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**Inside Out**

by **Prevailing**

Summary

Ten years ago, Elim Garak went under deep cover as a Bajoran tailor.
Chapter 1

It’s a fluke when Julian walks past the tailor’s shop and the jacket in the window catches his eye. He’s on his way to the infirmary, ready to brief his fresh-faced staff and begin his shift as the station’s CMO. He doesn’t have time for shopping. But the jacket is a rich green and—oh, is that velvet? Just a peek can’t hurt. Slipping inside the shop, Julian caresses the fabric between his fingers and hums in appreciation. Not velvet, but something equally soft.

“It should bring out your eyes nicely,” a mellifluous voice says.

Julian turns to find an older Bajoran man smiling at him. The proprietor, he assumes. “Oh, hello!” Julian says, his fingers still running up and down the delightful fabric. He’s always been the tactile sort. “Do you really think so?”

“There’s only one way to find out. Would you care to try it on?”

“I don’t know—” Julian stammers. He frowns at the jacket that has charmed him. “It’s a bit big, isn’t it?”

“You’re in luck, then,” the man says, “as I happen to be a tailor.”

“I—well. Right, of course. Sorry.” He doesn’t know what he’s apologizing for, but the man handles Julian’s sudden onset incoherence with breezy professionalism, whisking the jacket off the mannequin and holding it out. “If you’d allow me.”

Julian slips an arm through the offered sleeve and turns as the man pulls the jacket over his shoulders. There’s a full-length mirror beside the rack of blouses, and Julian preens in front of it, twirling about and petting the fabric covering his stomach. “Brilliant,” he whispers.

The man circles around, inspecting the fit with experimental tugs here and there. “I quite agree.”

“Is it a type of velvet?”

“Nausicaan suede, actually. Yes, yes, I like this on you.” The man brushes a hand against the waist and Julian jumps as a spark of electricity jolts him. The man laughs, giving the carpet a rueful glance. “I apologize. I must be shuffling.”

“It’s all right.” Julian grins and appraises his backside in the mirror. Bloody brilliant. After a moment of hesitation, he blurs, “I’ll take it.”

A look of disappointment passes over the man’s face. “Don’t you want to haggle?”

Julian isn’t used to paying for items, much less bargaining over them. It seems dreadfully Ferenginesque. But the man seems dead set on this ritual, so he looks down at the tag on the jacket’s sleeve. A bit low, he thinks, considering the quality of the workmanship. With a pointed smile, he names a higher price.

The man raises a brow, but catches on to the game at once. His rebuttal is lower than Julian’s offer. Back and forth they go until Julian relents on a price that’s higher than originally requested, but still low enough that the man doesn’t seem to feel he’s ripped Julian off.
“I can have it ready for you in two days,” the man says as he helps Julian out of the jacket and hurries behind a counter.

“Don’t you need to take my measurements?”

The man waves a hand. “Already done.”

Julian laughs. “You’re that good?”

“I’m that good.”

“Well, if you need to reach me, my name is—”

“Julian Bashir,” the man says. “You’re the station’s Chief Medical Officer.” Julian must look surprised, because he adds, “it’s a good practice for every merchant to know his potential customer base.”

Of course. “And your name?”

The man’s smile is wide and disarming. “It’s on the shingle.”

As Julian leaves, he tilts his head to read the colorful tile hanging above the door, written in Kardasi, Bajoran, and Federation Standard: **Pela’s Clothiers**.

It’s later in the day, when Julian is in Ops conferring with Jadzia over a malfunction in the medical database, that he thinks to mention his encounter to Major Kira.

She leans over her station to scowl down at him. “Pela Serot? You mean the collaborator?”

She spits out the word with the same venom she reserves for Cardassian.

He winces at the accusation as if it were leveled at him personally. “He seemed rather nice to me.”

“Of course he’s nice,” Kira says. “He was nice to everyone, including the Cardassians. He mended their damned uniforms. He took their money.”

“Surely you can’t label a man a traitor simply for doing his job.”

“Watch me. As far as I’m concerned, any Bajoran who profited from the occupation is the worst kind of traitor.”

Jadzia turns around. “That seems a little harsh.”

Kira’s eyes flick between the two of them. She sighs and mutters, “I don’t expect either of you to understand.”

Julian shrugs it off; he hasn’t been aboard Deep Space Nine long enough to be familiar with the finer points of Bajoran-Cardassian relations. But it piques his curiosity. A possible traitor aboard! Is this Mister Pela hiding in plain sight from the Bajoran authorities? Does Commander Sisko know? Should Julian do something to stop him?

As promised, the tailor/collaborator contacts him two days later to cheerfully announce that his jacket is ready. When Julian arrives, the tailor wastes no time steering him to a line of shirts and sweaters he claims will complement the jacket nicely. It’s excellent salesmanship, made more effective by Pela’s hand on the small of Julian’s back, guiding him into a dressing room. He’s aware that the man is flirting with him. Shamelessly. Even if it’s only to ensure a sale, Julian basks in it, his ulterior motive to spy on the man long forgotten.
And the clothes are stylish, and the blue one fits snugly around his chest, making his pectorals seem larger than they are. Julian rubs each soft and silken sleeve against his cheek and sighs in delight.

He can’t settle on any one item, so he buys them all.

This begins another round of bartering, more intricate than the last. Pela wants to give him a discount due to the sheer quantity. Julian argues that each shirt is so different that the “buy two, get one half off” model isn’t fair, but might become amenable if Pela throws that paisley scarf in for free. Pela insists that the green and orange wrap to the left would be better.

Julian has no choice but to give in.

“I’m trying to become your favorite customer,” Julian says, propping his chin in a fist as he watches the tailor neatly fold each garment.

“Oh, you’re well on your way, dear doctor.” Pela winks. “You have excellent fashion sense.”

Julian bows. “Why, thank you, Mister Pela.”

“Please, doctor, it’s Pela. Plain, simple Pela.” He pauses for what can only be effect. “But you can call me Serot.”

It takes enough staggering and puffing to carry his many bags to his quarters that Julian considers asking the chief to beam them over. When he finally arrives and dumps the contents onto the bed and surveys the impressive pile, he wonders how long he should wait before going back for trousers. Two days should be about right.

“I think you have a shopping addiction,” Jadzia says one night at Quark’s bar. He’s arrived at their table in another new ensemble, which she appraises with quirked lips. “Either that, or a major crush.”

“Is that jealousy I hear?” Julian teases. When she makes a show of rolling her eyes, he leans forward. “I can’t explain it, but I find him utterly fascinating.”

Jadzia shrugs and sips her drink. “He seems like any other Bajoran shopkeeper to me.”

“Oh, but Jadzia!” Julian wags a finger at her. “You should know better than anyone that looks can be deceiving. Just yesterday, I saw him in the Replimat, reading. I almost never see anyone sit still and simply read for pleasure. As it turns out, he was reading an Andorian treatise by an author I’d studied for a paper at the Academy. He’d come away with a wildly different impression about the role of community in local politics, one I hadn’t even considered. Before I knew it, I was twenty minutes late to my shift. Nurse Jabara was very cross with me.”

Jadzia’s eyes have already glossed over. “Political theory was never a strong suit of mine. Curzon, though—”

Julian doesn’t mention that Serot has invited him to lunch tomorrow.

When he arrives, the tailor is already sitting at the same table as before. Upon spotting Julian, his face lights up in a way that’s so genuine, so open and honest. It’s a refreshing change from the grudging tolerance Sisko, O’Brien, and the rest of the command crew give him.

Serot has hasperat, Julian a platter of kebabs. They discuss their meals, the ethics of vegetarianism (Serot is trying to take it up, and, with one hand over his mouth conspiratorially, admits to cheating), and from there find themselves debating Leviathan. Julian is surprised that Serot has read Hobbs, and is even more surprised that he isn’t entirely convinced of the merits of representative government.
“I agree with the absolute sovereignty of the state,” Serot says, “but how can that be maintained when everyone is treated equally and has an equal say in state function?”

For a moment, Julian is stymied. “A little chaos is a small price to pay for democracy.”

“Chaos for whom?” Before Julian can reply, Serot continues. “Despite being the paragon of democracy, it seems the Federation never did ask me how I feel about its presence on my home.”

This is a common refrain among the Bajorans, one Julian has overheard in the mutterings of his nurses. Mutterings his enhanced senses can’t help but pick up. He nods, pushes his empty plate away, and raises his eyes. “Do you not want us here?”

Serot smiles sadly. “Doctor, it’s much too late to ask for my opinion. It won’t change anything.”

“I know that. But it still matters.”

“Do you really—”

Julian laughs at the sudden hesitation. “Yes! Come on, Serot. You don’t seem like the type to withhold an opinion. Tell me.”

Serot looks over his shoulder and, laying his palms flat on the table, lowers his voice. “Keep in mind, my dear, that I’m very glad you’re here. Your presence brightens this dreary station considerably.”

Julian feels his face flush, covers it up with humor. “You don’t need to flatter me to get my continued business, you know.”

“I’m merely speaking the truth. I’ve been enjoying your company. But we don’t need Starfleet. The resistance drove out the Cardassians, all without Federation intervention.”

At high cost to Bajor. “We’re not here to intervene. We’re offering aid and acting as a deterrent should Cardassia regroup and seek reprisals. Or worse, try to retake Bajor.”

“At the cost of becoming your protectorate.”

“Major Kira would agree with you there.”

Serot’s nose wrinkles further at the mention of her name. “Major Kira.”

“She says you were a collaborator.” Julian isn’t sure why he says it. Perhaps he doesn’t like the accusation himself and hopes that Serot will refute it. Put his mind at ease. It isn’t fair, he thinks, with the occupation so fresh in everyone’s minds, but it’s too late. “I’m sorry, I just stuck my foot in it, didn’t I?”

“I suppose she would think so, and she isn’t the only one here who feels that way.” Serot slides his hands away to fold them in his lap. “She’s under the impression that any Bajoran who didn’t actively fight in the resistance was a collaborator.”

“So you weren’t—”

“That’s all in the eye of the beholder. I may not have been in the active cadre of the resistance, but I was a passive supporter. At the risk of sounding defensive, I did my best. Yes, doctor, it’s true that I worked for the Cardassians. I mended the uniforms they wore while torturing and oppressing my people. But I also charged them for it. And what I didn’t need to live on, I funneled back to the resistance.”
“Then why not tell her that?”

“Major Kira is already well-aware. Let’s just say that her opinion of me is rather complicated. In fact, you’d be well-advised to keep your distance from me, lest your reputation be sullied.”

“Oh, because I’m making so many friends now? If you haven’t noticed, I’m sort of the station pariah.” Standing, Julian grabs their trays and tosses them into the reclamation port. He follows Serot across the Promenade. “Nobody wants to talk to me.”

“Certainly that’s only because they haven’t gotten to know you.” Serot glances over at him, toward Julian’s chest, then away, then back again, as if worried. “My dear, I didn’t want to say anything at the Replimat, but are you aware you’re wearing that shirt backward?”

“Am I?” Mortified, the shirt is instantly over Julian’s head, exposing his torso to the Promenade.

He’s sure he just heard Security Chief Odo mutter, “Put that back on, Doctor Bashir,” but Julian’s attention is on how Serot has stopped in his tracks to stare.

Julian wrestles with the shirt longer than necessary before tugging it back in place. He smoothes his hair and is pleased to find Serot watching him with a quirked head.

“Better?” Julian asks, grinning.

A smile spreads across Serot’s face. He nods once.
Chapter 2

It’s not a purposeful act of snooping when Julian learns how Serot is viewed around the station. The residents simply notice that the two of them have been spending time together and offer their opinions on the matter, unbidden.

Julian braces himself for the worst, recalling Kira’s open disdain for the so-called collaborator and Cardassian sympathizer. But Serot’s fellow Bajorans seem to consider the tailor a respectable man, trusting him with their clothes and, in some cases, friendship.

“He’s sweet,” Nurse Jabara tells him while they prepare for surgery. “I’ve been coming to him with my problems for years now.”

“Our resident therapist,” another nurse interjects.

Jabara nods. “We joke that he’s the reason there isn’t a professional one aboard the station. It’s true, though. He’s a good listener. Some of his advice has really helped me.”

“He has a way of getting information out of you, doesn’t he?” the other nurse adds. “I can’t believe I told him I was pregnant before my boyfriend. Isn’t he seeing that El-Aurian trader?”

“Lucia! You know better than to start rumors.” Finished scrubbing, Jabara gives Julian a smile. “I hope it works out between you two. He seemed so lonely.”

“Oh?” Julian says with a bat of his lashes. “And what would it be?”

That only prompts a scoff and shake of the head from both women. “Give me a break,” the second nurse says.

It’s a relief to find that Major Kira is in the minority, that Serot was exaggerating his tainted reputation. The tailor seems to have a talent for self-deprecation.

Then again, there are a few older Bajorans who seem more skeptical about Serot’s past motives, and aren’t hesitant to make it known. It isn’t a surprise; Bajorans appear to be a generally suspicious lot. One man spins a tale about how Serot arrived when the station was first built. Unlikely, but Julian is too polite to say so. Encouraged by Julian’s silence, the man then goes on to claim that Serot was raised by Cardassians. “That one’s got a wily mind,” the old nutter warns. “Just like a spoonhead.”

“Ah, that would be Mister Tima,” Serot says one afternoon when Julian recounts the conversation. “He also insists that I’m not a natural blond.”

Before he can stop himself, Julian has wrapped a strand of Serot’s long, wavy hair around his finger. The golden hues catch the light and bring out the blue of Serot’s eyes. It works well with the topaz earring he wears. Julian can’t imagine his hair any other color. “Are you?”

Serot gives him a sidelong look.

Julian reluctantly releases the strand. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize, my dear. I’d only hoped you’d have more faith in me. If I wasn’t, I’d at least have the sense to cover the grays, wouldn’t I?”

“I beg to differ. It’s a distinguishing feature-- one you wouldn’t just hide.”
Serot smiles. “How very interesting.”

Julian continues his covert investigation, intrigued by the different opinions surrounding his new friend. Those who know Serot (and there are many who do) describe him as “shy but friendly.” At the mention of Serot’s name, the woman at the jewelry stand holds out a necklace with a sly wink. “He’d love it.”

Gossip on the station has already reached pandemic levels, it seems.

That’s why Julian is surprised when it takes more than one try to jog Quark’s memory. “Oh, him,” the Ferengi finally says. “He doesn’t come by the bar very often. Here’s a piece of advice, Doctor: don’t trust anyone who doesn’t have a taste for booze.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

“I wouldn’t let him anywhere near my wardrobe, that’s for sure. Bajorans have the worst sense of style. Just look at your pants!”

Julian glances down. “What’s wrong with them?”

“They’re one color.” Quark turns to refill Morn’s glass. “You know, Doctor Bashir, I wouldn’t have taken you to go for that type.”

Suppressing a sigh, Julian decides to bite. “And what type is that?”

“Old and boring.”

“He’s not boring.” And he’s not that old, Julian doesn’t add.

“Uh-huh. Tell me, does he drink too much and squander his earnings at the dabo table?”

“No,” Julian says.

“Does he sexually harass the females? Spend his nights in the holosuites?”

“No, but--”

“Then, hate to break it to you-- he’s boring.”

From across the bar, a gruff voice drawls out, “Quark.”

“Constable Odo!” Quark straightens, lips drawing back to reveal pointed teeth. “I know what it sounds like, but we weren’t talking about you.”

Odo folds his arms across his chest. “Oh?”

“We were talking about Serot,” Julian says. He casts Quark a sour look.

“Ahh,” Odo says. “I heard you’ve been asking around the station about Mister Pela.” Odo fixes Julian with a long, penetrating stare. “Is running such enquiries a normal part of humanoid mating rituals?”

“Not really, I admit. Major Kira thinks he was a collaborator. I want to prove her wrong.”

Slowly, Odo nods. “She has her suspicions, but I was never able to substantiate them. And neither was she, I might add. He’s been on this station longer than I have, and during that time I haven’t seen any indication that he was working for the Cardassians, beyond his usual tailoring duties. I even
opened a file on Mister Pela—” Odo doesn’t add on Kira’s behest, but Julian knows that’s the case. “But there was nothing to fill it with.”

“See?” Quark interrupts. “If even Odo can’t think of a reason to spy on somebody, what’s that tell you?”

Odo scowls.

That’s enough evidence to satisfy Julian, to assure him that his gut instinct isn’t leading him astray.

With that settled, he and Serot agree to have lunch once a week. In anticipation of their first meeting, Julian gives him a copy of Robinson Crusoe and isn’t disappointed by the spirited discussion that accompanies their meal. In return, Serot offers him a Bajoran war novel about a doctor who experiments upon his patients, creating part-animal hybrids for his own deranged amusement.

Julian knows when he’s being baited. He tapes an isolinear rod of The Island of Doctor Moreau to the door of Serot’s quarters.

The following day, Serot visits him in the infirmary to express his delight about the similarities. “Distrust of doctors must be a universal concept,” he says.

“Sadly, from my experience, it is.” Julian closes the distance between them. “Speaking of which, I have no medical records on you since— well, ever. You’re overdue for a physical.”

“Very clever segue, my dear, but I’m afraid you’ll have to add me to your sample size of people distrustful of doctors.”

“Really? I’m disappointed, Serot. I figured you too smart to be iatrophobic.”

Serot smiles, and it doesn’t escape Julian’s notice that he’s backing out of the infirmary. “And a laudable appeal to my rationality, but all in vain.”

“I promise I’ll be gentle,” Julian purrs. It’s such an obvious pass that Nurse Jabara straightens and bangs her head on an overhanging cupboard. “I’ve been told I have warm hands.”

“I’m relieved to hear it.” Serot is only two feet from the exit. “Perhaps one day I’ll even allow you to put them wherever you like. But not while there is a single tricorder in sight. Until then, Doctor.”

And Serot is gone, leaving Julian dumbstruck while Nurse Jabara snickers, rubbing her skull.

“Until then,” Julian repeats under his breath. It’s a promise.

Julian is aware of what he wants, and it echoes in the back of his mind whenever Serot flirts with him. He knows they’re courting. But he likes the circling dance they’re doing, wants to savor it like rich chocolate melting on his tongue. It’s rare for someone to intrigue him so thoroughly, for the buzz to not wear off within the hour. Serot lingers in his mind, mentally following Julian throughout the day and into his quarters. It’s getting worse. It’s impossible to ignore.

Not that he ever would.

It’s a relief that Serot seems similarly affected, if the stolen glances are to be believed. Yet Julian knows that if he doesn’t take the initiative, they’ll be circling forever.

Determined to lay his claim, Julian appears in Serot’s shop one day when they aren’t due to meet. “You’re late for lunch, Serot,” he announces, arms akimbo.
Without missing a beat, Serot lowers his sewing and checks the time. “So I am. I do apologize.”

He packs up and closes shop, following Julian out.

It’s by tacit agreement that they begin to meet for lunch every other day. When serious topics are on the docket—literature, Cardassian excursions into the demilitarized zone, whether Tor Jolan’s compositions are derivative of the Boldaric masters—they stick to the Replimat. When they merely want to enjoy the other’s company in a relaxed setting and stare at the stars or people-watch, it’s the bar. On the rare occasion that Serot craves animal protein, they go to the Klingon restaurant, where Serot invariably regrets his choice and argues with the chef about the lack of vegetarian options until Julian worries the Klingon will decapitate them both. Julian begins to think Serot does it on purpose.

Always, the lunch hour is much too short.

They have a favorite table at each venue, and Julian is certain those tables are shrinking; each day it feels as if they’re sitting closer together. Their trays bump. Their knees brush.

It must be a conspiracy.

When they aren’t swapping favorite lines from Shakespeare’s sonnets, Julian tells Serot about why he became a doctor, about his early love for tennis, and even about his childhood stuffed bear. He tells Serot that he purposely missed that question on the Starfleet Medical Exam. “Deep down, I don’t think I wanted to be first in my class. I only wish I’d picked a less humiliating question to get wrong.”

Serot takes his hand and strokes Julian’s knuckles. He doesn’t say anything, but Julian doesn’t need him to. He’s never told anyone the truth before, and even if it isn’t the whole truth, it’s a relief just to have the words floating in the air, freed.

He learns that Serot has a knack for storytelling. His voice is perfect for theatrics, his eye for detail captivating. When Serot tells story after story of his life on Bajor with his family and friends, Julian finds himself riveted. Serot casts himself as sidekick and observer, looking on as braver and stronger Bajorans fight off Cardassians and come to his rescue. Julian stares into Serot’s expressive blue eyes, admiring the way they widen and narrow depending on where he is in the tale.

*Jules, you’re infatuated.*

He doesn’t care.

Serot’s stories move him to laughter, excitement, and, sometimes, even tears. Everyone else might not see it, but to Julian he’s an amazing man. One Julian wants to simply be with. And he’s afraid, because if it’s love, he’ll inevitably ruin it.

It’s like this that Julian spends the next months, wanting more and terrified to lose what he has. They keep circling in that slow dance, staring at each other, meeting every other day, trays bumping, Serot making no further moves than his meaningful smiles and polite innuendo.

It’s the Bajoran Gratitude Festival when Julian finally works up the courage to ask Serot to dinner. He isn’t sure what has changed, but the station has a magical feel this evening, and Julian likes to believe in some higher powers rooting him on. The Gratitude Festival is all about starting afresh. Maybe this is what he needs.

He finds his tailor friend bent over his workbench, a bolt of blue linen splayed at its center, lost in his work. Julian sneaks behind him.
“Peldor joi,” he whispers over Serot’s shoulder.

Serot jolts and nearly slams Julian’s nose with the back of his head. Only Julian’s quick reflexes spare him a nasal fracture.

It’s worth it. Serot glares at him. “You shit!”

Julian grins wickedly. Seeing ever-polite Serot driven to cursing never ceases to amuse. “I’m sorry, did I startle you?”

“What kind of doctor tries to give people heart attacks?”

“A very bored one.” He presses two fingers into the hollow of Serot’s throat and feels the rapid pulse pumping back. From this angle, he can see Serot’s wearing a silk shirt under his heavy jacket, cut into a daring V that is millimeters away from exposing chest hair. How perfect it would be to run his fingertips across that smooth skin.

Serot’s voice lowers. “So you admit that you’re unethical?”

“You have no idea. When I took the Hippocratic Oath, I had my fingers crossed behind my back.”

“And that’s precisely why I hate doctors.”

“Well,” Julian says, “if you’re going to be rude, maybe I should give these Delavian chocolates to someone else.”

The ire in Serot’s eyes dims. Slightly. “What do you want?”

“To take you to dinner.”

Serot looks at him for a long time. Julian uses every ounce of willpower to pull away and radiate confidence. He offers an arm, hopeful.

At last, Serot weaves his hands in the crook of Julian’s elbow. “Who am I to question such charm? Lead the way.”

Julian could click his heels for joy. He leads them to Quark’s bar, where he’s reserved their usual table near the viewports. Depending on where Deep Space Nine is in its rotation, Serot’s eyes will settle on the same constellation of stars. This time isn’t any different. The moment they’re seated, Serot has found his favorite cluster of ancient light.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Julian says. “What are you looking at out there?”

Serot doesn’t turn toward him, but he seems to draw inward, his expression sheepish. “I’m not an expert, but I think-- I think that’s Cardassia Prime’s star.”

Julian frowns. It’s a disturbing admission. “Why?”

“I don’t know. My eye is simply drawn to it.”

Julian watches Serot fidget and is only half aware of Rom coming by to lay down silverware and glasses. Gently, Julian prods, “What do you feel when you look at-- at that?”

“Nothing, really.”

It’s the first time Serot has ever lied to him. Julian can’t pin down the look that crosses his face
whenever he finds those stars-- and the near disappointment when they’re not in view-- it’s a kind of curiosity. A near longing. Julian knows that most of Serot’s family died in the Occupation. Maybe it’s a longing for vengeance. Serot’s a gentle man. Of course he’d be ashamed to admit such thoughts.

“We all have our quirks,” Julian says.

Serot grins at him, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Like sleeping with toy bears?”

“I don’t sleep with Kukalaka. He sits on a shelf.”

“When you get to be my age, my dear, you’ll have quite a plethora of so-called quirks.”

“I like them,” Julian blurts out. “Your, ah, quirks, I mean.”

Serot’s grin widens. The appearance of Quark saves Julian from any further embarrassment. “Gentlemen,” the Ferengi says with a bow, “happy Gratitude Festival.”

Quark takes their orders and scuttles off. Serot’s brow furrows in a rare scowl, and Julian realizes that he’s frowning at the outlandish earrings Quark and the Ferengi waiters are wearing. “Not a big fan?” Julian says.

“It’s nice to see outsiders take an interest,” Serot says. “But it’s possible to appreciate the celebration without being--” He cuts himself off.

“Offensive?” Julian ventures.

Serot tilts his head in assent. “Though I wouldn’t mind seeing you in an earring.”

“Mister Pela, are you trying to convert me?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m enough of a fraud as it is.”

That throws him off. “Why do you say that? I’ve seen you go to the temple every day.”

“I wish I could tell you, but it’s really a private matter.”

Julian nods. This is new ground for them. They have never discussed Serot’s religious beliefs before, and this seems to be the optimal time to bring up the subject. But Bajorans are also reticent to share their individual spiritual experiences, especially with outsiders.

“I’m hardly one to judge,” Julian says, carefully, “being a godless heathen myself. But--” Julian leans in, elbows propped on the table, brows raised suggestively, “I have been curious about the strength of my pagh.”

“Have you.” Serot steeples his hands. “It’s easy enough to find out.”

“Would you mind testing it for me?”

“Me?” Serot waves the thought away. “Oh, no, no. You should really find a Vedek.”

Julian keeps a straight face. “A Vedek?”

“Only the very best. It’s important for even a godless heathen to receive a proper reading.”

“Why stop there? Why don’t I call the Kai while I’m at it?”
“What an excellent idea! I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“Come on, Serot. Can’t you do it for me? Please? I brought you your favorite chocolate.”

“Which I notice you still haven’t given me.”

“After you test my pagh. I promise.”


Julian bites his lower lip at the contact.

Serot tugs firmly on Julian’s ear and his eyes widen. “Oh!” he says, fanning himself with his free hand. “Prophets save me! Your pagh is very strong. I daresay the strongest I’ve felt.”

“I have been working out.”

Serot laughs. He’s about to release Julian’s ear, but Julian grabs his hand, holding it close to his face. He hears Serot suck in a breath. Emboldened, Julian nuzzles into Serot’s palm, smelling him, lips brushing his wrist.

Serot’s pulling him closer, and the table is doing that shrinking thing again. Julian’s free hand finds Serot’s neck. Then it’s their lips that find each other, and Julian feels a flutter of excitement. Their noses touch. It starts slow and gentle, their mouths lingering, and then they deepen it, until Julian tastes the inside of Serot’s mouth.

They break away to catch their breath, foreheads leaning together.

“More,” Julian whispers.

Serot takes Julian’s face between his hands and kisses him again.

They’re on their fourth extended kiss when Quark tries to slide their dinner onto the table. “Make room, please! These things are heavy!”

They angle their bodies just enough to allow Quark to place the platters of food. It’s with great reluctance that they finally succumb to the aromas and dig in. There is nothing to say now, but the silence is pregnant with unspoken and unnecessary words. Between bites, they exchange shy smiles, and Julian isn’t sure if he wants this moment to last forever, or end so they can take this somewhere private.

Julian offers to walk Serot back to his quarters, and they leave hand in hand.

When they reach the door, Julian backs Serot against it. “Will you invite me in for--” Julian runs a finger across the hint of stubble along Serot’s jaw. “Something to drink?”

Serot tilts his head until their lips are centimeters away. “What are you craving?”

So many wonderful, dirty things. “A raktajino would be lovely.”

“Then I suggest you order one,” Serot says, “when we go out tomorrow night.”

Before Julian can fully process the words, Serot kisses his cheek, taps the door code, and takes one smooth step into his quarters.
As the doors close, Serot shoots him the smuggest grin Julian has ever seen.
The rumor mill is exploding.

Granted, Julian thinks, it isn’t much of a rumor if the evidence is in full view of the public.

The every-other-day lunches have become nightly dinner. They’ve abandoned the Replimat for their usual table at Quark’s, where they eat from each other’s plates and spend dessert snogging.

They go on dates at every station event they can find. Once, it’s a poetry reading, and Julian has to kiss Serot into silence to keep him from critiquing some of the worst performers. Another evening: they accompany Commander Sisko and Jake into the holosuites for one of his much-lauded baseball games. Sisko monopolizes the time explaining to Serot why he should find the game exciting, leaving Julian to sulk and eat his hotdog.

A week later, Keiko teaches a class on gardening that Serot is bursting at the seams to attend. By the time the class is over, they’re both covered in soil, Julian’s face aches from laughing, and the other students are scowling at them. On the way out, Keiko cradles the plant she’s rescued from their whirlwind incompetence and shakes her head. Julian fixes her with a grin, unrepentant.

Along with Chief O’Brien, Julian puts together an Earth festival to relieve any homesickness for the humans aboard the station. He delights in leading Serot through the stalls, explaining the myriad of fried foods and costumes and bizarre traditions. They watch Jadzia’s progress through a limbo line, Serot wincing at the spinal contortions, before moving across the promenade where blindfolded children swing bats at a papier mâché spheroid suspiciously shaped like Quark’s head. “A piñata,” Julian explains. “It’s usually filled with candy.”

“What do you suppose *that* one is filled with?” Serot asks.

They don’t stick around to find out.

Despite Julian’s best wheedling, Serot won’t join him for the apple bobbing competition. Julian emerges from the tub triumphant, apple clenched between his teeth and water dripping from his hair. Serot gives a slow Bajoran clap and smiles as Julian offers the apple from his knees. Serot plucks it out and replaces it with his lips.

Another night, there’s a wine and cheese soiree, organized by a peace group advocating the human rights of the Maquis. Dragged there against his will, Julian swirls his glass of red and downs it. Raises his finger for another. Everyone at the event is serious, including Serot, who keeps turning his head every time Julian goes in for a kiss. When Julian pouts, Serot frowns in open disapproval. “You’re drunk.”

He is. But Julian has never felt much sympathy for the Maquis. Unlike the Bajorans, the Maquis have a wealth of options. They’re Federation citizens. They could have their pick of Class-M planets in the quadrant, and yet they choose to duke it out with the Cardassians over what isn’t legally theirs, what hasn’t even historically been theirs.

The wine is excellent, however, and if harassing Serot keeps him from voicing his unwelcome opinions on their misguided rebellion, so be it.

Serot is chatting with one of the activists, clearly doing his best to ignore the drunk human clinging to him. “Please pay my companion no mind,” Serot says, “he’s been possessed by a pah-wraith.”
Underneath the ever-present jacket, Serot’s wearing a boat-necked knit jumper, one of Julian’s favorites. Tonight he’s dubbed it Serot’s Slutty Sweater because it exposes so much skin, and he likes sibilants.

Peeling back the jacket, Julian’s mouth finds Serot’s neck and gives it a hard suck and nibble. The full-throated moan that escapes Serot is filthy and lewd and loud, sending electric shivers down Julian’s spine and drawing horrified stares from the other guests.

Glaring, Major Kira jerks a thumb to the door and tells them to take their dalliance elsewhere before she forcefully ejects them herself.

They stumble out into the corridor. “I’ve never been so embarrassed,” Serot says, tugging at his jacket. He rubs the wrinkled bridge of his nose and tries to shake Julian off, to no avail. “I was quite enjoying that event.”

Julian snickers and presses his face into Serot’s neck, finding the skin hot and flushed red. “I believe I’ve found your weakness, Mister Pela!” he giggles, lust-drunk. He paws Serot’s jumper. “I cannot wait to hear you make that noise again. Speaking of which-- my place?”

Serot looks at him.

The rest of Julian’s memory is a haze of bright light, nausea, and muttering. Julian wakes the next morning in his quarters, alone, with a murderous hangover, a crick in his neck, and a bedside note from Serot detailing the many ways he embarrassed himself the night before.

For Julian, the evenings bubble with profound happiness and sexual frustration. Serot is skilled with his tongue, and he can work Julian into a frenzy by merely gliding a finger up Julian’s arm. But after weeks of dinners full of meaningful glances and teasing, Julian still can’t get past second base (and he curses Sisko and all things baseball for that tired metaphor). It isn’t for lack of trying. Every night ends the same: with a hug and a peck on the cheek.

The problem, Julian decides, is that he needs to step his romancing up a notch.

Julian almost asks Kira if there are any Bajoran mating rituals he’s missed.

Almost. He thinks better of it.

Instead, during their weekly literature swap, Julian slips in Emma. When the resulting discussion fails to turn to personal opinions on romantic love, he tosses out Much Ado About Nothing and Family Happiness and The Age of Innocence. Serot catches on to the theme and gets coy; he offers little besides dispassionate observations on human society and how the concept of arranged marriage seems almost Cardassian. He intends it as an insult and looks affronted when Julian plays devil’s advocate by defending the practice and, by extension, Cardassian society.

Throughout their discussions, Julian struggles to pay attention when all he can do is stare into Serot’s eyes. I’m doomed, he thinks. Doomed.

Running low on ideas, Julian takes Serot into a holosuite program simulating a beach he frequented while at Starfleet Academy. “Sorry for the cliché,” he says as they cross over a mound of sand, but it isn’t necessary: at the sight of the Pacific’s rolling waves, Serot’s hand goes to his mouth and he stares.

“Have you never seen an ocean before?” Julian says.

“We were always inland,” Serot says, as if that’s explanation enough. It fills Julian with a sudden
Julian takes Serot’s hand and leads him to the shoreline. The breeze tousles Serot’s hair and he struggles to keep it in place. Smiling, Julian smoothes it down and kisses Serot’s neck. “It’s fine,” he says. “It looks good.”

They walk along, listening to the crash of the waves. Serot collects scattered shells and turns them over in his hands. He tilts his head at the way his footprints compress the wet sand, and listens when Julian explains the principle of incompressibility of fluids, all without rolling his eyes. Julian grins, proud of himself for giving him this new experience. He wraps his arms around Serot’s waist and follows Serot when he weaves away every time the water threatens to lap his ankles. “It’s cold,” Serot says.

“Next time, I’ll show you Santorini,” Julian says. The water will be clear, and warm enough to swim naked.

He doesn’t get the chance. After what should’ve been a quick trip through the wormhole, Julian returns from the Gamma Quadrant to deliver the news about Kai Opaka. Serot takes the blow with a series of rapid blinks. “Why did you let her go?” he asks finally.

“It wasn’t my call to make,” Julian says.

“And you couldn’t save her? Did you even try? I thought you were supposed to be a good doctor.”

Julian nods, taking the insult for what it is-- a common defense mechanism. The doctor is always the first scapegoat. “I can’t save someone who is already dead, Serot.”

“You’re right.” Serot turns back to his workbench, looking suddenly lost. “I’m sorry. I think-- I think I’d like to be alone tonight. If you don’t mind.”

“I understand.”

Julian doesn’t. Not really. He wants to be there to soothe Serot through his grief-- if it can even be called that, given that Kai Opaka isn’t quite dead. Julian’s supposed to be the shoulder to cry on, dammit, and although he knows it’s silly, he can’t help but take it personally that Serot would rather be left alone.

He goes through motions. He writes his Starfleet report on the latest events with a mug of Tarkalean tea at his elbow. Once finished, he showers and goes to bed early.

Julian turns the report in to Sisko the next morning and immediately moves to leave; he’s aware Sisko doesn’t like him and would vote him off the station if Julian weren’t so good at his job. To his surprise, the commander stops him with a raised hand. “Lieutenant. Given that the station will be in mourning for the next few days, why don’t you take some personal time?”

“Thank you, sir, for the offer, but I can’t leave--”

“Only a few days. Take a runabout wherever you want.” He smiles. “Bring Mister Pela along.”

It’s a gracious offer, and the opportunity Julian has been waiting for. He hurries to Serot’s shop and interrupts him in the middle of a transaction with a customer. “I plan to take some shore leave,” Julian starts. “I want you to come with me.”

Serot raises a brow. “What do you have in mind?”
They bounce ideas back and forth over dinner until Serot suggests taking him to Bajor for the annual springball tournament. Julian latches onto it at once. Bajor! A chance to learn more about Serot! “I’d love that. In fact, I’ve been following the preliminary competitions for the last several months.”

“My dear, why didn’t you say anything? And to think, all this time we could’ve been discussing Wenna Juso’s backhand.”

“You didn’t seem-- you seemed too, well, sophisticated for sports.”

“How little you know me!” Serot’s fork slices a bite-sized piece from Julian’s pie. “If it’s settled, then, I’ll make all the arrangements.”

It’s perfect. Julian packs his duffle that very night and can hardly sleep through his excitement. On the runabout trip to the planet, Julian teaches Serot the rudimentary skills to pilot the shuttlecraft and regales him with his detailed knowledge of springball and its history. I’m going to impress this man, Julian decides. I’m going to charm him out of those well-fitting trousers.

It’s early summer on the southern hemisphere and mid-morning when they touch down. Serot smiles the moment the sun’s rays hits him, and he glances about with open pleasure as they take in their surroundings. “Here,” Serot says. “Let me show you this park.”

Mesmerized by Serot’s earnestness, Julian follows. Serot’s enthusiasm is contagious, and Julian can’t help but grin as Serot points out and names every flower and tree and random building on their walk to the inn where they’ll be staying.

The inn is nothing but a cottage, really, overseen by an old Bajoran woman with whom Serot discusses their lodging arrangements while Julian hangs back and observes the crowd swelling the streets for the coming event. When Serot returns, he tosses Julian a key. “Your room is on the top floor. It’s facing west with, from what I hear, a breathtaking view of the mountains.”

Julian fumbles the key. “My room?”

“I’m going to drop off my bags, then perhaps we can catch a late breakfast. I’ll meet you down here in twenty minutes.”

“Ah. Okay.” Julian turns the key over in his hand and plods up the stairs. Serot’s right about one thing-- the view from his room is impressive-- but as he stares at the bed with its white linens and embroidered coverlet, he wonders if he should take this as a hint, or as a challenge.

This is new for him. Perhaps it’s the arrogance talking, but Julian has never had difficulty enticing men into bed. His looks and his charms do most of the heavy lifting, his persistence closing the deal. It’s never taken this long for Julian to get into someone’s trousers. Is he doing something wrong? Is Serot simply not as interested as he lets on?

No. Perhaps Serot is only as worried about botching this as he is.

The tournament is a whirl of cheering spectators and sweet-smelling food and Serot’s hand in Julian’s as their eyes follow the ball across the court. Serot’s found them good seats despite the short notice, and Julian barely has to crane his neck to watch the competitors dance around in their tight, brightly colored outfits.

Serot’s attention flicks to one of the monitors, showing a game running simultaneously on another court. Julian reads the names. “Wenna Juso, eh?”

“He’s doing poorly,” Serot says.
“One of your favorites?” Julian feels his lips pull into a smirk as Wenna misses the ball and stumbles. “He’s terrible.”

Serot bristles. “I’ll have you know, what he lacks in skill he makes up for in determination.”

“That’s not the word I’d use,” Julian says. A number of women and a few men are also intently watching Wenna Juso’s progress across the springball court. Julian appraises Wenna’s form, his mane of dark hair, the toned muscles of his lower body. Well, that explains it. “Mister Pela, do you have a crush on him?”

“I do not!”

“He’s the weakest player, yet he’s your favorite--”

“I never said--”

“It wouldn’t happen to be because he has the nicest arse, now would it?”

Serot’s cheeks turn a shade of pink, but he keeps his eyes on the screen. “He has the nicest backhand.”

“Is that what they call it now?” Julian teases. Leaning over, he whispers in Serot’s ear, “You know, I’d look rather fetching in one of those outfits myself.”

That gets Serot’s attention.

“In fact,” Julian continues, “I was rather good at racquetball once upon a time. They’re similar sports. You never know. Maybe I’ll take it up again.”

Serot’s expression becomes serious. “Should you ever need such a form fitting uniform, I have several design concepts I’d be most honored to show you.”

It’s as close to a proposition as Julian’s going to get, and Serot drives it home with a deep kiss, his tongue pushing into Julian’s mouth. Julian hugs Serot close and grins as a player scores and the crowd around them erupts in cheering.

Wenna Juso loses his match in the third set, eliminating him from the tourney, to the audible dismay of his fans. Julian’s favorite, Lika Phider, moves up in rank, and Serot begrudgingly joins Julian in rooting her on.

When the day’s matches come to a close, they wander the city in the red evening light, the streets illuminated with orange lamps. While the tournament itself is exciting, the real thrill is following Serot in his native element. Serot leads Julian into several shops, giving a cursory history of their owners, and purchases a bolt of fabric he claims will make excellent jackets. He has it sent back to the inn.

Rain has started to sprinkle when they stray into the countryside. Serot takes Julian’s elbow and they half-run to a squat building with a round door from which the scent of grilled food wafts. Inside, each table is quaint, sturdy wood topped with a small bouquet of flowers. One of the waiters recognizes Serot and they pleasantly chat about the man’s family and the springball games as they’re seated at a table in a far corner, intimately tucked away. This must be an old haunt.

They order, and Julian is struck how Serot seems so perfectly at home here. He’s positively beaming. Serot’s never looked unhappy on the station, not quite, but he’s never appeared this content. It makes him think. “Serot,” Julian says, “why have you stayed on Deep Space Nine?”
Serot frowns over the question, as if it’s nonsensical. “My shop is there.”

“Right, but you could always move it here.” Julian makes an expansive gesture at the window, featuring the dusky sky, the trees. The friendly people. The fresh air redolent of life, not stale and recycled. “Why not? It’s so nice here. I can’t fathom why you’d leave it behind. Plus, I’m sure you’d have more customers.”

“My dear,” Serot says, smiling sidelong, “are you trying to get rid of me?”

“Never.” Julian leans back as the waiter swings by with their plates. “Only an observation.”

“One that could apply just as easily to you. On Earth.”

And share the same air with his parents? No, thank you. But Julian avoids the topic. “You already know why I requested this posting.”

“Frontier medicine,” Serot says with the hint of amusement as he picks at his salad. “Perhaps that’s it— I’m charmed by the possibilities of frontier tailoring.”

Julian laughs. “Seeking out new fashions at the edge of the galaxy?”

“Say what you will about my profession, but my location does have a certain…” Serot trails off, makes a helpless gesture.

“Je ne sais quoi?” Julian suggests.

“Exactamente.”

“Exactement,” Julian corrects. “Exactamente is Spanish.”

“Do pardon me. Your human languages all sound the same.”

“Those two, maybe, but not—”

There’s a susurrus among the restaurant patrons, and a hush falls. Julian glances around to find that a Cardassian man has seated himself a few tables away. He’s wearing loose-fitting green robes— not the military uniform Julian is used to seeing— and addresses his waiter with a polite incline of the head. Surely that can’t be what the commotion is all about. Besides being a Cardassian on Bajor, he appears harmless. But the other Bajorans are staring.

“Is that common?” Julian whispers, hoping Serot will catch his meaning.

Serot turns to follow Julian’s eyes. He frowns and stabs a rogue vegetable with his fork. “They’re not banned from the planet. Unfortunately.”

Serot says it louder than expected, and Julian winces as notices the Cardassian flinch and look in their direction. The Cardassian and Serot exchange a long stare. Julian fidgets as thoughts of an ensuing brawl— flying chairs, flipped tables, thrown punches, and blood— come to mind. But Serot merely returns to eating without a care.

“Well, that was rather rude,” Julian says. “He might be a nice fellow, for all you know.”

Serot shakes his head. “You’re far too trusting.”

They eat in relative silence after that. Julian is hardly a “Cardie lover,” as Chief O’Brien would call it, but he doesn’t care for this knee-jerk dislike and borderline bigotry either. Not at all. To act as if an
entire species is cruel and untrustworthy is overly simplistic. Ignorant. Then again, the entirety of his experience with Cardassians has been with the amiable yet sneaky Gul Dvoll, who, granted, might not be a reliable representative of Cardassians.

The Cardassian man continues to stare at Serot and sip his drink. There is no malice in the man’s expression. No hostility. He seems almost curious, as if Serot is an odd-shaped puzzle. That almost makes it worse. Julian tries not to notice, to instead be an entertaining dining companion, but he finds himself unable to focus on anything except the possible threat.

“You’ve barely touched your food,” Serot says. “Do you not like it?”

“No, no, it’s delicious.” Julian takes a bite, demonstrating.

After almost twenty minutes of this, the Cardassian finishes off his drink and stands.

Julian holds his breath. For a moment, the man shifts through his pockets, then tosses something onto the table. He walks to the door and doesn’t glance back.

Once he’s gone, Julian relaxes and rediscovers his appetite. “Thank god. I thought he’d never leave.”

He isn’t the only one who holds that opinion. Around them, conversations pick up, full force. As does theirs. The rest of the dinner is pleasant, and when they emerge from the restaurant hand in hand, the rain has stopped and night has fallen. It’s a chilly stroll back to the inn.

They’ve been walking for only a minute when Julian picks up the distinct patter of footfalls behind them.

The tapping on wet cement follows them for three more blocks, raising the hairs on the back of Julian’s neck. He holds Serot close and hangs an abrupt left.

Serot protests. “This isn’t--”

“I want to take the scenic route,” Julian says, kissing Serot’s cheek. “Tell me what you know about this area, please?”

Serot happily complies. Julian only half-listens, enough to ask questions and prod him on, but his attention is really on listening for their pursuer. The footfalls die down and stop. Perhaps he was imagining it. Being a Starfleet Officer has made him paranoid.

Then they pick up again, slower than before but still drawing closer.

Julian reaches for his phaser and curses as he remembers he’s in civilian clothes. The phaser is back at the inn, tucked in a drawer. He’s on holiday on a peaceful planet. What use would he have for a phaser?

Julian tries to urge Serot to walk faster, subtly, not wanting to send Serot into a panic. If they break into a run, he isn’t sure how their pursuer will react. But to Julian’s enhanced hearing, the man is getting closer. He feels his heart pound against his breastbone. He has to make a decision.

Serot is still chatting away, unaware of anything amiss. Julian slows until they pass a narrow alley between two homes and shoves Serot into it. Serot’s eyes flash alarm as he stumbles sideways; Julian’s already whirling around.

He comes face to face with the Cardassian man.
Julian widens his gait, arms out as a barrier between him and Serot. “Would you mind telling me why you’re following us?” Julian snaps.

The Cardassian doesn’t acknowledge Julian; with cold, shrewd eyes, he looks past, at his target. Julian feels Serot try to peek around from behind him. “You,” the Cardassian barks, “Bajoran. Do I know you?”

Before Julian can reply, Serot says, “How can I presume to know what you know?”

“He’s a cagey thing,” the Cardassian says, finally glancing to Julian.

“Strange how being stalked can do that to a person,” Julian says.

“I assure you, I don’t mean any harm. I’m unarmed.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Julian keeps his arms out, not about to let this man close to Serot.

“I’m only wondering because your Bajoran friend here is very familiar. A Cardassian doesn’t forget a face. Well, Bajoran, have we met before?”

Gently, Serot pushes Julian’s arm down and comes around. Warily, Julian allows it, but stays close. In case.

The Cardassian tilts his head and looks Serot up and down. His eyes settle on Serot’s face. He blinks, frowns as some variety of recognition flits by. Then he’s backing away, hands raised in a placating gesture. Even in the darkness, Julian can see the color drain from his scales and his pupils shrink to pinpricks. “My mistake,” the man stammers. “I was confused. I’m terribly, terribly sorry for interrupting your evening.”

He does a quick, rigid bow and hurries away into the night.

Once his footsteps have faded, Julian snorts. “Well, that was bizarre.”

“Agreed.” Serot takes his arm and leads the way back to the inn. “What gall. Even after five decades, we still all look the same to the Cardassians.”

Julian nods slowly. He’s sure the Cardassian won’t be any more trouble, but he continues to glance over his shoulder until they reach the safety of the inn. The old woman is sweeping the floor and smiles in their direction as they come in. It’s warm inside, and Julian feels the tension easing out of his muscles. “Walk me to my room,” Julian murmurs to Serot with an innocent smile.

