’re safe now.”

Julian squints at him. “Was there a *helicopter*?”

“I had to steal it,” Garak says. “MI-6 wouldn’t give me one of theirs.”

Julian doesn’t ask whether Garak stole it from MI-6, or from his captors. “Dukat, and the others?”

“Dead.”

He wishes Garak would say something to make a little lighter of the situation—a terrible pun, anything. “Didn’t anyone get my message? I said it was a trap for you, that you shouldn’t come.”

“Yes.” Garak sounds miserable, which is terrifying. Garak isn’t supposed to sound like he’s having feelings. Garak’s face twists at that.

“Sorry. My—brain-to-mouth filter isn’t working very well at the moment.” He wishes Garak would touch him. He’s not willing to say that out loud, but he does turn his body toward Garak a little more. There’s a bandage on Garak’s upper arm. “How long?” He lifts a hand to his own chin and feels the scrape of hair. A few days at least. When he reaches to touch his throat, Garak grabs his hand away, but releases it quickly.

“Three days since I found you. You’ve been asleep most of the time.” Garak is pressed so close to the side of the bed that Julian can feel the warmth of him through his clothes. “Dr. Patel didn’t want to wake you until you woke up on your own.” Julian can’t tell if Garak actually looks uneasy or if he’s projecting his own interpretation on Garak’s face. “She’s going to tell you that she won’t release you unless there’s someone at home to take care of you while you recover.”

Trepidation. That’s the word. It’s very hard for Julian to ask, “Will you be?” His throat aches. This time, Garak doesn’t stop him before he can touch his neck, and he finds the bruised spots where the guard gripped his throat. Garak’s eyes follow his fingers.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Is someone else going to do a better job of it?” Julian doesn’t have the energy for this. He’s tired, bone-deep, and whatever narcotic painkillers he’s on, they’re starting to wear off. All he wants is to go curl up in his own bed with Garak wrapped around him. He has a distressing memory of confessing love to a Garak hallucination. “If I said something while I was hallucinating, forget it. I’ll recover faster at home and no one will keep me safer there than you.” He thinks that’s relief on Garak’s face, and it shouldn’t hurt as much as it does.

Dr. Patel releases Julian to Garak’s care with a bottle of painkillers and a strict schedule for taking them. “Focus on resting,” she tells him.

He feels rather stupid as Garak holds the car door open for him. “You know, the only part of me that’s broken is my wrist,” he says. “I wasn’t shot, I wasn’t stabbed—”

Garak’s face is unreadable. “Dr. Patel gave strict orders.”

“Yes, yes, rest. I know.” Julian sits down a little harder than he means to in the passenger seat and has to admit that his depth perception is a bit off. His black eye is too badly swollen for him to wear glasses without pain, which means that he’s wearing a contact lens in his one good eye. It leaves him a little dizzy and waspish. The silence on their drive is less comfortable than it used to be. Julian can’t help feeling like he’s supposed to be apologizing for something, like Garak is waiting to hear something, and yet Julian doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say. “I wasn’t being irresponsible,” Julian says, and he sounds like a protesting teenager. “I took an MI-6 car.”

Garak’s hands tighten almost imperceptibly on the wheel, though his driving is precise as ever. “Dukat wasn’t interested in you.” Every word is tightly controlled. “I doubt he really realized what he had in you, or he’d never have been gloating and daring me to come rescue you.”

“He knew I was important to MI-6, important enough that they’d send their best agent.” He thinks that Garak’s fingers tighten again. The streets of London are slipping by without Julian really noticing. Garak doesn’t respond.

Julian has gone from awake to a semi-dreamlike state by the time he and Garak arrive at his flat. Garak steers him through the door and his touch is perfunctory, nothing more. Julian ends up in bed in a pair of pyjama pants, not quite sure how he got there, and he falls asleep before

he can ask if Garak is coming to bed.

He gasps himself awake out of a dream and flails until he's sitting upright, dragging giant breaths of air into his lungs. The place next to him in bed is empty; in the dim light, he can just make out Garak sitting at the end of the bed. Julian tries to steady his breathing, reminding himself that there's no hand around his neck anymore. "Could you—" His throat hurts again. "Could you lie down?"

"All right." Garak stretches out next to him. It's jarring to find him fully dressed, the buttons of his shirt pressing into Julian's bare skin.

Julian means to confront him, but sleep takes him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian wakes from another dream of being strangled to find that Garak has placed a very light hand on his sternum. "You're safe," Garak says.

