

Where the Orchids Bloom

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Summary

From childhood to middle age, whether he goes by his child-name, by Elim, or by his codename "Regnar," Garak is always surrounded by flowers.

The dead don't notice Elim's father. Neither do the living. Father – Tolan – is service-class, and his duty is to keep his head down, clean the monuments, and tend the cemetery's flowers. Elim helps. He's only seven, but he's been tagging along to work in the cemeteries since he was an infant, so he handles the pruning shears with ease. Father lets him trim the hedges and mow the grass, but it's only when the sun is low and Elim's sweat has cooled that Father calls him over to see the orchids.

The orchids are slender. Graceful. The layers of their petals peel back, each one cleverly concealing the color underneath. Only Father knows how to treat the barren soil so Edosian orchids will grow. The cemetery is filled with clever men who served the state well. It's Tolan's job to polish their gravestones and keep the grounds beautiful for their corpses.

And if those clever dead men were in Tolan's place, if they were ordered to plant orchids here, they couldn't do it. They know torture; they know death; they don't know beauty.

Just knowing that fact makes a seven-year-old service-class boy proud.

There are spells in-between his missions for the Obsidian Order where he has nothing to do. No word from Enabran Tain; no messages over his comm chip. Nothing but long, dreary shifts in the Hall of Records, deflecting probing questions from his coworkers, who seem to think he's always on vacation.

His walk home from work takes him past the cemeteries. Tolan is long-dead – he'd died when Garak was a teenager. But his gardens remain. Here, in the shadow of a Gul's memorial stone, Garak sits in a field of orchids. They've spread out since Tolan's death. His replacement keeps them alive, but lets them profligate until the cemetery's grass lawn is overtaken. Cross-legged, Garak lets his eyes unfocus, his energy spreading as thin as the orchids, until he catches onto their frequency and melts into it. Until he disappears.

He lies down. He watches the thin reed-like stems sway in the wind, the layered petals fluttering apart to reveal the secrets underneath. When he turns his head, he can see widows and their children visiting the deceased. He's never visited Tolan's tombstone, he realizes. He isn't entirely sure where the service-class are buried. When he thinks about it, in all his walks throughout the city, he's never seen a graveyard for housekeepers and maintenance men. If they exist at all, they certainly aren't marked by Edosian orchids.

He closes his eyes.

Tain sends him a bouquet of orchids when he's exiled.

It's the first gift he's received since Tolan died; it's the last gift he'll receive until Julian Bashir is stationed here. For now, Garak places the orchids in a dusty vase in the corner of his shop and gets to work scrubbing bloodstains off the floor.

The previous tailor was a Bajoran.

The previous tailor isn't here anymore.

When the orchids start to wilt, Garak revives them. He neglects the Cardassian uniforms he's supposed to mend and works on developing a soil nutrient formula instead. By the end of the year, he has a sun-lamp aimed at a garden box so large it lines his shop's entire starboard wall.

His hypospray is confiscated. The wire is gone. At night, alone in his quarters, Garak is fine, but during the day—?

He can sense the Bajorans staring at him. The Federadji judgment, he can laugh off, sneer at. He enjoys working them up and playing into their stereotypes. They're so fixated on what an obvious spy he is that they never stop to think he might be exiled. Except for Dr. Bashir. But the Bajorans... Working them up would be unwise.

The Bajorans have every reason to stare.

One year after the wire is removed, Garak locks his shop doors and sits there in the half-light. His chest rises and falls, lungs clutching at every shallow breath. Through the slats of the windows, he can see artificial light falling on the orchids, turning their petals orange.

The Edosian orchids are toxic. Tolan was an expert in them, but it was Enabran Tain who told him so. If you pair them with a certain Vulcan flower, they become especially deadly. But even on their own...

Garak peels the petals back layer by layer, the way he always wanted to when he was a child, destructive and unwise. He places every petal on his tongue. When the orchids are stripped, their reeds bare, he waits for death to take him. The toxic petals cling to the lining of his stomach.

He gets a little sick. That's all.

Cardassia, after the Dominion War, is nothing but dust.

It's a scene Garak has seen a thousand times before. The nightmares started after the first time he failed one of Tain's tests of wit and memory. He'd spent the whole night locked in that storage cupboard, and when he returned home, slept it off, he'd been plunged straight into nightmares: buildings collapsing; rubble squeezing the air from his lungs; pressure snapping his ribs and crushing his internal organs from the inside out.

As he grew older, the nightmares grew more sophisticated. It wasn't just him dying underneath those shattered homes. It was his parents. It was Tain. It was his classmates: Eight Lubak's compact body snapped in two; Palandine and One Charaban scrabbling for purchase, lost to a pit of duracrete and dust. Older still, and the victims' faces changed. They became all the people Garak had tortured, killed: Dr. Parmak, Dukat's father. A million Bajoran civilians. Avuncular Romulan senators who reminded him of his father. Tolan again.

Always Tolan.

But here on Cardassia, where the dream is made reality, Tolan's garden shed is still standing. The rest of Enabran Tain's stately home is gone.

He sifts through rubble.

He rescues the living.

He buries the dead.

He never tells the other workers that beneath Enabran Tain's house, in the basement apartment, his mother's body is entombed. He tells himself she must be dead by now. That there's no point in digging for her.

He leaves her there. He plants Edosian orchids on the only patch of viable soil he can find.

In a year's time, Garak has put his skills to good use. Not the skills he learned from Enabran Tain: the skills he learned from his father.

He lives in Tolan's garden shed. He melts, anonymous, into the service-class who tends the dead. He builds monuments to the unknown citizens, the laborers and housekeepers, who were crushed to death when Cardassia fell.

He plants orchids. Everywhere.

And one day, when he's sitting numb and empty in Tolan's garden shed, Garak hears a knock at the door. It's been months since he sent his letter; still, he's surprised to see Julian's face, obscured by a dust mask. His hair's gone white from the particles in the air. His eyes are strained.

He steps inside. He pulls his dust mask off, his skin two different shades. He accepts the cup of tea that Garak offers him with a murmur of thanks, and as he sips, his warm eyes scan the monuments outside, the towers of rubble Garak has compulsively arranged and re-arranged to honor the dead.

"I want you to teach me something, Garak," Julian says finally.

Garak thinks of the Order; his interrogation methods; the decoding skills that Sisko asked him to use during the war; the skills that gave him nightmares and nearly drove him insane.

"I don't have anything worth teaching," Garak says.

Julian narrows his eyes in something almost like a smile. He puts a gentle hand on Garak's arm and steers him toward the window, so he can see the patches of rejuvenated earth where his father's favorite flowers grow.

"Teach me how to plant orchids," Julian says.

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