Serot escorts him up the stairs. At the door, Julian throws his arms around Serot’s neck and kisses him. Serot’s hands go to Julian’s waist, possessive, as he opens his mouth to let Julian’s tongue explore.

Presently, Julian breaks away, dazed and out of breath. “Come in for tea?”

“Oh? You have tea in your room?”

“No. We’ll have to pretend.”

“I fear I have a terrible imagination.”

Julian sighs. “I’m propositioning you, you bloody git.”
“And I want nothing more. But--” Serot shakes his head.

“Why?” Julian asks, on the verge of whining. “Did I do something wrong?”

Serot’s eyes are fixed on a portrait of a Bajoran family. “My dear, you’ve done nothing wrong,” he whispers, and Julian picks up on the slight tremble in his voice. That explains the separate rooms, then. On the plus side, it puts Julian’s mind at ease, knowing that Serot does want this.

“Then,” Julian begins, “come in. Just for a little while.”

Serot glances at him.

“A few sips of tea,” Julian says.

“You don’t understand.”

“One sip.”

“It’s been-- a long time.”

“Luckily, I’m not in any hurry.” Julian draws him back into another slow kiss. His heart is hammering in his chest again. Bold, Julian shifts his hips until his arousal rubs against Serot’s. “Please?”

Serot sucks in a hissing breath. “Yes.”

Julian unlocks the door.
The next morning, they’re back at the tournament grounds watching Lika Phider go head-to-head with her rival. Julian’s eyes follow her fluid movements across the court, but he’s still reliving last night, feeling Serot’s fingers in his hair, Serot’s palm rubbing wide circles over the crotch of Julian’s trousers until he is close to howling in the best kind of frustration.

It’s over too quick: Serot crawls backward off the bed like a fish wiggling free from the line. Julian lets him go. The moment the door closes, Julian’s kicked off his trousers and slides under the bedcovers to finish himself off. Pleasure thrums down his spine just knowing Serot will be doing the same.

Half the crowd is booing, jarring Julian from his reverie. He sits up and blinks. What did he miss?

“It was out of bounds,” Serot says from beside him. Then he shoots Julian a knowing look, brows raised. Julian smirks; he can’t deny his dirty thoughts.

Lika Phider manages to scrape through the match-- Julian jumps up to vigorously clap in the Bajoran style when she scores the final point, sealing her victory. When he turns, he finds Serot still seated, smiling up at him.

Julian smiles back. “She won’t be playing again until tomorrow morning’s semi-finals. Are there any other matches you’d like to see?”

It feels like playing hooky as they slip from the cool stadium and into the sun. Serot takes them into an adjoining district surrounded by green hills and dotted with twisty little houses. They picnic on a hill overlooking a river. Serot kicks off his shoes and lies on his back in the grass, absorbing the sun’s glare. Julian sticks to the shade and warns of radiation burns from ultraviolet light. His concerns are summarily waved away. They then wend their way through the township. Serot discovers a book vendor and for hours they wander shelves of musty tomes, getting lost in the maze. Julian runs his fingers along multicolored spines and stalks his prey. Finding it, he drags Serot into a nook and kisses him silly.

Serot breaks away to come up for air. “My dear, you’re out of control.”

“Call a doctor,” Julian says, “I can’t seem to keep my hands to myself.”

It’s late afternoon when they return to the inn and find it empty. The old woman has left behind a note: she’s off grocery shopping. Snickering at his own naughtiness, Julian leads Serot to his room and pushes him to the bed, where they strip each other down to shirtsleeves and underwear.

Serot goes for a wrestling move, trying to maneuver Julian onto his back. It’s a decent attempt. But strong as Serot might be, he’s only a tailor, and Julian makes a show of flipping him over onto the mattress. It isn’t as easy as he expects; the man is surprisingly heavy. Julian grunts from the exertion and wonders if Serot’s bones are made of lead.

Pinning a squirming Serot down, Julian presses feather-light kisses over Serot’s face. His fingers trace circles over his shirt, around his nipples, eliciting a sigh and splaying of the legs. Edging downward, Julian’s hand slides under Serot’s waistband. Serot’s breathing hitches and he digs strong fingers into Julian’s hips. Julian revels in the feel of him in his hand, hard and smooth and warm.

Then Serot’s hand dives into Julian’s underwear, and there’s no more thinking for a long time.
Sunlight wanes through the window’s slats. Julian drowses, watching the beams cross the room. Behind him, Serot’s breath warms his nape and an arm circles his waist. Julian wills his limbs to move. “I have an errand to run.”

Serot yawns, moves for his trousers. “I’ll come with you.”

“No, no, stay. Read your book. I’ll only be a while.”

Serot relents. Julian hurries through the streets, following a map in his mind’s eye. To his relief, the shop’s door is still wide open. Upon stepping through, he zooms straight for the glass cases displaying array upon array of shiny jewelry. Faceted stones wink and twinkle at him.

“May I help you?” a woman asks from behind the counter.

Julian claps both hands together. “Yes, I hope so. I’m looking for something for my boyfriend.”

“Do you have anything in mind?”

“Not really, unfortunately. I’m not Bajoran—well, quite obviously—but he is, and I want something that says ‘I fancy you very much’ but also doesn’t come off as too pushy. What I’m trying to say is I want to show he’s special to me, but— but without getting too serious because—well, honestly, I wouldn’t be averse, which is a first for me, but it’s much too early for that. Does that help?”

The shopkeeper nods pleasantly and leads him to a display case featuring shelves of Bajoran-styled earrings. She reaches in and holds up a chain of silver and carved onyx. “An earring like this would suit nicely for what you intend.”

Julian kneels to peer into the case. His eyes lock onto an earring front row center: brushed wolfram in a delicate latticework with stones of sapphire and blue topaz. He presses a finger to the glass. “How much is that one?”

He has it planned in his head. He rehearses as he stands out on the balconet that night in only an undershirt. It’s silent out here in the countryside. Nobody walks the street, despite the influx of people coming in for the tourney. The lights of the city blink in the distance. Julian sucks in breaths of cold, clean air and closes his eyes against a breeze. He gets every detail down, until even his brain gives in to exhaustion and he climbs into bed.

What he doesn’t plan is for Lika Phider to progress that morning from the semi-finals and into the final round. “The odds were not in her favor,” Julian says as the crowd reacts to the upset with clapping. He runs a stylus over the lineup he keeps in his PADD and shifts the brackets, calculating the new probabilities.

Serot is scanning the crowd. “Didn’t you say that she was championship material?”

“I did, yes, but I never said she was likely to get that far.”

“I have no doubt that you predicted this all along.” Serot taps on Julian’s temple. “Right in here.”

Julian laughs. “You ought to stop that.”

“Oh? Stop what?”

“Making me feel so damned special, that’s what.” Julian takes Serot’s arm and hugs it to his chest.

It’s another match before it’s decided who Lika will play against. This time, the odds bear out: Honal
Yalis, the favorite and last year’s champion. Serot and the crowd appear charmed by this. Little
surprise. Bajorans relish a good David-and-Goliath standoff. Honal seems to play that up as he
saunters onto the court for the final game, acknowledging Lika with only a passing glance.

Julian’s fingers clutch Serot’s arm as he watches the ball fly. The stadium echoes only with the
grunts of exertion from the players as they shuffle and swing. Even the announcers are keeping quiet.
The first and second set go to Honal. Julian winces and consults the PADD. There’s no need for it--
he’s already recalculated her chance of winning in his head-- but he does it anyway. Then Lika takes
the third and fourth, throwing everything into disarray and showing her disdain for statistics. She
might actually have a chance.

The fifth and final match is about to start when Julian reaches into a pocket, tracing the outline of the
box until the sweat from his palms threatens to rub the pile off its surface.

This is the worst idea. The thing doesn’t do Serot justice. It’s not bold enough, doesn’t say how
much Julian adores him. *I should’ve gone for a ring-- something stylish and simple.*

Julian looks over. Serot is absorbed in the match.

*I’m being ridiculous.*

He vacillates. The thwack of rackets echoes through the stadium. He pulls out the box, tucks it back
in.

*Later, later.* The scenarios he ran last night didn’t include him losing his nerve.

Then he’s got the box out and his mouth is moving with sudden confidence. “Serot--”

The crowd gasps in unison and Serot jumps to his feet as people clamber to peer down at the court.
A smattering of applause breaks through the shocked silence.

Serot presses his lips together.

Julian can’t believe he’s missed it. “Did she--”

Serot dips his head. Julian stares across at the disordered court, flash flooded by the crowd. He sighs.
Already spectators are rising from their seats and filing out of the stadium, muttering among
themselves. The announcers are recapping the game and final score in rapid Bajoran.

Serot’s expression turns curious, and Julian realizes that he’s got the box in his lap, ready to flip
open. The moment thoroughly ruined, Julian glances away and smiles. He cracks open the box.

With a delighted snort, Serot plucks the earring from its velvet perch and holds it to the stadium
lights. “Dear Julian, how charming you are!” He unclips his old earring with practiced efficiency. It
disappears into a pocket. Julian’s gift is fastened in its place and Serot turns his head. “How does it
look?”

Julian puffs his chest. It brings out the brilliance of Serot’s eyes just as he’d hoped. It’s perfect.
Absolutely stunning.

His approval must show on his face, because Serot grins and leans down to kiss him. “Thank you.
Now, shall we beat the swarm and get back to the runabout?”

They retrieve their bags from the inn and admire their surroundings one last time before boarding. “I
like your planet, Serot,” Julian says as his eyes settle on the array of gray-and-purple mountains. The
words sound weak in his ears. *Charming, indeed.*

“Thank you,” Serot says. His gaze follows Julian’s. “I missed it, but, in a way, it no longer feels quite like the home I remember.”

“With the Occupation over,” Julian says.

“That must be it.”

As they take their seats on the runabout, Julian wonders if he’ll one day feel the same way about Earth, now that he’s made Deep Space Nine his home. How long does it take for that hold to wane? Does it ever?

They’re clear of Bajor’s atmosphere when Julian turns to watch Serot work the controls. He’s picked up on the procedures fast, much faster than what can be attributed to quick learning. “Tell the truth, Serot. Have you piloted before?”

Serot tilts his head. “As a child, I had a model of a Bajoran interceptor. I often tried to make it fly, much to my father’s considerable dismay.”

Julian smiles and makes an adjustment to their course. “Is that your way of saying no?”

“I suppose it is.”

“Well, you could’ve had me fooled. You know, I’ve heard that androids can be remarkably lifelike.”

“If I’m an android, I’d like to have a word with my creator about the shoddy workmanship of my lower back.”

“And, as I keep reminding you, if you’d only stop by the infirmary I could easily take care of that.”

“And let you use that as an excuse to poke and prod me? I think not.”

The phrase *poke and prod* unleashes a different sort of image in Julian’s mind. He forces himself to focus on the controls and not on the fact that he’s in close quarters with an attractive Bajoran man that he fancies more than he’s ever fancied anyone.

They fly in companionable silence. Serot brings them alongside Deep Space Nine and docks the runabout with little input from Julian. As they exit the docking ring and onto the promenade, bags slung over their shoulders, Julian stops and takes Serot’s hand, tugging him to a halt.

Serot turns to give him a questioning glance.

“I just wanted to say thank you,” Julian starts, “for bringing me along. I can’t imagine anyone else wanting to spend their free time with me.”

Serot squeezes his hand. “My dear, of course I want to spend my time with you. I love you.”

The way he says it, so matter-of-factly, catches Julian off guard. “You-- you what?”

Serot lifts Julian’s hand to his lips and smiles.

In a burst of laughter, Julian throws his arms around Serot’s waist and lifts him off the ground, spinning them both round and round in a wide circle.

He sets Serot back down and kisses him as he sways. “I love you,” Julian whispers back. “I love
you, too.”

Serot presses against Julian’s chest and sighs deeply. Julian basks in the sensation of strong arms around him. Several people walking past favor them with curious glances and smiles. That is, until Odo takes notice.

“Move it along, gentlemen,” Odo mutters. “You’re blocking the street.”

Serot bows low and together they hurry out of the way. Julian whispers in his ear, “I wonder if he can shift into a wet blanket.”

Odo grunts. “I heard that, Doctor.”

They wind up back in the habitat ring. Julian is nearly skipping in place as Serot affects a leisurely pace to his quarters. This time, as Serot keys the door open, he turns to Julian and smiles. “Would you like to come inside?”

Julian crosses the threshold and doubles over. “Holy mother of god, Serot! It’s bloody sweltering in here!” Julian takes a breath. “Are your temperature controls broken?”

Serot shrugs out of his jacket and taps at the panel. “I like it warm. I can adjust it for you.”

“Warm,” Julian repeats. The lowered temperature takes effect immediately and Julian gulps the cooler air. It’s still hotter than his liking, but if it helps Serot get naked, he’ll take one for the team.

With deft fingers, Serot helps Julian out of his shirt and guides him toward the bedroom. Julian stumbles; the lights in here are dimmed to their lowest setting, but he can make out the silhouettes of desert plants and exotically shaped flowers. It gives the room a peppery yet sweet scent. He’s about to comment when Serot pushes him onto the bed and straddles his legs.

For his part, Julian can’t figure out the fastenings of Serot’s shirt. It remains splayed open as they roll about the bed, kissing and rustling in a struggle out of too-heavy clothes. “Oh,” Serot whispers as Julian caresses his sides, pulling down trousers and everything underneath, “your hands are warm!”

Smiling wide, Julian runs his palms over Serot’s bare skin. “Thank you for permitting me to put them wherever I like.”

Serot settles between Julian’s thighs. There’s a fumbling for bottles—Julian thumbs off a cap and squeezes— and muffled laughter as its contents spill everywhere. Serot works Julian up with two fingers, come-hithering and stretching, his tongue licking down neck and across clavicle. Then Julian is guiding him inside, gasping and shivering as he’s slowly filled. It’s as perfect as he imagined, and so worth the wait. Serot whispers endearments as they rock against the mattress, his arms trembling as he struggles to hold a position he’s unused to maintaining. Julian trembles all over from the force of Serot kissing him and staring into his eyes.

It isn’t until Julian has flopped into the pillows, boneless, that Serot finally pulls the shirt over his head and tosses it aside.

With a final, fond peck on Julian’s nose, Serot stretches out on his back. Julian makes a pillow of his shoulder and drags his fingers through Serot’s chest hair, dampened by their commingled sweat. Serot’s heart beats harder than it should, but Julian clamps down the knee-jerk physician’s advice to increase aerobic exercise. Instead he nuzzles further against Serot and kisses his neck.

Once Serot has caught his breath, he chuckles. “I eagerly await putting this in my diary.”
“You have a diary?”

“Mhm. Kept one all my life.”

“I used to have one, myself, but it was such a doldrum, remembering to write each day. Perhaps we should swap.”

“My dear, you are a consummate snoop.”

“I don’t want to snoop, I want to share.”

“I’m afraid you’d be terribly disappointed in me if you knew what I thought of some people.” Serot peers at him from the corner of his eye. “I can be a bit catty.”

Julian snorts. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

The command crew look upon their relationship as if it's old news. “Where’s the other lovebird?” Jadzia asks whenever she spots him alone. She pinches Julian’s cheek and turns to Commander Sisko. “They grow up so fast, don’t they, Benjamin?”

Sisko smiles around his mug of coffee. “Don’t they?”

O’Brien, meanwhile, finds it weird: “It’s none of my business,” he says, holding out a palm as Julian passes the spanner, “but he’s a touch dull for you, isn’t he?”

Julian wishes people would stop saying that. “Maybe he’ll mellow me out.”

“I bloody well hope so.”

Kira says nothing, at least directly. It’s as if she’s mellowed from the usual disdain over his relationship with Serot. She hasn’t called Julian a naive twit in months. Once, while he and Serot are having lunch in the Replimat, he swears he catches her walk past them with a half-smile on her lips.

Julian pays little attention to the opinions either way. He’s found someone who doesn’t coddle or condescend him, who doesn’t judge his idealism or enthusiasm.

They share dinner in each other’s quarters, switching off each night. After cleanup and tea, Julian explores Serot with his mouth, with his tongue and fingertips, jotting it all down for journal entries he doesn’t intend to write.

He likes it when I breathe on his inner thighs, Julian narrates. He won’t let on, but he likes it when I give his bum a good smack. He giggles when I bite him right here.

One especially quiet night, after they’ve been (intimately) together for one month twelve days and thirteen hours, Serot introduces him to an old Bajoran sex practice called bvele’ki. “I think you’ll like it,” he says. He sits at the edge of the bed and beckons Julian closer.

Julian’s willing to try anything once, especially when it comes to sex. He climbs into Serot’s lap and rests his head on Serot’s shoulder as he sinks down. Just as he lifts his hips, Serot stills him with a hand on his back. “No moving, my darling. It’s about taking your time. Enjoying every moment.”

It’s about breathing, too, and a kind of intimacy that’s at first intimidating. Julian’s tried this before with others, under different spiritual underpinnings and nomenclature. It never quite ‘worked’; he’s always been the type to hurry to the finish, to seek instant gratification. The constant eye contact and sheer closeness to the other person didn’t help, either.
With Serot leading the way, however, Julian is stunned how long they can stay locked like this, clinging, how his emotions build to such intensity. It isn’t awkward or daunting. He’s sensitive to Serot’s every movement and every breath, and when Serot finally rolls Julian onto his back, he has to sink his teeth into Serot’s shoulder to keep from screaming.

Not bad, Julian decides, this *bvele’ki* thing. He secretly calls it *sharing pagh*.

Julian can’t fathom his good fortune. He’s afraid, yes, terrified at how fast this is going, of the intensity of his feelings. Even after several months, it only seems to build. How far will it go? Is it possible to lose one’s self in another person?

“It’ll wear off,” O’Brien says between racquetball games. He wipes sweat from his forehead onto his wristband. “It always wears off.”

“Is that what happened with you and Keiko?” Julian asks. He’s bouncing up and down to keep his heart-rate up.

“Yeah, it happened t’ me and Keiko.”

“After how long?”

“I dunno, it’s not like it happens overnight. It’s gradual. Two weeks, maybe.”

“Two weeks! Chief, that’s terrible.”

“It’s different for blokes than it is for women.”

“Serot and I are both men,” Julian says, “and we’ve been sleeping together for four months. And we *still* want to see each other every second of every day.”

“Well, isn’t that just dandy for you, then.”

“I miss him right now, actually.”

“Aye. Maybe you should go find him and leave me be.”

“I’m sorry, Chief. Am I being a prat?”

“All I’m saying is, the man must have the patience of a bloody god to put up with the likes of you.” Julian smiles wistfully. “And the stamina of--”

“Now don’t you dare finish that sentence!”

“Sorry, Chief.”

“For Christsakes, serve the damned ball already.”

So Julian waits for the feelings of crazed, obsessive love to wear off. Sometimes he thinks he’s finally over it. Then he catches a glimpse of Serot in his shop, sewing, his long blond hair pulled back out of his face and piled into a messy bun, exposing his neck. Julian is magnetized.

There’s no stopping himself. He’s rushing up behind Serot, hands clamping those broad shoulders, and bellowing, “Boo!” He laughs malevolently at how easily Serot startles and threatens him with a thousand kinds of death.
Luckily, Julian knows a secret: he kisses and sucks up and down Serot’s neck. It never fails to make Serot groan and melt into his arms, and today isn’t any different. “Inside me,” Serot is soon begging. “Inside me.”

It’s a short walk to the changing rooms.

Julian decides to stop worrying and enjoy this overpowering feeling. The words “while it lasts” want to bookend that thought. It’s a simple truth that he’s never been interested in long-term relationships--a fact O’Brien gleefully points out now that he’s in one-- and he’s even less enthused about them while he’s in Starfleet. It can’t work. His duty always comes first. Serot is a civilian. If something were to happen to Julian, Serot wouldn’t be able to bear it. And Julian can’t handle the thought of Serot hurting for any reason.

But when he’s riding Serot, and Serot looks up at him with eyes wide and full of adoration, Julian desperately wants this to last. He rocks his hips faster as his throat constricts and his eyes sting. “Serot,” he chokes, “I feel so good when I’m with you.”

Serot grips him tightly. His voice is equally thick with emotion as he answers: “Oh, me too. Me too, Julian. Me too.”

“I’ve never, ah, met anyone who-- who--” Julian licks his lips. He can’t think straight with the way Serot’s pounding into him. “Love you, oh, please, more.”

Serot pulls Julian down on top of him so they’re pressed together, chest to chest. He thrusts slow and deeply. Julian’s cry is muffled by Serot’s lips, by his tongue in his mouth. “I love you,” Serot whispers into his ear, his voice husky, making Julian shiver. “You’re perfection. You make me want to sing. I want to share my life with you. Be inside you. Forever.”

Julian can feel his defenses falling off and shattering, leaving him more vulnerable than his nakedness. Yet he’s never been safer. “Forever,” he agrees.

He tells Serot things he shouldn’t tell anyone. Everything except that one thing he’ll take to his grave. And sometimes he considers confessing even that. As each dinner draws on into breakfast, Julian shares himself with their morning coffee. He blurs out every mistake his engineered brain recalls, and Serot listens and shoulders the burden of this knowledge. Julian butters his toast and tells Serot about every patient he’s lost, every Starfleet mission, every unpopular opinion about the Maquis and genetic engineering, every time he’s disagreed with a commanding officer on policy.

It’s during one of these candid breakfast moments when he decides to blow all caution out the airlock.

Julian sets down his fork, clears his throat. “Serot, what would you say if I asked you to move in?”

Serot’s eyes widen. He chews more slowly than usual as he seems to consider.

At last he lowers his toast to his plate and rubs his fingers with a napkin. “My dear. I’d say yes, of course.”

They spend some time hashing out the details. Two hours later, Julian strides into Commander Sisko’s office and slides a PADD across the desk.

Sisko swivels in his chair, tapping the baseball in his hand as he glances at the PADD’s contents, not bothering to pick it up. His eyes travel up to Julian’s face. “When is the wedding?”

Julian falters. “Sir?”
“Surely, Doctor, you don’t expect me to allow two unwed people to cohabitate. Do you? It runs counter to Bajoran religious law. They would have my head on a *platter.*”

“I--” Julian hadn’t even considered that. Serot sure as hell didn’t mention it. “I’d assumed--”

“You assumed wrong. Come back to me when you have a valid marriage certificate. Then I’ll consider your request for shared quarters.” He returns the baseball to the desk. “I’d even be willing to perform the ceremony myself.”

“I suppose,” Julian says, working to keep the disappointment out of his voice, “I could ask him.” Julian moves to retake the PADD.

Sisko grabs it away and grins like a madman. “I’m only joking, Doctor!” He presses a button, signing off on the document, and passes the PADD back. “There. Give that to the constable.”

Oh, a joke. He forces a nervous laugh. “Very funny, sir.” With a mumbled “thank you,” Julian turns to leave.

“Oh, and Doctor?”

“Sir?”

“Congratulations.”

*I must be crazy,* Julian thinks later as he stands in the middle of their new, larger bedroom, watching Serot hang clothes in the closet they will share. How could this possibly not end in disaster? Julian is an only child: he’s always had his own space and his own toys. Sharing isn’t in his repertoire.

None of his previous relationships developed this far. What will he do when he wants to be left alone? What happens when they fight? How do they handle daily chores?

Julian must have said some of that out loud, because Serot is looking at him. “I’m afraid we’ll only have one recourse, my dear,” Serot says. “A duel to the death. I hope you know how to handle a bat’leth.”

Julian manages a smile, but the worry still nags.

“Or,” Serot continues, “we’ll have to talk about it, like rational adults.”

“Talk,” Julian repeats.

“If you recall, it’s one of your favorite activities.”

That startles a laugh out of Julian. “Hey, now. You’re not one to judge.”

Serot inclines his head. “Granted. Now, come here and help me unpack, or you’ll be spending your first night sleeping on the couch.”
Chapter 5

Julian should know better than to worry. Within a few weeks, they’ve settled into a routine, mixed up only when Serot has an overly fussy customer or when there’s a random crisis aboard the station. In the event that Julian has to leave for an extended away mission, Serot is always there to bid him goodbye with a kiss and a gift.

Once, it’s earmuffs, and Serot won’t take “these aren’t Starfleet regulation” for an answer. Julian has no choice but to placate him by boarding the runabout with the earmuffs clamped over his head, to a round of laughter from his fellow officers.

Even if the station still feels alien and hostile, with its looming, hideous architecture, their quarters become Julian’s home. Their home.

Every night before bed, Serot sits before the terminal to recount the day in his journal. It’s yet another quirk on the growing list. Serot lets Julian steal peeks over his shoulder without protest, clearly unashamed of whatever he’s jotting down. With good reason: what Julian picks out from the long paragraphs of Bajoran text tells him that it’s nothing more than a detailed account of every little event that’s transpired.

Detailed is putting it mildly. Serot sometimes spends two hours writing, making sure he gets each conversation in there, no matter how banal. He gets cranky when Julian teases him about this obsessive ritual, and crankier still when Julian tries to distract him or entice him into bed.

And, should he manage to succeed in the latter, Serot wastes no time rolling away to grab a PADD and complete the entry. That’s dedication even Julian envies.

Julian shakes his head and pulls the covers up under his chin. “Are you going to add the bit where we had sex?”

Serot doesn’t look up from his work. “Of course.”

“Well will you say that my performance was bang-up?”

The corners of Serot’s lips twitch. “I believe the adjective would be adequate.” He laughs as Julian throws a pillow at his head. “Perhaps I should make a revision.”

“Oh, please, not on account of me! I wouldn’t want you to lie in your diary.” He grabs Kukalaka from the nightstand and balances the bear on his head while he waits for Serot to finish. “You are one of the weirdest men I’ve ever met. If I’m half as strange by the time I’m your age, we’ll be driving each other up the wall.”

Serot lowers the PADD and smiles at him. It takes Julian a beat to register the implication of what he’s just said. He feels his cheeks grow hot and burrows under the covers to hide for the rest of his life.

They sleep with legs entwined, Serot hugging Julian protectively. Or leeching off his warmth. It’s difficult to tell. The position gives Julian several good cramps in the morning, but he never has the heart to nudge Serot away.

Serot’s nearly always the first to rise, so it’s a rare treat when Julian wakes and finds Serot curled up on the other side of the bed, having taken the covers along with him. When Julian leans over to inspect his bedmate, Serot doesn’t stir.
Serot is pretty like this; almost cherubic. Julian admires the way his dirty blond hair, tousled by
lovemaking and sleep, falls across his face. Julian’s fingers itch to brush the stray strands away.
Julian wants to kiss his face, to tickle the wrinkles over the bridge of his nose.

But Julian is feeling wicked this morning.

Grinning, he pounces, poking Serot in the ribs and stomach rapid-fire. “Wake up!” he shouts.

Serot’s eyes snap open--

--and Julian reels as the world spins and he lands hard on the floor. He tries to breathe, to gasp his surprise, and finds his diaphragm paralyzed.

His vision blurs in and out of focus. He catches movement, a blur of gray, and then Serot looming over him. Julian expects concern-- did he trip like some giraffe-legged oaf?-- and almost smiles in embarrassment. He tries to sit up, but can’t move. Julian struggles, feels a heavy weight across his clavicles, pinning him down. Serot. He’s holding Julian down, fist gripping Julian’s nightshirt as he glares down with eyes that are cold and hard and even.

Julian wheezes out a question. He tries to crane his neck and feels a sharp sting. He blinks rapidly, taking in the position of Serot’s other arm. He’s holding something. A knife. Serot is holding a knife to his throat.

Serot’s breathing is steady. There’s no recognition in his eyes. No love. Just an apex predator sizing up his prey.

Julian has been in countless near-death situations.

He needs to breathe, to break the spell. He begins to mouth Serot’s name.

With a jolt, Serot scrambles off him, wide-eyed. He half drops, half throws the knife. He makes a noise between a choke and a whimper.

Julian falls back, sucking in a breath of relief as his lungs move again. He lets it out slowly and stares up at the ceiling. The adrenaline has drained him into a dizzy and shivering husk. “I’m okay,” he says. “I’m okay.”

“Oh. Oh, Julian.” Serot’s voice shakes. “Julian.”

“I’m okay.”

“You’re-- you’re bleeding.”

With a trembling hand, Julian’s fingers go to his throat. They come back red.

“I’m sorry. I don’t, don’t, don’t know--”

Julian grasps Serot’s wrist and sits up. The room continues to spin. He needs to vomit, and there’s a wetness that sends him clambering to his feet. “Stay here. I’ve quite literally pissed myself.”

Serot’s trying to steady him. “Julian, I--”

“I’ll be right back. Please, stay.”

Julian staggers to the refresher and locks the door behind him. In his periphery, he catches the mirror: blood trickling down his neck. He wets a towel and dabs at the wound. It isn’t as bad as it looks. The
cut is five centimeters across and stings like a bad papercut, but is already coagulating. He cleans and closes it with a few swipes of the dermal regenerator he keeps to heal errant love bites and bruises.

He focuses on peeling off his soiled pajamas. He tosses them in the cleaning port and sets the shower. Throws down a mat. Places his sonic depilator and various soaps and shampoos.

It isn’t until he’s under the stream of hot water that Julian replays what happened. The quickness of it, smooth like it was a practiced movement, how Serot’s arm had held him down so easily, the stranger behind Serot’s eyes. It was an accident.

Serot nearly killed him.

Julian lathers and rinses and dries off quickly. He needs to know why. When he emerges from the bathroom, he’s in doctor mode, ready to pinpoint the problem and solve it.

The bedroom is empty. He pulls on a fresh pair of pajamas from a drawer and pads into the living area.

Serot sits at the dining table, staring into a mug of tea, one fist pulling at his hair: the picture of misery. He doesn’t move when Julian enters, but Julian can see the muscles in his shoulders and jaw go rigid.

Julian replicates his own mug of Tarkalean tea and carries it over to the table, where he sits across from Serot. He takes a sip. Then another.

“It was an accident,” Julian says.

“That’s not an excuse.”

“It’s an explanation, that’s all. Part of it.” Julian holds the hot ceramic mug to his cheek. “I’m not mad, Serot. I wasn’t hurt.”

“You were bleeding.”

“And it could’ve ended much worse if you hadn’t stopped yourself.” Julian keeps his voice gentle. “Have you always slept with a knife?”

Serot presses his lips together, and Julian knows he doesn’t want to talk about this. “Not those nights when I slept in your quarters.”

It makes sense. He wouldn’t have had a way to hide one. “I thought you were a pacifist.”

Serot’s eyes snap up. “That doesn’t mean I’m stupid.”

Julian stands and rounds the table. Serot flinches, but Julian ignores it. He climbs into Serot’s lap and throws his arms around his neck. “Listen to me. I know you had a hard life on Bajor. It was traumatic for you.”

Serot turns his head away.

Julian grasps his chin, forcing eye contact. “It was traumatic. What the Cardassians did to you, your family-- I don’t expect you to tell me every single detail of what happened. Sometimes circumstances have an effect on us we don’t like. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, okay? I scared you, and you reacted on instinct, not malice.”

Serot lowers his head into Julian’s chest and Julian feels him shudder and emit a quiet sob. “I’m
“Sorry,” he slurs into Julian’s shirt.

Julian strokes the back of his head. “Shh, habibi. Shh, I’ve got you.” You’re safe. Julian pulls back to take Serot’s face in his hands and kiss him. Serot’s lips are wet and salty. “I forgive you.”

“Why?”

In that one word, Serot sounds so lost it breaks Julian’s heart. “Because I love you.”

Serot pulls Julian flush against him, kissing back. “You shouldn’t,” he whispers.

Julian shakes his head. He takes one of Serot’s hands. The cuff of the sleeve is splotched red where Julian grabbed it earlier. He admires the strength of Serot’s hands, built for creating pretty, soft things. Jackets that entice doctors, make them fall in love. He can’t imagine them hurting anyone. Julian sucks a finger into his mouth, and Serot sighs. “That’s not what you say when someone says they love you.”

“It’s true.”

Serot bites the tip of Serot’s finger. “Say it.”

Serot laughs hoarsely and squeezes Julian against him. “I love you.”

Later, when Serot has left for the shop, Julian retrieves the knife from the floor. It isn’t a kitchen knife, as he’d assumed, but a proper dagger, heavy and cold in his hand. The edge is razor sharp and oiled: signs of regular maintenance. Julian’s blood stains one side. It would’ve taken Serot little effort to slice through vein and artery, through the muscle and cartilage of his throat.

Frowning, Julian crosses the bedroom and stands over Serot’s side of the bed. It’s a question of timing: Serot had to retrieve the dagger (where had it been? Under the pillow? Inside the casing?), all the while throwing Julian clear off the bed and subduing him on the floor. It was too fast. Even with his enhanced reflexes, Julian couldn’t pull that off. Especially not right from sleep. It’s a question of timing, yes, but also of strength and skill.

Skill. It would take more than instinct. Pure instinct would be clumsy. Serot’s behavior had been anything but. It had been honed.

He’s lying about something.

No, that’s not it. There’s no deception in anything Serot does. It’s confabulation. Julian isn’t trained as a psychologist, but he knows there’s a difference.

Julian tucks the dagger back under the pillow. Serot must’ve actively participated in the resistance, must have been trained much the same way as Major Kira. Julian can certainly imagine Kira pulling off a similar move. Whether Serot remembers any of it, or if he’s blocked it from his memory is a separate issue, one Julian isn’t ready to prod just yet. It’ll be a sore spot.

Not for the first time, Julian wishes there was a professional counselor aboard the station. He’ll have to bring that up with Commander Sisko during the next staff meeting.

He nearly forgets about the incident as it becomes lost in the passing months.

Julian keeps an eye on Serot for any worrying behavior and is careful when springing from behind furniture, lest he receive a blade to the gut. But Serot is the same as he’s always been: gentle, and more afraid of weapons than knowledgeable about their use. Whenever Julian leaves his phaser lying
around after a long day, Serot throws a kerchief over it to hide the offensive object from view. Julian can’t help but smile at that.

If Julian’s memory wasn’t so reliable, he’d wonder if he imagined the whole thing.

Julian doesn’t nag, and he certainly doesn’t snoop. Trust is the cornerstone of a successful relationship, everyone tells him, and it makes it easier that Julian doesn’t have a reason to invade Serot’s privacy.

Except Serot has the best socks.

They’re soft, made of some high quality and rare wool, and Julian’s just found a hole in his last pair. The last matching pair. There are more hiding under the couch, but he doesn’t feel like unearthing them right now.

It’s his last resort, Julian reasons as he presses the front of a drawer, opening it. Inside it’s a veritable treasure trove of socks, each pair sorted by color and neatly folded. Julian goes for the brown ones.

He’s rubbing the fabric against his cheek when he catches a glint of gold. Julian peers inside the drawer. His heart sinks.

Let it go, Jules. It isn’t worth it.

Julian clears his throat. “Serot, habibi?”

From the living area, Julian hears Serot setting down a PADD. There’s a wariness in his voice as he calls back, “Yes?”

I must use the same tone of voice whenever I ask him to do something unpleasant. Whoops. “Could you come here, please?”

Serot appears in the doorway. His expression vacillates between amused and annoyed when he spots Julian fiddling in his sock drawer. “My dear, didn’t I recently give you socks of your own?”

“What’s this?”

Serot approaches and his eyes follow where Julian indicates. He winces. He wrests the brown socks from Julian’s hand and places them back in the drawer, covering the object in question.

Julian snatches them back out. “Serot!”

“Julian.” Serot tries to grab the socks again and scowls when Julian holds them out of reach. “Julian, the elastic is very delicate--”

“This isn’t about the socks!”

“--You can’t yank them on like a brute.”

His patience up, Julian tosses the socks away to grab the mini disruptor from the drawer. He holds it under Serot’s nose. “This! Where did you get this?”

Serot’s eyes widen and he stumbles back. “My mother! My mother gave it to me! She got it off a Cardassian she killed and she gave it to me. I don’t know more about it than that. Julian, please, put it down!”

At the sight of Serot’s panic, Julian lowers the disruptor, cursing himself. Good job, you twat. All
that Starfleet sensitivity training was a waste on him.

Taking a breath, Julian says, “Your mother died twenty years ago.” When Serot only frowns at him, hands still raised, Julian adds gently, “This disruptor couldn’t be more than half that old.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying--” Julian turns the disruptor over in his hand. It seems much too small to be standard military issue, but he’s hardly an expert. All he knows is that it can’t be that old. “Serot, your mother couldn’t possibly have given this to you.”

Serot’s eyes narrow. “What? Of course she did. I remember. I was standing on the porch. It was after my sister had died, and mother came out with a bundle in her arms. It was Phenya’s daughter. My niece. I said the house smelled like brine and was making me sick. I was catching my breath. And mother pulled that from the front pocket of her apron and said I needed to take it. I didn’t want it, but--”

“Serot,” Julian whispers, “that didn’t happen.”

“I remember it. Every detail of it. The pattern of mother’s apron, the child-- are you saying I’m lying about that?”

“No. Not lying. Some of that might have happened, but she couldn’t have given you this disruptor.”

“Not lying,” Serot repeats, “but you think my memory is impaired? All because you’ve become an expert on Cardassian weaponry?”

Julian marches into the living area and activates the table console. He sets down the disruptor. “Computer, scan object and identify.”

The computer chirps and says, “Cardassian phase disruptor light pistol, series seven.”

“Manufacture date?”

“Second quarter, 2358.”

Julian likes being right, but there’s no winning outcome here. That’s driven home when Serot blanches and looks to the floor. Julian wants to hold him, but he can’t give up his advantage, now that Serot’s been thrown off guard. “She couldn’t have given it to you. So where did it really come from?”

“I don’t-- I’ve always had it with me.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Julian.” His voice is strained. Close to begging. “What do you want from me?”

“The truth, obviously! I want the truth. Where did you get it?”

“I don’t know!”

“You do! I want to hear you say it, Serot! Just admit it!”

Serot turns away with a huff of exasperation. “Admit what?”

“Admit that you were in the resistance!”
Serot bursts out laughing, startling Julian. “Is that what this is all about? You think I was in the Bajoran underground? And you came to that dubious conclusion all from a Cardassian pistol I keep in my sock drawer?” Serot’s shoulders shake as he fights laughter. “I’m sorry, my dear, but you should keep your detective work to your holonovels.”

“Serot.”

“I suppose it’s all for the best I no longer have my springball racket. Otherwise you might believe that I was a champion springballer in my youth.”

“Serot, you still haven’t explained the bloody disruptor!”

“What does it matter?”

“You don’t even know where you got it! Doesn’t that bother you? Serot, habibi, I want to help you.”

“Help me with what? Just because I can’t remember one little thing doesn’t mean I’m going senile.”

“I never said you were. But this disruptor--”

“Enough with the damned thing! I don’t even know how to use it!”

“Oh?” Julian snaps. “Just like you don’t know how to use a knife?”

It’s the wrong thing to say. Julian knows it the second all the good humor drains from Serot’s face. Serot takes a step toward him, finger raised, as close to furious as Julian’s ever seen him. “I apologized for that.”

“I know, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t--”

“And I’ll keep apologizing for it, because I’d never hurt you.”

“I know, I know.”

“You said you forgave me.”

“I do. Listen, Serot, there are therapists on Bajor who specialize in this sort of thing.”

At the word therapists, Serot turns away and begins to pack up several PADDs and shrug on his jacket.

Julian watches with increasing alarm. “Where are you going?”

“To the shop. That order of bridesmaid dresses aren’t going to hem themselves.” He tucks the PADDs under an arm and moves to the door. “Enjoy the socks.”

And then he’s gone, leaving Julian alone in a room that’s too hot, with a Cardassian disruptor pistol and his own idiocy to keep him company. He almost chases Serot out, begging him to come back, but he sinks to the couch, head in his hands. That couldn’t have gone any worse.

He’s only trying to help.

Julian tries to work on his latest research paper. His mind keeps rolling over the fight until he gives up. He pads into the bedroom. The brown socks lie on the floor where he’d thrown them. He yanks them onto his feet with a savage tug and flops onto the bed.
He keeps reaching for the other side of the bed, each time grasping only empty air. Serot isn’t coming back tonight. Julian thrashes around, rolls out of the bed to sit in front of the console.

He turns his research to Bajoran neurological disorders, to trauma and its effects on the Bajoran brain. Searches for symptoms of memory loss and confabulation. He makes a shortlist of prominent neurologists and psychologists on Bajor, jotting down their details. He contacts several and leaves the rest for later.

It’s a long shot. Serot isn’t going to agree to see a therapist, much less another doctor. But Julian needs to know their options. Maybe with enough time and gentle prodding, Serot will realize that this is the best way. *I’m not trying to fix him, Julian insists. I just want to help.*

When he comes to a good stopping point, Julian stares at the console screen.

He shouldn’t.

His fingers are already moving. Julian accesses a Bajoran database and runs a search for *Pela Serot.* He doesn’t know why he bothers, given that Odo must’ve done an exhaustive investigation himself. But Julian knows Serot better and has additional parameters Odo wouldn’t have had.

He narrows his search by province, strikes gold. The profile he finds matches what Serot has told him. Date of birth. Names of parents and siblings. School records. Financial audits. Death certificates of relatives. Labor camp identifications used for getting through Cardassian checkpoints. The most serious brush with the law Julian finds is a fine for loitering, of all things.

Nothing that indicates any time spent in the underground, although Julian doesn’t expect to find anything on that. Any intelligence on that front would be with the Cardassians and thus long hidden away, or erased.

Unsatisfied but unsurprised, Julian packs up and begins an early shift at the infirmary. The staff on hand sense something amiss-- must be able to read the crazed look in his eyes-- but Julian is in no mood for their concern. He puts on a pleasant smile and works though the shift and into his usual one, checking his messages and becoming more agitated when he finds none waiting.

It’s close to lunch when Jabara appears at his side. “What did you do?”

“I might’ve insinuated to the man I love that he needs his head examined.”

“Does he?”

“I’m not sure,” Julian admits, and squirms under her penetrating stare. “I’m in trouble, aren’t I?”

He knows he is-- knew it the moment he opened his big mouth and drove Serot away. Julian’s never considered himself a coward, but when Nurse Jabara takes over his patients for the rest of his shift and tells him to “get moving, sir,” Julian wants to run to his quarters and hide.

Julian is used to being right. He’s a genius and brilliant young doctor. He got where he is by being right. But he’s introspective enough to know this is different, and the longer he waits, the more he’ll make a mess of things.

With a deep breath and squaring of the shoulders, Julian strides down to Serot’s shop.

He nearly loses his nerve the second he spots Serot, kneeling with pins in his mouth before Major Kira where she stands on a pedestal in a floor-length gown. She catches sight of Julian in the wall of mirrors and turns her head. “What do you think?”
Julian shifts his weight between feet. “It’s beautiful. What’s the occasion?”

“Ballroom dancing in the holosuites.”

Julian’s attention is on Serot, who hasn’t so much as looked up from his work. “Really? I never expected you to--”

“It was Dax’s idea.”

Serot continues to pin folds in the gown, ignoring them both, as if Kira were spontaneously talking to herself.

Kira also takes notice of Serot’s silence and frowns at Julian with a pointed, questioning look.

Julian can only shake his head. “Serot?”

Serot’s voice is painfully neutral. “Can it wait, Doctor?”

Busted down to Doctor. That hits Julian like a stab in the gut. “I, sure, I can see you’re busy--”

“Are you two fighting?” Kira says.

“No,” they answer in unison.

Kira snorts. “Right. I can come back later. It’s not a problem.”

“Don’t be silly, my dear,” Serot says, “you have an appointment. Besides, we’re almost done here.”

“I really should get back to the infirmary,” Julian lies.

Kira steps off the pedestal. “No, you two should talk. I’ll come by tomorrow and we can finish up then.”

“Very well.” Serot rises to his feet and follows Kira into the dressing room to help her out of the heavy gown, with nary a look in Julian’s direction.

Julian wanders, flipping through racks of clothes and glancing to the exit. He shouldn’t have waited so long. Or maybe he hasn’t waited long enough. Arms folded behind his back, Julian paces back and forth. He’s still angry. He should leave, let Serot cool off. When Serot’s ready, he’ll know where to find him.

Before Julian can make his escape, Kira strides out of the dressing room, pulling on the jacket of her uniform. Serot emerges with the dress slung over one shoulder.

Kira’s eyes flash a warning as she catches Julian edging toward the door. “Well,” she says, glancing between them, “I’ll leave you two alone.” As she passes, she opens her mouth, hesitates, then leaves without another word.

Julian fidgets. He contemplates cracking a joke to loosen the tension, but Serot bustles around the shop like Julian is nothing more than an annoying breeze, better left ignored. He pulls the gown over a mannequin to ensure it keeps its shape and raises the stand so the hemline doesn’t touch the floor. From there, he’s collecting stray cuts of fabric to toss in the reclamation port and setting out commissions beside his workbench.

*Say something, twit!* Julian isn’t sure to whom that thought is directed.
Serot sighs. Over a shoulder, he says, “My dear, I doubt you came all this way to watch me work.”

The end of the silence, combined with the term of endearment, deflates Julian. “I thought I’d take your advice.” When Serot turns, looking at him for the first time, Julian continues, “To talk things out. Like rational adults, I believe you said.”

“I’m afraid lately I’ve been more interested in my bat’leth suggestion.” Serot cracks a smile.

With anyone else, Julian would brush it off as a wry joke, but Serot’s sense of humor is so rarely dark that it throws him off. Julian’s enhanced brain runs through a catalogue of possible responses. Playful banter about their respective skills with bladed weapons? God, no.

Instead Julian crosses the distance and takes one of Serot’s hands in both of his. “I’m sorry, Serot,” he says. “For invading your privacy, for interrogating you like that, for insinuating that you don’t know your own past, for diagnosing you, for nagging you to see a therapist, for-- for ignoring your feelings. I’ve been a rubbish boyfriend.”

Serot’s expression softens and he adds his other hand, covering Julian’s. “You’re nothing of the sort. In light of my recent behavior, I can’t blame you for worrying that I might be going crazy. It concerns me, too. You were only acting on your medical instincts.”

“I know better than to stick my nose where it isn’t wanted. I should’ve gone about it differently.”

Serot tilts his head in a sideways nod. “Your delivery does seem to have room for improvement, yes.” He moves closer. “I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have stormed out the way I did. I’m much too old to behave so childishly.”

“While we’re apologizing,” Julian says, hazarding a smile, “I have a confession to make. I got angry and was a tad rough with your socks. I think I might’ve stretched them out.”

“A truly unforgivable sin, that.” Serot wanders away to lock up the shop and takes Julian’s arm. “Let’s go home.”

They pick a leisurely pace, strolling back to the habitat ring, Serot holding Julian close, head resting on Julian’s shoulder, and Julian allows himself to bask in the relief that this might all be okay. “I was afraid I’d lost you,” he admits.

“Lost me? Wherever would I go?”

“You know what I mean, you great pedant. I thought you’d leave me.”

“I’d have to be truly out of my mind to consider leaving you.”

Julian catches Serot by the wrist and presses him against the wall. “Do you mean that?”

“So you think,” Serot says, looking up at him, “all those things I say when we make love are lies?”

“I don’t know.” And that is a lie, because Julian feels himself smiling. “Tell me again.”

They barely make it back to their quarters in one piece. The instant they’re past the threshold, Julian has their trousers unfastened and coaxes Serot to the bedroom.

Later, they bask in afterglow. Serot stretches out on his stomach, and Julian grins wide as his eyes follow the curve of Serot’s bare arse. “Miles was right,” Julian says. “Make-up sex is fucking brilliant.”
The coverlet muffles Serot’s chuckling.

Julian glides a lazy hand up and down Serot’s bum. “Thank you.”

Serot grunts, seemingly close to drifting asleep. When he speaks, his voice is cautious, his face turned away. “You were right as well.”

“I was?”

“There are many things I don’t properly remember.”

Julian nods. He doesn’t want to press this, not now that it feels like they’re back on even footing, but if Serot is going to bring it up, maybe it’s safe. He ventures: “You have your diaries, maybe—” But Serot is shaking his head. “What?”

“Suffice it to say, my so-called diaries have been subject to many an unfortunate accident throughout my life, fire and theft being the primary culprits.”