"*Fuck*," Julian says feelingly. "Fuck." When Garak starts to lift his hand away, Julian grabs it and presses it back to his skin. "Don't." It feels like a novelty to see light at the windows—to see windows at all. "Whatever you're going to do—I want a few more days." He can't see Garak's face beyond a pale-toned blur.

Garak hesitates. "All right," he says. Julian can only see well enough to see that Garak is leaning down toward him before he feels the warmth of Garak's breath against his skin. Gently, he kisses one of the fingerprints left on Julian's neck, and then the next. When Julian clutches at his shoulder, Garak shifts until he's bracing himself above Julian, careful not to rest his weight on Julian's chest. When he's kissed each of the marks, he kisses Julian's mouth and Julian lets out a shaky breath because at least he knows what to do with this. He starts to drift off back to sleep around the time that Garak is kissing his way slowly down toward his navel, and this time he doesn't dream of being strangled.

In the morning, Julian opens his good eye to discover that Garak is watching him sleep, their faces close. "Dukat didn't take you because you're important to MI-6," Garak says, all in a rush like he's been waiting to say it. "Two years ago, I seduced a woman to get access to her employer's files. Her participation was—discovered, and punished. That was Dukat's lover."

"Oh." He supposes that makes a little more sense than kidnapping an important MI-6 asset to draw out a different MI-6 asset. "I did try to tell him—"

"I saw the video," Garak says shortly. "I got back eight hours after you were taken." He touches his thumb to the scabbed cuts on Julian's cheekbone. "I didn't call in at first because I didn't know—I assumed you would be home that night and I'd see you then." His finger traces the undamaged skin around Julian's puffy eye. "Your messages all came in. *Likely trap. Do not send 003. Captors unknown. Location unknown. Trap for Garak.*" His voice is steady. "You were very precise at first in your descriptions of what was happening. *Torture minimal. Lack of sleep concerning.* You got less coherent. At a certain point they couldn't decipher your messages anymore. The best-case scenario was that you'd been drugged. 009 thought it was a good sign that you were still—intact enough to try to communicate. She said brain damage was less likely."

Julian closes both eyes as Garak cups his undamaged cheek with one hand. The all-consuming drowsiness has started to recede. "I'm quite disappointed in myself," he says, because he's not ready to confront whether Dukat was right to think that he could *hurt* Garak by taking Julian "I had an EMP and that laser in my watch as well, but I waited too long to try to use them. I should have set off the EMP in the car when I was first taken. Or used the laser to—" He doesn't know that he could have shot the driver in the back.

Garak doesn't say, no, you reacted naturally, no one would have thought to do something like that. Garak would have. "You were right. People close to me die," Garak says. "They die, I let them die, sometimes I kill them."

Julian finds Garak's cheek with his own hand. It's soft, and he imagines Garak standing in the bathroom shaving, razor at the ready for what must seem like an inevitable attack. "I would prefer if this weren't the part where you tell me that you'll need to keep your distance for my own protection." Garak's jaw works just slightly beneath his hand, as though that's precisely what he intends to say. "I think it's a bit late for that, given recent events." He hates the idea of turning into some burden on Garak, something complicated and worrisome. He doesn't want this to end, even if it's only Garak's way of working off energy between missions.

"It'll happen again," Garak says. "There will always be someone."

"Undoubtedly." Julian puts a finger to Garak's lips to keep him from speaking. "But—and I say this with the correct amount of ego—I am far more likely to be attacked or kidnapped for my role as Q, rather than for my occasional roll in bed with you." Ha, he thinks grimly. A pun worthy of Garak.

Garak catches Julian's finger in his teeth very briefly before releasing it. "Do you feel up to some breakfast?" And just like that, the conversation, such as it was, is over.

"I would like tea," Julian says, willing to accept the minor victory of having persuaded Garak that he's a valuable target even when not associated with Garak. "And some of that numbing bruise cream, and my bloody glasses instead of that damned contact lens."

\* \* \* \* \*

Garak actually attempts to turn down the next assignment that he's given. Julian is more or less recovered, the obnoxious cast on his wrist the last remnant of his injuries, though you wouldn't know it from the way Garak has been skittish around him. He's in a briefing with Garak, M, D, and 009, and diligently paying attention while skimming the written briefing and pondering equipment specs, when Garak says, "I think 009 could handle this alone."

The proverbial record-scratch is deafening. "No." Julian's mind is still half in the equipment specs. "No, it's a two-agent job, minimum. D and I are more than capable of running the technical side of it from here, but the scope—"

“It’s not up for discussion,” M snaps, and Julian realizes that Garak’s statement was something more than a comment on the personnel necessary for the mission.