“Oh. What do you have left?”

“Only the past three years, I’m afraid.”

Staring up at the ceiling, Julian rubs wide circles over Serot’s skin. “Have you considered going back and trying to recreate what you’ve lost? Many people write memoirs.”

“I fail to see the point.”

“It can be a kind of exercise, to see what you remember and what you don’t. Nobody’s memory is infallible. Even if some of it is a fabrication—” Serot releases a sigh and Julian backpedals. “For your own benefit. Nobody else has to read it.”

“What about my team of therapists?”

“Forget about the therapists. It was a stupid thing to say.”

Serot lifts his head to finally look at Julian. It’s that same lost expression, but with an undercurrent of trust that makes Julian’s heart ache. “It’s an interesting suggestion,” Serot says. “I’ll consider it.”

They leave it at that. For now.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

**Warnings for** depictions of impact play/erotic spanking.

Julian snaps the tricorder shut and circles the biobed. “It’ll take some time to synthesize an effective antiviral,” he says, smiling, “but I’m confident you’ll survive until then.”

Gul Dvoll struggles to sit up. Julian gently presses her shoulder, ordering her to lie back and rest. She hisses her disapproval between lips contorted from pain, but acquiesces. “What about my men?” she says.

Julian glances over to the other biobeds, occupied by a dozen Cardassians in identical black military uniforms. “I’ll take good care of them. I promise. You’re lucky you came when you did. I can reverse the damage to your internal organs, but not if you keep making it worse on yourself.”

She gestures to the boy Rugal and his biological father, both unconscious. “And them?”

Julian smiles and nods. She’s still out of sorts, so he doesn’t mind repeating himself. “Them, too.”

“Good.” A gray hand goes to her hair, smoothing out errant strands. She wears it long and slicked-back like the men. Julian wonders if it’s to better fit into a role dominated on Cardassia almost exclusively by males. “Have you caught who was behind it?”

For a moment, Julian thinks she’s lost in another delusion, talking to an apparition, but she’s lucid now, her eyes tracking him across the room. “What do you mean?”

“Come now, Doctor. My ship docks the station with Pa’Dar, and not two days later we all come down with the same bug—”

“Virus, actually.”

“Disease. A disease you say only affects Cardassians and is highly contagious. Doctor, I hardly think a man of your reputed brilliance got so far by ignoring such unlikely coincidence.”

Julian approaches a terminal to inspect a diagram of the virus. “You mentioned your symptoms resembled the Nishtola virus.” He pauses. “Unfortunately, our medical databases have no record of such a pathogen.”

“I’d have someone send the files over, but—” She waves to her unconscious comrades and shrugs. “It was commonplace during a dark time in Cardassia’s history. It’s since been eradicated.”

Of course, it’s conceivable that an airborne virus like this could be deliberately released, weaponized. “Who would—”

“Want to kill Cardassians?” Gul Dvoll smiles, then coughs and shudders. “Close that door, Doctor.”

He does as requested, spurred by the seriousness in her tone. When he returns, he trundles over a chair and sits. “Yes?”
“Listen, Doctor.” She moves to sit up and sighs when Julian holds her down again. “The news hasn’t been released by Central Command yet, but we learned of a Maquis outpost some time ago. One the Federation knew about and kept hidden from us.”

Julian knows the outpost she means, and what she’s insinuating. “You destroyed it.”

“It’s not out of the realm of possibility that those terrorists would resort to some infantile form of revenge.”

“I promise we’ll look into it, but right now I’m more interested in getting you better.”

“The culprits will have escaped by now, but I appreciate it.” The gul reaches out and gives Julian’s cheek a pat. The scales of her fingers are smooth and cold, but not unpleasant. “When you create your cure and I’m ‘better,’ perhaps we should have dinner on my ship.”

Julian laughs. “You need to rest. In fact, how are you even still coherent?”

“Ah, but you’re the doctor, aren’t you? You should know that I’m made of stronger stuff. Are you still seeing that tailor of yours?” When Julian gives a patient nod, following the digression, she smiles. “If you should ever tire of Bajorans, you know where to find me.”

Julian waits until her eyes flutter closed and her brainwaves indicate that she’s drifted asleep before checking the progress of the synthesis and verifying the time. He’s late. His Bajoran staff is fidgeting around in the presence of so many Cardassians, but he knows they’ll be professional and polite in his absence. “Alert me should anything change,” he tells Nurse Jabara, then hurries out.

Jake answers the door the moment he presses the chime. Inside Sisko’s quarters, the scent of Creole brunch is thick in the air. He isn’t surprised that nobody’s waited for him before digging in. Except Serot, that is. He lights up as Julian crosses into the dining area. Jadzia stops nibbling the corner of a buttermilk biscuit and teases, “Took you long enough.”

“I’m sure he had a good reason,” Sisko says in a tone that suggests he sure as hell better. He stands to retrieve a spare plate.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Julian says, “I was called away to the infirmary. The virus progressed into stage three much faster than anticipated.”

Sisko cracks a pair of chicken eggs over a pot of boiling water. “And how is our favorite gul this morning?”

“Stabilized and surprisingly chipper.” Julian doesn’t miss the mirrored look of annoyance that flits across both Serot’s and Kira’s faces. “I expect everyone to make a full recovery. About that-- might I have a word with you, sir?”

Sisko nods for Jake to take the reins of the meal and leads Julian into the hallway.

Once they’re out of earshot of the table, Julian murmurs, “Commander, Gul Dvoll suspects that the Maquis might be behind the virus.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised, what with this trouble with Pa’Dar and his son happening at the same time. It seems more than coincidental.”

“She thinks it’s specifically related to the Maquis base on Imdal III. She said Central Command had it wiped out.”
“What? How the hell did they find it so quickly?” Sisko glares at the ceiling and, taking a breath, lowers his voice. “Dammit. Did she say when this happened?” When Julian can only shake his head, Sisko dismisses him with a wave and slaps his combadge. “Sisko to Odo.”

Returning to the dining area, Julian finds O’Brien lecturing the table on the Battle of the Boyne. Julian grins as he takes a seat beside Serot. “Is Miles boring you yet?”

“Not at all,” Serot says. “I’m only afraid that military strategy of this magnitude is lost on me.”

“He’s lying,” O’Brien cuts in through a mouthful of grits. “He loves discussing ancient Irish history. You should’ve seen how fascinated he was by the Nine Years’ War.”

Julian nods thanks to Jake as he passes Julian a plate loaded with shrimp and eggs drowning in Hollandaise. “He’s only being polite, you know. He barely understands how chess works.”

Beside O’Brien, Keiko makes an exaggerated show of choking on her coffee. “Julian! What a rude thing to say!”

Serot inclines his head. “I’m afraid he’s right. I’m a hopeless cause. Though,” he adds, raising a brow at Julian, “I do wonder why you insist we keep playing.”

Before Julian can defend himself, Jadzia smirks, her eyes darting back and forth as she follows the conversation. “He likes the boost to his ego, that’s why.”

“No, I don’t!”

“Say what you will,” Kira cuts in, ignoring Julian’s outburst, “but Pela’s lack of guile is what sold me on him not being a collaborator.”

Julian flinches, but Serot only smiles fondly at her as if that’s some form of compliment. While Julian is relieved that Kira’s warmed to Serot, and Serot has taken her under his wing as an almost father figure, Julian can’t shake the implicit insult. Even if Serot isn’t willing to admit it or delve into his past, he was in the Bajoran underground. That’s something to be celebrated. Julian wants to see Kira praise him, give him the credit he deserves. But Serot seems content to be viewed as nothing more than a simple tailor.

It makes little sense. But Julian has always relished any praise for his accomplishments.

It’s later in the afternoon and Julian is knee-deep in administering treatment to Gul Dvoll and her crew when Serot swings by with a container of food. “I assumed you’d have worked off your brunch by now,” he says as he slips it into Julian’s eager hands.

Julian shovels forkfuls into his mouth while standing over his console. “Thanks, love. I’m sorry about this. I’ve been swamped in Cardassian bodily fluids.”

“Perhaps, then, it’s all for the best that you skipped our lunch.” Serot watches in silence for a moment as Julian drops the food to give hyposprays to his patients, each one in a different stage of consciousness. “Shouldn’t they be in quarantine, in case the virus--” He makes an extraneous gesture. “Jumps species?”

“No need to worry, Serot,” Julian says, knowing he’s only concerned for Julian’s wellbeing. “This virus has receptors specifically adapted to Cardassian genetics. It wouldn’t be able to survive in a human-- or Bajoran host, for that matter-- much less replicate. There shouldn’t be any danger of it crossing the species barrier.”
“And we can’t have that,” Gul Dvoll rumbles from her biobed, one eye open. “Imagine the resulting pandemic should a single Bajoran become infected.”

Julian plants a reassuring hand on Serot’s shoulder. “Which won’t happen.”

“It’s good to see you again, Mister Pela,” Gul Dvoll says. She smiles wide. “You’re looking charming as always.”

Serot’s smile is obviously strained as he dips his head in a polite nod. He turns back to Julian. “I’ll see you tonight, my dear.”

It isn’t until hours later that Julian is able to release the Cardassians from the infirmary with clean bills of health. Gul Dvoll says her goodbyes in the docking ring. She’s freshened the inverted droplet in her forehead with cobalt blue pigment, and gives his hand a firm shake, human fashion, as she thanks him for all his efforts. Then she turns to Sisko. “Commander, I’m much relieved we could settle this matter with young Rugal. It wasn’t an optimal resolution for us, but I’m genuinely glad to know he’ll be happy on Bajor.”

The Cardassian boy and his adoptive father had been all smiles at the news. Pa’Dar, as far as Julian could tell, had borne the shame and disappointment with obvious heartbreak. His eyes had remained downcast as he’d boarded Dvoll’s vessel, and Julian couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

Sisko agrees with Dvoll and shakes her hand with a promise to fully investigate the virus that infected her and the other Cardassians.

It’s a long slog cleaning up the infirmary and compiling his reports. When Julian finally arrives home late in the evening, Serot is waiting for him in their quarters, lights dimmed, with dinner spread over the table. Two candles send shadows dancing across the walls.

Julian freezes in the threshold. Serot’s wearing that low-cut sweater, and has let his hair down, waves shiny and wild in the way Julian likes. Serot smiles as he catches sight of Julian and beckons him closer.


“Did you forget?”

He didn’t, and he knows it isn’t. “I’m sorry, Serot.”

“Luckily, my dear overworked doctor, that isn’t for a while yet.” Serot pops the cork off a bottle of springwine and pours. “Come. Sit.”

Julian obeys, reeled in by that smile and the scent of roasted lamb. Serot has never requested he cut down on his consumption of meat-- replicated or otherwise-- but Julian has found himself doing it regardless, part out of respect and part out of habit.

That doesn’t mean he doesn’t miss it. The lamb is perfect: juicy and so tender it falls off the bone, seasoned with rosemary and Bajoran spices that fit surprisingly well with an animal from Earth.

Serot won’t let on to the reason for the special meal. That is, until he sits up with an air of forced casualness and says, “Has Gul Dvoll left?”

Julian hides his smile by dabbing his lips with a napkin. “A few hours ago, yes. Why?”
“No reason.”

Julian lets his amusement bleed into his voice. “Pela Serot, are you jealous?”

“Concerned might be a better word.”

“About Gul Dvoll? Really, she’s like that with everyone. Including you, I might add. From what I hear, she was flirting with Kira the moment she stepped on the station.”

“You aren’t helping.”

“C’mon, Serot,” Julian says, grabbing his arm and stroking it. “You have nothing to worry about. Nobody turns my head the way you do.”

“Good.”

“Besides, Cardassians aren’t my type.”

“Good.”

Julian crosses the table to take Serot’s face between his hands and kiss him. “You are so very transparent. Tea?”

They take the tea on the couch, Julian resting his head in Serot’s lap while Serot reads. Or tries to. Julian gives him a rundown of the day before moving on to other topics. His thoughts drift back to the Cardassians, and he interrupts himself mid-anecdote. “I learned something rather unpleasant from Gul Dvoll. Remember that Maquis outpost I mentioned the other day?”

“My dear, please don’t tell me what I fear you’re about to say.”

“Wish I could.”

Serot releases a sigh. “How did they find it so easily?”

“I don’t know.” Julian hates to upset Serot, but with his interest in the fate of the Maquis it only seems right to let him in on the details. “Gul Dvoll thinks the virus was the Maquis’ doing.”

“Of course she does. Why believe in coincidence when it’s more convenient to blame one’s enemies? She’d infect herself if it suited her ends. Cardassians are devious.”

Julian disagrees, but he keeps the peace, changing the subject. “How did today’s session go?”

Hesitation, then: “Well enough.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“That doctor-- and I do use the term loosely-- Wedel is under the impression that I’m suggestible. Indeed, he says I’m such a fool, I’d believe just about any false information about myself.”

“I highly doubt he called you a fool.”

“He puts far too much confidence in his silly tests.”

Julian sits up to take a draught of tea. Doctor Wedel is a well-regarded specialist in post-traumatic stress on Bajor and one of Julian’s top picks. Convincing Serot to see a therapist by subspace transmission three times a week had been challenging enough. Wedel isn’t Julian’s first choice, but
Serot is against seeing a neurologist, limiting Julian’s options to someone who won’t go physically poking in Serot’s brain. “He’s an expert in his field. He must have a reason for it.”

“It’s a waste of everyone’s time.”

Leaning in, Julian kisses his way across Serot’s jaw and down his neck. “I know you hate it, but please keep up with the sessions, at least for a while. Give it a chance.”

“Whatsoever you say, dear.”

Julian likes the sound of that.

His hands roam downward. Soon he’s commanding Serot out of his jumper and trousers. Serot obeys, albeit lazily, taking his time undoing every button and fastener as Julian stares.

“You’re a tease,” Julian says.

Once in the bedroom, Serot drapes himself over the mattress, naked and posing for him. Julian recognizes the look in Serot’s eyes, the way he’s shifted onto his hands and knees. It’s a not-so-subtle hint of what he wants, and Serot is blushing from the excitement of it.

Julian reaches into one of the side drawers and laughs as Serot perks up. “Serot, you’re being transparent again.”

“I’m quite all right with that as long as you give me what I want.”

“Demanding, too.” Julian’s fingers brush smooth wood and he draws out the thin paddle. “Is this it? Is this what you want?”

Serot’s already offering his wrists. “Tie me.”

“Now, now, who is ordering who about here?” Julian retrieves the leather restraints and gently fastens them around Serot’s wrists, binding them together. Nice and tight. “Good?”

Serot closes his eyes and nods.

It’s an unexpected turn, this. Despite knowing the theoretical reasons for it, Julian still can’t wrap his head around the concept. What had started one night as light spankings in the heat of the moment escalated when Serot, in a voice quiet and uncertain, had begged Julian to hit him harder.

Julian had resisted. He hates causing harm. It’s what makes him an abysmal soldier and a good doctor. Hurting Serot was out of the question, and he’d argued that with a passion when Serot continued to ask for it. “I can’t,” Julian said. “Hurting you, seeing you in pain, being the cause of it—”

“Believe me, Julian, I wouldn’t be pursuing this embarrassing conversation if I didn’t want it. Please. You can patch me up afterward, if you like.” He’d smiled then. “I don’t ask too much from you, do I?”

Julian had sighed, lost. Manipulative git.

Julian twirls his wrist, inspecting the wood paddle and its bored holes. It’s a compromise— he’ll do this for Serot, but only on special occasions. It’s much too hard on Julian to make it a regular occurrence.

As the saying goes: *this hurts me a lot more than it hurts you.*
When he brings the paddle down, Serot gasps and flinches in a way that makes Julian want to drop the torture implement and run screaming. But Serot’s begging him to keep going, harder, please, and Julian’s arm obeys.

The hard spanks from the paddle make Serot howl and sob, but also writhe and moan in some delirious ecstasy all at once. The sight of Serot unraveled in these dual states is unnerving, but Julian keeps going, wincing at the sting in his shoulder and the welts striped red across Serot’s skin. The paddle whistles and slaps, and the harder the blows fall the more Serot’s cries of pain dissolve into nothing but the throes of pleasure. A thrill surges down Julian’s spine and across his groin, leaving him reluctantly hard and aching.

Untouched by anything but the paddle, Serot climaxes. He collapses forward, panting. Tossing the paddle to the floor, Julian lies behind him and tugs the blankets over them. He gathers Serot into his arms and hugs him tight while he recovers.

“Thank you,” Serot whispers.

Maybe this is just another quirk, and Julian must admit he’s entertained some bizarre fantasies himself over the years. It means a great deal to Julian that Serot trusts him enough to share in what might be considered, to some, an aberration.

Yet Julian can’t shake the feeling that this is an unhealthy avenue for them to explore, that it’s somehow tied to Serot’s trauma. If it is, should he be encouraging this behavior? Is he making it worse?

Julian presses his lips to Serot’s dampened nape. “Why do you like that so much?”

Serot’s reply is slurred. “Feels good.”

“One of the many paradoxes of the humanoid condition, I suppose,” Julian says.

“Perhaps.” Serot reaches back, and his hand settles between Julian’s legs. “You didn’t seem to mind,” he says, smugly, and dives beneath the covers.

No, Julian doesn’t understand it, but that doesn’t matter. This is what Serot wants. That’s enough.

Over the coming day, with the Cardassians long gone, the station quiets to its usual humdrum. Odo won’t divulge how his investigation into the possible terrorist connection is proceeding, leaving Julian to wonder as he tends to the usual stuffy nose and back strain.

Later in the afternoon, Chief O’Brien brings Molly in by the hand. “I think she’s swallowed something. A toy, or whatever.”

Julian smiles at the girl. “Is that true, Molly?” When she only looks at her feet, Julian has O’Brien lift her into the biobed. He flips open his medical tricorder and scans her while checking for signs of pain. There it is, in the duodenum. He turns to O’Brien. “Does that look familiar?”

O’Brien inspects the scan. “That’s one of my hex keys!” He frowns at the girl, then looks back at Julian. “What are you gonna do?”

“She might pass it without problem, but to be on the safe side, I’d like to do an endoscopic removal.”

“Will it be quick? She’s got dress rehearsal in an hour, and if she’s late Keiko will have me skinned.”

“Never fear, Chief! I’ll have it out in no time.”
While Julian preps Molly for the procedure, O’Brien glances around. “That must’ve been a nightmare, having this place full of Cardies.”

“It was almost pleasant, actually. They’re good conversationalists.”

“Aye, if you don’t like getting a word in edgewise.” O’Brien shifts his weight between feet. “That Rugal boy seemed to be a good kid, though.”

Julian extracts the hex key within five minutes and, grinning, deposits it into O’Brien’s hand. “Do try to keep your tools out of the reach of children, Chief.”

O’Brien pulls a face. “Thanks. You two coming to the play tonight?”

O’Brien’s tone suggests that bowing out isn’t an option. Given that it’s Keiko’s combined class performing, and Serot’s already volunteered the both of them into going, Julian can only nod. “Kabuki theater, right?”

O’Brien grins. “It’s going to be a great disaster.”

Julian had burst out laughing when he heard Keiko was instructing a group of primarily Bajoran children to perform an ancient Japanese play. “I look forward to it.”

Once O’Brien is gone, Molly in tow, the afternoon slumps into a lull. Taking advantage of this rare lack of injuries, Julian dismisses half his staff for the rest of the shift and packs up, heading to the tailor shop. Lately Serot has been working on an elaborate commission of suits for an eccentric Klingon entrepreneur, and Julian loves simply sitting and watching him work his magic with silk and thread.

Julian breezes through the doors and halts as he finds the shop empty. The overhead lights continue to blare the white luminescence Serot hates so much, suggesting Serot must be about somewhere, but his workbench is cold and the suit on the mannequin is still only half-finished. Julian checks the dressing rooms, expecting Serot to jump out and surprise him for once. Empty. He pokes his head in the backroom, calling Serot’s name and ensuring that he hasn’t been buried beneath a pile of fabric bolts. Nothing.

It’s not like Serot to leave his shop unattended, even if he’s only going ten feet across the promenade to grab a bite to eat. Julian questions the neighboring shopkeepers and the woman at the jumja stand, but they only shake their heads. Nobody even noticed Serot wander out.

Julian comms their quarters, gets no response. He waits around the shop for ten minutes, drumming his fingers along the counter, before slapping his communicator. “Bashir to Odo.”

Odo’s voice is strained over the comlink. “Odo here.”

“Have you seen Serot about? He’s left his shop deserted and that isn’t--”

“Doctor, I’m in the middle of a situation here. If I see Mister Pela, I’ll be sure to tell him you’re looking for him.”

Julian straightens. “What kind of situation? Anything I can do to help?”

“Not unless you know how to pry a dead Cardassian vole from a security console. Odo out.”

With a last glance across the promenade, Julian leaves behind a note and uses Serot’s codes to close up the shop in his absence. Back in their quarters, he putters. He lies on the couch upside-down, legs
up as he reads a book of Bajoran poetry. He tosses it aside and replicates several bowls of dim sum.
He pops dumplings into his mouth as he paces. Back and forth. Checks the time.

Serot should’ve come home by now, or at least sent him a message. It isn’t like Serot to neglect to
inform Julian of his whereabouts. But Julian’s also aware that he’s been smothering Serot with
concern and treating him— in Serot’s words— like one of his “invalid patients.” Julian can’t blame
him for being frustrated.

Still. If Julian doesn’t hear from him soon, he might go crazy.

He’s out the door, about to tap his communicator for another conversation with Constable Odo,
when the combadge chirps on its own: “Quark to Doctor Bashir.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Julian mutters to himself, then replies. “This is Bashir. What is it,
Quark?”

“Doctor, I think I have something of yours. Would you mind dropping by my bar and picking it up?”

Julian doesn’t bother asking for clarification. If Quark wanted to supply more information, he would.
“I’ll be right there,” Julian says, and runs back to retrieve his med kit. He hurries out of the habitat
ring and onto the promenade.

Quark catches his eye the moment he strides into the bar. “Ah, Doctor,” he says, waving at Julian.
“Come with me.”

“What’s this about, Quark?”

Quark leads him past rows of tables. It’s dinner hour, and the bar is packed with roaring customers.
Julian follows Quark to the back until they come to a door. Morn stands beside it, his hands
clenching and unclenching. “Go sit down and have another drink, Morn,” Quark says. “Doctor
Bashir’s got this situation handled.” Once Morn has returned to his place at the bar, Quark jerks a
thumb toward the door. “Your boyfriend’s barricaded himself in there. Normally I wouldn’t care
since I charge by the half-minute, but he’s been in there for hours now, and people are starting to
complain.”

Julian looks the door up and down, frowning. “What’s he doing in there?”

“Not my problem.”

“Can’t you unlock it yourself?”

“Doctor, my customers expect a modicum of privacy. What kind of proprietor would I be if I
interrupted them in the middle of— well, you know.”

From the other side of the door, Julian hears a heavy sigh. “I can hear you.”

Quark pounds on the door with a fist. “Good! Then get out. Why don’t you go hole yourself up in
your own facilities? I’m losing customers every minute because they’ve got no where to relieve
themselves!”

“It’s hardly my fault your bar is woefully inadequate in that regard,” Serot shoots back. “And
unclean, I might add.”

Quark throws his hands in the air.
Julian gestures him aside and presses a hand to the door. “Serot, it’s me, Julian.” When there’s no response, he continues, “I’m here now. Let me take you back home.”

“Go away.”

The petulance takes Julian aback and gets his mind racing. There’s definitely something seriously wrong here. Through the door, with his enhanced senses, he can hear labored, staccato breathing. “Serot, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Is it something I did?”

“What?”

“Did I--”

There’s a chuckle, hoarse and punctuated by wheezing. “Everything isn’t always about you, my dear.”

“Then what--”

“Food poisoning. If you insist on knowing everything, it’s food poisoning.”

That’s a load of bollocks if Julian’s ever heard it. He glances at Quark, who only shakes his head. “He didn’t get it from my food!”

“Luckily,” Julian calls out to Serot, “I happen to be a rather capable physician. Now if you’ll just open the door--”

“I’m perfectly content to wait it out right here. If you don’t mind, all I want is some peace and quiet.”

“If peace and quiet was what you were looking for,” Julian says, “you picked a rotten place for it.”

“Evidently.”

“Serot, open the door.”

“No.”


“Don’t you dare!”

“--Bashir one alpha.”

The door slides open and Julian steps inside, blocking the way as Quark tries to follow. The narrow refresher is darkened; Serot has punched out half the lights, scattering shards of glass over the tiled floor.

There’s a cough from the corner. Serot’s curled into a ball, knees drawn to his chest as he scrubs his face with a sleeve. Crumpled to the floor and shivering, he opens one eye to glare at the intruder.

Julian’s kneeling beside him in an instant. “Oh, Serot,” Julian brushes damp hair from his eyes. His skin is feverish and clammy with sweat. “How did this happen?”
“Told you. Food poisoning.”

Julian flips open his medical tricorder and begins a scan. The readings show an elevated heart rate and low blood pressure but nothing else concerning. That’s not right. It should at least--

Serot slaps the tricorder from Julian’s hand. It skitters across the floor.

Julian forces his anger down and nods. “Very well, point taken. Will you at least let me examine you?”

“No. As I said, I’m fine. If you--”

“Like hell, you’re fine! You look like death warmed over! Now, listen to me: no boyfriend of mine is going to die of food poisoning, do you understand? So you might as well cooperate because I’m not leaving. I’m going to examine and treat you whether you like it or not.”

Serot closes his eyes, and Julian knows he’s too fatigued to so much as stand or protest. “You can’t do that without my consent.”

“You can press charges against me later.” Julian gently feels Serot’s pulse and furrows his brow as Serot coughs. “Is coughing a Bajoran symptom of foodborne illness I’m not aware of?”

A violent shiver wracks Serot’s body. His voice is a plea. “Go away.”

“Serot, please, what are you afraid of?”

“How I cope with illness. It’s worked for me--" Serot hisses and breathes faster. “How I cope with illness. It’s worked for me--”

“Shh, don’t talk.”

“--all these years, and I don’t intend to change.”

“Are you feeling any aches or pains?”

“Everywhere.”

Julian tilts Serot’s head to the side and goes cold as he spots the tinge of dark red between Serot’s teeth. He grabs Serot’s wrist. The fabric of the sleeve is streaked with blood. “Are you vomiting or coughing blood?”

Serot closes his eyes and presses his face to the tiling along the wall. The lethargy is finally taking its toll.

Julian keys his communicator. “Bashir to Ops. Medical emergency. Lock on my signal. Two to beam directly to the infirmary.”

He sees Serot’s eyes go wide in animal terror.

Forgive me, Julian thinks as he feels the tug of the transporter beam.

The moment the infirmary materializes around them, Serot stares at Julian as if he’s turned into Marcus Brutus. “Why? Why can’t you--” He stumbles back as an aide tries to coax him into a biobed, then struggles as another takes his arm. “Let go! Don’t touch me! Let me go!”

“He’s hyperventilating,” says Nurse Jabara, appearing at Julian’s side with a frown of worry. “I thought it was a joke. I didn’t think he was actually iatrophobic.”
“I’m sorry, Serot,” Julian says as he rounds the biobed where the aides are restraining him. Serot is in the midst of a full-blown panic attack. He shouldn’t be able to put up such a fight in his condition. Julian buries himself in his doctor’s guise to keep his other instincts in check. He could restrain Serot with a forcefield, but that would only make the situation worse. “I know you’re scared. But if I’m right, you’re about to experience multiple organ failure, starting with your lungs.”

“I don’t care!”

“You’re not thinking rationally. I’m sorry, but I was wrong. The virus *can* cross the species barrier. Your symptoms are exactly what Gul Dvoll and the other Cardassians experienced.” Julian nods to one of the nurses. “Begin quarantine procedure 2A of the infirmary.” To Jabara: “Five ccs merfadon.”

Serot looks ready to bite off Julian’s hand as he approaches with the hypospray. “Get that away from me!”

“It’s only a sedative. It’ll help you—”

“Relax while you experiment on me? I think not! Let me go!” Serot glares at one of the aides. “I don’t consent to this! Get Constable Odo, tell him—”

Julian presses the hypospray to Serot’s neck, releasing the merfadon with a hiss of pressure.

The effect is instantaneous and utterly, utterly wrong. Serot’s eyes roll back and he emits a groan from deep in his throat— a sound that cuts straight into Julian. He’s heard it too much in his career. He knows what’s wrong before the biofunction monitors scream in warning.

“He’s in cardiac arrest,” says a nurse.

Julian whirls on Nurse Jabara. “What the hell was in that hypospray?”

“Five ccs merfadon, as you asked.” She pulls out the vial, double-checking. “If we had a workup on him, we’d know he was allergic—”

Julian’s already synthesizing the antitoxin. He keeps his hands steady, ignoring the monitors that flash Serot’s crashing vital signs. Merfadon is a Bajoran sedative, with an incidence of adverse reaction so low it’s statistically insignificant. The cardiac arrest could be a badly timed coincidence, but if this is indeed the same virus the Cardassians contracted, as Julian suspects, then the heart would fail directly after the kidneys.

Unless the virus kills faster in Bajorans.

Julian administers the antitoxin and nods to Jabara as she moves the pulmonary support unit into place. He delivers one shock. After the second jolt, Serot sucks in a wheezing gasp of air and the readings jump back to normal parameters.

Releasing the breath he was holding, Julian reviews the vital signs, paying attention to the oxygen saturation. Serot’s unconscious but stabilized, and Julian is confident he’ll be able to rouse him when the time comes. He flips open a fresh medical tricorder and begins a new scan.

The results are as confounding as before: low blood pressure, elevated heart rate, but no indication of internal hemorrhaging. No sign of organ failure. No detection of the CRD6P81 virus or its possible mutations. Yet simply by looking at the symptoms— the blood, the pigmentation of Serot’s skin and the bruising where the aides held him down— Julian knows that’s wrong.
“That’s odd,” Julian says, mostly to himself. “These readings can’t be right.” He thumbs on the sensor array above the biobed. “Begin scan and bring it up on monitor three over here.”

The cluster lights up and Julian waits as the beam passes over Serot, inch by inch. As it moves, the monitor resolves into images of skeletal and organ structure. Julian flips through, taking in the coloring along the lungs and liver and kidneys, signaling necrosis. It’s bad, but if they move fast Serot won’t need any organs replaced.

*Dammit, Serot, if you hadn’t hidden this from me--*

Julian squints at the images, barely registering the chirp from the computer as the scan finishes and the beam flickers off. This isn’t right. Taking a step closer to the monitor, Julian runs a finger over the white outline of bone, tracing the ribcage. There are too many ribs. The liver is too large. There are organs missing and extra ones that he can’t identify.

No, he *can* identify them. He’s seen this anatomical design before.

Jabara strides over. “The tricorders are working perfectly, Doctor. I don’t know why you couldn’t--” She cuts herself off as her attention snaps to the monitor. “His spleen-- it’s in the wrong--”

Julian switches off the monitor and starts toward his office.

“Doctor,” Jabara calls out, “should we synthesize the interferons for--”

“Hold off on that right now, Nurse.”

Once inside the privacy of his office, Julian brings up the scans again. He sits, not trusting his legs to keep him aloft, and leans forward, hands clasped under his chin. The rational part of him recognizes what he’s seeing, but the rest of him is looking for any way to deny it. Genetic mutation. Serot had worried about experimentation-- perhaps someone had opened him up-- and what? Played hide-and-seek with his internal organs and manipulated his bone structure on a lark?

*Occam’s Razor,* he reminds himself.

Julian forces himself to take slow, steadying breaths as he breaks up each scan, looking at the independent structures from different angles. It isn’t until he’s looking at the brain and its unique structure and strange implants that everything aligns into perfect, horrible clarity.

Julian swallows. He’s cut open people, been bleed on, sneezed on, sprayed with scent glands, covered in every goop and bodily fluid in the known universe, and he’s always taken it with the professionalism of a doctor performing his duty.

Now, now he finds himself fighting for breath, mouth dry and the room spinning and blood rushing in his ears. He recalls Starfleet Medical, his amusement at the first year students fainting at the sight of a dissected corpse. Of every tumor he’s extracted, every pustule and sebaceous cyst and flesh melting bacteria, every dead and dying patient, this is what sends him unraveling.

*It doesn’t make sense. It’s impossible and unfair and it doesn’t make any bloody sense!*

“Doctor?”

Julian looks up. Nurse Jabara stands in the doorway, face creased in concern. He clears his throat. “You can lower the quarantine,” he says. His voice is barely above a whisper.

“What’s going on? What was on the scan?”
Taking in another slow breath, Julian spins the monitor toward her. Maybe he’s imagining it, and she’ll see the reality he can’t: a normal, healthy Bajoran male.

She stares at the scans for a long moment, and then shakes her head. “I don’t understand. It’s like his internal organs have been scrambled around.”

“Not scrambled.” Julian calls up the scans from Gul Dvoll and aligns them side-by-side.

He watches Jabara as her eyes flick back and forth between the images. Her face blanches as the realization dawns. She turns to him with the unspoken question written in her eyes, mouth slack and unable to form words. She shakes her head again, more vigorously.

Julian turns the monitor back toward him. “Not scrambled,” he repeats.
Chapter 7

The silence seeps into Julian’s bones like a spreading cancer. His knees are threatening to buckle, and the chair is looking mighty seductive, but he forces himself to stay standing beside the monitor. Rubbing damp palms over the legs of his trousers, Julian looks to each individual face arrayed around the conference table.

Most of his colleagues had been yawning into fists when he’d called the meeting. *It can’t wait*, he’d said when they protested his timing.

Now, plied with stimulants and surprise, their eyes are wide and devoid of that early fatigue. Each crew member stares at the monitor, then Julian. Blank expressions slip into disbelief, settling on something worse: pity. The last is directed at him.

A few look to each other. Jadzia and O’Brien exchange a frown. Odo sits ramrod straight in his chair, tilting his head to inspect the monitor from all angles. Kira opens and closes her mouth, squinting, as if fighting vertigo.

The silence drags. Julian wants to phase through the deck plates and out the station. He wants to let out a mute scream into the void of space while his lungs collapse and his bodily fluids bubble.

Sisko leans back in his chair and steeples his fingers. “You’re sure, Doctor?”

“How,” Sisko says, “did this go unnoticed for so long?”

“I have a number of theories. Whoever engineered the surgery was nothing short of a genius. They were well aware of the limitations-- mainly that their work wouldn’t hold up to a full bioscan-- and proceeded within those confines. He has subdermal implants that send out false Bajoran readings capable of fooling even sophisticated medical instruments. That, combined with his severe iatraphobia, must’ve helped him avoid detection.”

“And if you hadn’t brought him into the infirmary when you did?” Jadzia asks.

“He would’ve died of multiple organ failure.” On the floor of Quark’s washroom.

Odo clears his throat. “How long?”

Julian nods, glancing at the scans. He knows what Odo is asking him. “From the age of the implants and minor scar tissue, I’d guess ten years.” There’s an intake of breath from someone at the table. “I found another implant, one in his brain, that seems much older, though I have yet to identify its purpose.”

Sisko rubs one of his temples, staring hard at Julian. “And you didn’t suspect anything all this time?”

Julian swallows as he finds his mouth dry. He’s expected this question, and though Sisko’s tone is neutral, he can’t help but hear the accusation in it. He tells the truth. “No. There were hints, I suppose-- strange behavioral quirks. But I never thought it could be *this*.”
Sisko swivels his chair. “Your thoughts, Constable? You were here before the rest of us. You’ve known Mister Pela the longest.”

“I’ve only been here for five years,” Odo begins with a slow growl. “I can’t attest to his whereabouts for the previous five, but I see your point.” He taps a finger against the table. “I’ve heard rumors of Cardassian sleeper agents, but I’ve never seen evidence of it.”

“Go on, Constable. Anything that might help.”

“The rumors concern the Obsidian Order altering the appearance and memories of their operatives in order to infiltrate a host society.”

“I don’t recognize the name. Am I right to guess this ‘Obsidian Order’ is yet another obscure part of the Cardassian government?”

“It operates separately from Central Command. The Obsidian Order is the ever-vigilant eyes and ears of the Cardassian Empire. It’s said that a Cardassian citizen can’t sit down to a meal without each dish being duly noted and recorded by them.”

Jadzia raises a brow. “Remind me to never order off the menu should I decide to vacation there.”

“Whether you agree with their goals or not,” Odo continues, “you can’t help but admire their efficiency. Even the Romulan Tal Shiar can’t compete with them when it comes to intelligence gathering and covert operations.”


Odo nods once. “Exactly that, Doctor.”

“I knew it,” Kira hisses through her teeth. She slams a fist onto the table and jumps to her feet. “I knew it! I told you, didn’t I? I knew he was a spy!”

“Now hold on there, Major!” Julian rounds the table. His body is trembling with tension. How dare she! To turn her back, to make a one-eighty like this after she and Serot had become friends. “You have no right to make that kind of accusation. You have no evidence!”

“What more evidence do you need? He’s worse than a collaborator. He’s a damn Cardassian.”

“And when did that become a crime?”

“Come on, Bashir! Why else would he let himself be altered if not to spy on Bajor?”

“That’s enough,” Sisko says.

“That isn’t evidence,” Bashir says, “that’s speculation. For all we know he was kidnapped and brainwashed--”

Kira laughs. “Are you serious? The Obsidian Order kidnaps and brainwashes its citizens all the time, but not for its undercover missions. He would’ve been well trained. He would’ve volunteered--”

“That’s enough!” Sisko says. “Both of you. Sit down. Major, this isn’t the time to be scoring points. Lieutenant, I know this turn of events is hard for you-- it took courage to come forward and bring this to our attention. But we have to explore every possibility until we know for sure.”

Julian bows his head and drops into a chair. “Yes, sir.”
“Good. Now. Do you think Mister Pela has any idea?”

“No,” Julian shoots Kira a look. She’s quietly seething. “Serot’s always acted like a completely loyal Bajoran. He can barely stand Cardassians.”

Sisko sighs. “Too bad-- I’ve had my fill of self-loathing Cardassians lately. Anything else? Any other ideas why a Cardassian would be hiding on this station as a Bajoran tailor for so many years?”

The silence falls again as the command crew considers. Julian has already put thought into the whys, and much as he hates the connection to the Obsidian Order, it’s the only one that fits the evidence so far. *They might’ve intended him to be a spy, but that doesn’t mean he ever acted on it. Betrayal is not in his nature.*

“Could it be,” Jadzia says, “that Serot’s in some kind of trouble? The Cardassians have a harsh legal system by Federation standards. If you wanted to hide, what better way than to change your appearance, wipe your memory, and start a new life on a remote station?”

Julian brightens at that idea. Yes! That makes sense. Maybe Serot had been a conscientious objector and Central Command hadn’t taken kindly to it.

“But that’s difficult to pin down without knowing his previous identity,” Jadzia continues. “Assuming the worst, that he’s a Cardassian operative-- have we ever seen Serot interact with other Cardassians, or possible intermediaries?”

Odo says, “He seems to avoid Cardassians. And I’ve never found anything suspicious in the way he conducts his business. If he’s been passing on information, it’s more subtle than anything I’ve seen.”

“How can he be sending messages,” Julian snaps, “if he doesn’t even know he’s a spy?”

Odo appears to agree. “Which leads me to believe he’s a sleeper agent and not undercover.”

“If he was placed here ten years ago,” Jadzia says, “It would’ve been during the height of the occupation. Why didn’t the Order pull him out when it ended?”

“They may have forgotten about him,” Julian offers.

“Aye,” O’Brien says, chiming in for the first time. “Or they’ve still got use for him. The Cardassians haven’t made it a secret they’d like to take Bajor back. Or maybe they’re leaving him here to keep an eye on us, Commander.”

Julian winces at the new accusation. *Thanks a lot, Chief.*

Sisko takes it all in. “If that’s the case, Doctor, have you shared any Federation secrets with him?”

That catches Julian off-guard and sends his pulse racing. He struggles for words. “N-no, I mean nothing besides day-to-day minutiae. You know, the kind of thing you share with a partner. Nothing confidential.”

Sisko waves it away. “Relax, I’m not trying to put you on the spot. If that’s all, Doctor, I want you to work with Constable Odo to unravel this mystery. I want to know what, if anything, he’s been reporting to the Cardassians and put a stop to it.”

“It’ll be easiest if I take him into custody,” Odo says.

Sisko must catch the horror as it passes over Julian, because he dismisses the idea on the spot.
“You’ll do no such thing until it’s absolutely necessary. You’ll follow Doctor Bashir’s lead.” Sisko’s attention falls on Julian. “I expect daily reports on your progress. If he shows any sign of suspicious activity, endangering this station, or becoming a flight risk, I want to know about it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sisko looks ready to dismiss them when Kira says, “Commander, we need to inform the provisional government.”

“I disagree! Bajor has been in the dark about Mister Pela’s identity for ten years. An extra week or two won’t hurt. I expect all of you to keep this under your hats. We don’t want to tip our hand early. Now, unless there’s anything else, I’d like to get back to sleep.”

Julian’s soon standing in the middle of Ops, staring at the many blinking lights. Jadzia comes around to squeeze his arm. “If there’s anything you need,” she whispers. “I’m here.”

“Me too,” O’Brien says, appearing at his other side. “It’s a rotten thing to go through alone.”

“I’m not alone,” Julian hears himself say, shouldering past to board the lift. “Infirmary.”

The lift is about to descend when Odo hops on. Arms stiffly folded behind his back, Odo glances in Julian’s direction then stares ahead as Ops disappears.

“I do appreciate how difficult this must be,” Odo says.

*I doubt it.* “But you still want to arrest him.”

“It would be more efficient than whatever you have planned, but as Commander Sisko said, we’ll do it your way first, Doctor.”

Julian catches the operative word in that sentence and isn’t fooled. “I won’t let you make this an interrogation.”

“Who said I wanted to interrogate him? I have nothing against Mister Pela. In fact, I like him. I’m only here to do my job.”

Julian rolls back his shoulders. Of course, Odo doesn’t have a grudge. If anything, he’s the most impartial person on this station. He likely wants to make sure he maintains his reputation as a skilled lawman-- which will be tarnished should it be known he let a spy run amok under his nose for so long.

“I’m sorry, Odo. I guess I’m just feeling a bit defensive.”

Odo nods once. “What do you plan to tell him?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” The lift comes to a stop and Julian holds Odo with a sharp look, indicating he means business. “I want you to stay outside for now. And I don’t want you shapeshifting so you can eavesdrop. I’m not going to jeopardize Serot’s trust over this.”

If Odo wants to protest, he keeps it to himself, leaving Julian to return to the infirmary.

They’ve moved him out of the intensive care ward. Nurse Jabara is sitting beside Serot’s biobed, hair in disarray as she runs her fingers through the strands. She rises. “Doctor, he woke up while you were gone. He became very agitated again, so I gave him a dose of improvoline. It seems to have calmed him down.”
Julian glances through the monitors, then down at Serot where he’s sleeping. His face is slack and free of pain. That’s all that matters. “I want to apologize,” Julian tells her, “for snapping at you before. I’m sorry.”

Jabara favors him with a sad smile. “It’s all right, Doctor.” Her attention falls on Serot before returning to Julian’s face. “I understand.”

She vacates the seat, and Julian takes her place. The monitors above the biobed chirp healthy life signs as Julian’s gaze swings along Serot’s body. He brushes the back of his fingers along Serot’s cheek, scraping against stubble. Cardassians don’t grow facial hair, do they? How long would this clever disguise have fooled Julian? Would they have gone on to marry and have a family, unaware? What if the Obsidian Order had opted to “activate” him?

Serot’s eyes flutter and open. Smiling, his hand moves up to cup Julian’s where it rests on his cheek. His expression is unfocused and dreamy. “My dear. You have the most brilliant aura about you.”

Julian laughs and leans over to dim the overhead lights. “Do I look less angelic now?”

Serot blinks once, twice. “Not at all.”

“You old charmer. I take it the improvoline’s working?”

“A wonder drug. I’d like to request a year’s supply.”

“You’ll have no such luck, I’m afraid. It’s a rather potent psychotropic with anxiolytic properties, and, as you can imagine, prone to causing dependence.”

“How unfortunate.” Serot blinks again and furrows his brow. His fingers squeeze Julian’s hand. “What’s wrong?”

It isn’t a surprise that Serot, even sedated, can see right through him. “You gave me a scare,” Julian says, squeezing back. That isn’t a lie, but an understatement.

“But I’m better now?”

“The virus is clear of your system and we’ve repaired the damage to your--” Your non-Bajoran organs. That’s right. You’re a Cardassian. Not only are you a different species, but you’re not even in the same biological class. How could you not know? “Your internal organs.”

“That means I can leave, then?”

“Not yet. I’d like to keep you under observation for a few more hours.”

Serot watches him with those keen, too-blue eyes. “There’s something else.”

Julian breaks eye contact to bring Serot’s hand to his own face. He can’t do this. Not now, with Serot still recovering and loopy from the improvoline. It’s just an excuse to stall for time. He’ll take it. “There are a few things I’d like to talk about, but--”

Serot winces. “My outburst. It seems I’m finding new and unique ways to mortify myself in front of you. I’m terribly sorry about that.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Julian says. “I’ve had much worse.” When Serot scoffs at the notion, Julian wags a finger. “It’s true. I once had a frightened Terellian hurl me across the room because I tried to take his temperature. As I always say: you’ve never been in a real fight until you’ve been pummeled by
one man with four fists.”

That draws out a weak chuckle from Serot. “My fearless doctor.”

“At your service. Do you still plan to rat me out to Constable Odo?”

“For committing battery against me by forcing treatment without my consent? I think I can be persuaded to retract my statement.”

“Serot, you’d blackmail me?”

“What I have in mind is nothing you wouldn’t already do willingly.”

Julian’s fingers loosen around Serot’s hand. He tightens them again.

Serot starts to sit up. “Julian, really, what is it?”

“It can wait. Lie back and rest first.”

Serot opens his mouth, ready to protest.

“Doctor’s orders.” Julian kisses the back of Serot’s hand. “I love you.”

“I’d much rather discuss it now.”

Julian won’t be drawn out. “That’s not what you say when someone says they love you.”

Despite his obvious frustration at being denied an answer, Serot collapses back into the biobed. “I love you, too, my dear.”

To Julian’s relief, Serot does eventually fall back asleep. The past ten hours have been trying for both of them, and Julian wishes he could collapse right beside him. Odo is standing where he left him, and squints when Julian reports that Serot isn’t yet ready for the news. “I’ve decided it’ll be better to wait until he’s recovered.”

“You’ll have to tell him eventually, Doctor.”

“I know that.”

“We need his cooperation to begin this investigation.”

“Why? What good will it do to upend his whole life? There must be another way. What about Gul Dvoll? Commander Sisko has always had a good relationship with her. Maybe she knows something, or at least knows someone who can shed some light.”

Odo shakes his head. “I don’t recommend it, Doctor. If Mister Pela is indeed a sleeper agent, alerting the Cardassians that we’ve uncovered the identity of their operative could prove very dangerous.”

“How?”

“They’ll want him back. They may declare him a criminal and demand extradition.”

“Commander Sisko would never agree to that,” Julian bursts out. He isn’t entirely sure. What’s one man in the grand scheme of the Federation’s relationship with Cardassia?

“Barring that, they might simply have him killed. His existence is evidence the Cardassian
government has been using sleeper agents-- evidence that could be used politically by Bajor and the Federation to their disadvantage. The Obsidian Order isn’t known for leaving loose ends untied.”

It’s like a cold hand has clamped down on the back of Julian’s neck. Through the haze, he sees Odo turn and leave, saying something about returning to his office and to contact him when he’s ready. Julian steers himself back into the infirmary. Sitting beside the biobed, he watches Serot’s eyes flit back and forth in sleep.

Doctor Wedel might’ve been on the right track, but his realm is the Bajoran mind. He can’t help here. All those repressed memories, held back by Cardassian agents either benevolent or malicious. What if they’re not repressed, but wiped clean? How would Serot cope, then?

Julian knows of several methods to reverse amnesia, but none of them have been tested on Cardassians, and he isn’t willing to use Serot as a lab rat while he stumbles through a solution. He doesn’t even have the tools to formulate a sound model for testing. That leaves him with tracking down a doctor knowledgeable of Cardassian physiology. One who is trustworthy, who won’t reveal Serot’s identity to the Cardassian powers that be. Not only that, but one willing to take the risk of sharing Cardassian medical secrets with a Federation officer.

Julian rubs his eyes as the futility of it rushes over like a flood meant to drown. He leans back in the chair to stare at the ceiling.

*How will I do this? How will I protect Serot and do my duty to uncover the truth?*

The fatigue sneaks up on Julian; before he can pull away, he’s drifted asleep. He dreams of beds of verdant grass, stretched out in all directions. The blades tickle the naked skin of his stomach, the backs of his knees, the webbing between his toes. Small, alien creatures crawl from their burrows to fix him with periscopic eyes. As they walk over him, their wet, forked feet stick to his skin. They sniff and bite, but their jaws aren’t strong enough to do more than pinch. He giggles as their silent explorations tickle him.

Julian catches one by the tail and holds it up for inspection. It squirms, fighting to break free. The tail snaps, and the creature falls into his lap. Black blood gushes and sprays across his legs. The creature writhes, pawing at the air. With a cry, Julian cradles it between his hands but can’t stop the blood from flowing. It drips between his fingers.

The creature goes still. The others scurry away to hide in their burrows.

When Julian wakes, he finds Serot propped up in bed, a cup of tea steaming between his hands. “I had Nurse Jabara bring you a blanket,” he says.

Stretching out the stiffness in his neck, Julian glances down at the gray Starfleet-issue blanket in his lap. So she did. “Thanks. How are you feeling?”

“Well enough that I can feel my fashion sense returning.” Serot tugs at the much-scorned purple and orange shirt he’s wearing. “I’m ready for a wardrobe change.”

“Hold on. I’ll go get you a change of clothes.”

“I’m fully capable of doing that myself.”

“Maybe, but I haven’t released you yet.”

Serot’s brows draw together in a frown, but on Julian’s insistence he remains in the infirmary while Julian hurries to the habitat ring.
Once he’s in their quarters, flipping through the closet, he slaps his combadge. “Bashir to Odo.”

“Odo here.”

“I’m ready.”

They argue over where to meet. Julian would rather break the news in their quarters, where Serot would feel safest. Odo claims the security office would drive home the gravity of the situation and make his job easier should Serot prove threatening. It’s a ludicrous proposal. They compromise on Julian’s office: sterile, official, neutral.

Odo takes up residence in a corner, standing beside Julian’s desk like a mustard-yellow pillar. Julian’s given Serot the fresh set of clothes and paces around the office as they await his arrival. It gives Julian time to rehearse his Bad News speech, tweaking words here and there to fit the situation.

Serot appears in the doorway, and Julian immediately regrets the dark purple suit he picked out for him; the color only highlights Serot’s pallor and the gray shadows under his eyes, emphasizing the hell his body just endured. He looks fragile. Julian wants to run and pull him into his arms.

Maybe they should postpone this, wait until Serot’s fully recovered. But Odo seems to read his thoughts. He shakes his head, forestalling any attempt to delay further.

Serot’s lips twitch into a hesitant smile as he catches sight of Odo. “Did I do something wrong?”

Odo grunts. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

To his dismay, the remaining color drains from Serot’s face. This is already off to a terrible start. “Serot,” Julian says, “why don’t you sit down?”

With one last wary glance in Odo’s direction, Serot takes the seat across from Julian’s desk. He scoots in close and whispers, “I thought this talk of yours had to do with my illness.”

“It does, in a way.”

“Then what is he doing here? Isn’t my medical status confidential, Julian?”

“It is. Odo’s here to help me with an investigation.”

Serot tilts his head and Julian tenses as the behavior suddenly reminds him of Gul Dvoll. “An investigation into my medical history, then? Have I caught some disease that’s a threat to the station?”

“No--”

“Am I dying?”

“Serot,” Julian says with a long exhale. He should’ve prepared for Serot’s tendency to maneuver the conversation away from where Julian intends. “You’re perfectly healthy. Will you please let me explain?”

Serot shows no sign of relaxing, but gives a nearly imperceptible nod.

Julian closes his eyes to gather strength. If only he could pass this off to someone else, but he wants Serot to hear it from him, to know that he’s going to be here no matter what happens. “It was hard for me to process at first. But the tests don’t lie, and I ran them multiple times to be sure. Everything from your bone structure to your very biochemistry is masked from most sensors.”
“Get to the point, Doctor,” Odo grumbles.

Julian ignores him, his eyes on Serot and only Serot. “You have subdermal implants designed to send out Bajoran lifesigns.”

“What are you saying?” Serot says. “That I’m not a full Bajoran? That I’m a half-breed? With what, a human?”

“Serot, you’re not a hybrid of anything. You’re a Cardassian.”

Serot sighs and presses his lips together. “I’m not in the mood for your jokes, Julian. You know how I feel about being here, and I think I’ve been patient enough.”

“This isn’t a joke. Your DNA confirms it.” On the readout screen, Julian brings up the results. Serot doesn’t look at them. “You’re Cardassian. If I had access to Cardassia’s genetic database, I could even trace your lineage. Someone-- for some reason-- has disguised you as a Bajoran and altered your memories.”

For a long, nerve-wracking moment, Serot glances between Julian and Odo, his eyes narrowed as if trying to detect who is behind the ruse. He jumps to his feet and rounds the chair until he’s standing behind it. “Are we back to this again, Julian? Is this about the disruptor?”

Odo’s head snaps up. “What disruptor?”

Serot plows over him. “You couldn’t get your theory about me being in the Bajoran underground to quite fit, could you? So now I’m a Cardassian! I must give you credit for creativity-- I did not see this coming. My only question is what you’re getting out of this game. Is your job as Chief Medical Officer really that dull?”

Julian leans forward, forcing himself not to buckle under Serot’s glare. “I know you’re angry and confused, but this has nothing to do with that. You can go to any medical professional and they’ll tell you the same thing. In fact, if it helps convince you, I welcome it.”

“What a convenient offer, especially when you know I’d never take you up on it!”

“Dammit, Serot, don’t you see that your fear of doctors is precisely the reason why nobody figured this out sooner?”

“Don’t you see, Doctor, how absolutely ludicrous you sound?”

Julian is close to raising his voice. Can’t Serot understand that he’s only the messenger, that he doesn’t enjoy any of this? Before he can formulate a reply, Odo steps forward.

“Listen to him, Mister Pela,” Odo says. “The evidence is all here. We’ve gone over it with Commander Sisko. It isn’t a figment of Doctor Bashir’s overactive imagination.”

Serot stares wide-eyed at Julian, and it’s that same look of betrayal Julian had hoped to never see again. “You told Commander Sisko?”

“I had no choice.”

“Who else?”

“Only the command crew, and they won’t tell anyone else. Not until we have this figured out.” Julian winces. “And Nurse Jabara. I’ve sworn her to secrecy as well.”
Serot covers his forehead with a hand and, swaying, grabs the back of the chair for support.

Julian’s on his feet and at Serot’s side. He raises his hands, ready to steady Serot should he need it, but doesn’t touch him. “It’s a lot to take in, I know, but I’m here and we’re going to get through it.”

“Spare me. What you’re accusing me of isn’t some disease to be cured.”

“Serot, please, I’m not accusing you of anything!”

“You called me a Cardassian. You may as well come out and say I’m a monster.”

Odo growls low in his throat. “This is getting us nowhere,” he mutters, and crosses the room to grab Serot by the shoulder and spin him around. “You are a Cardassian, understand? You may as well stop this foolishness and come to grips with that.”

“Oh?” Serot draws himself up. “You want me to accept that my life is a farce? I won’t. It’s easy for you to twist yourself into whatever you want— you can’t possibly understand what he’s saying, what it means. Of course you don’t. You don’t even know what you are.”

Odo squares his shoulders. “I don’t need to understand your sudden identity crisis to know the facts of the matter. You’re a Cardassian. Someone has gone to great lengths to disguise you as a Bajoran and place you here on this station. Someone is using you as a pawn, Mister Pela, and I want to know who it is.”

“Odo, this isn’t helping,” Julian says.

“No, Doctor,” Serot says, “it’s fine. It’s good to know what you really want from me. Dear Constable, if I knew anything about this, I would’ve told you long ago. Of that, you have my most sincere promise.”

“Then you’ll agree to cooperate with our investigation,” Odo says.

“Of course. But I still don’t believe a word either of you have said.”

Odo stares at him. “What more evidence do you need?”

“There’s nothing you could show me that would persuade me. I know who I am. This is obviously some kind of fraud intended to fool both you and Starfleet. Perhaps you should put your efforts into investigating that.”

“Serot,” Julian says, “there’s no way to falsify your organs, your bone structure, your very genetics. That kind of technology doesn’t exist.”

At least not to that extreme.

“It’s no use, Doctor,” Odo says, glancing up and down at Serot with the hint of a scowl. “He’s still in denial. That’s fine, I can wait. In the meantime, Doctor Bashir, maybe you should find a way to jog his memory.”

Julian feels Serot turn toward him with a fearful look. This isn’t right. They aren’t ready for this.

“There are several therapies available to revive inhibited memories,” Julian begins. “I’m not an expert on the Cardassian brain, but with help I should be able to find something effective and non-invasive, like what you’re doing with Doctor Wedel. Unfortunately, it’s more difficult when the memories are purposely blocked. We might have to resort to finding the right drug combination—”
Serot lets out a bark of laughter. “This has been an illuminating discussion, gentlemen,” he says with a suddenly pleasant glance between them, “but I really should be taking it easy.” Bowing his head, Serot breezes out the door. Odo doesn’t move to chase after him.

The moment the door shuts, Julian collapses into the chair. “Oh, god. That didn’t go well at all.”

“Did you expect it to?” Odo says.

“No, but-- Odo, you saw him. He hates me.”

Odo snorts. “I doubt it.”

It isn’t worth it. The truth isn’t worth all this. *I should never have started down this road. I shouldn’t have pushed him for answers. I should’ve kept my findings to myself and lived with the consequences of hiding the evidence. It’s worked well enough for me thus far.*

“I don’t think he hates you,” Odo continues. “He’s in denial. You humanoids always go through your emotional stages in much the same way. First it’s denial, then it’s becoming antagonistic and violent--”

“Anger,” Julian corrects. “That doesn’t work the same way for everyone.”

“In time, he’ll come to terms with being a Cardassian.”

“You can’t know that.”

“If I’m right, Doctor, he’s more adaptable than he realizes.” Odo gives the doors a thoughtful look. “And he has no choice in the matter.”

They go their separate ways to draft their first reports for Commander Sisko. Julian pounds it out like a professional, giving an objective, clinical recording of an obstinate patient refusing to believe the diagnosis. The task completed, Julian forces his mind clear and downs mug after mug of Tarkalean tea as he tends to an influx of patients.

The evening comes too quickly. A sliver of dread shoots through him as his eyes settle on the time. Julian pretends not to see it and continues working. It isn’t until he catches Nurse Jabara’s disapproving stare that he says his goodnights and slinks out of the infirmary.

He tries his best to nod to every person passing by on his way to the habitat ring. Everything’s normal. The projection doesn’t work; he’s a ball of tension by the time he reaches their quarters. It occurs to Julian that he doesn’t know what to expect inside. As he keys the door open and crosses the threshold, Julian holds his breath and listens.

Silence.

No, there’s a faint rustling from the bedroom. Julian doesn’t call out, afraid to wake the bear sleeping in its den. He creeps down the hallway and peeks inside the room.

Serot’s bent over a bag, stuffing neatly-folded clothes into its depths. When Julian clears his throat, Serot lifts his head and smiles in a disarming way that instantly puts Julian at ease. “Good evening, my dear. How was your day?”

“Stressful.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You should’ve stopped by the shop. I finished that Klingon gentleman’s latest
commission. We were both quite pleased with it.”

“I-- good. That’s good.”

“Indeed.”

Julian frowns as Serot continues to fold and place clothes into the duffle. “What are you doing?”

Zipping the bag shut, Serot looks up. He’s still smiling. “Packing.”

Julian can see that. He tries to keep his voice neutral, to not let on how much the sight unsettles him. A quiver breaks through. “Where-- where are you going?”

Serot stands and carries the bag over until he’s standing beside Julian. He hesitates, then pecks Julian on the cheek. “I’m not going anywhere, my love,” he says.

Julian relaxes and leans in for a full kiss.

Serot drops the bag at Julian’s feet. “You are.”
Chapter 8

Julian brings up the shot glass, clinking its rim against O’Brien’s as together they call out, “Cheers!”

The whiskey burns a trail down Julian’s throat.

He’s coughing through the sting when the front door slides open. Keiko strides in with an armful of PADDs and what looks to be a spiky fern. Her brows rise as she spots them on the couch, where O’Brien is pouring the next round. “Julian,” she says. “You’re back.”

Julian ducks his head. “Afraid so.”

“You two haven’t patched things up yet?”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be a bother. I can always ask Dax if she can put me up for the--”


“Stay as long as you need,” Keiko adds, setting aside her bundle. “We can’t have the station’s CMO camping out in the hallway. Did you get a chance to talk with him yet?”

“Not yet.” It’s been three nights since Serot told Julian he needed time to himself to “contemplate recent events.” Despite Serot’s reassurances that there was nothing to fear, the request scared Julian. It made him worry that he’d finally gone too far and ruined everything. But arguing would’ve only made the situation worse. In the end, Julian had opted to give Serot his space, promising to be there the instant Serot needed him.

Jadzia had been entertaining a guest when he went searching for a couch to surf. That left him with option two: the O’Briens. Julian knew the chief barely tolerated him, and Keiko would rather spend her evenings quietly with her family, but Julian didn’t want anyone else aware of his personal problems. He sure as hell couldn’t hit up anyone else in the command crew.

“Have you tried apologizing?” Keiko prods with a half smile. Only a jest. As far as she knows, they’re only having a lover’s tiff.

“Why should he,” O’Brien cuts in before Julian can reply, “if he’s done nothing wrong?”

“Is that true, Julian?” Keiko says.

Julian lifts his shot glass, takes a swig, and gives a sage bow of the head. “A wise man once told me that it takes two people to have a fight.”

O’Brien rolls his eyes, muttering that he made that up; Keiko smirks and hollers about dinner being ready in ten minutes, ordering everyone to clean up and get seated.

Later, after a dinner of stuffed chicken and green beans, Keiko retires to read to Molly, leaving Julian alone again with O’Brien and the whiskey. They make quick work polishing it off.

O’Brien holds the bottle upside-down, caps it. Despite his loud, giggly inebriation before, his words are sober. “You have any idea what he’s gonna be like when you finish your, uh, treatments?”

Julian doesn’t want to talk about this. “There’s no way to predict.”

“So he could be a completely different person?”
“Or much the same.”

“That’s a nightmare if I ever heard one. You go to bed with one person and wake up with another.”

“I’m trying not to think about it,” Julian says, hoping the chief will get the point and change the subject. But Julian is drunk and his mouth keeps moving. “It isn’t about me. It’s about Serot and doing what’s best for him.”

“What about what’s best for you?”

“What’s best for me,” Julian repeats.

“No offense, Julian, but why bother staying with him?”

Julian blinks. It takes three seconds for him to piece the words together. “What?”

“Don’t get me wrong, he’s a good bloke and all, but that’s not the real him. He’s a Cardie. Some of them are tolerable enough, I guess, but they’re sneaky and conniving deep down. You might as well cut your losses before you get hurt.”

“If you haven’t noticed, Chief, I’m not the type to cut my loses. I’m not about to walk out on him before I’ve even given him a chance!” Rocketing to his feet, Julian paces the cramped living area. “He needs support right now, not everyone ditching him the second things get rough!”

“And what happens when you find out who he really is? I’ve heard about the Obsidian Order, Julian. They’re ruthless. They torture and murder people for a living.”

Julian shakes his head. They don’t know that. Not yet. He could still be a man in hiding. And though Julian has spun the possibilities over and over, fretting over each thread, he presents to O’Brien a man without doubt. “I love him.”

“I know. But you gotta be realistic. It might turn out, at the end of the day, that he doesn’t love you.”

The corners of Julian’s eyes sting. He’s considered that as well. Much as he can try to control his reactions, control his feelings from getting out of hand, he can’t force Serot to do the same. It isn’t fair. “What would you do, Chief? If Keiko turned out to be a Cardassian?”

O’Brien picks up the whiskey bottle to inspect its label. “You don’t wanna know the answer to that.”

Dinner curdles in Julian’s stomach.

“I’m not proud of it,” O’Brien says. “I’d expect the same from her. You’re not obligated to stay, Julian. This isn’t what you signed up for.”

“What about Molly? What if--”

“They drop the subject. Agree to disagree. Julian isn’t about to shatter his optimism in the face of O’Brien’s bigotry. He won’t lose his happiness because he wasn’t willing to hold on to it. It would be a mistake to give up that easily. He won’t. He won’t.”

It’s Hold’em for the next hour, drunkenly going over the station gossip while O’Brien lays down the flop. Eventually, the need for sleep and an early shift drags the chief back to his bedroom, leaving Julian to fluff the pillow and pull over the scratchy blanket Keiko deposited on the couch. Sleeping
on other people’s furniture is like that, Julian decides: an exercise in discomfort.

Julian settles on the sofa and struggles to get comfortable. The weariness wars with the worry, keeping him awake in a limbo. Julian rubs his chest with a fist and blinks away the pinpricks threatening to make his eyes water. He wants this phase to be over. It’s taken all his effort to keep his distance from Serot, to give him the needed space, and he isn’t sure he can handle it any longer.

*I’m here,* he sends out. *I’m here and I want to help.*

Maybe Serot hears it, because that’s the last night Julian spends on O’Brien’s couch.

It’s the third day of sending Sisko unpromising reports on their lack of progress when Julian, finished with a solitary lunch at the Replimat, catches his first sighting of Serot. He’s standing in front of the temple, talking to someone. With his back to Julian, Serot doesn’t notice him trotting over until Julian calls his name.

Serot turns. The first thing Julian notices are the gray shadows under his eyes. The second is Major Kira. Julian’s confusion evaporates as Serot smiles and pulls him into a hug, his arms tight around Julian’s waist. “Good afternoon, dear,” he says, as if no time has passed.

It’s a cascade of relief, knowing that Serot doesn’t hate him after all. Julian presses his face into Serot’s shoulder and inhales. The scent of him relaxes Julian better than any incense or massage or sedative. “I missed you.”

For a moment, it feels like Serot might collapse on top of him. But he remains aloft. “As have I.”

“How are you holding—” Julian cuts himself off as he notices Kira tugging at Serot’s arm, steering him out of the embrace.

“Go on inside, Pela,” she says. “Give me a second and I’ll join you.”

Serot pulls away and, with one last glance at Julian, disappears into the temple.

Jarred by the intrusion, Julian whirls on her. “What was that about?”

“We go to the temple every day at this time.”

“You know what I mean.” Julian drops his voice to a hiss. “Not three days ago, you were going on about how you knew he couldn’t be trusted. You wanted to turn him over to the Bajoran interim government! And now you’re pretending that you’re best friends again?” What could she possibly be playing at?

“I was mad! It took me by surprise. I don’t expect you to understand, but I’ve gone my whole life listening to my gut instinct, and whenever I ignore it, I get burned. But Pela’s still my friend, and he came to me for advice.”

Julian draws back, feeling the slap. “He came to you? For what?”

“Whatever his genetics might say, he’s a Bajoran. I can sympathize with what he’s going through better than the rest of you can. Prophets know I’d be furious if someone tried to tell me I was a Cardassian. I wouldn’t believe them either. I’d fight it as long as I could. He wanted my advice on what he should do.”

The words are spilling out before he can stop them. “But I’m his doctor! I’m his boyfriend!”
Kira looks ready to roll her eyes. “This isn’t about you, Bashir. You can’t understand. Nobody’s oppressed humans the way the Cardassians oppressed us.”

“I get that. I understand there’s more levels to it--”

“You don’t. You’re not a Bajoran.”

“Neither is he!”

Shooting him a dirty look, Kira says, “He wants to try it this way first.”

“What way?” When Kira draws away, eyes on the temple and her escape, he claps his hands together. “Kira, please.”

“We’re going to Bajor. I can’t say more than that. It’s a private matter.”

Many questions leap to mind, but only one matters. “Can’t I come?”

“What about the word private don’t you understand, Bashir? Look, I’ll be sure to write a report for you and Odo when we get back.”

With that, she walks away. The temple door hisses shut behind her.

Julian sets his jaw. He glares at the door, turns on his heel, and marches across the promenade. When Julian blows through the doors of the security office, he yells, “Kira plans to take Serot to Bajor!”


“Today.”

“I never authorized that.”

Sitting at the desk opposite Odo, Quark waves the matter away. “So what? She needs a vacation. She’s been snapping at everyone like a Tholian crab for the past three days. I say let her go.”

“Quark,” Odo says, “get out.”

“I thought you were in the middle of arresting me!”

“And don’t stray too far, Quark,” Odo calls after him. “I’ve got my eyes on you.” When he’s gone, Odo says to Julian, “Did she give a reason why?”

“She said it was private. She doesn’t plan to hurt him, does she?”

“Relax, Doctor. I don’t think Major Kira means him any harm.” Odo taps a finger against his chin, an approximation of a humanoid in deep thought. “I see what she’s doing. If I’m correct, she intends to take him down to Bajor so he can have an orb experience.”

Julian’s eyes dart to the floor. A quintessential Bajoran way to approach the problem-- one he would never have considered-- and the likely reason why he wasn’t invited along. It still stings. “It’s risky,” Julian says at last. “As I understand it, Commander Sisko and Lieutenant Dax had visions of their past when they encountered the orb, but there’s no way of predicting what Serot will see, or how it
will affect him.”

“Or,” Odo says, “it might be the kick he needs toward cooperating.”

Julian shrugs.

Odo leans over his desk, holding himself aloft by the tips of his fingers. “Out with it, Doctor. Should we put a stop to this? It’s your call.”

It’s what Serot wants. He must have feared that Julian would overreact and had opted not to tell him. *I can’t say that I blame him.* Much as Julian worries over the dangers, it’s a starting point. An opening. Julian will have to research the negative side effects of orb experiences, just to be safe. It’s also possible that nothing will happen at all. Either way, it would only cause more friction in their relationship were Julian to deny Serot this attempt.

“Kira doesn’t want me to come along,” Julian says.

Odo almost smiles. “And we can’t have that, now can we?”

Odo moves swiftly and without hesitation. Soon they’re crossing the promenade and heading to the docking ring. Julian wonders if it would’ve been easier to send over a security team on ahead, but figures Odo would rather be here himself. *If you want something done right,* as the saying goes. Julian can understand the inclination.

They’ve been standing outside the docking platform leading to the *Ganges* for twenty minutes when they pick up the first snatches of conversation. The voices draw closer, and then Major Kira is standing before them with a bag slung across her shoulders. She scowls. Behind her, Serot actually smiles.

“I told you, my dear,” Serot says, “they wouldn’t just let us leave.”

“Oh?” Odo interrupts with feigned surprise. “Were you two going somewhere?”

Kira’s scowl deepens. “I don’t need to ask for permission.”

“Commander Sisko put us in charge of this investigation, Major. You can’t just run off with our key player. He might be dangerous.”

“Who, Pela? Are you kidding me? I think I can handle one middle-aged tailor. No offense, Pela.”

“None taken,” says Serot with a quick bow.

“And what if he attempts escape?” Odo says.

Kira taps the phaser at her waist and rolls her eyes when Julian visibly recoils. “Come on, Odo. What’s this about? If you’re trying to stop us, get on with it already.”

“Doctor Bashir has some concerns about what you’re planning.”

“Does he.”

That’s Julian’s cue. “Orb experiences are known to have a draining effect on a person. That’s in addition to whatever trauma is suffered from the experience itself.”

“And you want to supervise,” Kira finishes.
“Just to be on the safe side. You won’t even know I’m there.”

Kira glances back at Serot. He lowers his chin to his chest. “Fine,” Kira says. “But stay out of the way and be respectful. I’m not in the mood to babysit you.”

Julian nods his understanding, inwardly rejoicing. This is as close to a win as he’s going to get. “Thank you,” he says, looking directly at Serot.


Kira leads the way into the shuttle with Julian at the rear. She takes navigation and waves Serot into the adjoining seat. Julian hovers; he watches them interact as, over the comm system, Jadzia gives them permission to leave the station. Soon the Ganges is thrusting away into the star-speckled void.

Tentatively, Julian stands beside Serot and looks him over. By now he should’ve regained some of his color, but Serot is still pale. Not taking good care of himself. Julian brushes a rogue strand of blond hair from Serot’s eyes and relaxes when Serot leans into Julian’s hand.

“When was the last time you slept?” Julian asks. He manages not to sound chiding.

“Oh, I’ve indulged in a few naps in my shop here and there.”

Julian snorts. “All this time I’ve been sleeping on Miles’ lumpy couch, and you haven’t even been using the bed?”

To his delight, Serot laughs. An easy, genuine laugh. “That does seem rude of me. Maybe I should’ve kicked myself out.”

“Hey, you said it. Not me.”

“Sit down, Bashir,” Kira interrupts. “You’re making me nervous.”

Julian doubts that, but nods along anyway. “Yessir.”

As he sits back in a corner, out of the way, Julian watches Serot from his periphery. He’s working the controls with ease now, slipping into the role like he had the last time they visited Bajor. Muscle memory, Julian realizes. Fine motor skills memorized and unconsciously recalled. Of course. Serot isn’t an incredibly fast learner-- he’s done all this in a past life.

He can’t help but remember the dagger. Serot had never reacted that way when Julian surprised him while awake. But while sleeping, lost in an unconscious whirl where a suppressed identity can roam free--

Julian is back on his feet and hovering over Serot. Kira shoots him another scowl. He ignores it, attention on Serot as he continues to occasionally flick the controls. “What are you going to do next?”

Serot pauses. “Pardon me?”

“What are you going to press next?”

Frowning, Serot stares at the controls. He points, but doesn’t look convinced, as if expecting a trick question.

Julian nods. “Why?”
“Because--” Serot shrugs. “Because I have to.”

The muscle memory is there, but the underlying memories that explain the hows and whys are locked away. Perhaps there’s a way to trigger those memories. Julian is about to prod him further when Kira sighs and swivels toward him. “Doctor, you’re getting in the way.”

“Now I’ve lost my place,” Serot mutters. Kira leans over and keys something into his console. He raises a finger. “Ah.”

“See?” Kira says. “You’ve distracted him. Get out of here before I turn this ship around.”

Hands raised in acquiescence, Julian returns to his corner. There, Julian mentally jots notes about what he knows about Serot the Cardassian: he can pilot, knows how to wield a dagger, and is experienced in self defense and hand-to-hand combat. In all likelihood, he also knows his way around a disruptor. Flimsy evidence that only further supports Odo’s theory that Serot was in the Obsidian Order. There must be ways to tap into Serot’s subconscious and gather more information on who he once was-- a way to ignite his instincts and draw the Cardassian side out.

The time passes in relative silence. Kira and Serot murmur to each other and despite trying not to eavesdrop, Julian picks out words. Discussing scripture. He tunes them out.

Julian is outlining methods to test Serot’s implicit memory when they break Bajor’s atmosphere. Continents expand by the second and clouds flutter around them as they descend. Green specks resolve into trees. Red squares become the roofs of buildings. Winding serpents of brown and blue turn into roads and rivers.

They touch down in an area that reminds Julian of a jungle on Earth. A discordant chorus of birds chirp from the canopies and flies gather in buzzing swarms, demanding to be swatted. Kira leads the way out of the runabout and down a path overgrown with foliage, grass, and overturned trees. The trail takes them up and down steep hills, and soon Julian’s uniform is damp from the humidity and clinging to his skin. He keeps his attention trained on Serot, who is picking his way through the brambles with the caution of a man ready to faint.

Kira is a good ten paces in front of them, and the gap is widening. “Slow down, Kira!” Julian calls out.

She pauses long enough to turn and hand Serot a flask. “It’s not much farther.”

Julian brushes away a clump of hair stuck to Serot’s forehead and insists on taking his hand. Serot favors him with a wan smile and accepts the help. It’s a mystery how Serot is still standing-- a question that’s answered as Julian catches the light of determination in his eyes. As far as Serot is concerned, it doesn’t matter how much scientific evidence Julian piles up; he’ll only believe what the orb tells him.

Julian casts his eyes skyward. You Prophet buggers better not lead him astray.

They crest a hill and Julian sucks in a breath at the sight of the monastery, half-hidden by trees. Still gripping Serot’s hand, they meet Vedek Bareil along the footpath where he’s bowed over a patch of pink flowers. He rises and smiles at Kira in a way Julian finds vaguely creepy. “Welcome back, Nerys. I trust you had a safe journey?”

The pleasantries fly back and forth for what feels like hours until the subject finally settles on their reason for coming. “Sorry, Pela,” Kira says, taking his elbow. “Bareil, this is the friend I told you about.”
Bareil smiles. “Thank you for coming all this way, Mister Pela. I hope we can help put your mind at ease. Are you ready?”

“Maybe you should rest first,” Julian interrupts as Bareil places a hand on Serot’s shoulder. “After all, it was a long walk.”

“It’s entirely up to you,” Bareil says. “I can bring refreshments if you need time to gather your strength.”

“I’m fine, thank you, Vedek,” Serot says with a polite bow of the head, though his voice is tinged with weariness. “I’d much rather meet my fate now.”

“A man of action.” Bareil nods. “Come with me, then.”

Julian moves to follow, but Kira stalls him with a sharp look. He bristles against it, wanting to chase after them as they draw closer to the monastery. Instead he calls out to Serot, “I’ll be out here if you need anything!”

Once they’ve disappeared inside, Kira says, “He’s in safe hands.”

“Did you tell Bareil--”

“Of course not. Do you think I’m stupid? I told him I had a troubled friend I was worried about.”

“That’s all it took to convince him? I thought it was an honor to have an orb experience.”

“It is.”

“Then how--”

“I have some pull with Vedek Bareil.”

“I’m sure you do,” Julian mutters under his breath. She doesn’t seem to hear.

“Just relax. There’s a chance it won’t even work. The Prophets are the ones who decide if he sees anything. Either way, when he comes out, give him some space.” Kira turns her face toward the sky. “I hope Vedek Winn doesn’t show up this time.”

“Will you be in trouble,” Julian says, “if they find out he’s Cardassian?”

“The Vedek Assembly would be furious, that’s for sure. Let’s worry about that when we get there, okay?”

Julian sits on a cool boulder to listen to the birds warble. Two insects chase each other through the air. It hadn’t occurred to him that Kira might be taking a risk on Serot’s behalf. She’s vouching for him, and might ultimately be held responsible if word got out that a Cardassian was allowed to lay eyes on the Orb of Prophecy and Change.

After ten minutes of silent meditation, Julian says, “What will he see?”

“The past. The future. I don’t know.” She stands at the edge of a stream and looks out at the tree line in the distance. “Most of it didn’t make any sense at first.”

Julian fidgets. “Kira, are you mad at me?”

There’s a flash in her eyes, and then she’s upon him. “What the hell were you thinking? You told
him like, what, it was some kind of medical condition? What did you expect him to do, just accept it? He trusted you, and you threw that at him so coldly.”

“Wait, you’re saying I’m the cold one?” Julian clammers to his feet, not about to let her insult him. “I’m sorry, I must’ve missed how you rushed to help!”

“You hurt him!”

“What was I supposed to do? Let him go on believing a lie?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. He needed to be told, but not that way.”

Julian sighs. This is getting them nowhere. “We have a saying back on Earth: hindsight is 20/20. It references an ancient method of measuring visual acuity. It’s easy to know what you should’ve done after everything’s already happened.”

“I hope your vision is less impaired going forward, Bashir. Because it isn’t going to get any easier. For anybody, least of all him.”

“I know.” Julian rubs his eyes, suddenly exhausted. “I could always use your input, Kira. This-- whatever happens-- will go much better if we work together.”

Her expression softens, and she looks ready to reply when they both catch movement from the doorway. Vedek Bareil emerges first, drawing Serot behind him and whispering in his ear. Serot doesn’t appear to be listening. His eyes are locked on the stones beneath their feet.

Julian rushes over. He doesn’t bother with the tricorder-- until they remove Serot’s implants, it’s worthless. That leaves him with touch and sight. He feels the skin around Serot’s forehead, times his pulse, looks into his eyes. Serot remains motionless, allowing it. Thankfully, he isn’t any worse for wear than before he went inside.

“What happened?” Julian says, hates himself for it. Hadn’t Kira warned him to give Serot space?

“I left to give him some privacy,” Bareil explains. “When I returned, he’d closed the doors to the orb and was sitting on the floor.”

Does that mean he saw something? Julian wonders. Or was it a failure?

Serot’s fingers bite into Julian’s forearm, bunching around the cloth as he rouses from the trance. “Take me home,” he says. It isn’t an order, but a plea.

Julian exchanges a glance with Kira and she takes off running up the hill, back the way they came, not even bidding the Vedek goodbye. “I’m on it.”

Serot’s gone silent again. This time Julian doesn’t push him for details. Wrapping his arms around Serot’s shoulders, he pulls him into an embrace, only dimly aware of Bareil behind them, saying something. It doesn’t matter. Serot’s leaning his weight on Julian, and all Julian cares about is remaining Serot’s steady anchor.

Kira makes good time, and within ten minutes the shuttlecraft is flying overhead. Julian looks back at Bareil and meets his frown of concern with a weak smile. “Uhm. Thanks for your hospitality.”

They dematerialize and resolidify in the cockpit of the Ganges. From her seat, Kira nods and turns back to the controls, bringing the shuttle around.
“This way, habibi,” Julian murmurs as he tugs Serot toward the back of the ship. He tries to get Serot to lie in one of the bunks, but he won’t budge. “C’mon, Serot. You need to rest.”

Serot shuffles to the bench along the wall and, sagging into it, stares ahead. Julian doesn’t argue. He sits, sidling up and pulling Serot close until he’s resting his head on Julian’s shoulder. The answer is obvious now: Serot wouldn’t be reacting this way if the orb had remained dormant in his presence. Julian rubs circles over Serot’s back, over his arms and sides. He clamps down the urge to bombard him with questions.


If Serot hears him, he doesn’t acknowledge it.

There’s a clomp of footsteps and Kira appears in the doorway. Julian feels her eyes settle on them, sizing up the situation, before she crosses over and sits beside Serot. She gathers one of his hands between hers. They sit, together, for a long time.

Julian’s arm has gone numb when he finally reaches into his medkit and draws out the hypospray.

It helps Serot sleep.

Once home on the station and in their bed, Serot catches up on the rest he’s missed, aided by the sedative. Julian curls up behind him and buries his face in Serot’s hair—just like before this nightmare started, like they’re any other carefree couple. Serot doesn’t move throughout the night, and Julian pines for the same undisturbed, drug-induced sleep. He’s left tossing and turning.

Julian doesn’t want to leave Serot alone, but duty calls and he has no choice but to return to the infirmary the next morning. When he comes home for lunch, he finds Serot on the sofa, focused on a single spot on the ceiling.

There isn’t anything physically wrong with him. Serot eats what Julian pushes under his nose, but he doesn’t respond to his name or to Julian’s questions. Julian brings in Odo and Kira and Jabara, but each is met with the same faraway gaze and indifference. Sometimes, he ghosts around their quarters, looking at this painting or that bit of trash, but never touching anything. Awake, Serot is a silent observer. Mostly, he sleeps.

This cycle goes on for three days, and Julian is aware of Odo’s impatience. At first the constable declares that it’s all an act to stall for time, but eventually admits that if it’s an act, it’s a brilliant one.

“Give him something, Doctor,” Odo growls as they watch an expressionless Serot contemplate the stars through the viewport. Odo looks ready to march across the room and slap him back to reality.

“Take him for a walk around the promenade. Shake some sense into him. I don’t care what it is, just do something.”

“I’ve seen this before,” Kira says. “He’ll snap out of it eventually.”

“How can you be so sure, Major?” Odo says.

Kira only shrugs. It’s a helpless gesture, one that Julian has been seeing a great deal of lately.

“He has to come out of it himself,” Julian says at last. Forcing the issue has gotten them nowhere thus far.

Odo sighs. “Meanwhile, our investigation stagnates.”
Julian doesn’t care about the goddamn investigation. But he keeps his mouth shut. Instead he ushers Odo and Kira out the door and goes to sit on the arm of Serot’s chair, where he’s been settled for the past few hours. Serot doesn’t seem to notice his presence.

After a time, Julian points to a pinprick of light. “That’s Earth’s sun over there.” It isn’t even visible from this side of the quadrant, but Serot doesn’t know that.

Serot’s eyes glance to Julian, then back to the viewport.

It isn’t the daze that kills Julian. It’s the muteness. He misses the sound of Serot’s voice, even when he’s upset. He’ll take Serot in a rage over this lack of emotion, lack of anything. Julian grabs Serot’s hand and presses it to his face. “Come on, Serot. Habibi. Say something. Anything. Call me an idiot. Tell me that green jumper I’ve been wearing is an affront to your aesthetics. Scream at me! I don’t care, just please, please let me know that you’re still in there!”

Serot doesn’t even turn his head toward him. Julian drops his hand and jumps to his feet. He stands in front of the window, blocking Serot’s view.

“What did you see in there, hm? Was it really that bad? You can’t go on ignoring me forever, Serot. This is childish. You know that? Childish. You’re going to have to face this. You’re going to have to face that you’re a Cardassian. You’re a Cardassian. If you don’t like that, it’s too damn bad! You can’t just withdraw from reality!”

Nothing. Not even the flicker of ire.

Julian grabs Serot’s face, pulling him forward. What silly fairy tale was it where the prince kissed the princess back to coherence? Snow White? Sleeping Beauty? Both, perhaps. Julian presses his lips to Serot’s. When Serot remains still, Julian slides his tongue into Serot’s mouth, jabs him with it, tastes every corner of him until neither of them can breathe. It’s like making out with a dead fish.

Julian lets go. Serot sits back, unfazed, not even bothering to wipe away the moisture of Julian’s saliva from his lips and chin.

Running his fingers through his scalp, Julian grips fistfuls of hair and groans. “Don’t do this to me,” he whispers. “I can’t help you like this.”

Julian looks around their quarters, everywhere but at Serot. With a last groan that resonates deep in his chest, Julian stomps out the door. He heads to Quark’s and watches the dabo wheel spin.

On the fourth day, several people file into the infirmary to ask him what’s wrong with Serot. At first, Julian assumes it’s because the shop has been closed for so long. Then one Bajoran insists on leading Julian across the promenade, and Julian spots the problem. Something sinks within his chest. Inside the brightly-lit tailor shop is Serot, carrying on as if nothing is amiss. He putters this way and that, hanging garments and fussing over the frilled hemming on a dress. Serot’s physically present, but as Julian enters, it’s obvious the rest of him is still elsewhere. Running on autopilot.

“Serot,” Julian whispers, “you’re not ready to come back. Everybody’s worried about you.”

Serot walks around Julian like he’s part of the architecture and retrieves a section of red ribbon.

Julian catches his arm, careful not to make a scene. “C’mon, let’s go home and have an early lunch.”

Serot doesn’t protest. He even keys the door lock on their way out.

It’s unnerving, the way Serot sits at their little dining table and waits while Julian orders from the
replicator. He selects a Reuben on rye for himself and Salad Arrangement 429 for Serot. He carries the trays over, followed by a pair of Tarkalean teas. Serot begins stabbing into the salad without hesitation. Julian wonders if he’ll mindlessly accept anything Julian puts in front of him. But setting down a plate of gagh and awaiting the reaction seems a mean-spirited cruelty.

Julian picks up a PADD and reads aloud from a Cardassian drama he discovered in the station’s library. He’d started it in the hopes of learning more about Serot’s other culture and gleaning insights-- into what, he doesn’t know. Thus far the prose is overly utilitarian, yet the sentences are full of redundancies and drag on for entire pages. Maybe a bad translation. It’s been a slog, but it’s a respite from the silence between them.

Serot’s half-finished with his meal when he stands, teacup in hand, and wanders into the living area. Ignoring him, Julian continues reciting the meandering story of two young lovers torn apart by the sedition of their fathers.

There’s a crash, jolting him from the reading. He looks up to find Serot glaring at him. Across the room, a stain of brown tea drips from the wall and into scattered shards of ceramic.

“Will you stop reading that thing?” Serot snaps.

Julian blinks, thrown by the shattered teacup and Serot speaking. “W-Why?”

Serot turns and fetches a towel. He kneels beside the mess.

“No, Serot. Why? What is it? Do you recognize the book? Have you read it before?”

“Julian, please!” Serot scrubs frantically at the stain.

“Do you hate it?”

“I never read it!”

“Then--”

“It reminds me of him.”

The last word is spat with venom. Julian frowns. “Who? You mean-- who you were before? Serot, you’re not a different person. Who you were-- it’s still you.”

“I beg to differ.”

Julian crosses over to where Serot is picking at the ceramic. “Forget it, I’ll take care of it later. Come sit down, please. What did you see?”

Serot’s deliberately avoiding looking at him now, eyes turned away as they sit, but that doesn’t frustrate Julian nearly as much as the empty staring. They’re making progress.

“Was it the past?” Julian presses. “Or the future?”

“It was jumbled. I didn’t recognize any of the faces, but in the vision I acted as if I did.”

“Where were you?”

Serot shifts in his seat.

“Cardassia?”
Serot looks him in the eye. “If I ask you to do something, as someone who cares for me, would you?”

“You know I will. Within reason. You only have to ask.”

“Then wipe my memory. Everything up to the past eleven and a half years.”

Julian balks. “You can’t be serious. You don’t even know what you’d be destroying!”

“It is possible, though, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but Serot, this isn’t something you can take back. You might have friends-- family. You’d be leaving them behind.”

“Ah, but they must not have been important to me if I was so willing to neglect them all this time.” Serot’s voice is bitter, and Julian wonders if he knows more than he’s letting on.

“You don’t know that,” Julian says. “Do you? Do you know that for sure? It might’ve been against your will.”

“Please, Julian, I can’t bear knowing that this other man is inside me.”

“Serot, we’re the sum of our experiences, you can’t--”

“And the person you know as me never drew on them!”

“You don’t know that. The fundamental components of your personality might very well be housed in those memories. Decades worth. That’s not a trivial amount of time. If it were merely a matter of isolating recent memories and eliminating them to avoid trauma, that would be different.”

Serot lets out a breath of obvious frustration. “You aren’t listening to me. This is a trauma.”

“Maybe right now, but in time you’ll--” Julian backpedals, switching tacks as he notices Serot’s eyes narrow. “Do you have any idea what you’re asking me to do? I’d have to hide all this from you for the rest of our lives. I can’t keep that secret.”

Serot presses his lips together. “You have to.”

“You’d be living a lie!”

“And what’s wrong with that? Julian, I know it would be a burden on you. I wouldn’t be asking if I hadn’t already thought it out.”

Julian nods, wants badly to tell Serot that he actually understands what it feels like to want to forget some terrible secret about himself. “It’s not as simple as you and me. Not anymore. As of right now, Commander Sisko suspects you’re a Cardassian spy.”

“But I’m not!”

“Dammit, that’s not the point! He can’t trust our word for it, and neither can Starfleet. He needs proof. There must’ve been a reason for all of this--” Julian gestures vaguely at Serot. “--And until he knows for sure this will never be over. I’m sorry, Serot. I’d disobey almost any order for you, but I can’t do this. I sincerely think finding the truth is what’s best for us. For you.”

“That’s it, then?” Serot squeezes his eyes shut as if the lights are suddenly too bright. “What am I to do now?” The question is rhetorical, but Julian opens his mouth in an attempt to answer, despite not
Knowing what to say. Serot just shakes his head and continues, his voice a whisper, “It’s over, isn’t it?”

“What?”

Serot’s eyes begin to shine. He shakes his head again.

Julian launches himself forward and takes Serot’s face in his hands. “No! It’s bloody well not over! Why would you ever even think that?”

“You said it yourself. I’m living a lie.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“You don’t have to spare my feelings, my dear. You don’t know who I am. Neither do I. You’re under no obligation to—”

“Stop. I love you. All of you.”

“Hnh! That’s your famous naiveté talking! I could be a horrible person. Below reproach.”

“I don’t believe that. You’re kind, warm-hearted.”

“What if Odo’s right, and I was in the Obsidian Order? Then would you still go on believing that?”

“Why is it so hard to fathom that those aren’t mutually exclusive concepts? That you could’ve been in the Obsidian Order and still be a kind person? Who you are now didn’t come from nowhere, Serot.” Julian taps his chest with two fingers. “It’s deep down. That’s not going to change.”

“You said you aren’t attracted to Cardassians.”

Julian chokes down a laugh, finding his voice hoarse. If he’d known he was going to eat those words later, he never would’ve said them. “I already am. I’ll say it ’til I’m blue in the face: I love you. I do. I don’t care if you’re covered in skin or scales or fur or— hell— slime.”

That draws out a snort, but Serot’s almost smiling through the tears.

Inspired, Julian kisses him. “I don’t care if you’re a Bajoran or a Cardassian or a secret Horta. I’m not going anywhere. Okay?”

“You’re a fool,” Serot says, but there’s nothing behind the words but affection as he presses his lips against Julian’s.

Julian pulls Serot closer until they’re nearly sitting in each other’s laps. Even though it hasn’t been that long, Julian can’t help but grab Serot’s shoulders like it’s been eons, his tongue pushing into Serot’s mouth until they’re both dazed and gasping. Then Julian catches himself; he pulls away. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean— you’re still—”

“No, please.” Serot’s fingers tug at the fastenings of Julian’s uniform. His mouth seeks out Julian’s again. “Please.”

It’s all Julian needs to hear. In an instant, they’re kissing again and he’s wrenching off Serot’s jacket and tossing it aside. He’s pulling Serot’s collar like it’s attached to a leash, whispering, “Come, hurry,” as they drag each other to the bedroom and fight out of their clothes.

They fall to the bed. Serot reaches for Julian’s waistband, but Julian stops him. “No,” he says,
pressing Serot into the mattress. “Let me.”

Serot raises a brow, the beginnings of a snide remark evident. But he closes his eyes and the corners of his lips twitch.

Julian leans in, kissing the skin along Serot’s forehead, down the left side and then the right, planting one kiss at the center. Then he’s moving again, nipping down Serot’s nose, tracing his jawline with the tip of his tongue. He bites Serot’s chin.

Serot releases a breathy laugh. “What are you doing?”

“Shh. Stay still.”

Julian kisses the soft, delicate skin circling Serot’s eyes and smothered a grin when that earns him a gasp. Sensitive, then. Julian moves downward to kiss along Serot’s neck, pinpointing the areas he knows are a hotbed of nerve endings. Serot squirms, then splays and unravels into moans as Julian’s kisses become sucks and bites.

Julian stops, considering his next move.

Serot protests with a groan and buck of the hips. “What have I done to deserve such cruelty?”

“I must be cruel, only to be kind,” Julian says, lips brushing against Serot’s left nipple. When they’d first been intimate, Julian had been mildly disappointed by their lack of sensitivity. Now, after seeing Gul Dvoll’s soldiers in various stages of undress, he understands. The breastplate of the male Cardassian is protected by layers of cartilage and thick scales and lack the areolas found on humans and Bajorans. For Serot, nipples are an ornament-- part of the costume-- not an erogenous zone.

So Julian skips them.

Instead, Julian grazes his fingers along Serot’s flank, making him shiver, while his head dips lower to rest between Serot’s hips. He presses his fingers gently into Serot’s pubic bone. As he probes, his fingers find an indentation and follow it around where it circles Serot’s penis. Secondary penis, he adds to himself. The indentation is easy to miss, hidden beneath erectile tissue and muscle and skin, but now that he knows what to look for, its presence is obvious.

Serot releases a deep sigh and Julian increases the pressure along the indentation. “You like this?”

“I like the direction you’re heading, yes.”

Julian smiles, wonders if he should confess everything he saw under the bioscan. The differing internal organs are only part of it. Another component are the sexual organs housed behind the pubic bone, sealed off, ducts rerouted, connections to the sensory and motor cortex severed.