“I have most of the equipment on hand already.” Julian doesn’t have the emotional capacity to contemplate what’s happening at the moment. “The remote driving system is fully installed in the DB11. It doesn’t sound like you’ll need a second car. And I have a full makeup kit prepared for 009. The lipstick and powder shades should be appropriate now.” The pigments in the original makeup kit had been designed for 008 and thus severely melanin-deficient. “Sedative gasses have been replenished in the respective jewelry.”

“Thank you, Q,” M says, with a very significant look at Garak, and Julian decides that he’s happier not knowing exactly what’s being left unsaid.

In his workshop, Julian fastens the newly improved watch around Garak’s wrist. Garak holds onto his wrist for far too long, staring at Julian like he’s trying to say something silently, until 009 clears her throat. There’s a timeline, Julian remembers. And god only knows what Garak is trying to communicate anyway. “Don’t trigger the gas if the watch is within a foot of your face,” he warns. “009, I take it you know what to do with this?”

009 plucks the lipstick from the makeup case and smacks her lips together, though she doesn’t apply it. “Good night,” she says. “I shudder to think what the mascara does?”

“Don’t get it in your eyes,” Julian warns. “It induces temporary blindness.” He offers the DB11 keys to both of them, and 009 only rolls her eyes as Garak snatches them.

The mission, such as it is, goes as smoothly as any mission ever does. In San Antonio, Texas, Garak and 009 disperse to their respective hotels, to see if they can locate the dirty bombs that are allegedly going to be set off in twenty-four hours.

Julian doesn’t know exactly how 009 goes about searching out her side of the information—that’s D’s job to supervise—because it’s Garak, of course, who goes to the hotel bar, where the National Conference of Regional Transit Authority attendees are gathered, and picks out a likely-looking young man. Garak picks the lock to a utility closet one-handed with his other hand playing at the button of the man’s slacks, and he gives one shocking blue-eyed glance at the security camera before they disappear into the utility closet.

Julian can’t see them, but he can hear them. He hears the man say, “Let me touch you,” and finds himself telling Garak, “Don’t let him touch your cock.” His throat is dry and he hopes D is distracted by whatever 009 is doing. “Don’t let him make you come.”

He hears that choked noise in the back of Garak’s throat that he’s come to recognize as immense frustration, and then the noises very close to the audio receiver that tell him Garak is sucking the man’s cock, and that only leaves Julian to imagine what they must look like. When they emerge from the closet, Garak’s mouth is red and he stares hard at the camera again before saying, “I have the location.”

“Q, 009 has her location,” D says, as Julian turns to tell her, and he nods.

“We’ve got what we need. 003, 009, sending the locations and recommended routes to your mobiles now.”

Garak and 009 simultaneously enter distant quadrants of the San Antonio Metro Transit area, in which two bombs are hidden that must be deactivated at exactly the same time. Julian and D sit side-by-side, watching each other’s screens as well as their own, speaking softly and quickly to their respective agents to ensure that every movement is synchronized. There’s a tense moment when they both do something wrong—or perhaps the bombs are set to recognize when things are a little too perfect—and a rapid countdown begins. “Jul—” Garak starts, so quickly that Julian barely recognizes the beginning of his own name.

Then 009 says, “I know what to do. Garak, with me,” narrating each step, and they mirror each other’s actions as Julian and D watch helplessly from Q Branch.

At the end of it, both bombs have been deactivated. “Get out of there,” Julian tells them. “We’re calling in the bomb disposal squads.” He closes his eyes and tips his head back, letting out a long breath.

“This side of things is terrible sometimes,” D says. There’s too much understanding in her voice, and they sit quietly as Garak and 009 emerge into the hot light of downtown San Antonio. “009, you have your hotel and return flight plans. Stevens will be monitoring your signal until you reach home.”

“Roger that. I’m bloody starving.” 009 smiles in view of the nearest surveillance camera and ducks into an ice-cream shop.

“003.” Julian knows what he should say. It’s been a long day. Garak must be tired. He’ll want to spend the night at the hotel. Stevens can monitor both Garak and 009 from now on. There’s no reason to think that they need further direction. “If you catch the next flight out of San Antonio, you can be home in twelve hours.” His voice cracks a little as he says it.

Garak looks directly up at the traffic camera. “I’ll be there.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian walks into his flat and Garak is there as promised, one hand in his hair and the other at the button of his trousers. His mouth is hot against Julian’s own, and Julian opens to him. He loves this, the desperation in Garak’s hands after a mission like this, the soft noises in the back of his throat when Julian touches him. He presses Julian up against the kitchen counter and Julian realizes dimly that they’re always angled like this, Garak’s body between him and any threat.