This isn’t the time to mention it, Julian decides, and with a last grin in Serot’s direction, wraps his mouth around the Bajoran replica. Serot lets out a growl and tangles his fingers in Julian’s hair.

And so Julian focuses on the here and now: the feel of Serot under his tongue, the taste of salt, the way Serot’s breath hitches when Julian’s fingers skim lower to enter him. The familiar sound of skin slapping skin. How they both can’t help but smile at how well they fit together.

As Julian dips his head to steal a lingering kiss, he thinks about what won’t change. The feel of Serot’s fingers digging into his arms. The desire and affection in his eyes when they make love. Maybe it’s the idealist inside him, but Julian knows that even if a thousand little things are different, his feelings won’t change.
He can only hope it will be the same for Serot.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

The gameplay of kotra is based off this amazing guide. I had nothing to do with it.

Cardassia Prime is hot and arid, and Julian is thankful his ancestors were well adapted to desert conditions. Otherwise, he just might melt into the cobblestone path, his puddle of a corpse serving as a warning to other humans foolish enough to venture onto this alien world. The oncoming heatstroke makes it difficult for Julian to drag his reluctant companion along. Thankfully, Serot catches on to his need for rest and soon it’s Serot pulling him through the press of gray-scaled bodies.

Serot cuts a path toward a building, out of the sun, and Julian collapses into a chair the moment the sweet shade touches his skin. He’s about to strip off his clothes and go naked-- Cardassian propriety be damned-- when Serot grabs a glass from a Cardassian’s hand. The man protests in a fume of Kardasi, only for Serot to ignore him and pass the glass to Julian.

Julian glugs down the water and sets the emptied glass on the table. “Thank you.” He wipes a rivulet of sweat from his brow. “I feel like a greased pig.”

Serot tilts his head. Despite the sheen on his skin from the subdermal implants and a rosy glow on his cheeks, he seems unaffected by the heat. Lucky prat.

Serot wrinkles his nose. “Do you smell that?”

“I’m sorry, I must reek like an old sock. I can’t help it. Bromhidrosis is a natural effect of the bacteria in my skin’s flora multiplying in the presence of sweat.”


Relieved he isn’t the culprit, Julian sniffs. He catches a whiff between rotten fruit and sun-warmed seafood. “Oh, that’s foul. Did we happen past a rubbish bin?”

Serot’s glancing around now, trying to pinpoint the source. He closes his eyes and inhales. “It’s not bad.”


“Yes, careful. Right.” Julian takes another sniff, much as it pains him. “I think it’s coming from over there. Come on! Follow your nose!”

Soon they’re both crowding around a Cardassian man sitting at the bar. He cradles a mug of pungent pink liquid between his hands. Serot points. “Sir, might I ask what you’re drinking?”

The Cardassian curls his upper lip and mutters something.

“He called it rokassa juice,” Serot translates.
“He said something else after that.”

“That he did.”

Julian raises a brow, not about to be satisfied with any reticence.

“He referred to us by a few colorful slurs, if you must know.”

No surprise there. It’s typical of Cardassian xenophobia. Serot’s taken the brunt of the most vicious insults— a function of looking Bajoran. Yet he’s handled the hostility better than Julian, who still can’t get over how someone had dared call his face “rustic.” That’s a step below homely!

Julian decides to let it go. “Rokassa juice,” he says, testing the word. He looks at Serot, who only shrugs. Doesn’t ring any bells, it seems. Julian waves at a woman behind the counter and orders a mug of their own.

Luckily, she doesn’t seem bothered by his use of Federation standard. She carries the drink over along with a metal straw and sets it upon the bar with a clank.

Julian pushes the mug toward Serot. “Bottoms up.”

“You first,” Serot says, pushing it back.

“This is for your benefit, need I remind you?”

“This was your idea.”

“Yes, but it might be toxic to humans!”

“Hardly a valid concern here,” Serot says.

“Okay, point taken, but it smells really disgusting.”

Serot folds his arms across his chest. There won’t be any budging now. Revision: Serot is a stubborn prat.

With a dramatic sigh, Julian brings the straw to his lips. “Big baby,” he says, and sucks down a brave mouthful of the stuff. He gags as tart sweetness coats his tongue. A sharp contrast to the stench. It isn’t horrid, per se-- not nearly as awful as their experiments with kanar. He pushes the mug back toward Serot. “Your turn.”

Serot gives it one last experimental whiff before taking a sip. He holds the fluid in his mouth, swallows with a wince, and shoves the mug away as if its presence offends him. “If I should ever visit Cardassia,” he says, “I shall surely starve.”

Julian laughs, recalling the incident with a plate of regova eggs. “It must be an acquired taste. Actually, it’s a bit like durian fruit, back on Earth. Does it remind you of anything? Any memories of tasting it before?”

A headshake from Serot. That’s nothing new. In the past two weeks of these simulations, Serot has had vague sensations of familiarity, with none of them manifesting into a concrete memory of his past life. But it won’t do to lose hope. They just have to find the right trigger, whatever it might be.

“Ready?” Julian says at last.

Together, they rise from the bar, abandoning the mug of cloying juice to the flies.
They make their way back outside, past the administrative buildings and gardens and street vendors of the Tarlak sector. This is the heart of Prime’s Cardassia City, circa ten years ago. Or so Quark claims. Neither Julian nor Serot would be able to tell the difference. Still, Julian absorbs every detail—the white orchids sprouting from their planters, the neatly-trimmed hedges, the red-gray sky, the colorful clothes of pedestrians—and tries to imagine Serot walking through here as a Cardassian among his people.

It’s a familiar exercise by now. They’ve visited major cities and backwater towns across the planet in all seasons. They’ve attended festivals and holiday celebrations. Glimpsed oceans and mountains and highlands. Explored museums and universities and libraries and boutiques. Sampled the local delicacies. They even found an ancient Hebitian temple and wandered its cavernous interior. Through it all, Serot has felt nothing but inklings: ghosts too ephemeral to give but a sensation of what’s missing.

“Maybe you never lived on Prime,” Julian says as they arrive in an open square. Here, there are no Cardassians reading in semicircles or socializing while sipping tea. The people move with purpose as the statues of dead politicians look on. They’ve reached the Imperial Plaza. “Maybe you lived elsewhere in the Union,” he adds. Julian likes the idea of Serot the colonist, eking out a living in the outer territories.

When Serot remains silent, Julian squints against the glare of the sun and turns. He spots Serot ten yards away, staring at a clump of ugly gray buildings. The Cardassian emblem is everywhere on this planet, but here it seems to be especially omnipresent.

Serot wanders toward one building in particular, as if drawn by a magnet. Wordlessly, Julian follows until they’re both at the base of its wide stone steps.

“I’ve been here before,” Serot says, voice faraway.

This is the first time Serot’s ever found their surroundings familiar. It’s always been scents, sounds, and tastes that have resonated. It’s a good sign, Julian thinks. Maybe they’re getting somewhere. Besides the Cardassian symbol, there’s nothing marking the building. An error in the simulation, most likely. What he wouldn’t give for a perfect holosuite program.

“Well,” Julian says, “let’s go in.”

“We wouldn’t be welcome.”

“That hasn’t stopped us before, has it?” Julian takes Serot’s arm and grins. “Come on. Nothing to be afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid. I’m wary. And you would be, too, if you had any sense.”

“Sticks and stones will break my bones,” Julian recites as they climb the stairs.

“They won’t use either, I assure you.”

Julian pauses. “Serot, what’s wrong? What is this place?”

“I don’t know. But these are governmental buildings, Julian. Nothing benign comes from Cardassian bureaucracy.”

Julian makes a show of rolling his eyes. Bajoran melodrama again. He continues ascending the steps. “From what Kira’s told me, you don’t want anyone overhearing you say that.”
It’s a joke, but Serot glances over his shoulder, then at the sky.

They reach a pair of immense doors that open as Julian inches closer. “See?” he says. “Everything’s fine.”

The doors close behind them, instantly cutting off the source of sunlight and casting the interior into darkness. Julian trips over a hidden step and catches himself. Damn Cardassians and their hatred of decent indoor lighting. Julian can almost feel Serot’s smile as he takes his hand, leading the way with his superior night vision.

The hall opens into a small room. Red lights illuminate the floorboards, casting shadows over a squat desk. Nobody sits behind it. A burst of cold air hits them in the face and Serot shivers. He tightens his grip around Julian’s hand. “We should go,” he says.

“Why? You said you’d been here before.”

“I was wrong,” Serot says, too quickly.

Julian knows that’s a lie. He doesn’t understand Serot’s sudden paranoia. Sure, the place is a tad creepy, but all of Cardassia gives the sense of foreboding.

He’s about to argue the point when there’s a shuffle from behind them. They turn and come face-to-face with a Cardassian man in a black uniform. In the darkness, Julian catches a glimpse of narrowed eyes.

The man’s voice is gruff. A question, followed by an order.

Serot tenses and jerks Julian behind him.

“What did he say?” Julian asks.

Serot’s backing away, toward the entrance, taking Julian with him. The Cardassian keeps advancing.

“Tell him we’re just looking around,” Julian says. “Tell him we mean no harm!”

“And how do you propose I do that? I don’t speak Kardasi!”

Julian doesn’t know where the second man comes from. A hand clamps on Julian’s arm, wrenching him backward, and Serot shouts his name as they’re pulled apart.

A knee slams into Julian’s stomach.

The safeties are on, but the impact still hurts. Julian wheezes and tries to grapple with his attacker. It’s no use. He can’t see more than silhouettes dancing out of range. The Cardassians seem to slip back and forth through the shadows. They disappear, leaving Julian to spin circles, seeing only red and black.


Then there’s a cold hand around Julian’s neck. It tightens and throws him to the floor with barbaric, smooth efficiency. He tries to kick free, but he’s turned with a speed and strength he never expected. He’s shoved face down. A metal restraint snaps his wrists behind his back.

Julian lifts his head and feels warm skin brush his nose. He blinks and laughs, loudly, as he realizes Serot is lying on his stomach directly across from him, similarly bound. What a pair they make.
“This is ludicrous,” Julian says and wiggles to peer into the blackness. Their attackers have disappeared. With a huff of annoyance, Julian barks, “Computer, end program!”

The projections vanish and they find themselves on the floor of the holosuite grid. Serot shifts onto his elbows. “Well,” he says, “that was unexpected.”

Julian helps Serot to his feet. “I’m going to have a word with Quark about this. We’re trying to do serious work here, and he sells me a glitched program!”

“You believe it was a glitch?”

“What else could it be?” Julian says. “People don’t just attack out of nowhere like that. What do you think?”

“I think it’s possible we wandered somewhere he most certainly weren’t welcome.”

That’s not all of it; Serot is hiding something. There’s no time to argue— he has to be back in the infirmary. Julian opts to postpone giving Quark a piece of his mind and exits the holosuite, grabbing a towel on his way out to swab the sweat from his face and hair. Hand in hand, they leave the noisy bar and cross the promenade.

Serot’s Palm is clammy. Julian looks over and studies Serot’s pensive expression before focusing straight ahead. They can talk about it later. Once they reach Serot’s storefront, Julian gives him a kiss and a “see you tonight.” Then he’s on his way again.

Odo is waiting for him in front of his office. “Doctor Bashir.”

“Hold on there, Odo. I’m not fit to be around proper company.” Julian gestures to his own disheveled, sweaty appearance. “I’ll only be a moment.”

Odo shakes his head. “That isn’t necessary. I don’t have a sense of smell.”

“For the sake of everyone else, then! Really, only one moment.”

Not waiting for permission, Julian ducks into the infirmary’s refresher, with its rows of narrow shower stalls. He gives himself a quick rinse, towels off, and tugs on the fresh uniform he keeps in his locker for just such an occasion.

When he emerges, Odo is where he left him, impatience burning behind his eyes.

“Ah, that’s much better,” Julian says, grinning. “Now, Odo, how may I help you?”

“You know what this is about, Doctor.”

Julian does. He waves to his office, concealing his irritation behind a pleasant, close-lipped smile. Soon they’re sitting across from each other.

Odo breaks the silence with a growl. “This experiment of yours isn’t going anywhere.”

“I beg to differ,” Julian says. “In fact, I think we’re making a great deal of progress. Every day, Serot gets a little closer to recalling his past. I warned you that these things take time, Odo.”

“As I see it, time is what you’re stalling for.”

“Excuse me?”
“That’s right. You’re afraid of what you’ll find once you start him on a treatment regimen that
works.”

“This will work, dammit! I know it’s not the instant result you want, but it’s the best way to ensure
he doesn’t suffer psychological after-effects.”

“That’s all very well and good, Doctor,” Odo says, “but you’ve had two weeks in your little
holoprograms, and you admit yourself that he hasn’t recalled a single memory yet. The Obsidian
Order doesn’t do anything half-way. He can smell all the flowers he wants, it won’t do any good.
Those memories are locked away. Or has that changed in the past twenty-six hours since your last
report?”

Julian sets his jaw, grinds it side to side. “It’s the safest course of action, even if nothing’s
guaranteed. You should appreciate better than anyone what happens when doctors take shortcuts as a
means to an end.”

Odo inclines his head in a nod, accepting the barb. He tosses a PADD onto the desk between them.
“I never said I don’t understand. But station security is my top priority.”

Julian looks at the PADD but doesn’t touch it. “What’s that?”

“Your new orders from Commander Sisko.”

Julian’s breath stills in his chest. He slides the tablet closer. Bricks of paragraphs scroll across its
aluminosilicate surface. He already knows what it says. “This is a mistake.”

“Then you should bring that up with the commander.”

Maybe I will. Julian wants to march over to Ops right now. Not that it will do him any good. “You
can’t force him. He’ll refuse.”

“Then I’ll have no choice but to detain him.”

“Which is what you’ve wanted since day one!”

“I don’t want the Cardassians involved, Doctor, and neither do you. Now can you convince him this
is in his best interest, or not?”

“It’s not just that, Odo, it’s coming up with the treatment itself. Every Bajoran physician with even
half a working knowledge of the Cardassian brain won’t share their work with me.”

“I’ve never known you to give up so easily,” Odo says. “Or to be afraid of a little risk.”

Julian glances away. If he doesn’t cooperate, he has no doubt that Odo and Starfleet will find
someone who will. And that person won’t care about Serot even a fraction as much as he does.
Damn it if Odo doesn’t know that.

Odo stands and gives Julian a stiff glance-over. “Maybe it’s time you got creative, Doctor.”

Julian fists the fabric of his pant legs as he watches Odo go.

For the next five hours and seventeen minutes, Julian concentrates on nothing but his day-to-day
work, flinging all thoughts of Odo and Sisko and the Obsidian Order out of his mind.

The end of his shift doesn’t come fast enough.
The second he’s through the doorway of their quarters, Serot is upon him with lips and hands, pressing Julian against the wall.

Julian envelops him in a long-limbed embrace and smiles. “Good evening to you, too.”

“You weren’t in the infirmary,” Serot growls in his ear, making Julian shiver, “when I came looking for you this afternoon.”

“Mm, yes.” Julian arches as Serot makes another seal of their mouths, then breaks away to add, “Staff meetings.”

Serot guides them to the desk. “What a doldrum.”

“And I suppose your day was more interesting.” Julian unzips his uniform and wiggles his hips as Serot yanks it down. With the cloth pooled around his ankles, Julian bends across the desk, bum raised. He grins over a shoulder. “Hmm?”

“In fact,” Serot says, fumbling through drawers, “I had a most stimulating argument with a customer about hemlines.”

Julian’s eyes flutter shut as cold, viscous fluid dribbles between his ass cheeks. He grips the edge of the desk, face pressed against scattered PADDs, and meets the first stab of pressure from Serot’s fingers with a desperate cry.

From there, it’s only mere moments before they’re fully naked, and when they finally couple, it’s hard and frantic. Serot grips Julian’s hips like he might run away, but Julian isn’t going anywhere. He needs this just as badly as Serot needs the distraction from the reality that chases him. They both need the affirmation that they’re still together. Nothing’s changed, Julian reminds himself as he rears up to press his back against Serot’s chest, feeling slick skin on skin. Serot’s breath his hot and harsh in his ear.

And though the lovemaking is erratic and insistent, Serot still whispers “I love you,” like he always does. And, as Serot thrusts deep into him, Julian still howls it back.

Once spent, they sink together to the floor. Their breathing steadies.

“When Quark fixes the program,” Serot says between gasps, “I’d like to go back there.”

Julian lifts his head from where it’s resting on Serot’s chest. He lowers it back down, ear flush against the thud of a heartbeat. “Whatever you want, love,” he says with a yawn.

He’ll tell Serot about Sisko’s new orders. Later.

It’s been like this for the past two weeks— sex sandwiched between the holosuites and their daily duties. It isn’t a coping mechanism he would’ve expected from Serot, but much as Julian hates to admit it, Serot’s becoming more of a mystery with each passing day. Julian makes himself available at all times, even if it means forgoing a lunch or two. Or a breakfast.

Julian rubs at a green and purple bruise along his inner thigh. If it weren’t for his enhanced libido, Julian doubts he could keep up with such enthusiasm.

A common rumor: Cardassians are insatiable. Julian pushes it from his mind.

But the next morning, as if to prove this point, Serot wakes Julian with a prod in the small of his back and a puff of laughter against his nape. They rock in near silence, taking the time for each kiss and
caress to linger.

Hours later, as the scent of sex is fading from Julian’s skin, Serot reappears in the infirmary with a shy smile playing across his lips. He feigns a crick in his neck. Julian catches amused glances exchanged between his staff. Nurse Jabara frowns and turns back to her patient, clearly pretending not to notice.

“Come,” Julian says in a low, professional tone, “let’s have a look at that.”

Julian leads Serot into his office and locks the door behind them.

“Tell me your secret,” a nurse jokes later between a routine surgery, when the patient is sedated and they’re both alone.

*Impending disaster,* Julian doesn’t say. He smiles. “That would be telling.”

When a lull finally settles in at the infirmary, Julian uses the moment to return to his office and take a seat behind the terminal. He’s been putting this off long enough.

Julian reconsiders, wonders if he can do this later. He stands. Paces. Sits again. “Bloody hell, Jules,” he mutters, “just get on with it.”

He brings up the comm and keys the appropriate hail, scrambled and secure so there’s no tracing its origin. Not that it matters. Everyone knows where he lives.

There is a long delay over subspace before she answers. Gul Dvoll’s face fills the screen, sans blue makeup, black hair loose. Her eyes widen. A smile crawls across her face. “Doctor Bashir. I always suspected that waking up to your face would be a pleasurable experience.”

The unexpected flirtation catches Julian off guard, but he passes it off with his most charming smile. “I’m sorry, Lurin, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Dvoll’s eyes sparkle at the use of her first name. “There is no need to apologize, Doctor. This is turning out to be an excellent start to my day! Have you changed your mind about leaving Starfleet and your stuffy tailor to join my crew?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“A pity.”

She says nothing more, and continues to smile; she’s waiting for him to make the first move. “I have a rather unorthodox request to make of you,” he says.

“Of which you would be most grateful should I choose to grant it, yes?”

“I’d be utterly indebted to you,” Julian says, knowing he has her undivided attention. “You see, I have a Cardassian under my care, and I need more data in order to treat him. Medical texts, or, better yet, another doctor to confer with.”

“Send him back to Cardassia, Doctor. We take care of our own. We aren’t animals.”

“That isn’t an option, unfortunately. He’s, ah, he’s--” Julian drops his voice. “A political dissident.”

“I see.” Gul Dvoll taps her ridged chin. “Your Federation principles are confusing what is actually a very simple matter. Send him back to Cardassia. He’ll receive both the medical treatment and the punishment he deserves. Do you need me to send a ship out to retrieve him?”
“No,” Julian says, struggling to keep his frustration in check. “I won’t allow him to leave the station. He’s under my protection, and that isn’t going to change.”

“What’s his name?”

Julian considers, gambles. “We don’t know. He’s suffering considerable memory loss.”

“Then how do you know he’s a traitor?”

“An educated guess. Gul Dvoll. Lurin. Please. I wouldn’t be asking if this weren’t a highly sensitive matter. You’re the only one with pull in the Cardassian military I can trust. Can you help, or should I find someone else?”

She studies him for a beat, and Julian feels a rush of panic as her eyes narrow with what he’s come to recognize as Cardassian suspicion. Could she already know about Serot? Has she known about him being Cardassian all this time? If he was indeed a sleeper agent, would the Cardassian military be privy to Obsidian Order intelligence?

“No upstanding Cardassian doctor would ever help you in this matter,” she says at last.

Julian bows his head in acknowledgement.

“They wouldn’t take the risk. They’d be dragged down along with the traitor.”

“I know, but there must be someone.”

“Really, Doctor, I don’t understand your unwillingness to let us sort this out ourselves.”

“Call it human stubbornness. He’s my patient, and I can’t in good conscience surrender him to a possibly brutal fate when he doesn’t even know who he is.”

“Our justice system is hardly brutal, Doctor,” Dvoll says. “But I will try to comply with your request. After all, you did save my life. I’ll see if I can find some doctors with less-than perfect reputations and forward you their information.”

“Oh, thank you, Gul--”

“I suggest you don’t breathe a word of my involvement to anyone.”

With a polite smile and a nod, she cuts the transmission.

Julian collapses back into his chair with a sigh. He rubs the bridge of his nose, glad that’s over. Now he can only hope Gul Dvoll will stay true to her word. If she doesn’t— if she opts instead to turn Serot over to Central Command in order to score some points with her leaders— then he’s just made a terrible mistake.

Julian mutters clichés under his breath until it soothes his worry. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

That evening, Serot beats him to their quarters once again. Julian glances around the dimly lit living area and looks to the couch, where Serot lies on his side, barefoot. A low-cut robe exposes an alluring V of chest hair. Serot’s eyes brim with mischief.

“You look the very picture of Roman hedonism,” Julian says.

Serot reaches for him. “Come closer, my dear, and I’ll show you more.”
Julian dances out of his grasp. “Oh, no. I’m on to your tricks.” He hurries over to the refuge of the replicator. “Actually, I have something else in mind for tonight.”

Serot props himself up on an elbow. His smile widens.

Julian punches a preset into the replicator. As with contacting Gul Dvoll, this ploy has been on his list for some time. Now that Odo has forced his hand, this is the perfect opportunity to try what he’s considered Plan B. In a whirl of golden light, an hourglass-shaped board materializes, along with a canister of triangular game pieces. He carries it over to the coffee table and feels a pang of regret when he notices Serot’s smile fade.

“What’s that?” Serot says, staring at the board with sidelong wariness.

“You don’t recognize it? It’s kotra. A Cardassian game.”

“It looks suspiciously like chess.”

“It has its similarities, I suppose, in that both are two-person strategy games.” Julian waves for Serot to sit up and takes a seat beside him. He clacks a pair of dice together in his palm. “I’ve been studying its rules for the past week. Gold or silver?”

“Is the object to make me look like a fool? Because I’ve never played before.”

_I doubt that._ Julian goes for humor. “Me? Take pleasure in making you look ridiculous?”

Serot ignores that, continues, “I think we’ve established that I’m terrible at these games.”

“And a sore loser as well,” Julian adds, which earns him a sour look. “Think of this as a little experiment. We’re not playing to win. I don’t even want you to pay attention to the rules.”

“Then what’s the point?”

Julian places a hand on Serot’s knee. He traces a slow, soothing circle with his thumb. “Humor me.”

A long-suffering sigh. “Very well.”

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Julian crosses the room to retrieve his med kit. Kneeling on the floor, he clicks it open and pulls out a curved device. “This is an alpha-wave inducer,” he says, holding it out for inspection.

Serot leans away. “You said nothing about neural devices!”

“It’s entirely non-invasive, I promise. All it does is increase production of alpha waves.” Julian fails to add that, set correctly, it can replicate a state of hypnosis. “It’ll relax you.”

“I’m _perfectly_ relaxed, thank you.”

“I’ll keep it on a low setting,” Julian says, returning to sit next to Serot. “It’ll help access your subconscious thoughts, maybe even your memories.”

At that, Serot frowns. “Why didn’t you try this before, then?”

“Frankly, this is a tad out of my realm of expertise. I’ve only used these to induce sleep in my patients, not jog anyone’s memories.”

“Oh, quite persuasive, Julian! Please, delve into my brain _post-haste._”
Julian laughs and ducks his head. Point taken. “Have I ever mentioned I love it when you’re sarcastic? All right, I admit I’m not doing a good job selling my plan here. But I promise it’s safe, and we’re running low on options.”

Serot eyes the device with even more wariness than he had the kotra board. “That we are.”

“Will you wear it?”

Taking the alpha-wave inducer between two fingers, Serot looks it over. “If you make me believe I’m a Ferengi— so help me, Julian.”

“I swear on Kukalaka’s furry head, I won’t make you think you’re a Ferengi. Or a chicken, for that matter.”

They set up the game board, Serot taking silver. Julian explains the rudiments and which pieces to use— it wouldn’t do any good if Serot’s subconscious doesn’t know what metaphorical cards he’s holding. “You need to place your capital, your legate, and at least one mine on the board,” Julian says, indicating the seemingly identical pyramids, with their hidden identities written in Kardasi on the bottom. “The other fourteen pieces you pick at your discretion.”

When he’s done, Julian leans over and attaches the alpha-wave inducer to Serot’s forehead. It lights up.


“Fine. No, I’m having trouble concentrating.”

“That’s normal. It should fade soon. Shall we continue?”

Julian places his pieces in a strategic arrangement along his side of the fanned board, making sure to protect his capital. He smiles as Serot puzzles out where to put all seventeen of his own pyramids. At last, he blinks like one in a drug-induced haze and nods. Ready.

Julian goes first. He dice-rolls, moves his glinns and his dal, then offers the dice to his opponent.

The dice tumble. Serot squints at the number. “Julian,” Serot says, one hand poised above his arrangement of kotra pieces. “I don’t—”

“Just move whatever. Don’t think too hard— that defeats the point. It’ll get easier.”

Serot grabs six random pyramids and moves them.

They go on for a time, dice thudding over wood, back and forth, and soon Julian has captured two of Serot’s gils and one dal. He’s lost another two pieces to Julian’s mines. “You’re pretty bad at this,” Julian teases. Although Serot seems more focused and confident than before, his performance suggests otherwise.

“How do I know the very thing?”

“Maybe I should adjust the settings again,” Julian says, shifting to check the colorful readout on Serot’s forehead.

“If you must.” Serot’s lilt is slightly off, almost accented. Julian frowns in concern. Then Serot moves another piece--
--and takes Julian’s legate.

Julian stares at the board, trying to figure out what just happened. There must be a mistake, but no--Serot’s baited him into a trap, sacrificing his lower ranks in order to capture Julian’s most major piece. He hadn’t known that Serot’s agent was so close, waiting for the right moment.

“Do hurry up, dear,” Serot says in that strange accent again. Julian can’t quite place it.

“Say that again,” Julian says.

Serot repeats himself with the rapid obedience of the suggestible. Julian curses himself in a surge of guilt at his careless use of a command. He’s not trying to direct the flow of behavior, only observe it. Still, when Serot repeats the statement, Julian puts it together: the universal translator has kicked in. Oh. Julian’s eyes go wide.

He’s speaking Kardasi.

Julian keeps the realization to himself, lest it throw Serot off. Inside, he rejoices: it’s working!

“It’s on, my dear tailor.” Julian tosses his poor legate into Serot’s tray and rolls.

This time, Julian doesn’t underestimate. He tries to anticipate, look at least five moves ahead and calculate the possibilities depending on dice rolls, but it isn’t long before Serot, between impatient wheedling in Kardasi, has taken out his gul and dal, leaving him nearly toothless.

Julian keeps his panic in check as he regroups. He’s studied this game inside and out. Luckily, he manages to promote one piece and rescue his legate, which prompts a smile from Serot. Julian returns the smile, winks. He couldn’t have hoped for a better challenge, especially from someone in a near trance. His unseen opponent is clever, aggressive.

And creative. Serot’s hand dips to where he’s kept his reserve pieces and brings one onto the board. Serot’s gul, Julian soon realizes. Five turns later, the piece—along with Serot’s legate—has decimated the rest of Julian’s military. By then, Serot has found and moseyed into his capital.

“You won,” Julian says in one disbelieving breath.

Serot’s lips twitch. “Beginner’s luck, perhaps?”

“I’m serious. It was a right slaughter.”

“Consider it payback for making me sit helplessly through so many chess games.”

The phrasing isn’t lost on Julian. The hairs on Julian’s neck stand on end. Sit helplessly, he said. Julian pretends to tally the points. There’s no reason—Serot won handily, turning out Julian as a rank amateur. “I’m sorry,” Julian says, trying to sound casual. “All that chess must’ve been painfully boring for you.”

“No apology necessary, my dear. There’s something almost calming about your human simplicity. Your games, your literature— it was an almost religious experience.”

Julian raises a brow. Is Serot’s subconscious seriously chiding him about his taste in books? “I’m glad I could give you some inner peace,” Julian says. When Serot only nods pleasantly, he continues, “May I ask you a question?”

“Please do.”
“Where did you get the disruptor?”

“Ah. A gift from my father,” Serot says, still smiling. “when I joined the Bajoran militia. Such a proud time that was for me, as you might imagine.”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense.” Julian stares at the man across from him. The realization dawns. “Are you mocking me?”

Serot leans in until his breath is hot against Julian’s ear. “Kotra is a game that favors bold moves, my darling doctor. Perhaps I’ll show you again.”

And Serot keys off the alpha-wave inducer along his forehead. The lights go dark and the device falls onto the couch between them.

Frozen in surprise, Julian watches as Serot looks over at the kotra board.

“Who won?” Serot says slowly, carefully, back to Federation standard.

“You don’t remember?”

“Obviously not.”

“You did. You won.”

Serot scoffs.

“You did,” Julian repeats. He looks at Serot closely, staring into blue eyes more sharp and calculating than any simple tailor’s. Who is he? A man who longs for Cardassia, hides daggers, smiles at Julian like he’s a sucker to be duped, and plays kotra as if it runs through his blood. Do I want to know?

Serot turns away. “Don’t look at me like that.”

Julian schools his expression. “What do you mean?”

“Like you don’t recognize me.” With a broad hand, Serot sweeps the pieces remaining on the board into the tray. “If your point was to convince me that I need to start your memory recognition treatments, I congratulate you. Well done.”

“That wasn’t the point at all.”

“Then what was the point, Julian? To have me wallow in what I don’t know, yet again? Every time we do this, I’m reminded how much of myself is just out of my grasp.”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s hard for you.”

“How much longer do I have to wait? When will I begin to remember?”

“The inducer seemed to work,” Julian says. Maybe too well, he silently adds. “If we try again, in time--”

“No,” Serot says. “One moment, I had control over myself, and the next-- I can’t remember anything. I’m not doing that again.”

Julian can only press his lips together. He reaches for Serot’s hand.
Serot bats away his grasp. “I had a perfectly good life, Julian. You should’ve left me alone in Quark’s. It wouldn’t have been a dignified end, but it would be preferable to this humiliation.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Just--” Serot stares at the ceiling. His eyes lower until their gazes meet again. “Finish what you started, Julian.”

“You’re beginning to sound like Commander Sisko and Odo. They want me to administer the first round of treatment.”

“Then listen to them.”

“They don’t have your best interests at heart!”

“And you do?”

That stings enough that Julian has to blink back tears. “I hope I do,” he whispers.

Serot’s expression softens. “You can’t be both my protector and physician, my dear. It’s a noble cause, but you know it biases your perspective.”

Julian takes a shaky breath and nods. “Bringing back your memories-- it isn’t that easy. No matter what method I choose, there’s no guarantee it’ll work. It might clear up your memories in a day, a week, a month. Or never. It might do irreparable damage.”

“What kind of damage?”

“It might cause imbalances--”

“It might make me insane, you mean,” Serot says. This time, he reaches out and takes Julian’s hand. “I trust you to do your best, my dear. But I can’t-- I can’t stand not knowing.”

What can Julian say, when faced with that level of desperation and implicit faith in his abilities? Part of him is relieved that Serot has granted him permission to do his duty to Starfleet. The rest is just plain terrified of what’s to come.

But he can’t show that, neither as protector or physician.

They share dinner in a lull of companionable silence and retire for bed. Spooned under thick sheets, they lie together and discuss their plans in murmurs, as if afraid someone may overhear. When Serot asks for the ambizine, Julian snaps a dose into the hypospray that takes up residence in their bedside table.

Julian wakes hours later, stumbling through the darkness for the refresher. With still-damp hands, he signs on to his terminal. It casts blue light across the table as he accesses his messages. An encoded letter waits for him. Its contents are innocuous: five Cardassian names and how to contact them. There’s a blurb under each name, saying things like “aided and abetted Bajorans during the occupation” and “spent ten years in exile for betraying the state.” No doubt damning information, but perfect for his purposes.

Climbing back into bed where Serot sleeps deeply, Julian glances out the viewport and gives silent thanks.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

While you're here, take a look at an unfinished man's lovely art. <3

TW: From here on out there will be instances of suicidal ideation, depression, and mental illness manifesting in a variety of ways. Please stay safe and avoid if you experience trauma triggers.

“Doctor Nalwis,” Julian begs, desperation seeping into his voice, “please listen. It’s nothing like that!”

The Cardassian woman on the opposing viewscreen scoffs. “Your empty reassurances don’t persuade me, Doctor Bashir. How do I know this isn’t a ploy by the Federation to use our medical knowledge against us? You might even take this to the Maquis. They’d have a great deal of use for that information, I’m sure."

“On my oath as a physician, I would never--”

“The answer is no, Doctor. I’ve already spent ten years isolated from my home. I’m not risking that again. No, I’ve already gone too far just entertaining your foolhardy arrangement. If you’re so desperate for information, contact the Ministry of Health on Prime.” Then, in a show of Cardassian politeness, she dips her head in farewell and closes the connection.

“Dammit!” Julian picks up a PADD and deletes another name from his dwindling list. At this rate, he’ll be shit out of luck come lunchtime.

There’s a ding of the chime and Nurse Jabara appears in the doorway with a blue mug in one hand. “Sorry to disturb you, Doctor, but you left this on the biobed. It got cold, so I replicated another.”

Julian takes the offered raktajino with a smile. “Thanks. I must’ve gotten distracted.”

“Are you making any progress?” she says, nodding toward the stack of PADDs documenting every drug therapy that might reverse memory blocks in the Cardassian brain.

Julian wishes he could reply in the affirmative, tell her that he has it all figured out. The genius doctor has done it again, as expected. But as he stares down at the list of names for the thousandth time that afternoon, he wonders if he was ever a genius to begin with. Without the input of an expert on Cardassian physiology, these therapies could be nothing more than poisons with good intentions.

Of all the Cardassian physicians that have replied to his inquiries, Nalwis was the most polite. One accused him of being an inept Federation spy. Another was convinced that Julian’s line of questioning was a test of her loyalty by Central Command. If it was, she didn’t fail; she waved away Julian’s protests and cut the transmission.

Perhaps he’s miscalculated. It seems the physicians who have fallen out of grace are even less likely to take a chance on a Starfleet doctor.

Now, after spending hours sweet-talking and sugar-coating, he’s exhausted all avenues except one.
A male doctor-- a rarity among Cardassians, who consider the practice of science and medicine to be women’s pursuits. According to Gul Dvoll’s notes, this male doctor spent years in a labor camp, but nowhere does it specify the crime. Some variety of sedition, Julian guesses. The official pronouncement is almost always sedition.

The doctor has yet to respond to Julian’s messages, and all attempts at forging a direct link have gone unanswered.

Best to suck it up and beg Gul Dvoll for another list of names.

But he has other duties, and soon patients overwhelm the infirmary as a ship of sickly passengers from the Gamma Quadrant docks the station. Later, there’s a minor scuffle involving Quark, four cases of antique silverware of contested value, and two of Julian’s most malnourished patients. By the time Odo has it all sorted, Julian is so close to collapsing from exhaustion that he doesn’t realize he’s skipped lunch and, now, dinner.

He’s ready to leave for the evening when he notices the new message on his monitor.

With a gesture of Julian’s fingers, the recording begins. A trim Cardassian man appears on the screen before the weathered backdrop of a tent. He’s at the cusp of middle age and wearing a worn tunic of beige and gold linen. “Doctor Bashir,” he begins in translated Kardasi. “This is Doctor Parmak. I apologize for my delay in contacting you. The area where the military left us is very isolated and outside communication is still difficult.” As if to emphasize this, the feed spurts and fizzles before settling again. “I received your message and-- to be honest, I’m not sure what to make of your situation.”

“Frankly, neither am I,” Julian mutters to himself.

“Without knowing the full circumstances of your patient’s memory loss, you must know it’s difficult for me to give you a prognosis, much less suggest a course of treatment. Of course, I’d like to help, but I sense there is much missing from your story. If you like, we can discuss this at your leisure. You may contact me on the following channel.”

Julian memorizes the details scrolling across the darkened screen and checks the time. Perfect-- Parmak will be available in twenty minutes. Julian replicates a cup of tea and counts down the minutes, exact to the second. It keeps him from fretting and reminding himself how badly he needs this man’s cooperation.

Nine minutes and thirty-four seconds into his countdown, he receives a call from Serot. “I’m sorry, love,” Julian says. “I lost track of time. Bit overwhelmed over here.”

“I hope it isn’t on account of me,” Serot says. There’s a hint of a quaver in his voice.

Julian straightens in his seat. “Serot, are you all right? Is something wrong?”

“No, my dear, noth-- I’m just very tired. I think I’ll turn in early, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t be silly,” Julian says. “Of course I don’t mind. I’ll be home soon with more ambizine if you need it.”

“Right now, I could sleep through an explosion.”

“Even so. And-- I’m sorry about dinner.”

Serot grunts. Julian wonders if he’s already nodding off, but then there’s a murmured “goodnight.”
The line goes quiet.

“This will all be over soon,” Julian promises the air, and opens a secure channel to Doctor Parmak.

The screen shifts as the other line immediately answers. Mid-afternoon sunlight beams through slits in a tattered yellow tent and casts a sheen over Parmak’s long black hair.

“Doctor Parmak, I presume?” Julian begins with a wide smile.

Parmak inclines his head. “Doctor Bashir. I’m glad you contacted me.”

“No, no, thank you for being willing to hear me out. I’ve been having a terrible time finding anyone to even consider helping me.”

“I’m not surprised. It isn’t every day that one stumbles across an undercover agent of the Order.”

Julian tries to keep his expression neutral-- the impassive face he maintains upon any mention of genetic engineering-- but it isn’t easy. “Agent of the Order? What leads you to think that?”

“Call me paranoid, Doctor, but we Cardassians aren’t susceptible to bouts of memory loss the way you humans appear to be. Even when we sustain significant trauma to the brain, it’s truly rare. I’ve only seen one case in my lifetime of work. Cardassian memory is wired quite differently from other species.”

“I’m sorry, Doctor Parmak,” Julian says, as if hearing this for the first time. “If I’m understanding correctly, are you saying his memory loss is a delusion, or a ruse?”

“Always possible, but no.”

“You’re saying it’s deliberate?”

Again, Parmak dips his head. “I’d further venture to guess that you already know that.”

Julian feels his mask slip.

“Why else would you go to such lengths to keep him aboard your station? Why else would you not contact the Ministry of Health on Cardassia and let them sort it out?”

“He’s a dissident,” Julian says.

“And how have you reached that conclusion?”

“The way we found him,” Julian says, hedging. “Hiding in a remote area of Bajor.”

Parmak leans back. “I’ll entertain that! Very well, a thought experiment, then. On one hand, we have the-- somewhat unlikely-- event that his memory loss is incidental to his political status. Perhaps, during his midday stroll, he was hit in the head by a rogue boulder. Amnesia.”

“I find it more likely,” Julian says, “that the Obsidian Order wiped his memories. As a punishment, perhaps.”

“Ah, I was just getting to that. Unfortunately for your supposition, we have no history of that. Memory blocks have been used to suppress unwanted memories for centuries, yes, but the mental health of prisoners has never been a subject of concern for my people, I’m sad to say. We don’t use memory wipes as a form of punishment. Certainly not for treason. If he’d been captured--” Parmak winces, “he would never have made it to Bajor.”
“You’re sure of that?”

“Very.”

“Then what if the memory wipe was for his protection?”

“If he were more interested in survival than his own ideals, that’s a possibility. But then, you said yourself that you found him on Bajor, did you not?”

Julian immediately sees his error. Bloody hell. I should’ve claimed we found him stowed away aboard a freighter. Or inside an escape pod. Julian gives a reluctant nod.

“It must’ve been hard for him to go so long on Bajor, as a Cardassian, not knowing who he was—”

“We don’t know how long he was on Bajor,” Julian cuts in.

“I suppose not. It might’ve been a recent development. What has he told you he’s been doing all this time?”

“Sewing.”

“Sewing.”

“He’s a tailor.”

Parmak smiles slightly. “Doctor Bashir, I know you’re trying to protect your patient, and I admire that. I do. But I can’t help you unless we’re honest with each other.”

Julian shifts, weighing the truth between trying to maintain the ruse. His gut instinct wants to trust Parmak, but that instinct has led him astray before.

“Your Cardassian patient,” Parmak says. “He’s been modified to appear Bajoran, hasn’t he?”

Julian closes his eyes as he feels himself sag, bones crumbling under the weight. “It doesn’t mean he was in the Obsidian Order.”

“But you strongly suspect it.”

“Yes.”

“Please, Doctor Bashir. You called on me to help you. Tell me.”

And so, slowly and against his better judgement, he does. Julian starts from the beginning, leaving out the details of his relationship with Serot, going over the little things that tipped him off that something was amiss with his friend the Bajoran tailor. Parmak nods, not interrupting. He’s a good audience. Calm. Attentive. When he’s finished, Parmak is silent, digesting. It makes Julian fidget as he expects a verdict from on high.

“He fooled all of us,” Julian says to fill the gap.

“Including himself, by the sound of it.”

“Do you agree with our Security Chief Odo? He has no evidence that the Obsidian Order uses sleeper agents this way, but he’s utterly convinced.”

“I’ve heard similar rumors myself. The Order doesn’t do anything by half-measures.”
“Odo said the very same thing.”

“Your experience of him attacking you, and his reaction to the inducer, suggests that his memories were stifled, not wiped. It’s not an easy process, compartmentalizing our minds like that and reconstructing false memories to lie on the surface. To create an entirely new identity would require vigorous programming.”

“But it must be reversible. The memory suppression?”

“I have no doubt the Order can deprogram their agents. The method would be a well-kept secret--imagine if their enemies knew how to do it themselves! I can only guess at the type of drug--something relatively fast acting to work in a pinch.”

“Can you narrow down the options?”

“Desegranine would be my first guess, but it needs to be irradiated in order to be effective, and only those who performed his original programming would know the correct dosage. If it’s so much as a milliliter off, it could kill him.”

Julian worries his lower lip. “What else? Anything safer? I was thinking of citradolomine.”

“ Toxic to Cardassians.”

“Phandrapam?”

“Would destabilize his brain chemistry within two days.”

“Lorthutol?”

“You may as well give him a placebo.”

“Velumide tartrate.”

“It might work, but is ninety percent more likely to cause an aneurism.”

Julian sighs as he runs through his mental list. After ten minutes, it’s dwindled to the obscure and the longshots. He contemplates a Vulcan treatment, prescribed for dissociation caused by mind-melds.

“What about dezothomide?”

Parmak raises his head, his eyes lighting up at the suggestion. “Perhaps,” he says. “Perhaps if administered with a mild stimulant to counteract the depressive effects--yes, that might safely break down the blocks.”

“Thank god. I was afraid I’d have to beg Lwaxanna Troi for help.” Off Parmak’s puzzled look, Julian waves it away. “Betazoids.”

“Ah. Unfortunately, the Obsidian Order’s blocks, along with his training, would make the endeavor a waste of time for even a skilled telepath.”

So dezothomide it is, then. They comb over the minutia of dosage, proper administration, and likely results. When the final detail is thoroughly hashed out, Julian smiles with genuine gratitude. “Thank you for this, Doctor Parmak. I know helping a Starfleet officer, much less a possible agent must not be an appealing prospect--”

“Please, Doctor Bashir, there’s no need to say more.” Parmak’s expression is pinched, his shoulders drawing together as if to hide embarrassment, and Julian regrets the stupid comment. “Your patient
has a long road of recovery ahead, all without the aid of established Order procedure. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. I advise you monitor him closely.”

“I will,” Julian says. You can count on it.

“And please keep me apprised of his progress.”

Julian promises and, with a last emphatic thank you, closes the connection. He grins at the possibilities. This just might work. He wants to wake Serot up and drag him back to the infirmary right now so they can know for sure, but he smothers the budding excitement.

Serot is unlikely to be as enthused.

Julian packs up and heads home, mulling over the fine details of what he and Parmak have discussed. Should Julian be worried about how easily Parmak agreed to cooperate, while Parmak’s colleagues fled like blue-bellies darting under a rock at the first sign of danger? Cardassians are not known for their altruism, even as doctors. Chief O’Brien would attest to that.

Never mind-- such cynicism does no one any good, and only trivializes Parmak’s obvious bravery.

Arriving at their quarters, Julian keys the security lock on the door. It sputters and flashes red.

Well, even his nimble fingers slip sometimes. With a shrug, Julian taps out the code again.

The door responds with the same indignant titter and red blinking light.

“Well, that’s weird.” Julian mutters. He takes a step back to examine the signage. These are indeed his quarters-- he hasn’t wandered to someone else’s in his daydreaming.

He’s about to slap his combadge when the door slides open. Bloody Cardassian engineering malfunctioning again. He’ll have to alert the chief in the morning.

Julian shuffles in the darkness toward the replicator, careful not to make any noise and wake Serot. He’s halfway there when he hears a swish of fabric and turns to catch a glimmer of light.

The computer terminal is on.

“Ah, Doctor,” Serot says from behind the terminal. Its screen casts a yellow-green glow over his face and upturned lips. “Welcome home!”

Julian flinches as he recognizes the alpha-wave inducer blinking from Serot’s forehead. Julian doesn’t have time to wonder how; Serot shifts, and Julian’s gaze drops to the disruptor in Serot’s hand. Pointed directly at him.

Julian sets his jaw. “You.”

Serot’s smile widens. “You’re late, my darling. Please sit down.” He gestures to the dining table with the barrel. “Your dinner is getting cold.”

“How did you manage to get it working?” Julian says.

“You must be famished, dear.” Serot’s smile vanishes. “Sit down.”

Something in his tone tells Julian to play along, though it’s difficult to take the threat of violence seriously. This is still Serot: plain and simple. And he knows that disruptor is useless. Yet Julian makes a show of taking a seat and tossing a napkin over his lap. The plate on the table boasts an
aromatic red curry sauce drizzled over filleted fish and rice. He scoops up a forkful, sniffs, and takes a generous bite. The food is room temperature, but he eats anyway, aware of Serot watching him.

“You won’t shoot me,” Julian says through a mouthful.

Serot leans back and tilts his head. “Oh? And why do you think that?”

“Because you love me.”

That earns him nothing but a chuckle. “My darling, while I’m touched by your naïveté, I’m afraid I’m more than willing to kill you.”

Julian stares, fork halfway to his mouth. Serot stares back, and he’s smiling again, showing all his teeth.

“Serot,” Julian whispers.

“Not my name.”

“Habibi, please.”

Serot pivots his wrist. There’s a flash; an angry beam of light bursts from the disruptor. Julian’s plate glows yellow and the air crackles as it dematerializes out of existence.

Julian drops his fork.

“Dear me!” Serot says with widened eyes. “How clumsy of me! My finger must’ve slipped. Strange, I could’ve sworn my disruptor had been disabled.”

Julian winces and stares down at the empty spot where dinner once rested. So Serot knew that he’d switched out the power supply to render the weapon non-functional. It had been for Serot’s own protection, just in case. He’d never thought--

“Don’t look so guilty,” Serot continues as he aims the disruptor back on Julian. “I find it rather devious. But really, my darling, I thought our relationship was built on trust!”

Julian’s hand moves to his communicator. Serot doesn’t stop him. It makes an ineffectual buzz, and Julian feels his hope fizzle along with it.

Serot nods. “Now, my darling--”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Now, Doctor, please don’t make any sudden moves while I finish here. I’m almost done.”

Stiff and silent, Julian watches as Serot rapidly works the console, one-handed, his eyes darting along the screen. Its contents are hidden from Julian’s view. For a time, Julian does nothing more than take measured breaths and twist the napkin between his fingers as his mind races for answers.

“What are you doing?” Julian blurts.

Serot makes an extraneous gesture with the disruptor. “This and that. I wouldn’t concern myself, if I were you. It’s better that you be able to feign ignorance.”

“Why? Is what you’re doing illegal?”
“Such curiosity! You can’t help yourself, can you, Doctor? I can see why my persona was so charmed by you.”

Julian doesn’t like the sound of that. With every passing second, the likelihood of Serot being a simple political dissident becomes more of a fantasy. He wonders again how Serot’s subconscious managed to wrest control. Serot wouldn’t have applied the inducer on his own accord-- there is no doubt about that.

“I let the genie out of the bottle, didn’t I?” says Julian.

“Genie?”

“A supernatural creature of old Earth mythology. I won’t bore you with the details, since you’ve already expressed your distaste for human culture.”

The corner of Serot’s mouth twitches in a smile. “How kind of you, Doctor.”

“The alpha-wave inducer must’ve worn down whatever barrier was keeping your subconscious at bay. You didn’t need it to temporarily take control of Serot’s motor functions, but you can’t hold it for long, can you?” When Serot goes on tapping commands, seemingly paying him no mind, Julian continues. “It makes me wonder what you even are. Perhaps a separate personality with your own motives and desires?”

Serot’s expression doesn’t change, but Julian can tell he’s listening intently.

“But that isn’t it entirely. You’re not a whole person, are you? You can’t be. Maybe you’re only a scrap, part of an identity. A facet. Or maybe you’re nothing but the id to Serot’s superego.”

“Doctor, your psychological insight is as dreadful as your sartorial taste.” Serot switches off the console and stands. The disruptor has disappeared too fast for Julian to pinpoint where it’s gone. Into a pocket, likely. Serot draws close until he’s towering over Julian. Much too close. “I despair, knowing that all my efforts have been undone by an obtuse creature such as yourself.”

Ignoring the insult, Julian tries to appear unintimidated. “What efforts?”

Serot glides a finger down Julian’s neck, down to his shoulder. “Though I must admit you are lovely.”

Julian scrambles out of the chair and away from his grasp, rounding the table to keep it between them. It takes Julian a second to catch his breath. “Who-- who even are you?”

“What a vague question.” Serot stops advancing forward to splay his hands, bowing low. “What would you like to know?”

The sudden show of cooperation is disconcerting. Julian hesitates, then draws himself up. “You may start with your name.”

“You already know my name.”

“Your real name. Your Cardassian name.”

“Ah.” Serot takes two steps closer. “Skrain Dukat.”

“Skrain Dukat,” Julian repeats, testing out each consonant. It’s alien to his ears, dissonant with the man he’s always known as Pela Serot. “I like it,” he says. “I think.”
“I’m honored that it meets with your approval,” Serot says, with what sounds like sincerity. “I was formerly a gul in the Cardassian military. A rising star, if the legates were to be believed. And very ambitious.”

“Gul Dukat,” Julian says. He likes the ring of that even better. *My boyfriend, a gul.* Serot raises a finger. *“Formerly.”*

“What happened?”

“That ambition I mentioned-- I was young and arrogant, and not wise enough to spot those who hoped to use me for their own ends. I made secret deals, manipulated my way into the good graces of my superiors at the expense of others. Oh, I played the game quite well, Doctor. I was close to receiving a most prestigious posting. But in all my dealings, I’d made many enemies.”

Julian barely notices that Serot has slithered closer, like a snake sneaking up on its prey. Serot is inches away, staring at him intensely. “And?” Julian says.

Serot shrugs. “My enemies moved against me. I was lucky enough to make it off world with my hide intact.” He dips his head and raises a pointed eyebrow. “More or less.”

Julian can’t help but chuckle. “Why here? Why a Bajoran?”

“Why not? Doctor, what form would my enemies least expect me to take?”

“Fair enough. I just don’t understand why you’d go so far as to block your own memories.”

“I think you understand perfectly.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve had nothing but time to hone my skills of observation, Doctor,” Serot says, purrs, as he places both hands on Julian’s chest to smooth the front of his uniform. “You know very well what it’s like to hide in plain sight, don’t you, Doctor? To erect a false identity?”

Julian stares forward, piecing together the string of insinuations. A numb shock settles over him. “I don’t-- in fact, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Please.” Serot traces a finger along Julian’s jawline. “A *brilliant* mind such as yours must recognize your own kind.”

Julian feels his eyes shutter closed. There is only one thing Serot could be hinting at. Of course. Of *course* he couldn’t hide it forever. He shivers. “Does--” he clears his throat. “Does Serot know?”

“He doesn’t suspect a thing.”

Julian releases a sigh of relief. “I never meant to lie to him.”

“Oh, but of course you did, Doctor. Don’t disparage yourself by insisting otherwise. You would’ve happily gone on fooling him for the rest of your life. It’s quite admirable.”

“Dukat--”

Serot grins, eyes sparkling with obvious delight.

“Please,” Julian says, grabbing Serot’s elbows. Every instinct screams that this man is dangerous and
not to be played with, but Julian must get through to him. His heart hammers in his chest, part fear of being unmasked as a fraud, part excitement from his proximity to someone both familiar and alien. “Please. You can’t tell anyone. My livelihood, my career, everything is at stake.”

“Ah, yes, I’m well aware of the Federation’s benighted policy on genetic engineering. If you were Cardassian, this wouldn’t even be an issue.”

“Be that as it may—”

“You’ll find I’m good at keeping secrets,” Serot says, and he’s so close now, one arm snaking around Julian to stroke between his shoulder blades. His free hand caresses Julian’s cheek.

Julian is so caught in the lingering touches that when Serot dips his head, Julian opens his mouth for the kiss. He can’t suppress a groan as Serot tastes him with deep flicks of his tongue. Serot is guiding him, walking him backwards until his spine presses against the wall.

Jules, you idiot.

“Shouldn’t,” Julian labors as his fingers weave into the waves of Serot’s hair. “You’re not-- you’re not--”

“I’m not what?” Serot says between kisses. Damn him, but he sounds utterly calm.

“You’re not--” Julian grits his teeth against the thrills running down his spine. “You’re not Serot.”

Serot chuckles against his skin. “You’re concerned with infidelity?”

“You’re not Serot,” Julian repeats with a stubborn set of his jaw.

“Doctor, you’ve said yourself that we’re the same person.”

“Maybe I was wrong.”

“Then feel free to stop at any time,” Serot says, and his smirking mouth is on Julian’s again, taunting him to protest.

Julian breaks away to unbutton Serot’s shirt. “And you aren’t in the Obsidian Order?”

If Serot is surprised by the change of subject, he doesn’t show it. “Now what would I be doing with such a disreputable organization? You spend too much time listening to the Constable’s fanciful theories, Doctor.”

“You swear?” Julian cringes at how childish it sounds.

“Arrange a meeting between me and your Commander Sisko. I’ll clear my name and put an end to this nonsense.”

“What will you tell him?”

“Only the truth, Doctor. Only the truth.”

And Serot’s lips return to Julian’s neck, sucking, nibbling, and then biting, and it’s so unexpected Julian can only paw madly at Serot’s chest and squirm. Through the fog, he can sense the differences: the deep growls resonating from Serot’s chest as their hips grind, the aggressive thrust of his tongue. Yet the feel of muscle underneath Julian’s fingertips, Serot’s scent-- it’s all familiar. Julian feels a twinge of need pressing outward from his tailbone. His legs weaken and spread. “Serot,” he
whispers.

Serot hisses disapproval in Julian’s ear.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” He gasps as Serot’s hands slide downward. He tries to say the name, but it doesn’t come out. The more he tries, the more he falters. “Too fast. Slow-- slow down. Please.”

“No.”

That jars Julian from the fog. “Come on, now, don’t be like that--”

Serot’s hand goes to Julian’s throat. He doesn’t press down, but the threat is real, sending Julian into a panic. Serot would never do this, would never hurt him. “You don’t command me,” Serot says through clenched teeth. His eyes have lost their playful glint. “You won’t bend me over your knee, like my counterpart.”

“I never said I would!”

“You liked it, didn’t you? Having me on my back, performing tricks for you?”

“No!” Julian tries to push away Serot’s hands, but his grip holds. “It was never like that! I love you!”

Serot laughs. “You don’t know me, Doctor.”

“I want to,” Julian says, staring into Serot’s eyes, trying to make a connection and break him out of this sudden and bewildering rage. “I want to.”

“Why, so that we may be friends? You smug human child. Do you have any idea why he’s locked me in here? Let me offer you a piece of advice, Doctor: stay away from me.”

“Like hell I will!” Julian chokes as Serot leans in, strong fingers pressing his carotid arteries just enough to send Julian flailing. “S-Stop.”

“No.”

“I said stop!”

Serot goes still. A look of indignation passes over his face, but he doesn’t move. Julian shakes off his grasp and, rubbing his throat and coughing, stumbles across the room until the dancing spots in his vision fade. He expects Serot to make another grab for him. But he doesn’t. He remains still, glaring after him.

“Oh,” Julian says, and almost laughs. “You’re not completely free of the bottle, are you? No, I suppose not.” The alpha-wave inducer, set to simulate hypnosis, can’t be helping matters, either. But Julian doesn’t mention that. “This disguise of yours wouldn’t have worked if your mind was left in control. I’m right, aren’t I? You had to be buried, and you couldn’t do that yourself. You needed others to program you.”

Serot narrows his eyes. “You can lock me up in whatever excuse the Federation calls a prison and interrogate me. It won’t do any good. It won’t be any worse than this.”

“Who said anything about prison? Serot-- Dukat-- I don’t want to interrogate you!”

“Is that so? You naïve brat. Do you really think your superiors are going to let me go free? All those years hemming pants and staring at my own soft, pink, pathetic reflection-- all that good work and artistry ruined, and for what?”
“For what? Dukat, we’ve been over this-- I couldn’t let you die in Quark’s washroom! I’m sorry if you think I ruined your grand plans, but you’re more important than that!”

Serot rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “Spare me your maudlin prattle! Haven’t I suffered enough?”

“I’m serious! Why are you acting this way? You know-- you know I love you!”

“And that, Doctor,” Serot snarls, eyes alight with scorn, “is the last lie you’ll ever tell.”

Refraction off starlight-- Julian catches the glint of the dagger in Serot’s hand. Julian’s reflexes take over. “Stop!” he shouts. “Don’t you move!”

Serot freezes and his eyes flash with rage; Julian circles around to safety and, heart pounding, snatches the phaser he keeps hidden in a pile of socks behind the sofa. It’s set to stun.

Julian hesitates. Now what?

There’s a plethora of ancient Earth stories about sending unwanted spirits back from whence they came. Incantations and exorcisms. If Julian has learned anything from those stories, it’s the importance of getting the words right.

“Stay right there,” Julian begins in the authoritative voice of Deep Space Nine’s CMO. He’s the master here. “I’ve had quite enough of your nonsense! Now, listen closely and do as I say. I command you to go back to where you were before-- before I released you-- back to Serot’s subconscious. And you’ll stay there and won’t come out or try to take possession of his body unless I, and only I, specifically call upon you.”

Serot glares at him. Then the expression melts, softening into a smile that’s almost-- what? Affectionate? “As you command, Doctor,” he says, and drops the dagger. It clatters to the floor.

Julian lunges toward Serot and deactivates the alpha-wave inducer. Serot’s eyes go glassy, drift into a state of blank confusion.

“Serot?” Julian whispers. When there’s no response, Julian grasps his shoulders. “Come on, Serot, please. Come back to me.”

For a horrifying instant, Julian fears the inducer may have damaged his brain. Then, slowly, Serot’s eyes flicker back and forth, focusing on Julian.

Julian relaxes, smiling. “There you are.”

Serot frowns. One hand goes to his chest, where Julian unbuttoned his shirt. Then his eyes lower to rest on the alpha-wave inducer in Julian’s hands. His mouth opens, and Julian knows he must suspect that Julian forced it upon him. But before he can voice his outrage, Julian shakes his head. He crumple into Serot’s arms and begins to cry.


Julian can’t help it; his eyes dart to the dagger, lying on the floor. Serot flinches against him. “No, it’s all right, Serot. I’m fine.”

“You’re clearly nothing of the sort! Please, Julian, tell me. What happened?”

Julian wipes at his face and, taking Serot’s hands, leads him to the couch. Serot insists on fussing
over him, throwing a blanket over Julian’s knees and replicating a cup of Tarkalean tea. Even with Serot holding him close, soothing circles along his back, Julian can’t stop trembling. At last, he manages to speak in stilted, hesitant sentences.

Serot listens, squeezing his hands and reaching out to smooth Julian’s hair. When Julian gets to the bit where Serot’s alter ego claimed to be a gul in the Cardassian military, Serot stands. “Excuse me, dear,” he says. “Please, continue.”

Julian falters, watches as Serot switches on the terminal and flicks the controls. “He--” Julian licks his lips, swabs at his eyes again. “He, ah, sort of came on to me.”

Serot stops tapping the console. “What?”

“You-- he-- bloody hell, now I’m doing it! He kissed me, and he was rather forceful about it, but he wasn’t--”

“--met with any resistance,” Serot cuts in before Julian can finish stammering. His expression is pinched, incredulous. “With my doppelgänger, Julian!”

“Really, Serot, you’re blowing this out of proportion. You’re the same damned person.”

“We’ll have to save the discussion of my rapidly degrading psyche for later,” Serot says, turning back to the console. “I think we have a very serious problem.”

Julian rises from the sofa. “What’s wrong?”

“You mentioned that my other self was using this terminal when you came in. I think I’ve figured out what he was up to.” Serot presses his lips together. “My journal entries are missing.”

“All of them?” Julian nudges Serot aside to take over the console. Every file in every folder is empty. “I don’t get it. Why would he do that?”

“Julian.”

“There could be any number of reasons why they’re missing. Maybe you misplaced the files. You haven’t done any journaling in a long time, right?” Julian hasn’t seen him type a single word since this started, despite having a plethora to write about. “Maybe you forgot where you saved them.”

“Julian,” Serot says, “I know where I put my journals.”

Julian looks back at the monitor. “There might have been a virus. You know how temperamental this Carda-- this technology can be. I should have the chief take a look at it.”

“He deleted the files, Julian. He deleted them because they incriminated me.”

“You think just because your journals are missing that means you’re some kind of spy?”

Serot releases an extended, long-suffering sigh. “Why else would he go through the trouble? You said it yourself: I’m a Cardassian disguised as a Bajoran and I’ve been gathering information for years--”

“You like to journal! You told me yourself!”

“Because I’m supposed to. Don’t you see? It isn’t incidental. Nothing about me is incidental. Dear, I know you want to believe I’m innocent, but it seems to me that others were viewing my reports this whole time.”
Reports. Not journal entries, but reports secretly transmitted-- perhaps through some form of automation-- to Cardassia.

“You’ve suspected this,” Julian says. It isn’t an accusation, but a form of resignation.

“It crossed my mind. It’s part of the reason I stopped writing. The drive is still there, but--” Serot rubs the wrinkled bridge of his nose. “I have to turn myself in to Constable Odo.”

“What? No, Serot, listen to me. You’ve done nothing wrong!”

“I’ve been spying on everyone on this station! You don’t know how many friends I’ve betrayed!”

“That’s why you can’t tell Odo,” Julian blurts out. “He and Chief O’Brien will find a way to retrieve the files.”

“I know you’re afraid for me, but the sooner I come forward, the better it’ll be. Maybe they’ll be lenient.”

Julian rubs at his eyes. “You don’t understand. I’ve told you things. Policy, tactical information-- things that never should’ve left the briefing room.” Julian makes a helpless gesture as he grabs at the air in front of him with both fists. “I’m your most reliable informant. If Starfleet finds out, I’m finished. My career will be over. I’ll be lucky if I don’t spend the next decade inside a labor camp.”

Serot stares at him, wide eyed, as if Julian is suddenly changing colors and growing new appendages. He turns toward the console, regards it a moment, but makes no move to access it.

“Say something,” Julian begs. “Please.”

“The Maquis,” says Serot. “You told me where their base was.”

Julian trembles. It had been a stupid, careless act. One that had resulted in the death of many Federation citizens. Before Julian can reply, Serot staggers away. He disappears into the bedroom. Julian follows. He finds Serot kneeling on the floor, tugging at his earring.

“You didn’t do it deliberately,” Serot says.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m still guilty.”

“You didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

“Neither did you!”

“I can’t drag you down with me.” Serot looks at Julian, and his eyes are shining. “What should we do?”

“We go on with the treatment as normal. We don’t have to tell anyone about this.”

To his dismay, Serot shakes his head. “There’s no telling what will happen once I regain my memories. If my other self is as conniving as you make it sound, then I might betray you the moment it becomes convenient. We need to be proactive. If it comes as any consolation, there’s a good chance my other self was thorough in deleting the records. Maybe they can’t be recovered.”

“And if he wasn’t?”

“Then we live with the consequences. Julian, you’ve sworn to uphold the principles of Starfleet, which includes telling the truth even at personal cost. I can’t let you break your oaths because of me.
You’d never forgive yourself.”

You’d never forgive me, Serot doesn’t say. He doesn’t have to. Julian bows his head, awash in shame. “You’re right, of course. I’m being awfully cowardly, aren’t I?”

“Nonsense.” Serot crosses the room to kiss the tip of Julian’s nose. It’s a gesture that never fails to make Julian smile. “You’re the bravest man I know, my dear.”

Julian’s eyes lower to the floor. “We should wake Commander Sisko, then.”

“Now?”

“Before I lose my nerve.”

“Very well,” Serot says, buttoning his shirt. “Lead the way.”
“And why did you fail to mention this before?” Odo growls, eyes nothing but slits in his smooth, masklike face.

Commander Sisko raises a brow in Julian’s direction. Objection sustained, he seems to say. Answer the question, Doctor.

Perhaps they should’ve waited until morning after all. Waking the commander and disturbing Odo from his bucket hasn’t been boding well. Neither appears to be in a good mood.

Julian straightens. The fingers of his right hand twitch, squeezing Serot’s hand where they’re intertwined for moral support. “Sir, to be quite honest, I didn’t expect it to work—”

“But it did,” Odo says. “It worked so well, in fact, that you were able to talk with the suspect. You and I are conducting this investigation together, Doctor. It didn’t occur to you to bring this to my attention?”

“He wasn’t particularly cooperative—”

“All the more reason to inform security. Now he’s been tampering with our files and who knows what other systems. All you’ve done is unleash a security risk. He should’ve been properly restrained and monitored when we had the chance.”

Sisko lifts a hand from the desk, curbing the flow of Odo’s reprimands. “Do you have a way to assess the damage, Constable?”

Odo dips his head. “With Chief O’Brien’s help, we should be able to run the diagnostics and pinpoint any areas Mister Pela tampered with. In the meantime, I advise we confine him to quarters and monitor his activity.”

“That won’t be necessary, Commander,” Julian cuts in. “I have his subconscious fully under my control. You see, the alpha-wave inducer,” Julian nods to the device on Sisko’s desk, “when properly adjusted, can simulate a state of hypnosis in the patient. Serot’s already highly suggestible as it is, and under hypnosis, I’ve found he can’t resist direct commands.”

“Have you tried just ordering him to cooperate?” asks Sisko.

It’s a reasonable enough question. Julian shifts his weight between feet. “Our interactions thus far have been rather, ah, charged, sir.”

For a too-long moment, Sisko glances between Julian and Serot. Thankfully, he doesn’t press the matter. “It seems you’ve found an important key, Doctor. I’d like the chance to talk to Mister Pela’s other half myself.”

Julian feels Serot stiffen. “With all due respect, sir,” Julian says, “I don’t recommend it. Not only is the process upsetting to Serot, but the man’s volatile.”

And he terrifies the hell out of me, Julian doesn’t add.

“My security team should be able to handle it,” Odo says with an additional scowl, like Julian’s insulted his capacity to keep the peace.
“It’s not just that. Frankly, I think the man’s mad.”

“As in angry?” says Sisko.

“As in loony, sir.”

Serot drops Julian’s hand, leaving his palm cold and empty.

“He’s been repressed for over ten years,” Julian continues, giving Serot an apologetic look as he takes Serot’s hand again, “without any outlet to express himself. Anybody would go a bit crazy after that long.”

Sisko blows a puff of air between his lips. “Still, we can’t ignore this opportunity to pick Mister Pela’s brain. If we act now, we can get to the bottom of precisely why he’s been disguised as, of all things, a Bajoran citizen.”

“I have a few questions of my own,” Odo adds, looking Serot up and down in a way that makes Julian feel fiercely protective.

“Commander,” Serot cuts in, breaking his own silence, “I’d like to cooperate with your investigation, but I’d rather not endure that thing again.”

“I understand your hesitation, Mister Pela, and I’m sorry to ask you to go through what must be an unpleasant experience, on top of everything else. But if we can pull this off, it’ll make all of our lives much easier. Yours, Doctor Bashir’s—” Sisko steeples his hands and leans back in his chair. “You can refuse, of course.”

“Then I refuse.”

Odo looks ready to protest, but Sisko only shrugs. “It’s your choice, Mister Pela. You’ve been a fixture on this station for a long time. From what I’ve heard, you’re beloved by many of our residents. But without your cooperation, I’m afraid I can’t allow you to stay here any longer.”

Julian flinches. “You can’t mean to arrest him!”

“I don’t plan to make Mister Pela see the inside of Deep Space Nine’s brig unless he earns it.”

“Then where? Not Cardassia! Please, sir, there’s no telling what they’ll do to him if you send him back! He doesn’t know anything about being a Cardassian. No. I won’t allow it. If you try, you can find yourself another CMO!”

“Julian!” Serot says.

“Luckily for the infirmary,” Sisko says, “I don’t intend to ship him off to Cardassia, either.”

Julian nods, that battle won. “He’s a Bajoran citizen. He has rights.”

“Exactly, Lieutenant. That’s why we’ll be leaving this up to the Bajoran interim government.”

All the moisture in Julian’s mouth evaporates, leaving it dry and tasting of bile. “Bajor?”

“I’d prefer to keep him here under your care,” Sisko continues, “but in the end, this is a Bajoran station. Mister Pela predates the Federation’s involvement, and, as you said yourself, he is a Bajoran citizen. They have every right to handle a Cardassian spy on their soil.”

“But-- but we don’t even know for certain he is a spy.”
“You’re right, Doctor. We don’t.” Sisko glances to Serot. “I’ll have Major Kira escort you first thing in the morning on the 0900 transport. We can have the chief send down your things later if need be.”

Serot has gone pale and still, and for a moment Julian fears he’s stopped breathing. “That’s unfair,” Serot whispers.

Sisko presses his lips together. “I know.”

Julian struggles to form words with his mouth as the room falls silent. He has to find a way to fight this. But before Julian can devise a counter-proposal, Serot starts to laugh: a snicker that grows to a full chuckle.

“Very well,” Serot says, breathlessly, and Julian watches, nonplussed, as he smiles. “I see I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“No, it doesn’t seem you do,” Sisko agrees.

“I’ll put on that infernal device one more time, if it means keeping my freedom a little longer.”

In Julian’s periphery, Odo nods.

“I hope there are no hard feelings,” Sisko says, the earlier harshness in his tone having melted. “I don’t enjoy being in this position.”

“If the situation were different, I’m sure I would be rather impressed with your mercenary tactics, Commander.”

“Serot,” Julian says, “you don’t have to do this.”

“On the contrary, my dear.” Serot turns to give him a reassuring smile, but Julian isn’t fooled; he can see the fear in his eyes.

They can easily schedule the unpleasantness for later, but Serot is eager to get it over with and Sisko wants to make the most of his early return to duty. There’s no point in postponing the inevitable. Even at this early hour, Major Kira leans over the command table in the center of Ops, her posture rigid. Julian feels her frown sink between his shoulders as they file into the lift.

When they reach the infirmary, there are no patients to be found. Good. Julian dismisses the entirety of the skeleton night crew, while Odo dispatches a small security team to wait outside the door within earshot should matters go awry. That leaves the four of them, alone, ready to begin.

Julian takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. He smiles to Serot and pats the seat of a biobed. Serot approaches with all the reluctance of a man condemned.

Julian readies a sedative and presses the hypospray to Serot’s neck. “Better, love?”

Serot exhales and nods. “Much. You should probably restrain me while you’re at it.”

“Is that really necessary?” Sisko says.

Odo grunts. “It can’t hurt.”

Julian silently agrees without so much as a glance in Odo’s direction. He guides Serot into a reclining position on the bed and keeps an eye on his respiration, on the lookout for any sign he’s hyperventilating. With a last squeeze of Serot’s hand, he commands the computer to raise the invisible fields. The computer chirps. Julian detects the faintest whiff of electricity as the fields form
over Serot’s shoulders, arms, waist, and legs.

Serot experiments with lifting his limbs and wiggling free. He doesn’t budge.

“Comfortable?” Julian asks.

“Like a bed of Tholian down,” Serot mutters. “I’m ready.”

With a glance to the waiting Sisko and Odo, Julian begins, first attaching a pair of sensors to Serot’s temples to monitor his brainwaves. The alpha-wave inducer comes next. “Just relax, love,” Julian says as he activates it. “I’m going to be here the whole time. You’re safe, I promise. It’ll be over soon.”

When the muscles of Serot’s face go lax and his eyes drift closed, Sisko whispers, “What now?”

“Now we try to bring the other one out.” Julian hadn’t expected to ever use the inducer again, much less this soon after encountering Serot’s alter ego. As he tries to coax out his subconscious, Julian speaks gently, as if rousing a newborn from sleep: “It’s me, Dukat. It’s Julian. I want you to come out now. I order you to come out. Talk to me, Dukat.”

“Doctor,” Odo interrupts, “what is it you’re calling him?”

“Sorry, that’s his, ah, other name. Dukat. He revealed it to me during our last encounter.”

“Did he happen to mention his given name?”

Julian shrugs. “Skrain, I believe.”

Odo snorts and shakes his head. His lips form the crease of a smile. “I see.”

Julian exchanges a frown with Sisko.

“Care to let us in on the joke, Constable?” says Sisko.

“To borrow a human phrase,” Odo says, “I believe Mister Pela was pulling your leg. This was before your time here, Commander, but Skrain Dukat was a former gul in the Cardassian military. He was briefly the Prefect of Bajor, before Gul Dvoll took over. I worked with him on several occasions.”

Julian looks between Odo and Serot, trying to make sense of this new information. “You said ‘briefly.’ What happened to Dukat after Bajor?”

“I’ve only heard rumors. Some say he was recalled back to Cardassia and put on trial for corruption. I stopped following the case once it was obvious he was never coming back. Curious that Mister Pela would assume his name.”

“And you’re sure you’d recognize this Dukat person if you saw him?” Julian pointedly jerks his chin in Serot’s direction.

“Believe me, Doctor, there’s no way Mister Pela is Gul Dukat. He doesn’t have the neck for it.”

Julian peers into Serot’s relaxed face. “Why would he lie about that?”

Before Julian can shout to belay that order, the computer chirps again and Serot sits up at the edge of the biobed. He fixes them with a friendly smile.

Both Sisko and Julian step back in surprise. Odo moves to grab his newly-freed suspect.

Serot raises his palms. “Gentlemen, please, I mean no harm! See? I’m unarmed. Nothing to be frightened of. Those restraints were just becoming rather claustrophobic.”

“Odo,” Sisko snaps, “why is this man able to order our computer around?”

“No need to blame the good constable,” Serot interrupts, straightening his cuffs. “It seems some of my old command codes still work. This was, after all, once a Cardassian station. Though I admit I might have created a few new codes just to be on the safe side.”

“I don’t have time for this. Mister Pela, you’ll lie back down and—”

“Not my name.” Serot turns toward Julian. “Doctor, I wasn’t expecting you to rouse me so soon! What a pleasant surprise.”

Julian tries to play it smooth; inside, he feels a twinge of annoyance-- this man led him on, made a fool of him in front of his superior officer. “You’re not really a gul, are you? Everything you said was absolute rubbish!”

“My, you do catch on quick.”

“Tell me your real name. Right now. No lies.”

“Of course, Doctor. It’s Garak.”

Julian and Sisko reflexively look to Odo for some sort of confirmation, but the constable is staring at Serot through narrowed eyes.

“And you’re a spy,” Julian continues.

That sly smile makes a reappearance. “I’ve never felt the need to limit myself to one profession.”

Odo huffs and pushes past Julian. “You’re wasting time asking him questions. He’s going to keep prevaricating until you demand the answers. Tell me, Mister Garak, or whatever your real name is--tell me who you work for.”

Serot’s eyes shift, unblinking, to rest on Odo. “I’ve dedicated my life to serving my one love,” he begins, his voice flat, mindless, “and I’ll serve her until my last breath.”

Odo nods in satisfaction, shooting Julian a look that can only mean watch and learn. “Tell me her name.”

“Cardassia.”

Sisko laughs. “He has you beat there, Constable.”

Odo merely harrumphs. “Hardly. I’ve dealt with all kinds of reticent types before. This one isn’t any different. Be honest, Mister Garak. Tell me what organizations you’ve worked for and the names of your superiors. And please, go into detail.”

That question sends an abnormal spike in neural oscillation. Julian frowns over the monitor. The alpha wave activity has doubled, and is becoming more erratic, while the beta waves go nearly flat.
Struggling to resist the question, Julian guesses. Locked in deep concentration. Julian’s about to relay this information when his eyes dart to the mu waves as they suddenly desynchronize.

In his periphery, he sees Serot shift, left hand snaking back while the rest of his body remains still, utterly and ostensibly fixed on Odo. Neither Odo nor Sisko appear to notice, their attention on awaiting Serot’s answer.

“That’s an interesting question,” Serot is saying. His hand slips into a pocket.

The pocket.

The disruptor.

In the earlier tumult with the dagger, Julian had dismissed it from his mind. And Serot, locked away and amnesic, wasn’t aware his other self had retrieved the weapon from its hiding place.

There’s no time to shout a warning. Julian bolts forward, rushing with all his enhanced speed to cross the distance between them. Serot’s found the weapon. Its ugly gold barrel juts from his tunic as Serot aims. Before either Odo or Sisko can notice anything amiss, Julian catches Serot’s wrist in one hand and twists. Hard. There’s a sickening *pop* of bone.

Serot screams.

Then his eyes flutter closed and he moans, obscenely. The expression of bliss is eerily familiar, so discordant that Julian barely notices a tendril of Odo’s arm snatch the disruptor from Serot’s loosened grip.

“What the hell just happened?” Sisko snaps. “Mister Pela! You said you were unarmed! Did either of you know he had that?”

“Tell me who you were aiming at,” Odo growls, inspecting the disruptor in his reformed hand. “Was it Commander Sisko?”

Serot visibly shudders and cradles his wrist. “No.”

“Then who? Tell me. Was it Doctor Bashir? Who was it, Garak?”

Before Serot can reply, a voice answers for him. “Himself.”

Julian turns to find Kira at the door’s threshold. “What?”

“She was aiming at himself,” Kira repeats. “I could tell from the way he was angling his elbow.”

Serot nods once, alert again. “Very good, Major.”

Julian’s mind resists, tries to fight what that means, just as his memory confirms what he saw. She’s right. His elbow had been rising, not dropping. It doesn’t make any sense, but she’s right. Julian spins toward Serot. “Why? Why would you do that?”

Serot favors him with a smile that holds nothing but scorn. But Julian knows that face well. He’d seen fear in those very same eyes only moments before.

A wave of pity overwhelms him. To be so alone and helpless-- it was upsetting enough for Serot, before, but this man has had to endure it every day. Alone, surrounded by enemies.

Julian squashes the pity at once. To hell with this man. “I never should’ve agreed to this.” Before
anyone can protest, he flicks off the sensors on Serot’s temples and deactivates the alpha-wave inducer. Rage firm in the hollow of his belly, he tosses the inducer into the reclamation port and punches a button. It dematerializes out of existence.

He seethes, staring at the empty space. Serot could’ve died. Just like that. There one moment, dead the next. When he turns, Kira is at Serot’s side, gently inspecting his wrist. It’s already swollen and red. Serot hisses through his teeth, his eyes squeezed shut.

“You broke it, Bashir,” Kira says. The accusation hangs in the air.

“I--” Julian paws through his equipment, searching frantically for a knitter. No, no: painkiller first. In the dragging silence, punctuated only by the rattle of metal, nobody asks how he was able to act so quickly, or how he could break a Cardassian’s notoriously sturdy bones. Julian’s voice cracks. “If I hadn’t stopped him, he would have-- he would have--”

Julian trails off as he hears Serot gasp. From the way Serot is shaking from residual adrenaline, pain, and emotion, Julian has no doubt that he knows what happened-- can divine it from the way everyone is staring at him. Even Odo looks like he wants to get the hell out of there and melt into his bucket.

“Serot,” Julian begins, stepping closer. He feels a stab as Serot flinches away. “I’m so sorry. Let me see.”

“Doctor,” Sisko says. “A word with you, please?”

Julian hesitates. His priority is on fixing the damage he’s done. But Kira holds out a hand, eyes on the tools he’s holding. “I can take care of it from here. Go on. This isn’t the first time I’ve healed a broken bone.”

Julian backs away reluctantly, hoping Serot will at least look at him. He doesn’t. Julian has no choice but to follow Sisko into his adjoining office.

Julian hasn’t so much as leaned on his desk when Sisko whirls on him, arms akimbo. “Well, isn’t this a mess. And I hold you at least partly responsible.”

“I understand, sir, but I did warn you that--”

Sisko silences him with a glare. “You should’ve done more testing before you threw your patient, your own partner, into this experiment of yours. It was rash. And he’s the one who is going to suffer the most, Doctor.”

Julian wants to protest the assessment that he cut corners. Alone, the alpha-wave inducer is harmless, and he’s made much bolder decisions before, all of them met with gratitude and pats on the back when they worked. If Sisko and Odo had been patient with his attempts to naturally spur Serot’s memory-- but all of that would be taking the blame off himself, where it rightfully belongs. “Yes, sir. I know.”

Sisko turns away to direct his glare at the far wall. “I agree that we shouldn’t try that device again. We don’t have the resources to work with someone that imbalanced. And even if we did, it isn’t our duty to rehabilitate him.”

“With all due respect, sir, his mental well-being means a great deal to me.” Julian pauses, picking up on the reluctant edge in Sisko’s voice. Rehabilitation might not be their duty, but he knows Sisko will make the effort regardless. “Unless you’re saying that it shouldn’t.”
“I’m not about to separate the two of you unless I have no other choice in the matter. What I said about Bajor was a bluff.” Sisko turns back to wag a finger under Julian’s nose. “But I can make no promise it’ll stay that way.”

Julian nods his relief.

“Now, Doctor. I hope you have a Plan B.”

Serot doesn’t say much on their walk back to their quarters, and shakes his head whenever Julian asks if he’s mad at him and if there’s anything he can do to make it right. “I’m only tired, Julian,” he says. That much is the truth.

Julian is tired, too, so he doesn’t argue the point or press Serot to talk it over like he would on a good day. A normal day. Instead, they crawl into bed, dim the lights, and stare at the ceiling in silence. The minutes tick by in Julian’s head, accurate to the second. He can hear Serot’s shallow breaths, each too frequent to indicate sleep. Julian considers retrieving Kukalaka from the shelf. Serot rubs at his face and sighs.

The bedsheets rustle as Julian sits up and riffles through the bedside drawer. He pops a hypospray.

“Thank you,” Serot whispers when Julian presses the ambizine to the hollow of his throat. He’s asleep within minutes.

Julian waits another hour, his mind turning and turning, his body exhausted, before he gives in and administers the hypospray to himself.

The next morning, Julian synthesizes twelve doses of dezothomide.
“How do you know,” Julian says, “when you’ve done more harm than good?”

It’s a question Julian has asked himself ever since he decided to become a doctor. Earlier than that, if he’s honest with himself. The root is buried deep into who and what he is.

Parmak blinks slowly, and Julian worries that the translator missed some subtlety and has bungled the entire conversation. But it’s merely a Cardassian affectation; Parmak hums thoughtfully as he considers. Julian enjoys watching him: his mannerisms, the ridges on his strange, gray face. He could get used to seeing a face like that every day, he decides. It isn’t so bad. Not bad at all.

Presently, Parmak looks Julian in the eye with the weight of age and experience, his gaze transversing lightyears. “Often when it’s too late,” he says.

Julian doesn’t appreciate the glibness of the statement, but he can’t refute the rightness of it.

Later, Julian clicks the yellow vials together in his hand like a row of worry beads. It’s all he does now, it seems. Worry.

He watches Serot sketch the contours of a dress while customers mill about the shop. “A bit low cut, don’t you think?” Julian says, peering over Serot’s shoulder.

“V-necks are back in fashion, my dear.”

“I never knew they went out of fashion.”

That earns him a mildly exasperated look and a push toward the changing room. “If you must insist on distracting me, might I suggest a more pleasant method?” he says, handing Julian a white shirt that looks as airy and soft as a cloud.

The neck plunges so low Julian has to ask if it was meant for someone with a more ample bust. That doesn’t stop him from pulling it over his head. It’s taut in all the right places, and when he emerges, Serot’s eyes dance, lingering on each and every tightly-covered curve.

And he smiles. It’s the first full, genuine smile Julian has seen in a long time. He basks in it.

One man stops in his tracks, asks if the shirt comes in a large.

“My dear,” Serot tells Julian minutes later as he rings up the customer’s purchase, “you really ought to get changed before you cause a scene.”

Julian laughs and tugs at the shirt. “You’re the one who made me wear this getup in the first place!”

“Regrettably, sometimes even I underestimate the power of my own fashion sense.” Serot gives him a long, appraising look that borders lechery. “On the other hand, it would be a shame to let it go to waste. Consider it a loan.”

“You’re too kind. See you tonight?”

Granted, it’s a silly question to ask someone you live with, but lately it’s become necessary. Serot has been staying out later and later with Major Kira, going to the temple with her after their respective duties, and not returning until after Julian has climbed into bed. He’s stopped waiting up.
Once, when Julian had asked to come along for support, Serot had only snorted. “It would only bore you,” he said.

Julian pouted at the sudden brush off. “Oh? And why is that?”

“Because, Julian, you don’t believe in anything.”

It’s true, of course. Julian would be bored to tears and likely scrutinizing every detail of their prayer session. He can’t help his skepticism. But Julian doesn’t have to like the assessment. He’s accepted that this is a part of Serot’s life he’ll never understand, much less be a part of. And that’s fine. After all, Chief O’Brien doesn’t garden with Keiko. They don’t have to be joined at the hip.

Still, he’s noticed the way Kira looks at Serot. A hand placed here, a glimmer of merriment in her eyes there. It can’t be his imagination. But no. Serot is a Cardassian, and Kira would never-- and Serot would never--

It’s a rough patch. All couples have them. Theirs merely happens to be unique.

To Julian’s surprise, when he arrives home after his shift, Serot is already there, putting the finishing touches on dinner while he sips from a mug. Julian sticks his nose into each serving dish, earning him a few swats before the sanguine liquid in Serot’s mug catches his eye.

Julian wraps an arm around Serot’s waist. “New tea?”

Serot’s flinch and barest hesitation tells Julian all he needs to know. “Redleaf,” Serot says.

“May I?” On Serot’s hand-wave, Julian sips, nods his approval. “Much better than the rokassa juice.”

Julian leaves it at that, curbing his own curiosity by not prying into how Serot selected the new tea, whether it be a jarred memory or a craving. Nor does he ask how Serot feels about it. Instead, he grabs a plate and sits at the table. No other Cardassian foodstuffs appear on the menu-- dinner remains their usual Bajoran-Human fusion fare.

When the barrage of questions isn’t forthcoming, Serot seems to relax, albeit with a hint of weariness as he lays down the platters. Julian smiles at him: am I that predictable?

Serot’s answering, patient smile seems to say: yes, indeed you are.

Conversation is kept light. At least at first. Julian boasts about new pregnancies while Serot considers the style of various alien baby clothes. There’s station gossip about Jadzia’s newest fling, and Quark’s betting pools to be deliberated over. Then the subject of Vedek Winn and the rumors surrounding the election of the next Kai comes up, and Julian can’t help but speak his mind. “She’s ruthless,” he says, “positively un-saintly!”

Serot rushes to her defense, as expected, but without his usual flair. His heart doesn’t seem to be in it. They’re still arguing when Julian scrapes the last morsel of food from his plate.

Serot’s own plate is still half full, drawing Julian’s concern. He’s been eating at an almost glacial pace lately. “Are you losing your appetite? If it’s a side effect of the medication, I can provide--”

“If only! Please, there’s no need for you to stay at the table on my behalf. Do you have a long night planned?”

“Two papers to edit for publication, one to research, and half a dozen articles to read on the potential
for respiratory droplet-transmissible Felozian swamp flu to evolve in humanoid hosts. But first, I think I’ll have a long, hot, shower.” He leans over, eyebrows raised. “You’re welcome to join me.”

Serot eyes him sidelong as if considering. “Perhaps another time.”

“I’ll leave the door open if you change your mind. By the way, I’m expecting a call from Doctor Parmak. Could you answer for me if he rings?”

“Certainly.”

“Thanks. Getting a hold of that man is harder than getting a refund from the Grand Nagus himself.”

“Then I’ll endeavor to keep him entertained while you’re indisposed.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“In fact,” Serot says, “I’ve been eager to meet this Cardassian doctor you’re so fond of. Do you suppose he’d enjoy Bajoran poetry?”

“Behave, you. As far as he knows, you’re only my patient. And don’t make that face-- the only thing I’m fond of is his superior knowledge of the Cardassian parasympathetic nervous system.”

“And how do I explain why I’m in your quarters at this time of night, answering your calls?”

Good point. But there is only a one in twenty chance Parmak will call while he’s in the shower. Julian shrugs, feels a mischievous grin tug at his lips. “Let him wonder.”

He leaves Serot to finish picking at his dinner and slips into the bedroom, stripping along the way. An array of PADDs clutter the bed. Julian picks one up. It holds the design of a woman’s dress. Another: sketches of a long coat with brass buttons. Preparations for the upcoming fashion season. Julian smiles and tosses the tablets back where he found them.

He’s in the shower, halfway through his second lather, when the comm chimes. Through the hissing spray of water, Julian hears Serot plod across the room to answer it. While Julian’s more than a little curious how he and Parmak will react to one another, Julian quickens his pace, swabbing the last remnants of soap from his chest and clicking off the tap. Best not to keep them waiting.

He towels off and hurries across the bedroom for fresh clothes. There’s a low murmuring from the other room, and Julian thinks nothing of it. That is, until Serot laughs in a halting way that Julian recognizes as nervousness.

“Oh, not at all,” he hears Serot say, polite, placating, “to be quite honest, I was under the impression that both of you had passed on.”

“Never?”

“After a time, I only assumed--”

“No!” Julian hears himself shout, and he’s jerking on his trousers and running into the adjoining
room, arms open wide to thwart impending catastrophe.

Sitting at the terminal, Serot turns. “Ah, here he is now--”

“Mum!” Julian says, hands to his hips as he stands before the screen, suddenly aware that he’s shirtless and still dripping. Three pairs of eyes settle on him. “Father. What-- what are you doing calling this late?”

“That’s what you have to say?” Richard says, tone full of the usual wounded accusation. Julian doesn’t fall for it. “You’ve been dodging our calls and letters for how long? And when we finally get through, it’s only because your-- what was your name again? Pete, was it?”

“Pela,” Julian mutters. “They’re not even remotely similar names.”

Serot moves to rise from his seat. “Ah, I’ll let the three of you continue your reminiscence in--”

“Stay,” both Julian’s parents say, and Serot stills. He lowers himself back down.

Julian scowls. “You have no right to order him about--”

“When were you planning on telling us you were in a relationship?” his father says. “And a serious one, by the look of it.”

“We’re very happy for you,” Amsha says, all warm smiles. Julian doesn’t fall for that, either.

“Frankly,” Julian says, “it’s not any of your bloody damn business what I do with my life!”

“Jules!” Richard says. “How can you say that? Of course it’s our business!”

Amsha adds, “We’re your family! We care about you!”

“You could’ve fooled me.” And in his periphery, Julian is aware of Serot watching him closely, his entire frame radiating interest. Julian presses his lips together, apologetic for dragging him into this sideshow. They always do this-- make him feel like a petulant child. But they don’t deserve him any other way. “Well, dad, now you know. I have a boyfriend. Is there anything else you’d like to stick your nose in?”

Naturally, Richard ignores the sarcasm. “What do you do for a living, Mister Pela? Are you also a doctor?”

Julian flinches, recognizing the implicit judgment in the seemingly harmless question: nobody is good enough for Richard Bashir’s perfect son.

But he needn’t worry. Serot shifts his attention to the screen and graces them with a smile that would disarm a Klingon. “A tailor, in fact. I own a shop on this station’s promenade. If you ever happen by, I’d be most happy to show you around. Mrs. Bashir, I think I have a Tholian silk dress that would be perfect for you.”

“Oh,” Amsha says, laughing as if he just bowed to kiss the back of her hand and offer an enchanté. “That would be marvelous.”

“A businessman, eh?” Richard interrupts. “I have a proposition for you--”

Julian shuts that down before it can get started. “Did you have a reason for calling? Because unless one of you is ill, I’d rather get back to enjoying the rest of our evening.”
His parents exchange a glance. “Maybe we should continue this in private, Jules,” his father says.

Serot bows his head and makes his second attempt to rise from his chair. “It was a pleasure meeting both of you.”

“The pleasure is all ours,” Amsha says, and Julian almost laughs.

With a squeeze to Julian’s wrist, Serot crosses the room to tidy up the remnants of dinner.

Julian glares at the screen. “Well? Are you happy? You’ve thoroughly embarrassed me!”

“I see you’re still holding a grudge over nothing,” Richard says. “Is it so much to ask that we speak to our only son once in a blue moon?”

“We don’t want to fight, Jules,” Amsha says. “Please. We worry, knowing you’re so far away in such a dangerous place.”

Richard nods. “He seems like a good man, your Mister Pela.” Julian can hear the but coming, and his father doesn’t disappoint. “But isn’t he a bit mature for you?”

Julian manages not to roll his eyes. “He’s not that much older.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Richard looks to Julian’s mum for support, but she only stares back, seemingly just as expectant to see where he’s going with this. “He’s mature,” Richard repeats. His meaning finally clicks, and this time Julian does laugh, because it’s the same concern he’s heard before from Quark and O’Brien. Boring. They think he’s boring. “You’d be surprised,” Julian says. “He’s been keeping me on my toes, as of late.”

There’s nothing better than the twin looks of discomfort that pass over his parents’ faces as they squirm. He doesn’t bother to correct their misapprehension. His father is the first to recover, voice lowering to a whisper, and although Julian expects the question, it still takes him by surprise.

“What does he know?”

Julian almost cuts the connection. But he stays his hand, knowing how important the question means to them, as three co-conspirators. Fresh in his memory, he remembers Dukat’s-- no, Garak’s words, smooth and reassuring, as he had caressed Julian’s chin.

“He hasn’t the foggiest notion,” Julian says.

Both their faces relax, and they’re all smiles again.

When Julian finally, thankfully, alhamdulillah, closes the connection, he finds Serot fussing over one of the houseplants, rubbing dust from its leaves and inspecting its health, his head tilted to one side.

Julian smiles. “Listening in, were we?”

“Me?” Serot blinks, hand to his chest. “I’d never.”

“I’ll have you know I replaced all the plants with fakes after you killed off the last batch.”

“And here I thought I’d improved.” Caught, Serot smoothes the front of his tunic and says, “What haven’t I the ‘foggiest notion’ about?”

“It’s nothing important,” Julian says, “just a family secret of sorts. Dreadfully boring, in fact. I’ve told
them it’s hardly worth worrying about, but they’re afraid how it would look if word got out.”