“I missed you.” Garak says it against his neck like a confession, one thigh pressed between Julian’s legs so that Julian can rub against it, and it makes Julian shiver.



“It was barely two days. You only wanted to come,” Julian tells him, and his voice goes high-pitched when Garak lifts his cock free in one big hand. “You only—” He’s panting as Garak’s fingers slide from the base of his cock, behind his balls and then back a little further to rub at his rim. “You’re just—” He loses his train of thought as Garak presses the tip of his finger inside and Julian can’t help but jerk against him. “Bed,” he says instead.

Garak *carries* Julian, who keeps his legs wrapped around Garak’s hips for dear life, into the bedroom. He feels how hard Garak is, his cock thick in his trousers, but Garak hesitates like he’s waiting for something from Julian. Julian finds the lube and slicks up two of Garak’s fingers with a filthy stroke, like he’s jerking his cock. “Jul—” Garak starts, and Julian grasps Garak’s wrist and pushes those fingers inside himself. It burns a little, two at once, but it’s worth it for the way it fills him up, the way that Garak groans and kisses him sloppily. Garak moves his mouth from Julian’s own to his nipples, licks and bites at them until they’re too sensitive and Julian’s cock is leaking messy. He pushes a third finger in as he closes his teeth on Julian’s nipple again and Julian comes like that, lightning-quick, tightening around Garak’s fingers so hard that it must be painful.

Garak is still fully dressed, but his cock is straining at his trousers and there’s the slightest damp spot. Julian drags his fingernails across it lightly, even as Garak’s fingers are still inside him, and it tears a noise from Garak’s throat that makes Julian shiver. When Garak withdraws his fingers, Julian misses them, but he unfastens Garak’s trousers and pulls him down onto the bed too. With Garak’s trousers open, his cock distorts the shape of his briefs obscenely. Julian crouches between his legs and mouths at the head of Garak’s cock through the cloth. He can just taste him when he drags his tongue leisurely across the damp patch. “Julian—” Garak says. “I *missed* you,” and it’s more urgent this time, as though Garak is trying to say something very different.

“Don’t,” Julian tells him. A week ago Garak was trying to let him down easy for his own sake. He doesn’t want to think about it now. “You don’t have to—pretend.” He rucks up the edges of Garak’s briefs until they’re tight around his cock. “Admit it,” Julian says, and kisses the inside of his right thigh with a hint of teeth. Garak’s groan is quiet, but Julian sees him fist his hands in the sheets. “It’s all right, you can admit it.” He bites at the inside of Garak’s left thigh, just hard enough that Garak hisses, and his cock jerks in his briefs next to Julian’s cheek. “Admit it’s a pretense, and you can come.” He can see Garak’s throat working, almost as though he’s laughing.

“I can’t,” Garak says, even as his thighs shake beneath Julian’s fingers. “Q—Julian—you idiot—I lo—” Julian yanks his briefs down and swallows his cock, and whatever Garak was about to say is lost in the desperate noise he makes as he comes. When Julian releases him and starts to stand, Garak tugs Julian back down to him and pulls Julian’s head to rest on his chest.

They breathe together like that for a long time until Garak says, “The problem with being a professional liar is that no one ever believes you when you’re trying to tell—the truth.” Julian doesn’t know quite what to say to that. He can hear Garak’s steady heartbeat. “I realize it may seem less than sincere when you watch me—do whatever is necessary to accomplish a mission—on a regular basis, but I do mean it.”

Julian laughs softly against his chest. “I suppose some people would take it as a sign of meaningful commitment that you moved into my dreadful little flat.” He’s sticky with sweat but can’t find the energy to peel himself away.

Garak’s arm tightens around him a little. “I like it here. It feels like—someone actually lives here.”

Orphans make the best operatives, Julian remembers. It takes a great deal of courage to joke, “You know, on our combined salaries, we *might* be able to afford someplace a little larger.” He feels Garak’s chest shake with laughter beneath his cheek. “I don’t expect you to alter your tactical approach,” he adds.

“I have,” Garak reminds him, and yes, he has told Garak to behave differently, hasn’t he. Only to use his hands and mouth, never to come until he’s at home with Julian.

“True. But I suppose I could even make allowances for special circumstances.” Julian is still struggling to grasp the idea that Garak *feels* something, something beyond an appreciation for excellent orgasms.

He hears Garak’s quiet laugh. “If the fate of the free world hangs in the balance?”

Julian pokes him in the side. “The *entire* world,” he scolds. “The *free* world is a propaganda relic of the Cold War—”

“I love you,” Garak says, and kisses him before he can argue.

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