*You’re overselling it,* Julian warns himself as Serot squints against the glaring lie.

“I’m sorry,” Julian says. “About them.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Julian? I truly thought they had passed on.”

“We aren’t close.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

“They’re not an important part of my life. I’ve barely spoken to them since I left Earth. We had a falling out when I was a teenager. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but it’s only because I didn’t want to drag you into it.” And that’s true enough.

Serot closes the distance between them and catches Julian’s elbows in his hands. “Did they--” Serot stops and winces, as if he’s tasted the most bitter accusation.

“Nothing so, uh, blatant,” Julian soothes him, and realizes he isn’t sure *how* he’d characterize their treatment of him. How to describe parents who alter their children for their own supposed good?

“They only wanted the best for me, but they went about it in entirely the wrong way.”

“You’re being deliberately vague,” Serot says.

“I’m sorry, but that’s the best I can do.”

“Because of this so-called family secret of yours?” When Julian remains silent, Serot releases his hold and steps back. “You’re allowed your privacy, of course--” Is there a hint of bitterness there? “But if they never harmed you, then how can you turn your back on them? They’re your family. You should be grateful for them.”

“That’s easy for you to say. Your parents were probably saints in comparison.”

Serot sighs.

“Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.” Julian rubs the bridge of his nose at his gaffe. “Please, listen, I’ve long given up hope on fixing my relationship with my parents. I know it doesn’t make sense to you, but I’m fine with it.”

“You’d change your mind if something were to happen to them.”

“Maybe,” Julian admits. “Maybe not. But right now I’m more than happy with you as the only family I have.”

Serot releases a bark of laughter. “Oh, my dear, you’re trying to change the subject by buttering me up. It couldn’t be more transparent.”

Julian grins, hopeful. “Is it working?”

His answer comes in the firm, warm press of lips against his own. Research papers and reading forgotten, they do a slow walk to the bedroom. When Julian’s knees hit the edge of the bed, he falls back and pulls Serot on top of him.

Serot kisses a line up and down Julian’s exposed neck and chest while his fingers tug at the waistband of Julian’s hastily-donned trousers. He’s leisurely about it, seemingly in no hurry to get
him naked. It gives Julian an idea.

“Hey, love,” Julian whispers in Serot’s ear.

Serot’s got the trousers down to mid-thigh now. A hand comes up to caress Julian’s backside. “Yes, my dear?”

“Share your pagh with me.”

Serot pulls back. His eyes are clouded with desire, but it’s fading quick. “The bvele’ki?”

“Right. That.”

Serot grimaces. “Are you mocking me?”

“No. Not at all.” Julian grabs Serot’s wrist to prove his sincerity. “We haven’t done it in a long time, that’s all.”

“You know very well why.”

“Because you’re a Cardassian? Serot, it doesn’t matter. You liked it, didn’t you?”

“That’s beside the point.”

“I miss it.”

“That’s unfortunate, and I’m sorry for that. It’s a lie, Julian. I have no right to practice it.”

Julian kicks off his trousers and flops back to the bed. “No right? That’s like saying I have no right to eat Bajoran food.”

“That’s an inaccurate comparison at best! It’s more like you praying to the prophets when you don’t believe.”

“That’s the difference, then? You think it’s in some way dishonest?”

Serot rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “As I just said.”

“Hey now,” Julian says. “Be patient with me here; I’m only trying to understand. If that’s what it’s about, then does that mean you don’t believe anymore?”

Serot’s eyes lower, but he doesn’t look at Julian. He’s on to something here.

Julian reaches up, brushes his fingers against Serot’s ear, across the earring Julian gave him on Bajor. Was it really a year ago? “You’re still wearing this,” Julian says. He strokes Serot’s cheek. “You haven’t taken it off.”

“A force of habit,” Serot says.

“Then take it off.”

Serot opens his mouth to protest, then scowls like he’s just been tricked. Into what, Julian doesn’t know, until he says, “It means more to me than that.”

“Good, because I meant it as a lot more than a fashionable accessory.” Julian drops his hand. “I have a theory, if you don’t mind humoring me. I think you still believe-- in the prophets, in all of it-- only
you don’t feel you have any right to. Am I hot or cold?”

“Uncomfortably warm.”

Julian nods and, taking Serot’s hand, pulls him back down until they’re lying chest to chest. “You don’t have to do it,” Julian says, “not on my behalf. But don’t avoid everything you’ve ever known out of some misguided guilt. If it feels real to you, Serot, that’s all that matters. It feels bloody brilliant for me, anyway. But it’s not a lie, is it? Tell me the truth. Is it real to you?”

Serot relaxes into his arms and buries his face into Julian’s neck. His voice is muffled. “Yes.”

“Then,” Julian says, pulling him into a long kiss, and leaves the rest unsaid.

There’s no speaking. Just searching stares in cast shadows, and this time Julian swears he can feel the spirituality in it, like Serot is infusing him with his own belief. At first he casts the sensation off as lightheadedness from fatigue or dehydration, but there’s no denying the tug he feels when Serot fixes him with his eyes. A tingling, otherworldly connection. It’s the early hours of the morning when the rite tapers to its conclusion. Through their joined breathing, Julian can hear the station waking up, one person at a time. They don’t bother retrieving the sheets from the floor as they cat-nap, drying skin still touching, until the computer wakes them.

From his side of the bed, Serot mutters, half-asleep, “Don’t forget.”

“I won’t.” Julian pops a yellow vial into his hypospray. With all his enhanced agility, he rushes across the bed and jabs it into the curve of Serot’s asscheek. There’s a thunderous roar, but Julian’s already across the room, safe from harm, giggling.

Julian spends his morning in the infirmary in a sated, trance-like state as he tries to make up for the work he ignored last night. He’s struggling to read the last report when his comm beeps.

It’s Commander Sisko.

The other members of the senior staff are already gathered around the briefing table when Julian arrives. Sisko’s expression is grim, his lips down-turned, and Julian’s thighs have just touched his seat when Sisko says, “Five days ago, Lieutenant Dax led a science team to Portas III, at the edge of the Demilitarized Zone.”

Julian nods. Jadzia had been brimming with excitement about a spacial anomaly forming inside the planet’s crust and could hardly wait to investigate. If Sisko hadn’t okayed the mission, she might’ve gallivanted off anyway. Julian’s attention had been so focused on other matters, he’d managed only a smile before waving her distracting presence away.

“She was due back yesterday,” Sisko continues, “and we hadn’t received word until this morning, when this came in.”

The image Sisko calls upon the display screen answers Julian’s question: Jadzia and her three fellow science officers-- bound, gagged, and bruised-- with red Maquis emblems pinned to their uniforms in place of their Starfleet insignias. Despite it all, Jadzia wears a slight smirk of defiance around her gag.

O’Brien curses under his breath. “Bloody bastards. Her ship wasn’t even armed, but they couldn’t help themselves, could they?”

“What do they want in exchange?” Kira says.

Sisko scowls down at a PADD in his hand. “They’ve been helpful enough to provide a long wishlist
of weapons they’d like to see delivered.” He tosses the tablet onto the table. “Of course, I shouldn’t have to remind you that Starfleet doesn’t negotiate with terrorists, Major.”

“What? You can’t expect us to leave them for dead!”

“That’s not an option. Nor is caving in to the Maquis’ demands. That is, after all, why I called you all in here.”

Kira volunteers for the rescue mission before Julian can open his mouth, but he’s a quick second, followed by O’Brien. Sisko takes pains in reminding them that they’re not under orders, that Starfleet Command would have their heads, that they can always refuse to risk their lives-- and possibly careers-- on this fool’s errand. But as they gather around the star map, Odo facilitating with plotting the specifics of strategy, everyone knows this is a duty of its own.

Later, Julian stands in the middle of Runabout Pad A, wringing his hands. Kira and O’Brien are already aboard and waiting. He’s about to tap his combadge when he catches sight of Serot rushing over.

“My sincerest apologies, my dear,” Serot says between gasps. “I was held up by a most indecisive customer. He couldn’t decide if he preferred the viridian wool from Betazed, or the indigo cashmere from Beta Agni II. It wasn’t until I offered him a discount so he could kindly leave the premises that he found the magenta velour from Ferenginar up to his standards.” Serot pauses to glare at him. “Julian, I understand why Nerys wants to play hero for the sake of our Lieutenant Dax, but why you? Have you forgotten the meaning of the word voluntary?”

“I’m familiar with it, but I can’t leave Dax alone out there,” Julian says. “If our situations were reversed, you’d want her to play hero for me, wouldn’t you?”

“I’d rather not entertain such a thought.”

Nuzzling close, Julian kisses his cheek. “I’ll be fine. I promise.” He’s run through the odds fifty-eight times.

Serot moves away to delve into a pocket inside his coat. “I’m afraid I couldn’t find a more suitable gift on such short notice.” With a flourish, he deposits a small, silver package into Julian’s hand.

Delavian chocolate. “I knew you had more of these squirreled away somewhere, you sneaky bastard. I have a feeling I’m going to need it.” Julian presses the chocolate to his chest and leans forward. “If anything happens, Nurse Jabara knows all your dosages and can get in contact with Doctor Parmak if necessary.” When Serot’s eyes widen in alarm, he quickly adds, “In case I’m delayed, of course.”

“See that you’re not,” Serot says, and turns on his heel.

“Wait!” Julian calls out. “You didn’t even—” Kiss me goodbye.

Serot glances over his shoulder long enough to smirk. “When you come home.”

He turns a corner and is gone.

Feeling himself smile, Julian casts the station one last glance before ducking inside the runabout.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Tinsnip for giving us this lovely little vignette from Serot's perspective. If you haven't read it yet, I highly recommend you do. I'll be incorporating details brought up in the narrative as I go.

Also, Lala_Sara has drawn an adorable Serot. Kudos!

Julian arrives in the runabout just as O'Brien is switching off his console. The man’s covered in sweat, and swabs a sleeve across his forehead. It draws Julian’s concern. “Are you all right, there, Chief?” he asks.

“I’m fine. Just finished recording a message for Keiko and Molly, is all.”

“What kind?”


Julian frowns, not following his meaning. Sitting beside the chief, Kira sets to undocking the runabout from the station. “It was very touching, O’Brien,” she says.

“Thanks. What about you, Bashir? You wanna record one for Pela? We can enter it right in the ship’s log.”

“You mean,” Julian says as he begins to understand, “something like ‘sorry I died?’ Bit morbid, don’t you think?”

“I’d rather think of it as a goodbye message. I’ve been averaging two a year since I was on the Enterprise. It’s not for you, it’s for him. He might find it reassuring to hear from you one last time, from the great beyond or whatever there is. I know Keiko would. Gives them a sense of closure.”


“Typically I start with an explanation to my wife-- how if she’s seeing this, it means the mission didn’t go as planned. Then I tell Keiko I love her and Molly, and that I wish I could’ve seen our little girl grow up into a woman. It isn’t brain surgery or anything. You just speak from the heart. Go on, give it a try. Start with ‘hello, Pela.’”

Julian feels himself smile. “First off, I don’t usually call him by his surname.” He is aware of Kira watching them from her periphery, and sores. “I don’t know, Chief. If I were in Serot’s place, I’d be upset I went on the mission if I was so worried about dying that I had to record a goodbye message as a precaution.”

“You’re over-thinking this. It’s supposed to be reassuring.”

“Besides, Chief, we’re all going to be fine.”

“Ah. The overconfidence of youth. Just out of curiosity, what do you suppose your Pela would do if
“You didn’t make it back?”

“What do you mean?”

“Would he stay on DS9, or go home?”

“He’s already made it clear he doesn’t want to go back to Bajor,” Julian says.

O’Brien stares at him, like he’s a dullard. “I meant home. As in Cardassia.”

“I--” The question sends Julian into a panic. How is he supposed to answer that? “I don’t know. The possibility of my imminent demise doesn’t come up often in conversation! I’m sorry I’m not dwelling on it all the time.”

“Okay, okay,” O’Brien says and raises a hand in appeasement. “No need to get defensive.”

Before Julian can assure him that he was most certainly not getting defensive, Kira cuts in, “We’re on our heading to Portas III, maximum warp. ETA four days, three hours. What’s the status of those---what did you call them, Chief?”

“Bread crumbs,” O’Brien says, even though he must realize Kira won’t understand the reference. “A burst of polaric ions every quarter parsec should do the trick. Once we come out of warp they’ll be ready to release on your mark, Major.”

“And there’s no chance the Maquis will pick up on them?”

“There’s always a chance, but unless they know what to look for, it’ll seem like nothing on their sensors but random background radiation. We’ll just have to hope it lasts long enough to serve as a trail on long-range scans.”

Julian casts a glance out the viewport, knowing the Demilitarized Zone is drawing closer with each second. The Maquis aren’t going to take them for their word; they’ll expect deception, and they’ll be ready to exact revenge on their hostages-- or Cardassian civilians, anyone-- if the trade-off doesn’t go according to plan. As he watches O’Brien work on the engineering trickery that’ll mean their success or failure, Julian wonders if he should record a goodbye message after all. Just to be on the safe side.

The thought comes unbidden: does Serot want to return to Cardassia? He’s never indicated one way or another. Is Julian the reason he’s staying? Will all that change once he gets his memories back?

The chief and major are hashing out how this scenario will likely go down once they reach Portas III. Julian’s own role is predefined: take care of any injuries and stay out of the way. He slips out, to the back of the runabout, and paces. Finding his hands trembling on their own accord, Julian shakes them out. Dammit. Dammit.

He switches on a terminal, switches it off. When he activates it again, he hits record and stares at the reflection of his own tired face in its screen. Julian deletes the entry and tries again. He doesn’t notice Kira enter until her face is floating in the recording alongside his.

“You look lousy, Bashir,” she says. “If you need to bow out, tell me now. There’s still time to turn around.”

Julian shakes his head. “That won’t be necessary, Major.”

“Good.” She jerks her chin to the terminal. “I see you got about as far as I did with my message to Bareil.”
“You tried to record one?”

“Tried would be the operative word. There’s nothing I can say in three minutes that he doesn’t already know. And Commander Sisko can fill him in on the rest.” She reaches over to power off the terminal. “I never thought I’d live to see you at a loss for words. I think I like you better this way.”

Julian forces a laugh. “Don’t count on it. Once this all blows over, I plan to be back to my old self.”

She gives him a long, strange look. Before he can ask what’s wrong, she says, “You know he’ll have to go back to Cardassia, Bashir. Even Odo knows it.”

“How odd!” Julian snaps. “Odo never bothered mentioning that to me!”

“Odo won’t admit it, but he knows how this works. The Order’s figured out that their agent’s been compromised, and since he wasn’t able to off himself--”

Julian winces.

“--they’ll send someone to clean up the mess.”

“The Obsidian Order wouldn’t dare kill him,” Julian says, his voice a choked whisper. Odo had said something similar, once, but he still can’t quite believe it. “One of their own people?”

“They’d do whatever furthered their agenda. And I never said they’d kill him. They’d find a way to tie that loose end. Pela knows that.”

Julian imagines Serot dead with a knife in the back. Comatose from poison. Vegetative. Amnesic. Mutilated, tongue cut out. And the runabout is speeding in the wrong direction. He begins to tremble again. “What are we supposed to do, wait for the Obsidian Order to do-- whatever?”

Kira’s face softens just enough to look upon him with pity. “I forget sometimes.”

“What?”

“That you’re not used to living in fear.”

When she returns to the runabout’s bridge, Julian sits on the edge of a bunk and runs his fingers through his hair. If Odo knows this is coming, then he’ll protect Serot. He has to. It’s his job. It’s bad enough, worrying about what Serot will remember while Julian’s gone, how he’ll react. Now he has to wonder who is lurking in the shadows, waiting to carry out the Order’s schemes.

There’s little speaking for the next four days. They keep to themselves except for meals, and even then Julian tries to eat alone, accompanied only by his thoughts. He can feel O’Brien and Kira observing him with some kind of collegial concern, but they never put voice to any of it.

All Julian wants is to contact Serot. He’d be fine just hearing his voice. Just to know he’s safe. But Kira has made it clear that they can’t risk being discovered: by Starfleet, by the Maquis, by anyone who could potentially jeopardize the rescue attempt. “Maybe after the mission,” she reassures him.

He’s dozing, sitting up, when he feels the runabout pull out of warp. Rubbing his eyes, he shuffles to the bridge and squints against the bright lights. A brown, lifeless planet that must be Portas III fills the viewscreen as Kira brings them into a high orbit.

“Anything, Chief?” she says.

“Nothing yet. No, hold on, I’m picking up on a ship coming ‘round the planet and bearing toward
us, max impulse. It’s a Maquis raider. They’re scanning us.”


A moment later, the face of a balding human man scowls at them. “I trust you brought what I requested?” he says, without preamble.

“We did,” Kira says, “but you won’t get your hands on it until our people are safe aboard our ship.”

“That’s not how it’s going to work, Major, and you know that. You’re going to follow my ship until my people are confident you’re alone. Then, when we’re sure everything we want is in operational order, we’ll let you take your traitor comrades with you.”

The screen goes black. “He seems nice,” Julian says. “Think we can trust him?”

O’Brien snorts. “Doesn’t seem we have a choice.”

“The raider is moving off,” Kira says, pointing. “Follow close and start deploying that trail.”

“Aye, Major. Where do you think he’ll take us?”

“I don’t know. I just hope Gul Dvoll has the sense not to bungle this up.”

Julian and O’Brien nod in agreement. There’s only a small window of success, and a wide margin of failure should the gul arrive too soon, or too late. Too soon, and they would be dead. Too late, and they could end up aiding the Maquis. It would mean a diplomatic crisis for Starfleet, and the end of their careers at best.

_That would be Starfleet Command’s own bloody fault_, Julian thinks, bitterly. If they didn’t treat their own officers as disposable, not worth rescuing from every zealot with a phaser, then maybe they’d have the resources to free them without taking such risks. Cowards. It’s a sentiment he’s voiced to Serot in more than one indignant rant. Likely there’s a report in the Obsidian Order headquarters a mile long detailing Julian’s insubordinate thoughts.

The Maquis raider leads them deeper into the Demilitarized Zone at a brisk pace, out of the star system and toward another. They change course several times over the next four hours, as if the pilot can’t settle on a destination, trying to shake any tail that might be following. Kira taps her fingers on the console. “Come on,” she mutters after the sixth reroute.

“We’re coming upon another ship, Major,” O’Brien says. “Bearing one thirty mark twelve, centaur-class. The raider is on an intercept course.”

“That must be where they’re holding Dax and the others,” Julian says. He stands and readies his medical kit.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Kira says.

“Over to that ship, obviously. To make sure they haven’t been too badly injured. That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?”

Before Kira can reply, the Maquis raider hails them again. “Here’s how it’s going to go, Major,” says the balding man. “You and your crew are going to beam aboard the _Lark_ along with the weapon. If you uphold your end of the bargain, you can take your friends home with you.”

“Major,” O’Brien starts, snapping to horrified attention, “the raider is locking phasers on us.”
Kira jumps up to shout at the screen. “What the hell is the meaning of this?”

A thin smile creeps along the man’s face, so smug Julian finds it nauseating. “Just an added incentive, Major. Once the Lark drops her shields, you have one minute to beam over to these coordinates. I’ll be monitoring the life signs aboard your ship. I wouldn’t try leaving anyone behind if I were you.”

“We just want our people back,” Kira says, with more deference than Julian knows she feels.

“I’ll believe you when I have my cobalt diselenide,” the man says, and cuts the connection.

Julian is already moving in position to transport out. “Bit of a wanker, isn’t he?”

“Him kidnapping Dax wasn’t enough to convince you?” O’Brien says, standing beside him.

“Point taken.”

“You know, dealing with these Maquis bastards almost makes me feel sorry for the damn Cardies.”

Kira shoots O’Brien a look as she takes her place on the platform.


O’Brien initializes the transporter; Julian feels the telltale tingle as his molecules fizzle away and arrange themselves in new surroundings. The bridge of the Lark is warm, and, as his eyeballs form, he catches sight of water condensing and dripping from exposed pipes criss crossing overhead. He wrinkles his nose at the stench of metal and mildew.

Instinctively, he reaches for his medical tricorder and jumps as a rifle jabs him in the ribs. “Ow!” He glares at the pink-skinned humanoid wielding the offending rifle and raises his arms. Webbed fingers run over his uniform, feeling for weapons. “I’m a doctor!”

“Welcome aboard,” comes the voice of the balding man, and they turn, mid pat-down, to find him approaching, flanked by a pair of similarly filthy rebels in stained and ripped fatigues. He points to the sealed crate that they transported along with them. “Is that it?”

“What else would it be?” says Kira.

“What else would it be?” says Kira.

“Open it.”

Kira nods to O’Brien, and the chief kneels to unlock the crate. Before he can pry it open, the man intercepts to scan it with a tricorder. He waves to two Maquis soldiers. “Take the doctor down to see our prisoners. If he does anything suspicious, shoot him.”

Julian knows better than to assume their phasers will be set to stun. As he follows the two soldiers through dark, dripping corridors, he keeps his med kit in front, closed, where they can see it. Their boots clamp upon the metal grates.

“I’m concerned about the state of your ship,” Julian says to fill the silence. The Bolian ignores him. The other-- a Vulcan woman-- only sniffs and clears her throat. “See!” Julian points to her as he observes her reddened eyes and flushed cheeks. “You’re exhibiting classic signs of allergic reaction, and I’d bet it’s from the spores of gray mold I see growing on these pipes. A type of Yridian gray mold, to be more precise. The nasty stuff has been plaguing starships for generations. Part of it is humidity. If you lowered the temperature on this ship just two point five degrees--”
“It’s already cold enough,” she says. The nasal tone of her voice only adds to its natural, Vulcan flatness.

“Right. Well, there are other ways you can remove this type of mold. It thrives on moisture, so fixing those leaky pipes should take care of that. And with a little bit of elbow grease and a good cleaning agent—”

“And who will do the cleaning, Doctor? You?”

The question takes him aback. “To be honest, I’m hoping I won’t be staying long enough to have assigned chores.”

“Yes, and *that* is a common problem around here,” she says. “Nobody stays long. Our crew roster is frequently changing. As a result, we rarely have set duties beyond critical maintenance. Do you understand what I’m saying, Doctor?”

“Why not just keep the same crew, if it’s such a problem?”

“Impossible.”

Julian glances at her, then stares straight ahead. “Oh.”

“They die,” she says, unnecessarily. “What is the logic in worrying over spores of mold when we have greater concerns?”

“For one, you’d fare better against the Cardassians if you had a clear head and weren’t wiping a runny nose every five minutes.”

He worries he’s gone too far-- the Bolian shoots him a murderous look-- but she only shrugs in acknowledgement. That’s the closest thing to a civil conversation he’ll get with this lot, Julian supposes, as they lead him to a pair of doors and tell the guards to stand at ease.

“Inside, Doctor,” says the Vulcan.

The doors swish aside. The room is dark, and Julian spots the forms of three humanoids nestled in rows of stacked bunks. One is muttering in his sleep. A figure sits on a chair between the beds, then jumps to her feet. “Julian!”

“Jadzia!” With a relieved grin, Julian rushes forward. He grasps her shoulders, confirming that she’s really there. “How are you holding up?”

“Just as well as can be expected,” she says, and there’s the familiar lilt of humor in her voice. “They did a pretty good job of banging us up for that farce of a kidnapping.” She pauses and leans close as she whispers, “You didn’t actually *negotiate* with them, did you?”

Julian looks back at their captors. “I’m going to take out my medical tricorder and scan her, if that’s all right.” Without waiting for confirmation, he flips open the device. “Please, sit back down. You have a herniated disc and a tear in the meniscus of your right leg.”

“Don’t forget the bruised ribs.”

“And the bruised ribs.” Julian nods at the readout; beyond what he has just listed, her remaining wounds are superficial. That doesn’t stop him from wincing at the green-purple swelling over her right eye.
“Second escape attempt,” Dax explains with a weak smile.

“How about the others?”

“They’re fine, Julian; I got the worst of it. Did you come alone?”

“Major Kira and the chief are back on the bridge.”

For a moment, she manages to sit quietly and let him work. That doesn’t last long. “Are you going to tell me what’s happening, or do I have to beg?”

She must know, logically, that he can’t tell her. Not in front of the guards. He loads a hypospray with anti-inflammatory and presses it to the side of her knee to release the dose.

He does a quick patch-up job, good enough that she’s able to move without pain or exacerbating her injuries. Together, under the watchful gaze of the two guards, they rouse the others. It’s time to go.

Their little group is walking the corridors, halfway back to the bridge, when an alarm sounds.

The overhead lights flash. They’ve gone into red alert.

A voice identifying itself as Captain Pilman bursts over the intercom, ordering everyone to battle stations: long range sensors have picked up a Cardassian warship coming out of warp at the edge of the system, he says, and repeats his commands.

Julian silently thanks Cardassian punctuality.

The guards snap to alert and Dax shoots Julian a glance. It’s the only warning he gets before she throws herself at the Vulcan woman and wrestles away the guard’s rifle. Spurred by adrenaline and his own quick reflexes, Julian tackles the Bolian before he can blast Dax into oblivion. The four of them tussle, the other officers watching from the edge of the fray before joining in. It doesn’t last much longer. The phaser rifle is cold and awkward in Julian’s hands as he retrieves it from the fallen Bolian. Julian can’t wait to get rid of it.

They’re lucky; this corner of the corridor is empty, and no one notices them lower the Maquis guards to the floor.

“There’s a transporter room up this way,” Dax says once she’s sure both guards are unconscious. “Take the others and beam back to the runabout. I assume it’s still here?”

“I’m afraid that won’t work. They’ve got a raider ready to fire on our runabout should anyone beam aboard without their clearance. At least that’s what the man told us.”

Dax slows. “What man?”

“He never told us his name.”

“Human? Thinning hair, squinty eyes?”

A succinct and accurate description. “I take it you’ve met?”

“Eddington was the one who captured us. I wouldn’t take his threats lightly, either.” Coming to a halt, Dax presses herself to the wall as a group of Maquis run past. “Change of plans,” she whispers. “I’m going to head to engineering. You take the others back to the bridge.”

“What? We’ll be captured again!”
“Better to be all together once our rescue gets here. Don’t resist them, Julian. Eddington isn’t above killing anyone he thinks is a traitor, especially when he feels threatened.”

Julian doesn’t get a chance to protest further; she’s already rushing down the corridor, rifle slung over a shoulder. He almost shouts after her to go easy on the leg. The remaining science officers are nervous, but follow his lead back the way he first came, toward the bridge. They don’t make it far before the Maquis find them and lead them roughly, by the point of their phasers, back to their captain.

*I only hope Jadzia has better luck.*

Upon crossing the threshold of the bridge, Julian spots Kira and O’Brien cuffed together. Her lips press into a thin line as the Maquis prod him and the others forward, until they too are cuffed and squatting on the filthy metal grates.

“I found them,” Julian cheerfully reports to her.

One of the guards is explaining to Eddington how they were found. Eddington cuts him off to glare at Julian. “Where’s the Trill woman?”

Dax’s warning echoes in Julian’s head, but his mouth doesn’t heed it. “What Trill?”

He doesn’t see the blow coming. He only hears the sickening crunch as the rifle strikes him, and the ringing in his ears as his brain rattles in his skull. Julian catches O’Brien’s wince, feels the hot trickle of blood down his temple.

Eddington has already stalked off in a rage, ordering his minions to find her. Then he’s shouting with another man. Well-muscled, long hair. Must be captain Pilman. Through his blurred vision, Julian spots a *Galor*-class warship on the viewscreen. The *Prakesh*. Beside him, Kira follows the flow of conversation with her eyes.

“We have what we came for,” Pilman is saying. “Take us to warp and kill them before they have a chance to come up with any more bright ideas.”

*“Three minutes to intercept,”* announces the computer.

“Sir,” Eddington says, “we have the raider. Our weapon systems are fully charged. We can take out that warship, I promise you.”

“Not good enough, Mister Eddington.”

“They wouldn’t dare endanger the lives of their Federation lapdogs.”

“Are you listening to yourself? They’re Cardassians! Do you think they care about these people? These fools have lured us all into a trap. Now that they know we have the cobalt diselenide, they won’t hesitate to destroy us.”

Julian shivers as a blank panic settles over him. He can only hope that’s not true. *I should’ve recorded that message when I had the chance.*

“This is cowardice!” Eddington says as he chases his captain across the bridge. The computer continues its countdown.

Pilman shoots Eddington a look of disgust. “I’m not risking our lives and the *Lark* against a Cardassian warship! Helm, set heading one-twenty-eight mark seven. Warp eight. Now, Eddington,
take this scum off my bridge before I confine you to quarters.”

Eddington is about to grab Kira when the helmsman clears his throat. “Sir, our warp drive is offline.”

Julian feels a burst of pride and silently congratulates Dax on a job well done. The joy is short-lived as the bridge descends into a whirlwind of shouting. Eddington, noticing the relief that must be plastered over Julian’s face, kicks him to the floor and shoves the barrel of his rifle into the nape of his neck.

“Don’t think you’re getting away with this,” Eddington snarls.

Kira shoves him away with her shoulder. “You call yourselves freedom fighters? You bastard, you’re nothing but cheap—”

More shouting drowns out her words. Facedown on the deck plates, Julian hears someone yell, “They’re on top of us!” and “They’re powering disruptors!” before the ship rocks and Eddington loses his balance. Julian sits back up, swaying, dizzy, in time to catch a glimpse of the Prakesh on the monitors, turning for another pass.

Pilman orders a volley of photon torpedoes, and the engines roar as the Lark angles for a shot. A voice announces the hit, just before the ship rocks again. Sparks fly from a console and someone screams as a fire cuts through the bridge. Julian’s up in an instant, ready to help, but Kira freezes him with a look. He’s pinned underneath it.

“We can’t just sit here doing nothing!” Julian says.

Kira’s eyes flick back and forth as she sizes up the situation. The Lark takes two more hits; one of the Maquis manages to shout that the shield integrity has dropped to thirty percent before he’s sprayed by another shower of sparks. The lights flicker out. Julian squints, only able to make out the silhouettes of Kira and O’Brien from under the red reflection of fire and smoke. Eddington calls for another round of torpedoes, yelling to be heard over the crewman listing the hull breaches. Pilman, wherever he is, has gone silent.

Kira turns to Julian. “They’re going to lose!”

“That doesn’t mean anyone has to die!” Julian shouts back.

She stares at him, then nods. Julian jumps up again and kneels beside the first injured Maquis he can find, fumbling with his cuffed hands. He’s tearing off the man’s sleeve for a makeshift tourniquet when the next round of disruptor fire drops the shields down to thirteen percent. The odds are nearly one hundred percent that they’ll be dead in the next volley if Dvoll doesn’t break off her attack.

“Sir,” calls a crewman hanging from one of the consoles, “they’re hailing us.”

Gul Dvoll’s voice cracks over the damaged communication’s system: “Lark, this is the Prakesh. Lower shields and prepare for transport.”

It’s an unconditional surrender. Julian peers through the haze of smoke and shattered equipment to find Eddington staring forward, fists clenched. Julian’s certain that he’s about to order the Lark into a collision course.

But although the man might be fanatical enough to sacrifice his own life, he doesn’t seem willing to offer up the lives of his crew to take out one Cardassian warship. Eddington collapses into a chair, his shoulders slumped. “Drop shields,” he says.
Julian releases a breath and waits for the Prakesh to beam them aboard. He’s one of the first to be transported. When he opens his eyes, he’s standing on a transporter pad along with Kira, O’Brien, the rescued science officers, and the Lark’s bridge crew. Armed Cardassians in black military uniforms supervise the process. They gesture them off the pad and Julian steps aside to allow more Maquis to materialize. The room grows hot and stuffy as it fills up.

Eventually, when the last person materializes, a pouty-looking glinn keys a comm panel. “We have everyone, gul.”

“Acknowledged,” comes Dvoll’s voice. “Take the Maquis to the brig and escort our friends to guest quarters.”

Julian glances across the sea of faces as the Cardassians begin to take their embittered prisoners into custody. He makes brief eye contact with Eddington before the man averts his eyes. Julian turns away. Through the viewport, he has a perfect view of the Lark, getting bigger as the Prakesh makes a final pass. They’re going to destroy it, he realizes. “Wait,” he says. “Wait!”

Kira notices at the same instant. “Where’s Dax?” She rushes to the same glinn who had just spoken to Dvoll. “You. There’s still someone aboard that ship!”

The Cardassian scowls down at her. “I assure you, Bajoran, everyone has been beamed aboard. Everyone alive, that is.”

“Listen, you overgrown reptile--”

Julian feels the Prakesh dip starboard and looks out the viewport in time to see the raider implode, followed by the Lark. Pilman was right-- Gul Dvoll would not rest until the ship was destroyed. Beside him, Kira has gone white.

“I don’t believe it,” Julian says.


Julian looks to the chief in confusion, then presses his face back to the glass. There, navigating through the debris, is their little runabout, unscathed. Its hail echoes through the comm system: “This is Lieutenant Jadzia Dax of the USS Ganges. Permission to come aboard, sir?”
Chapter 14

Later, after Julian has had a chance to heal the remnants of Dax’s injuries and his own, he retires to the assigned quarters he’s sharing with O’Brien for their ride home. They’ve seen neither hair nor hide of their illustrious rescuer since beaming aboard. The glinn passes on her regrets; since they left the Demilitarized Zone, Gul Dvoll has been busy with debriefings with her crew and Central Command, but she’ll greet them as soon as she has a chance. Until then, they have free reign of the ship, excluding the bridge and engineering.

“And,” the glinn says with a pained look as he turns to Julian, “the gul has invited you to have dinner in her cabin at 1900.”

“Hey,” O’Brien interrupts from across the room, “you know he’s taken, don’t you?”

“So does Gul Dvoll,” Julian adds. Not that it seems to matter to her.

The glinn narrows his eyes. “I’m only relaying a message.” It’s clear from the set of his jaw that he finds the prospect of his superior dining with a human loathsome, no matter said human’s attachments.

He reappears an hour later, as their stomachs are starting to gnaw, with two trays of food bearing a hamburger smothered in mustard and gooey cheese, and a dish of pork and sautéed vegetables in a hot garlic sauce. It’s an odd combination, Julian thinks, as he exchanges a glance with O’Brien, who seems to have also noticed. They tacitly opt to eat the meal without complaint. After all, the glinn clearly isn’t happy to be playing waiter, and at least he’s trying to be hospitable. It’s a form of what Julian is learning is standard Cardassian politeness.

Besides, the root beer is a nice touch. Julian wonders if the glinn has collaborated with Quark about favorite human beverages.

It’s hours later when Gul Dvoll finally makes her appearance, strolling into their quarters and favoring each of them with a wide, white smile. “Doctor Bashir, Chief O’Brien, let me personally welcome you aboard. I’m glad you could finally see my ship first-hand.”

There’s no doubting that the latter comment is made only for Julian. She makes that clear when she invites him, again, to join her for dinner. “Don’t tell me you’re not interested,” she says when Julian declines a second time, and he can’t help but think her disappointment is an act. “Major Kira spurned my generous invitation as well. What about you, O’Brien? I’m sure my replicators can find something pleasing to your palate.”

Julian has to cover his mouth to suppress a snicker at the way O’Brien’s eyes widen. “Uh, no, ma’am. I mean, gul. Sir. I don’t think my wife would approve.”

“Oh, you humans. Always assuming every liaison across genders must be romantic. Very well, I’ll have Glinn Damar fetch you your food for another sequestered dinner. Is there any other way I can be of service before I leave you?”

“Actually,” Julian says, “if it won’t be too much trouble, I’d like to make a call to the station.”

“There’s no need, Doctor. I’ve already contacted Commander Sisko and informed him that our mission was a success. He was most relieved.”

“No, I mean a personal call.”
Dvoll tilts her head. “Of course, how obtuse of me. Once you’ve finished your dinner, Damar will escort you up to the bridge. You should have complete privacy.”

Julian doubts that, but he nods his thanks.

Dinner is clam chowder, a papaya, and a heaping bowl of chocolate ice cream as the entree. “Now this is what I call a meal,” O’Brien says, digging in. When the glinn finally arrives as promised, he shepherds Julian on a silent tour of the Prakesh, through its dimly lit, red corridors and onto the bridge, where a skeleton crew of two Cardassians man the ship. They scatter the second Damar sets foot on the bridge, bowing out with curious glances in Julian’s direction. Damar pays them no attention. He only points to what must be the communications console.

Julian sits in front of it and studies the foreign text, looking for similarities between it and his own computer system in the infirmary back home. When he feels Damar still hovering above him, he glances up, catching the glinn’s pointed glare. “I won’t touch anything,” Julian says, solemnly. “On my honor.”

With a grunt, Damar turns and leaves.

For a long moment, Julian only stares at his surroundings. There’s something surreal, he decides, about sitting on an empty bridge in an alien vessel. Especially one commanded by a faction that had, until recently, been the enemy of the Federation. Pushing a breath between his teeth, Julian fumbles through the communications array until he manages to call up the terminal in his quarters on Deep Space Nine.

No answer.

He checks the time; it’s still early, and Serot has been known to work long hours in the shop when Julian is on away missions, or when tackling a particularly detailed project. This time, he tries the shop. Julian twists the fabric of his pant leg as he waits. Again the hail goes unanswered.

Jumping up, Julian paces, wonders how much trouble he’ll get in if he contacts Commander Sisko, or Odo. He’s done so much wrong recently, asking them to check on his partner can’t be that out of line, can it? There’s no need to worry. Serot could be indisposed. At Quark’s having a milkshake. Being garroted by an Obsidian Order agent.

Julian retries the hail. Then tries it again. Fourth time’s a charm: the screen lights up. Serot, alive, eyes him with obvious wariness. He then bursts into a smile. “Julian!”

Of course. The transmission must’ve pinged its origin as a Cardassian warship. No wonder he was hesitant to answer. “I didn’t scare you, did I?” he says, giving Serot an apologetic look.

“It’s no matter, my dear. Are you safe? Did you rescue the damsel?”

“I wouldn’t call Dax a damsel, but, yes, we all made it. I’m aboard Gul Dvoll’s ship, on our way home. Speaking of which, I wouldn’t put it past her to be monitoring this conversation.”

“Then I’ll refrain from our usual sordid pillow talk,” Serot says with a prim sniff. He moves closer to the monitor and seems to study him. “You were injured.”

Julian’s hand reflexively goes to his face, where Eddington hit him. Serot’s eyes widen. Surprised at having his suspicions confirmed. The man can be unsettlingly perceptive sometimes. “I said something I probably shouldn’t have,” Julian explains, trying to pass it off. “You know how my mouth has a way of getting me into trouble. I’m fine, really. It wasn’t bad.”
Serot glances away and shakes his head.

“I’m okay,” Julian whispers. “Really.” He hates this. It’s an old argument, and one that will likely never be resolved until Julian is out of Starfleet. Right now all he wants is to hug Serot until he believes him. “I miss you.”

That coaxes a smile back. Serot has his hair up—proof that he was in the middle of work when Julian called—and he smooths an errant strand as he glances sidelong into the monitor. “Whenever you’re gone for so long, Julian, I somehow forget how lovely you are. It’s always a pleasure to be reminded.”

Julian grins. He’ll never get tired of hearing that. “Believe me, the feeling’s mutual.”

Serot’s smile fades and he looks away again, blinking rapidly. There’s a sudden sadness in him that Julian swears he can feel even lightyears away. He appears on the verge of tears.

The sight of it scares the hell out of Julian. “Serot, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Perhaps it would be easier if I showed you.”

Serot moves out of frame, and behind him Julian takes in the tattered remains of the shop. It’s like a tornado has come through, upending mannequins and scattering garments onto the floor. Nothing is broken, it seems, only tossed around as if someone were frantically searching for something. “Serot, what happened?”

“I-- I can’t concentrate, Julian. I have so many commissions to fill, but every time I try to-- try to work, I can’t. Everything is wrong. The cut, the fabric. Everything I make is so hideous and I can’t, can’t fix it. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m so far behind and I can’t sleep because of your damned drugs and--”

“Serot, please come back on the screen. Let me see you.”

“I have so many thoughts in my head that I can barely move, and then, sometimes, I can’t think at all. It’s the drugs, isn’t it? It must be. You never said it would stop me from doing my job, Julian!”

“It’s only temporary, love. It’ll pass. In a few weeks, maybe--”

“I can’t wait that long!”

“It’ll get better,” Julian lies. This is only the beginning. “Come back, habibi. Please.”

There’s a shuffle of fabric, then the clank of something metallic falling. “Maybe if I doubled the dosage.”

Julian slams his palm onto the console. “Don’t you dare. Listen to me, Serot. You have to trust me. We didn’t come up with that dosage randomly. I know it’s hard for you, I know it’s frightening, but you have to promise me you won’t tamper with it.”

Serot sighs.

“Promise me.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Good.” Julian leans back, willing the frantic pounding in his chest to steady with deep breaths. “Thank you.”
Serot is back to shuffling with his fabric off-screen. “I should get back to this mess.” Before Julian can beg him to stay, he says, “Please come home soon,” and closes the connection.

Julian stares at the darkened screen, his mouth open to say please one more time. Behind him, a throat clears. He swivels in his chair to find Damar standing at the edge of the bridge. The glinn jerks his chin to the turbolift. Time to go.

This is going to be a long four days.

His perfectly engineered brain lets him replay the conversation verbatim. He spends the remainder of the night with a lump in his throat, despairing of his uselessness, and sleeps fitfully while O’Brien snores from the adjoining room.

The next morning, O’Brien leaves to shadow the Prakesh’s engineer in an effort to learn something from his Cardassian counterpart. Damar continues to bring his hodgepodge meals. Julian visits Kira, but Dax is always there, chattering, so he gives up trying to confide in her. Bored and wanting nothing more than to sneak onto the bridge to have another go at the communications relay, Julian wanders down to the brig.

Gul Dvoll’s doctor has done a perfunctory job of patching up the Maquis. He can do better. But as Eddington and the other rebels glare at him with such unmasked loathing and spit out insults about backstabbing his people and cavorting with lizards-- as if he personally dealt every broken bone and contusion himself-- Julian turns around. Even his capacity for magnanimity has its limits. And he can’t help that Eddington’s insinuation that he is in bed with the Cardassians hits a sore spot.

Back in his quarters, Julian discovers he can access a rudimentary medical database from the terminal. He whittles away the hours reading Cardassian texts, conferring with the dictionary as he simultaneously teaches himself the language and awaits dinner.

But when the door opens at the accustomed time, it’s Dvoll who enters. Damar follows her, carrying two trays of food. Dvoll smiles. “Good evening, Doctor.”

Julian watches as Damar sets the trays upon the table. “What’s going on?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Doctor? We’re having dinner. Sit down, please.”

Despite the pleasantries, Julian knows it isn’t an invitation. He crosses the room and sits. Dvoll takes the seat across from him. Damar slips outside, no doubt standing guard.

Julian wastes no time. He stabs his fork into his meal: chicken tandoori with a side of peanut brittle and glass of whiskey. He’s beginning to wonder if the glinn is trying to punish him by way of upset stomach.

“I won’t mince words,” Dvoll begins, stirring her soup with clockwise motions, “I want to know about your Cardassian patient. His name, where you’re keeping him.”

“Why?” he says.

It’s an inane question, but Dvoll deigns to answer it. “Why do I want to know the whereabouts of a dissident? It’s my duty to find him and bring him home.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but he’s no longer on the station.”

“I don’t believe you. I know you’re still in contact with Parmak. I’ve never met the good doctor myself, but surely the man can’t be that charismatic.”
“How— wait, are you spying on me?”

“How— wait, are you spying on me?”

“On him, Doctor. On him. There’s a reason he’s on that colony after so many years in the labor camp. We like to keep an eye on our known dissenters. Trust, after all, is earned.”

The tandoori burns his tongue. Julian takes a sip of whiskey to burn his throat and consider his words. “What would happen to my patient if I released him into your custody?”

“I think you know, Doctor. I’m a patient woman, and I was willing to help you, as a generous favor for saving my life. At great personal risk. But I can’t allow a Cardassian citizen to be held by the Federation indefinitely.”

“Oh, so that’s your concern, is it? That we’re holding him against his will?” Julian smothers the urge to tell her that the man in question isn’t a Cardassian citizen, but Bajoran, but he can predict how that conversation will devolve out of his control. If she’s been closely monitoring his transmissions with Parmak, there’s no telling what she knows. “I realize I put you in a difficult position by asking for your help, Lurin, but I can’t tell you anything more. You’ll have to take it up with Commander Sisko.”

“Then I’ll consider this matter closed, for now.” She lifts the spoon to her lips and resumes eating.

Julian decides to make the most of the forced companionship. “So,” he says, and smiles as if the earlier argument never happened, “what’s Cardassia like?”

Her head quirks in surprise. Then, with a small shake of her head, she returns his smile. “That depends. What part of Cardassia interests you, Doctor?”

It’s an enlightening conversation—so much so that Julian returns to Dvoll’s quarters the next two nights to hear her describe her homeland in her own words. After each meal, his head swimming with images of red skies, jagged cliff-faces, towering black buildings, and idyllic childhoods, Julian lets Damar escort him back to an empty bridge to try unsuccessfully to reach Serot.

This time, Julian knows he’s being ignored, though he suspects it isn’t from spite, but from a desire—like a wounded animal— to be left alone. What good could he do anyway, stuck out here on Dvoll’s ship? What could he offer, beside empty comfort?

Knowing that does nothing to alleviate his worry. The rest of the too-long journey, Julian’s insides are tied in knots. When the Prakesh finally, at long last, docks with the station, Julian is the first to disembark. If he’s breaking any protocols, Damar will have to try and stop him.

He nearly runs straight into Quark. When he tries to circle around, the Ferengi blocks his path. “Doctor Bashir! Just the man I wanted to see!”

“Doctor Bashir! Just the man I wanted to see!”

“Not now, Quark. It’s two in the morning.”

“Profit never sleeps, Doctor. What’s your hurry? This will only take a second of your time.”

“I’m really not in the mood right now, so if you’d please get out of my way--”

“It’s about Pela.”


“Had a feeling that’d get your attention. Here.” Quark shoves a PADD into Julian’s hands. “That’s an order for twenty pounds of fresh crabworms, imported from Ferenginar. I just need your
authorization to bring that much live bait aboard. Your boyfriend ran off before I could get it from him, and the shipment is due any minute now.”

“Crabworms?” Julian scans through the document, scouring for trickery. He finds none. “What does he want with crabworms?”

“No idea. Didn’t ask. Maybe he plans to eat them. I told him the gree-worms were tastier, but he wouldn’t listen. But anyone who thinks salty vegetables wrapped in bread is good eating can’t be trusted.”

“Cardassians don’t eat insects,” Julian mutters to himself, conferring with his mental database. “Do they?”

“What?”


“Anyway, just give me your thumbprint and I’ll be outta your hair.”

He presses a thumb to the display and, handing over the PADD, moves past. Enough delays. At his back, Quark calls out some line about it being nice doing business with him. Julian quickens his step as he hurries home.

The inside of their quarters is as sweltering as ever, and Julian whispers a command to bring down the temperature to their usual agreed-upon level. Pulling off his jacket and kicking off his boots, Julian crosses the darkened living room. The walls are a different color, the furniture rearranged. The change is subtle, yet jarring. He’s so focused on the new, dangling light fixtures that he trips over a slab of rock.

It’s knee-high, shaped like a fainting couch, and hot to the touch. Julian stares at its silhouette in amazement. I’ve only been gone nine days, and he’s redecorated, bought new furniture, and taken up bug eating. I hope he hasn’t shaved his head.

He crosses into the bedroom and kicks an empty hypospray canister. Squinting, he reads the labeling and recognizes it as a high-level sedative, much stronger than the ambizine. There’s more casings scattered around, and Julian isn’t sure if he’s more horrified by the sedatives or the uncharacteristic mess.

Julian finds Serot in bed, buried under the covers and tranquilized. He looks the same, at least. Every golden hair still in place. While his face is devoid of any pain, there’s nothing peaceful about his expression. He looks dead.

Tugging off the rest of his uniform, Julian crawls under the bedclothes and settles naked behind Serot. He shakes a shoulder and calls his name, trying to coax him out of the drug-induced unconsciousness. “Come on, Serot, wake up.”

Serot grunts. It takes two more minutes of nudging to get him to slur Julian’s name and make an uncoordinated attempt to pull the covers over his head. Julian’s not deterred. With a huff, he presses his lips to Serot’s nape--

--and recoils as he kisses smooth scales. A small shadow scurries across the bed and darts under Serot’s side of the covers. “What was that?”

Serot’s eyes are halfway open and twinkling. “What,” he drawls, “was what?”
“That thing! There was something alive! It was in your hair! And it-- and it ran off!”

“Oh.” Serot fumbles under the blankets and draws out his hand. “This?”

Inside his loosely-held fist sits a brown lizard. Its tongue flicks out, probably tasting Julian’s surprise.

“Well,” Julian says presently, “that explains the crabworms. May I?”

Serot passes the creature over. It isn’t in Julian’s hands for longer than a second before it’s squirming out of his grip. Serot comes to the rescue, and it immediately settles down in his palm.

“It doesn’t seem to like me,” Julian says.

“You were holding him too tightly.” Serot deposits the little lizard back in his hair, where it disappears.

Julian shakes his head in amazement. “Where did he come from? They can’t be native to the station. I thought only voles lived here.”

“There’s a merchant who stops by the station a few times every year.” Serot daintily covers a yawn with a hand. “He tends to specialize in exotic pets from all over the quadrant, but I think this little fellow is from a common species. The merchant sold him to me for practically nothing. When I saw him in his cage--” Serot’s voice takes on a note of apology. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“I’m not upset. Just surprised. It seems you were quite busy while I was gone.”

He means it as a lighthearted rib, but Serot looks away.

Time for a different tact. Julian settles back down and presses his face against the back of Serot’s neck, careful not to disturb the new resident in its burrow of tangles. “Why him, exactly? Why not a wompat, or a Denobulan lemur? Last time we talked about pets, I thought you’d settled on fish.”

“I think I used to play with them,” Serot says, “as a child. I don’t recall anything. Not concretely. But when I saw him, I felt something familiar.”

“Nostalgia.”

“Yes.”

“These lizards. They’re native to Cardassia?”

He feels Serot nod.

“What’s the little fellow’s name?”

“I won’t say. You’ll make fun of me.”

“I will most certainly not! Come on, now you must tell me. What is it?”

“Vrin.”

After his dead mother.

His Bajoran mother.

The woman who never even raised him, as Serot remembers.
Julian’s mirth dies in his throat. Every first and last maternal kiss, lovingly planted, programmed by a technician in some dark recess on Dvoll’s red, jagged Cardassia. Serot squirms, awaiting his reaction. Julian formulates a joke about calling a male lizard by a woman’s name, but it’s calculated to fall flat. “I like it,” he says instead. “I only hope Mister Vrin will get his own place to stay. I’ve gotten used to sharing the bed with just you.”

He feels Serot relax and can hear the smile in his voice as he says, “You’ll survive. You learned to share with me.”

“All right, a lot. That’s enough sass. Back to bed.”

Julian fluffs his pillow and tries to nuzzle close while Serot shifts and reaches over into the nightstand. He fumbles around. When his hand closes around a cylinder, Julian catches his wrist.

“No.”

Serot gasps and drops the canister. He shakes off Julian’s hand, cringing from a pain they both remember.

“I’m sorry,” Julian whispers and draws away, giving him space. “Sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“Not yet.”

“I deserve that,” he admits, grimacing. “I suppose we’ve both been hurting each other by accident, lately.”

“I suppose so.” With a wary glance in Julian’s direction, Serot picks up the canister. He pops it into a hypospray.

“Please don’t.”

“Why?”

Serot’s voice is laced with such defeat, Julian is at his side in an instant. “Shh,” he says, holding Serot tightly, afraid he might wiggle away, like the lizard, which has hidden underneath Serot’s silk shirt, over his clavicles.

*Who gave these to you? Was it Quark? I’ll strangle that horrible little man.* The doctor in Julian wants to recite the litany of problems that come with chemical dependence. But Serot isn’t stupid. He knows the risks, has his reasons, won’t take kindly to condescension, real or perceived. So Julian rubs circles along Serot’s shoulders and soothes him with promises. He guides him back to the bed, saying, “I’ve got you. I’m here, love. I’m here. It’s going to be okay.”

Gathered in his arms, Serot trembles and, quietly, begins to weep. Julian wonders, face pressed into the fall of Serot’s hair, what kind of thoughts keep him awake at night. Now isn’t the time to ask.

Julian intends to hold Serot close for the remainder of the night, partly to give him comfort, partly to keep him from seeking out the sedatives. Serot’s breathing soon evens out. Lulled, Julian drifts asleep and lets go.

He awakens hours later to the rustling of cloth and under-the-breath muttering. Julian pats the other side of the bed and sits up as he finds it cold and empty.
There’s a light in the closet. A tunic goes flying and lands in a pile of clothes on the floor. “Serot?”

Serot appears, wringing a purple shirt in his hands. “I apologize if I woke you, my dear.”

“What are you doing?”

“Cleaning out my wardrobe.” Serot rips the shirt in half and throws it to the floor with a glare of malice. “I don’t know what I was thinking!” he says, and tears more clothes from their hangars before shredding them between his fists. Julian watches, jaw hanging open, as Serot destroys a suit he’d lovingly crafted only a few weeks ago. Gold buttons clatter to the floor as he moves to the next victim. “What was I thinking? Ridiculous! I must be the laughingstock of the entire station!”

Serot paces the closet like a caged animal, tugging at his earring, getting more and more agitated as he rants about his terrible fashion sense, deeming each garment unfit for a Ferengi, and Julian can suddenly imagine what happened to his shop. Julian opens and closes his mouth, struggling to find a way to calm him down, when Serot reaches for a familiar sweater.

Julian wrestles it away. “Not this one!” he says, clutching it to his chest to keep Serot from yanking it away. Serot casts him an annoyed glance and moves on to Julian’s side of the closet. Fed up, Julian blocks his path. “Serot! Get a hold of yourself!”

“How can I when my lover dresses like a strumpet?”

Julian can’t help it. He laughs. Hard. “You’re the one who dresses me!”

“That’s entirely the problem! Please, Julian, I promise I’ll make something much more suitable for you than these hideous rags.”

Suddenly, the explanation for Serot’s erratic behavior strikes Julian. Of course. “Your aesthetic is changing,” Julian says.

That catches Serot’s attention. “My aesthetic?”

“I never thought that would be the first thing to change, but it makes so much sense now.”

Serot digests this with a small nod, deflated. “It’s permanent, then?”

“I suspect so.”

Serot surveys the chaotic state of their bedroom. The floor is hidden underneath shredded garments. He rubs his forehead. “Prophets. What have I done?”

“Destroyed your entire wardrobe, by the look of it.”

“My aesthetic, Serot repeats.


Serot looks him over, head to toe, his gaze settling on Julian’s groin before going back to his face. “My dear,” he says, wrapping an arm around Julian’s waist, “I don’t think there’s a species in the universe that wouldn’t find you beautiful.”

Julian laughs, the tension in his chest evaporating. “That, Mister Pela, was the right answer.”

For the rest of the night and into the morning, Serot is hunched over his desk, sketching in a flurry.
Each time Julian tries to peek over his shoulder, Serot thwarts him by covering his work. Julian settles on hand-feeding Vrin squirming crabworms. Or at least he tries to-- the lizard only tastes the air and ignores the proffered meal. Undaunted, Julian replicates a glass tank full of burrows and sand and foliage and places both lizard and treats inside. Then he waits.

“He won’t eat while you’re watching him like that,” Serot says.

“Why would that be?”

Serot nods to the aquarium. Julian glances back to find the lizard camouflaged against a log. The crabworms have disappeared.

Sneaky bastard.

When his shift comes up, Julian and the rest of the senior staff sit around the table in the briefing room. Dax’s customary chair is empty, its occupant off on a much-needed vacation. With one hand cupping an invisible baseball, Sisko updates them on the situation with the Maquis. “Unsurprisingly, Gul Dvoll wants to take the prisoners back to Cardassia for trial,” he says. It’s clear he’s furious she captured them in the first place, if only for the complications it brings to Starfleet and the Federation; as far as Julian is concerned, it was preferable to the other options: killing them or letting them go.

“With all due respect, sir,” Julian says, “Gul Dvoll took considerable risk coming to our aid. It only seems fair that she should have some say over what happens to her prisoners.”

Sisko says, tightly, “I know that, Lieutenant. But these are Federation citizens, acting against Starfleet officers.”

“With intention to harm Cardassian civilians,” Julian points out. “I’m sure these individuals are responsible for harming innocents on both sides.” Kira shoots him a look of surprise at his boldness.

Julian doesn’t envy Sisko’s job. It’s bad enough they’ve enraged Starfleet Command by going into the Demilitarized Zone to rescue Jadzia and the others. If they hadn’t been successful, the lot of them would be shackled in a galaxy-class starship’s brig this very moment, bound for Earth, awaiting court martial. They’re lucky, but not lucky enough to avoid the entire fallout. By the sound of it, Dvoll will be on the station for some time while her ship receives repairs and Starfleet negotiates with Central Command.

Julian doesn’t like that one bit.

After the meeting, Julian corners both Sisko and Odo. “Sir? There’s one more thing about Gul Dvoll. She’s been asking questions about our, ah, Cardassian expatriate.”

Sisko exchanges a long glance with Odo. “Is that what we’re calling him now?” He looks back to Julian. “And what did you tell her, Doctor?”

“I told her to ask you.”

“Probably sensible. Though I could do without the added wildcard of Mister Pela right now.”

“Understood, sir.”

Odo harrumphs. “I had a feeling this would happen. When you decided unilaterally to involve Dvoll, she took the first opportunity to act against us.”

Julian bristles. “First of all, I needed her help. I couldn’t very well go digging inside Serot’s skull
without at least some knowledge of Cardassian brain functions.”

“And how is that going, Doctor?” asks Sisko.

“Well, he hasn’t remembered anything useful to our investigations regarding his past. Not yet. But it is working.” Julian catches Odo’s impatient roll of his eyes and hastens to his next point. “Secondly, as I was saying, I trust Gul Dvoll.”

“Do you,” Odo says. “Is there anyone you don’t trust, Doctor?”

“She saved our lives!”

“Not altruistically.”

“What are you getting at, Doctor?” Sisko says, with a tone that demands Julian get to the point. “That you want to bring her into the fold?”

“To an extent, yes. She’s going to find out on her own-- we won’t be able to stall her for much longer. Cardassians don’t strike me as the type to give up easily. We might as well come out with it. She might even be able to help us dig deeper into Serot’s identity.”

“A Cardassian’s first duty is to the state,” Odo says. “She’ll report back to Central Command immediately. The military would relish a chance to embarrass the Obsidian Order with this information. And the Cardassians will do everything in their power to retrieve Mister Pela, one way or another. Is that what you want, Doctor?”

“Over my dead body is anyone taking Serot back to Cardassia,” Julian says.

Sisko studies him with a raised brow, then says, “I’m more worried about Gul Dvoll using him as a bargaining chip with Starfleet.”

Julian nods. “I admit, she could try trading Serot for the prisoners and jeopardize all our careers, but that would be shortsighted of her, and she’s never proven to be anything of the sort. By giving away Serot’s identity as a spy over to Starfleet, she’d be selling out all of Cardassia in the process. It would be political suicide, as it were. Sir, if you let me, I might be able to convince her to work with us. It’s worth a try.”

“That’s a lot of confidence to place in a Cardassian, Doctor.”

Julian knows; one can’t live on a Cardassian station in Bajoran space without being fully aware of the risk he’s taking trusting her. Cardassians are known for their belief in their own racial superiority, their cleverness, their ruthlessness-- not their moral rectitude. As a woman, Gul Dvoll would’ve had to play the game better than her male colleagues to get so far in the military. But Julian doesn’t have many other options, save for convincing Serot to go into hiding. It’s only a matter of time before Serot gives himself away by virtue of being himself.

Whoever that is.

The reality of their predicament becomes clear later that day, while he’s performing a segmental resection on an elderly Bajoran patient. The surgical suite is quiet, save for the steady beep of the biofunction monitor and the hum of Julian’s laser scalpel. He holds out a palm for the autosuture. The nurse beside him passes it over. Then she blurts, “Is something wrong with Pela?”

Julian’s training keeps him from slicing through an extra inch of tissue in surprise. He looks across the patient to Jabara, where she’s providing suction. Their eyes lock, and she goes pale. She gives a
nearly imperceptible shake of her head. Her eyes convince him: she hasn’t breathed a word to anyone. Julian keeps his voice neutral, but with an undercurrent of irritation, as he says, “What do you mean?”

The undercurrent goes unheeded. “He’s been acting strangely lately. I’m not the only one who’s noticed. I know he was ill, but that was a while ago, and ever since he’s been-- off, somehow. His shop’s been closed, but he always seems to be working. It’s like he’s avoiding everyone. Actually, I haven’t seen you two go out in a long time. Quark says he’s been--”

“Really, Lucia, I wouldn’t put any stock into what Quark says.”

“I’m sorry, I know I’m prying. But-- I’m worried. He seems depressed.”

“Serot’s been going through a phase,” Julian says carefully as he keeps his eyes on his work. “You could call it a transition period of rediscovery. In many human cultures, it’s common for people his age to feel they’re stagnating, not achieving what they want in life. Confronted with this realization, they often endeavor to reinvent themselves.” Although typically, Julian thinks, not into another species. “It’s nothing to worry about. I’d love to tell you more, but the operating room really isn’t the place for discussing our boyfriends. By the way, how is Morn?”

In the corner of his eye, Julian catches Jabara let out a breath.

It’s late in the evening when he finally emerges from the infirmary, weary after back-to-back appointments and minor surgeries that had been pushed off in his absence. He stands in front of Serot’s shop and isn’t surprised to find the door locked. Through the window, Julian spots him bent over his workbench, intent over a cascade of gold fabric. Julian taps the glass.

Serot starts. He hurries to the door and unlocks it. “I know you’re busy,” Julian says before Serot can greet him, “but I was hoping we could have dinner at Quark’s. He’s showing the preliminary matches for the springball tournament, and Lika Phider is playing at 2100.”

Despite the desperation in Julian’s voice, Serot’s expression is apologetic. “I’m sorry, my dear, but I’ve already eaten. Rather unsuccessfully. It seems that although my brain is interested in trying zabu stew, my stomach doesn’t agree.” He sighs at the tricorder that instantly appears in Julian’s hands and gently pushes it aside. “I’m fine. It was only a bout of nausea.”

“I’ve heard that one before.” But the tricorder is still flummoxed by Serot’s implants and fails to give a clear reading. He snaps it shut. “Serot, you know better than to go from a strictly vegetarian diet to something like zabu meat. From my understanding, Cardassians are facultative carnivores, but you should still take it easy. Perhaps start with a broth.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

“If not dinner,” Julian says, leaning against the doorframe and batting his eyelashes, “what about a little something else?”

The apologetic look returns again, just as Julian feared. Bloody creative types and their bursts of inspiration. Julian leaves him to his bolts of cloth and thread. He eats dinner while standing beside the replicator, making it easy to toss his empty plate into the reclamation port. The new lighting and red tapestries decorating the walls cast the living area in a gloom. He tries to make the best of it. He tosses insects into the lizard’s aquarium and stretches out on the uncomfortable, hot rock-couch to watch springball. The ball bounces back and forth like a swaying timepiece, hypnotic. By some miracle, he manages to fall asleep there.
Serot is too busy to meet for lunch the next day, so Julian spends his breaks with an unenthused O’Brien, or people-watching from the upper level of the Promenade. The street below is at its most packed at this time of day, but the Bajorans still manage to scatter like mice when Gul Dvoll passes through with her entourage. She window-shops, paying no mind to the glares and the way the merchants squirm under the former Prefect’s gaze. Julian wonders, absently, if there will ever be a reconciliation. He hopes he will live to see it.

For two days, he suffers this routine until one morning Serot summons him to his shop. The “closed” sign is lit, but the door is ajar. When Julian strides through, he finds Kira in a large chair alongside the changing rooms, rapping her nails against its wooden armrest. “Major?” he says. “What are you doing here?”

“For the same reason you are, I’d guess. Pela has something to show us.”

Julian glances around, looking for their mysterious host. When Serot fails to appear, he takes the empty chair beside her. “He certainly has a flair for the dramatic, doesn’t he?”

He swears he catches the twinge of a smile. She leans forward in her seat. “We can get this over with now,” she calls. “Bashir’s here.”

“Ah! Hello, Julian!” Serot calls out from a changing room. The curtains swish aside and he emerges with a wide smile. He spreads his hands, inviting appraisal. “How do I look?”

Julian blinks rapidly as his brain processes what Serot’s wearing. The suit is striped hunter green with red accents. “It’s colorful,” Julian begins, struggling for adjectives as Serot spins about, showcasing his newest work. The collar is so damned high, and beside Serot’s face and his hands, there’s no exposed skin. “Colorful and,” he says, “modest.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No, no, I never said that. It’s just different. That’s all.”

Serot turns toward a mirror. “I admit, it did take some getting used to. What about you, Nerys? What do you think?”

Kira’s eyes are wide, as if she’s been slapped. “Are you insane?” she says, crossing over to where Serot is preening. “You can’t wear that!”

“Oh? Why not?”

“You look ridiculous!”

Serot glances to Julian. “I do?”

“You look fine,” Julian says. “Actually, I think it might grow on me. It’s rather adorable.”

“You’re a human,” Kira snaps. “You don’t get to have an opinion. Serot, this-- this outfit you’re wearing-- it’s Cardassian!”

Serot tugs at his sleeves and shrugs. “It’s influenced by Cardassian design, yes. Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters! You can’t go out in that. It’d be as ridiculous as me wearing Gul Dvoll’s uniform.”

“My dear, that’s because her uniform would be much too big for you,” Serot says, smiling.
Kira sighs and looks up at the ceiling, as if beckoning the Prophets to take her. “Any Bajoran with half a brain will recognize that getup for what it is. They’ll think the worst of you. They’ll think you’ve lost your mind. You look like a Bajoran playing dress up as a spoonhead!”

Julian watches the argument with growing unease as the amusement fades from Serot’s face. “Come on, now, you two,” Julian says. “There’s no need to get upset. It’s just clothing.”

“You thought the worst of me the second you set foot on this station,” Serot says, rounding on Kira so fast she has to take a step back. “Do you think I don’t know what people say about me? I’m not stupid, Nerys. I know what they’re going to think. They’re going to hate me, just as you did. Or perhaps you still do? If that’s how it’s going to be, then get out!”

Kira sets her jaw. She clenches and unclenches her fists, then turns on a heel to head for the door.

She freezes in place. Julian looks over.

In the doorway stands Gul Dvoll. Noticing all eyes are on her, she smiles. “Rousing speech, Mister Pela,” she says. As her attention settles on Julian, her smile widens. “Charming suit, isn’t it, Doctor?”
A tendril of cold slides down Julian’s spine as Gul Dvoll slinks closer, cornering her prey. He steps in front of Serot and throws out a protective arm. *I’ve done this before,* he thinks, recalling one evening on Bajor. A lifetime ago.

Dvoll gives Kira a dismissive wave. “You may go, Major. I have this under control.”

Kira shoots a glance in Serot’s direction, looking ready to protest. Then her scowl returns. “I’ll be in Ops,” she mutters and stomps out the door.

Once she’s gone, Dvoll makes an expansive gesture. “So, Doctor, this must be your-- what did you call him? Your infamous dissident. Or have I misread the situation?”

“Gul Dvoll,” Julian begins, “I was going to tell you--”

Behind him, Serot hisses in his ear, “Were you, now? Did you plan to include me in any of these conversations?”

Julian doesn’t get a chance to answer. Dvoll steps between them and grabs Serot’s face. “I must hand it to you-- I suspected nothing. How many years were you under my nose, tailor?”

“Five,” says Serot.

Julian moves to intervene, but Dvoll freezes him with a look. The threat is real: one of her hands grasps the base of Serot’s neck. Julian backs down.

Dvoll prods at Serot’s face. “Yes, I can see it now. You have the bone structure of a Cardassian. As for everything else-- even your skin is warm like a Bajoran’s. Disgusting.” She roughly tilts his head, fingers pressing into the hinge of his jaw to peer into his mouth. “They filed down your teeth and removed the premolars. Your surgeons did thorough work.” She lets him go and Serot rubs his jaw, glaring at her sidelong. “But you’re as much a political dissident as I am a Hebitian priestess.” She turns to Julian. “How long do you estimate he’s been like this?”

“Ten, twelve years,” Julian says, warily. He has to find a way to deescalate this situation, quick.

Too late: the scales along her ridges flush a dark gray. She catches Serot by the nape again. “Spying on your own kind, were you? Go on, tell me what you reported to your friends in the Order while you scrubbed my uniforms!”

“Stop this!” Julian shouts. “Gul Dvoll, please. He can’t answer any of your questions-- he doesn’t know. Why do you think I needed your help in the first place?”

“Considerable memory loss, you said?”
“Yes, exactly.”

“I take it that Commander Sisko is just as eager to find out what Mister Pela has been observing all these years?”

Julian can only nod in assent. “Dvoll, please let him go.”

“In time.” Dvoll squeezes Serot’s neck, drawing out a hiss of pain. “I’m no Order-trained agent, Pela, but during my time as Prefect I learned a thing or two about information extraction. I’ll start by showing you the inside of my ship’s brig. What do you think, tailor? I’ll have Damar make sure the Maquis don’t abuse you too thoroughly, once they learn what you are.”

At the threat of Serot alone with those fanatics and their blind hatred of Cardassians, Julian moves to tap his communicator. But Serot only purses his lips and murmurs, barely above the din of the promenade, “And how, pray tell, do you intend to bring me in?”

The calm, measured tone of his voice makes Julian pause. Then he spots the dagger pressed against Gul Dvoll’s throat, its edge ready to slice through her jugular. Serot keeps it steady as they stare each other down.

When Dvoll speaks, her voice is infused with odd affection. “You don’t have it in you.”

Serot doesn’t budge. “If I’m an agent of the Order, how can you be sure?”

“Oh, but Pela, I never accused you of acting with premeditation.”

“That’s why you were willing to throw me to the Maquis.”

“A harmless bluster— you know how I am. It must be your face. I can’t help but become a bully at the sight of a Bajoran. I do miss it sometimes.” With that, she releases him.

Julian rushes over to Serot. He’s holding the dagger like a warding totem. As Julian draws him into an awkward embrace, he can feel Serot’s heart hammering beneath his strange Cardassian tunic. His expression remains measured. Only the hint of a tremor gives him away.

“I should have seen it,” Dvoll is saying. “You were always too friendly. With me. With the soldiers. I assumed you were just another spineless collaborator.” She chuckles to herself, though Julian fails to see what’s funny. “You don’t know how many times I almost threw you into ore processing.” Turning away, Dvoll runs her fingers through a dress the color of saffron. She brings the smooth fabric up to stroke the ridges along her chin. “When I first arrived to Terok Nor, I worried I’d befall the same fate as my predecessor.”

Serot tucks away the dagger. “Dukat was corrupt, cruel by even Cardassian standards. Losing his commission to shovel rock in a labor camp was hardly a fitting punishment.”

“Perhaps, but what about his mistress and their halfbreed spawn?”

Serot only frowns. Julian looks between them, struggling to keep up with the conversation. “You mean,” Julian says, “the former Prefect— this Gul Dukat fellow, was it? He had a Bajoran mistress and together they had a child. What happened to them?”

“We had them eliminated.”

The force of the news sends Serot staggering back. He collapses heavily in the nearest chair. “Why?”
“They were a liability,” Dvoll says. “Central Command would’ve been fools to let them live.”

“They were ready to escape. They had a transport scheduled for Lissepia.”

Dvoll regards him coolly. “I had a feeling you knew about that.”

“Of course I knew about that! I was close with every woman that fiend manipulated into his bed! Who do you think mended their dresses every time he brutalized them?”

“That reminds me of what you told me when we first met. Do you remember? ‘Who can you trust, if not your tailor?’”

Serot has gone pale. He runs a shaking hand over his face and whispers something, too quiet for even Julian to hear. “What are you saying?” Julian interjects. “Are you blaming Serot for what happened to them?”

“An informed guess, Doctor. Nothing more.” She tugs at the dress between her hands. “It would be interesting to pull the fabric around your life and see what catches. Dukat’s fall from grace was not accidental, and if the rumors are true, tailor, he liked to keep you close.”

Julian is puzzling out her meaning when Serot snaps, “If you’re implying I was somehow involved in deposing Gul Dukat, you’ll be hard-pressed to wring any regret out of me.”

“I’m expressing my gratitude! I can only begin to fathom how you’ve served Cardassia over the years.” Her eyes glide to Julian and she briefly smiles. “I may have my contentions with the Order, but a well-run military thrives on good intelligence.”

“Lurin,” Julian says, “please.”

“I should take this information directly to Central Command. I’m sure my superiors would find it very illuminating.”

“If I remember correctly,” Serot says, “you were never enthusiastic about toeing Central Command’s line.”

That’s a surprise. Julian turns back to Dvoll in time to notice her scowl. “If this is some clumsy attempt at blackmail, tailor, I’m not intimidated.” When Serot only shakes his head, she continues, “I’d take great pleasure in demonstrating to you my loyalty to Central Command.”

“You can’t be serious,” Julian says. “If you involve the Cardassians, you’d be ruining his life.”

And mine, Julian silently adds. And mine.

“What life, Doctor? This? Over ten years of living among Bajorans and mated to a human-- even one as pretty as yourself-- is hardly a crowning achievement. I’d be doing him a favor if I were to spare him another minute on this station.”

“I’m terribly sorry, but that’s not your call to make!”

Dvoll favors him with a thin smile. “Not to worry, Doctor. I don’t intend to contact my superiors just yet. Unless of course there is evidence that Mister Pela was acting as an agent of the Order.”

Julian shakes his head. “We’ve been unable prove that he acted on anything. That’s why I’ve been collaborating with Doctor Parmak to jog his memory.”

“And I see from his improved clothing style that you’ve met with some success. What else?”
“Excuse me?”

Dvoll inches closer to Serot. “There must be more. Any memories of whisking away traitors from their homes in the dead of night? Recollections of severing the fingers of your more reticent subjects? A gruesome rumor, of course. Perhaps someday soon you can tell me if it’s only an embellishment. Then again,” she continues, circling closer until Serot flinches, “I can’t imagine you as the type to go for anything so obvious as ripping out a man’s scales, row by row. Never underestimate the power of sleep deprivation and a well-timed threat, especially against your subject’s family. Is that what they taught you, Mister Pela?”

Serot jumps up to put his chair between them. “I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“No? It doesn’t strike you as familiar? Perhaps you never conducted interrogations. Perhaps assassination was more your style.”

Serot has half-hidden behind Julian, caught between the urge to flee from Dvoll’s screed and the drive to stand up for himself. Julian can see his resolve crumbling under her words, the unknown and countless horrible possibilities. “That’s enough, Dvoll!” Julian says. “You’ve crossed the line.”

“You’re right, of course. I see this conversation isn’t helping matters,” Dvoll says, suddenly conciliatory and polite again, though a smile lingers on her lips. If all Cardassians are this rapid-fire in changing emotions, then Julian predicts he is in for a rough ride. “I should be getting back to my negotiations with Commander Sisko, before I’m late. We’ll surely discuss this at length another time.”

And with a nod farewell, she’s gone.

Behind him, Julian hears Serot let out a shaky breath. Julian runs his knuckles down Serot’s cheek. “Are you all right?”

He very clearly isn’t. “Do you think what she said might be true?”

“I think she was trying to get under your skin.” Threatening Serot hadn’t worked, so she’d resorted to accusing him of every heinous crime, knowing he couldn’t dispute any of it.

“But is it possible?”

“Serot, love,” Julian says, pressing close, trying to soothe him with his embrace, “no matter what you did or didn’t do, you were a different person then. That’s the past. It has no bearing on who you are now.” He can feel Serot shaking his head, denying his logic, and while Julian can understand his dread at the possibility of having hurt others, nothing good can come from fretting over it. He taps Serot’s pocket and smiles. “I see you’ve been carrying that dagger around with you.”

“Ah, yes.” Serot ducks his head, avoiding Julian’s eyes. “Lately, I’ve been feeling more and more paranoid. Irrationally. I can’t help but feel someone is watching me.”

“Don’t apologize. Do you want to know a secret?” When Serot only raises a brow, Julian leans in to whisper, “It rather turned me on.”

“It did?”

Julian nods and gives Serot’s collar a suggestive tug. “See you at lunch?”

With one last reassurance that Serot shouldn’t worry about Dvoll, Julian hurries across the promenade and to the infirmary to begin his shift. He isn’t surprised when an hour later Commander
Sisko appears, bearing news of a recent visit from their “favorite gul” regarding Serot. There’s no accusation in his tone— he knows the discovery was accidental. “You were right, Doctor,” Sisko says. “She says she wants to help.”

Just as he was beginning to lose faith in her trustworthiness. “Do you believe her?”

Sisko shrugs. “A Cardassian perspective might prove invaluable. But I don’t need to remind you to keep an eye on her. In fact, if I were you, I wouldn’t leave them alone together.”

Julian takes the advice to heart. Dvoll’s behavior has vacillated between friendly and hostile, and his prerogative is keeping Serot safe. It could be that Dvoll’s motive is simply to come to the aid of a fellow Cardassian in need, but O’Brien and Kira would caution him about the Cardassian incapacity for altruism. Julian isn’t sure if he believes that— he is of the opinion that no society could function without some degree of altruism in its consciousness. Even that of the Ferengi. Much as Julian wants to take Dvoll at face value, giving her complete access to Serot would only be asking her to manipulate him. Into what, he doesn’t intend to find out.

When lunch rolls around, Julian finds Serot alone in his shop, seated on a stool and squinting into a PADD. When he catches sight of Julian in the doorway, he yanks off the pair of spectacles on his nose and tucks them into a drawer. “I saw that,” Julian says, smiling to take the reproving edge out of his voice. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re having trouble seeing up close?”

“Precisely because I knew you’d insist I do something about it.”

“Presbyopia is a common ailment in most middle-aged humanoids.” He catches Serot’s pout, and adds, “and it’s easily corrected, although I know you’ll never take me up on it.”

“I’m glad we’re understanding one another,” Serot answers with a brilliant smile as he gathers his jacket and begins locking up. “I always wondered if this preoccupation with perfection was a human characteristic, or a function of you being a doctor and thus obsessed with fixing everything.”

Julian follows him out. “You’d rather not be able to see ten centimeters in front of you?”

“Oh, but I can see. When I want to.”

“Fine, it just seems like a dreadful inconvenience, having to rely on assistive devices.”

“I worry how you’ll function once you begin to suffer the ravages of age, my dear.”

“Yes, yes, I’m a vain youth.” Julian waves a hand. “But I can’t be so blind— pun intended— to the advantages of age and wisdom if I’m with . . .”

They haven’t gone twenty meters when Julian becomes aware of the eyes following them. The entire promenade is staring at them. Well, not everyone— the non-Bajorans are going about their day, oblivious. Most of the Bajorans are only staring from their periphery, pretending to look elsewhere. Those are the polite ones. Several, however, are openly gawking.

“I wonder,” Serot continues in the same playful tone, seemingly ignoring how Julian never finished his thought, “if you encountered a man with thinning hair, would you demand he avail himself to your healing hands?”

The pool of rubberneckers increases as the Bajorans turn to whisper to their companions. Fingers point in their direction. I must be imagining things, Julian thinks, and looks to Serot. No, he’s definitely noticed, too: he’s walking closer to Julian than usual, as if seeking out the extra protection of his presence, and he’s favoring his surroundings with a bland smile. He nods to the closest people
gaping at him and looks back to Julian, expectant. Well? he seems to say. Aren’t you going to answer me?

Right. “I’d first assess whether the hair loss was caused by illness. I’d hardly pester anyone about a purely cosmetic problem.”

“But you admit you see it as a problem.”

Across the way, a man is so caught up on gaping at Serot that he rams into a woman carrying a pair of jumja sticks. The confectionaries go flying and the two raise their hands along with their voices. Julian would find it comical if the man he loved weren’t the object of the unwanted attention.

“Should we go back to our quarters?”

“No,” Serot says.

If Serot is trying to take a stand of some sort, Julian fails to see the point. But he doesn’t argue, and places a hand on the small of Serot’s back and guides him on the too-long journey to the replimat, all pretense of light-hearted conversation forgotten. He considers suggesting Quark’s instead, but decides adding noise and Morn to the mix would only make the situation worse.

By the time they retrieve their food and sit at their usual table, the stares have become frowns. Behind sandwiches and cupped hands, the gawkers lean in and exchange theories and gossip. At least, that’s what Julian suspects. Between bites of his soup, Julian glares at each and every rude person until they look away.

“Ignore them,” Serot says.

“Easier said than done. I should do something.”

Serot’s spoon clatters into his bowl. His eyes are pleading.

Julian has no choice but to relent with a slow shake of his head. “I don’t understand. It’s just a bloody suit. They’re looking at you as if you were, well, literally covered in blood!”

“As usual, my dear, you underestimate the importance of fashion. Every garment telegraphs the wearer’s identification-- his or her occupation--” He indicates Julian’s uniform with a hint of a wrinkled nose. “--social status, rank, grooming habits, political allegiance, or, in your case when I first met you, an inability to differentiate color.”

“This isn’t funny, Serot.”

“I never said it was. Let this serve as a lesson in how fickle people’s opinions can be. One moment you may find yourself well-respected, and the next--” He spears a plump vegetable between the tines of his fork. “A pariah.”

Julian looks down at his bowl as an overwhelming sense of sadness passes over him. It’s a lesson he’s learned before, one he has feared becoming part of his life again should his enhancements become common knowledge. If the residents of the station are this unsettled by Serot wearing a suit of Cardassian design, how will they treat him when they learn the truth? If only there were a way to spare Serot from enduring the coming judgment.

They try to make the best of the situation and each other’s company, but soon have no choice but to cut the meal short. Julian can only hope that nobody takes it upon themselves to harass Serot in his absence.
That evening, Serot is first to their quarters. Julian has just given Serot a peck on the cheek when the door chimes.

They exchange a glance. Stroking the head of the lizard cupped in one palm, Serot says, “Were you expecting someone?”

Julian scours his memory. “Miles has been meaning to come by to look at the computer. But he should be off-duty by now.”

“Is there something wrong with it?”

“He thinks he might be able to retrieve the records your, ah, counterpart deleted. Evidently the encryption method you used was so sophisticated, even the Chief’s usual data recovery subroutines failed to work.”

Serot looks across the room, at the terminal. Its screen is dark. “I suppose I should feel proud of myself for outsmarting our Chief O’Brien.”

“Maybe not for much longer. He thinks he’s figured out how to bypass the encryption and access the secondary backup another way. It’s a trick he picked up from Gul Dvoll’s engineer while we were aboard her ship. The only problem is that he needs more of the station’s main computer in order to pull it off. Who knows when that’ll happen. The last time I asked him, he was half-engulfed in a Jefferies tube.” Julian tries for an approximation of the chief’s accent. “‘I’ll get to it when I get to it,’ he said. If we could access those files, it would really help figure out what you’ve been up to all these years.”

“The chief is a busy man,” Serot says. “One can’t rush genius.”

Julian recognizes the twitch of a muscle in Serot’s neck, the tightness in his voice. “You’re nervous about what we’ll find?”

“What’s there to be nervous about, my dear? Those files only contain the sum of my condemnation.”

“Or your exoneration,” Julian reasons. “At this point, wouldn’t it be a relief to know the truth?”

The chime sounds again, and a voice calls from the other side. “Doctor, these are your quarters, are they not?”

“Speak of the devil,” Julian mutters, and keys the door open.

Gul Dvoll bids him a nod and steps inside. She’s still in uniform-- as a matter of fact, Julian has never seen her in anything else. The cuirass looks dreadfully uncomfortable as she carries a large roll of colorful fabric under each arm. She clears a path on the dining table with one clumsy sweep of an arm and throws them down. The bolts land with a thud.

“Pela, I wanted to apologize for my earlier behavior,” Dvoll says, dusting her hands and smiling. “As a token of my regret, please accept these handcrafted textiles from Cardassia. You may inspect their quality yourself.”

Serot places the lizard on his shoulder and approaches the table as if expecting the fabric to snake out and bite him. As he unrolls the first bolt, Julian peers over his shoulder. The fabric is midnight blue, patterned with rows of the Cardassian symbol in red and gold. The second bolt is a more subdued gray and green, depicting a stylized animal on the prowl, its massive paws extended.

“A riding hound,” Dvoll explains.
Julian is sure uglier fabric exists somewhere in the known universe, only it has yet to assault his eyes. In a show of Cardassian politeness, Serot smiles and bows his head in thanks. “What a charming gift,” he lies, badly, before Bajoran directness takes over. “What do you expect me to do with these... things?”

“I’m sure you can apply your expertise. A tasteful shawl, perhaps, or a tablecloth?”

“I think even one as stylishly reckless as the young Jake Sisko would find these garish.” Serot rolls his eyes toward Julian. “My dear, could you find a place to store these?” Out of my sight, is the silent addendum.

If Dvoll is offended, she doesn’t let on. Her eyes follow Julian as he carts the fabric bolts to the nearest closet. “In time, you’ll come to appreciate them,” she says. When the bolts are safely stowed, he returns to find Dvoll standing beside the replicator, eyes twinkling. “I hope you two haven’t eaten yet,” she says.

Serot blinks. “What?”

“She’s inviting herself to dinner,” Julian says. “She does that.”

“Please, sit down, both of you,” Dvoll says with all the charm of a proper hostess. “I’ve put a great deal of thought into this, and I may have the very thing to suss out Pela’s origins. We Cardassians have excellent memories. Nearly eidetic, in fact. And although we’re primarily visual thinkers, nothing can elicit a memory as strongly as our sense of taste, or smell.”

“We tried this already,” Julian interjects. “We tried it with a series of holoprograms on Cardassian culture. None of them worked.”

“No offense to your theoretical knowledge, Doctor, but what I’m proposing is more precise. Now, please.” She gestures toward the empty chairs.

Julian gives Serot a shrug. What she’s proposing can’t hurt. With obvious reluctance, Serot takes a seat beside Julian and splays his hands in a gesture of surrender.


A wooden platter materializes and she carries it to the table. The food is artfully arranged in rows, with two bite-sized pieces of each sample. She is adamant that they proceed in order, across the platter, tasting one sample before moving to the next. The first is a spongy white meat drizzled in a sweet brown sauce. Julian rather likes it. “From the Qarid region,” Dvoll says once they’ve chewed and swallowed. “Only a population of a few hundred thousand. Very rustic, by Cardassian standards.”

By the fifth sample, Julian is enjoying this foray into Cardassian culture. Beside him, Serot is more hesitant to take up his fork, and Julian has to ooh and ahh through a mouthful of purple curly vegetable to encourage him to try it. It’s fear, Julian knows. Dread over what reaction the unknown foods will elicit in him. They’re halfway through the platter when Julian asks, “Dvoll, this is all delicious, but what makes you think it’s going to do Serot any good?”

“A fair question, Doctor. All these dishes are obscure to off-worlders. They’ve never become part of Cardassian cuisine at large the way, say, tojal has. Or that populist trash you know as sem’hal stew. To try this variation of regova eggs, for instance, you’d have to travel to the region where the locals can make it just so.”

“Or have access to the replicator recipe,” Julian observes with a smile. Serot is ignoring both of them,
picking his way through the samples.

“Of course, none of these representations do the real thing justice, but I’m hoping you’ll indulge me. I’ve had the rare opportunity to travel throughout Cardassia and her colonies, and I’ve gathered these with much fondness. You see, Doctor, my people aren’t prone to migrating the way you humans are. A good Cardassian stays where she’s born to take up the family trade and look after her kin. We don’t stray far from what we know.”

“It sounds terribly insular,” Julian says. “If you don’t mind me asking, how do you fit into all that? Do you consider yourself a ‘good’ Cardassian?”

“I’m from a military family,” she says, as if that’s explanation enough.

Serot hums, drawing their attention. He points to a remaining coil of seared meat, spiced red and skewered. “What’s this?”

Dvoll straightens. “A type of street food found in Cardassia City. I’ve never had rokat prepared quite like that anywhere else. Is it familiar?”

Julian watches Serot closely. He leans back, arms folded, chin cradled in one hand, to study the hunk of fish. He nods.

Dvoll’s smile is triumphant. She grabs the platter to toss it unceremoniously into the reclamation port. Julian stifles a protest; he’s been looking forward to finishing it off. As soon as the platter has dematerialized, Dvoll calls up another. “You may want to avoid the first dish, Doctor,” she says, referring to a puffy pastry that looks to be filled with fruit. It’s demanding to be nibbled upon. “The barbs are not easily digested by humans. The result can be somewhat uncomfortable.”

Julian stays his hand.

Serot goes after the offerings with more gusto now, closing his eyes after each bite. “That confectionery,” Dvoll says, “is one of the most popular items in a bakery in--”

“The Torr sector,” Serot says, opening his eyes. “Across from the Alkeen amphitheater. It was as old as the amphitheater itself, but the owners refused to expand or install proper seats. It was always so crowded.”

“Your information is outdated,” Dvoll says smoothly, as Julian bounces in his seat, lips shut tight to keep from breaking the moment. “The most recent owner died three years ago, and his children gave in to public demand and remodeled the premises. A pity. The place had such charm. But every tourist has visited that shop. Try the next one.”

The second does nothing for him, but the third has Serot out of his seat, circling the table and rubbing his palms together. “We had these for breakfast, on special mornings. The housekeeper-- no, she must’ve been my mother-- could she have been both? She’d spend an hour preparing the eggs to get them fluffy, like this. I could never seem to wait for them to cool. I’d steal them in my pockets and burn the roof of my mouth.” Serot stops himself and looks momentarily embarrassed.

As a frequent babbler, Julian only smiles. “Go on. Please.”

“She’d always catch me, of course. The first batch was meant for someone else. If I managed to exercise restraint, she’d take me on a walk after breakfast. We’d look at the old homes.”

Dvoll’s expression is inscrutable. “The homes. What color were the roofs?”
“They were the most remarkable tarnished copper.”

“Sloped or flat?”

Serot considers. “A combination of both.”

Dvoll inspects the arrangement of foods on the platter and points to one in the center. “Try that.”

It looks like a ball of stiff noodles, dipped in a yellow coating. It makes an audible crunch as Serot bites into it, and takes him out of the city and rambling about the country and ancient garameth trees overlooking a shadowy manse. He’s barely able to contain his excitement, talking so fast that even Julian is struggling to keep up. Dvoll frowns in a way that Julian finds disconcerting, but Serot doesn’t seem to notice; he’s lost in another man’s memories. One recollection leads to another until he’s so overwhelmed he has to sit down. Dvoll waits for him to get his head back together before offering a square biscuit.

“Schooling,” Serot says, eyeing the crescent of remaining food. “Odd. That’s all I remember.”

“Not so ridiculous,” Dvoll says. “Those are rations served in the State boarding schools.”

They talk for the rest of the night, Dvoll asking this or that illuminating question, steering him deeper into his memories, most of them disjointed. That leaves Julian a third-wheel observer. The food forgotten, Julian cleans up and watches them, smiling. The lizard crawls across Dvoll’s fingers as she listens to Serot describe the gardens in the central square with obvious fondness. That hint of a frown never leaves her expression.

At last, she stands, announcing her intention to call it a night. Serot looks at her, gratitude written all over his face, and she dips her head and smiles. Julian wants to press her for an analysis of what she’s learned, the reason for the crease between her brow-ridges, but he’s hesitant to do so in front of Serot. The memories he’s experiencing seem so happy, and Julian is afraid to ruin them with needless concern. It can wait.

Serot is still restless as Julian prepares for bed. “It’s so remarkable,” says Serot, lost in a daze as he sits at the edge of the bed and tries to undress. He’s been there for five minutes but has only managed to undo three buttons. “I want to write it all down, but my hands would never be able to keep up.”

Julian grins around his sonic toothbrush. “It wouldn’t hurt to try. Come to think of it, I’d love to read your memoirs.”

“I’m afraid you’d find the opening terribly dull. All I can remember are cherished childhood memories.” A fourth button comes loose before Serot goes still again.

Julian waits for Serot to rouse himself from the memory before saying, “Maybe you should close the shop for a few days.” He hopes he doesn’t have to explain why. It’s bad enough Serot has been dressing like a Cardassian. They don’t need this bizarre behavior adding to the negative attention.

It doesn’t seem Serot hears him. Julian’s tucked under the covers when Serot finally says, “If I keep closing the shop, I’ll soon be wearing nothing but a barrel.”

What an image! “I’d never let you become a full-blown pauper. I’d loan you the credits to replicate a jumpsuit, at least.”

“Prophets, spare me such a fate.”

Serot flops back onto the bed, down six buttons and twelve more to go. Heaving a melodramatic
sigh, Julian rolls over to take care of the remaining fastenings and pull off the shirt, followed by the thermals. He’s working on the trousers, searching Serot’s face, when Serot raises his head to kiss Julian. Chastely, at first. Then Serot’s tongue slips into Julian’s mouth. Julian groans. Yes. He’s waited so long for this. Serot, back to full awareness, has Julian out of his pajamas faster than he can say corpora cavernosa, arms going round Julian’s shoulders to pull them flush together. His mouth does impossible things to Julian’s neck.

Panting, Julian manages to disentangle himself from the embrace enough to fumble through the nightstand. He knocks over a PADD and sends the hypospray skittering across the floor. Underneath him, Serot writhes and demands attention with a light snap of teeth against his throat. Julian’s hand closes around the right bottle. His mouth does impossible things to Julian’s neck. Panting, Julian manages to disentangle himself from the embrace enough to fumble through the nightstand. He knocks over a PADD and sends the hypospray skittering across the floor. Underneath him, Serot writhes and demands attention with a light snap of teeth against his throat. Julian’s hand closes around the right bottle. His mouth does impossible things to Julian’s neck. Panting, Julian manages to disentangle himself from the embrace enough to fumble through the nightstand. He knocks over a PADD and sends the hypospray skittering across the floor. Underneath him, Serot writhes and demands attention with a light snap of teeth against his throat. Julian’s hand closes around the right bottle. His mouth does impossible things to Julian’s neck. Panting, Julian manages to disentangle himself from the embrace enough to fumble through the nightstand. He knocks over a PADD and sends the hypospray skittering across the floor. Underneath him, Serot writhes and demands attention with a light snap of teeth against his throat. Julian’s hand closes around the right bottle. His mouth does impossible things to Julian’s neck. Panting, Julian manages to disentangle himself from the embrace enough to fumble through the nightstand. He knocks over a PADD and sends the hypospray skittering across the floor. Underneath him, Serot writhes and demands attention with a light snap of teeth against his throat. Julian’s hand closes around the right bottle. His mouth does impossible things to Julian’s neck.

Julian drags him to the edge of the bed and grips the backs of his knees. He can’t help but grin at the way Serot gasps and his eyes flutter closed as Julian fills him. “You’re lovely,” Julian says, giving Serot’s thigh a rub and rocking his hips, drawing out of another shudder and intake of breath.

Julian goes slow, taking his time, until he realizes Serot has wandered into his own world again. Under normal circumstances, Julian might be offended, but he only laughs and jabs Serot hard enough to jar him from whatever memory he’s reveling in. “Hey you,” he says, “pay attention when I’m trying to shag you!”

Serot blinks and hitches his legs around Julian’s waist. His heels dig into Julian’s bum and urge him forward. “Deeper,” he whispers.

Julian is only too happy to oblige.

For the first time in weeks, Serot sleeps peacefully without a chemical aid. Although he’s more subdued upon waking, no longer chattering as they enjoy breakfast, the earlier anxiety about the situation seems to have evaporated. When he leaves to pray at the temple, he looks, of all things, relaxed. For that Julian is grateful.

The morning is a barrage of surgeries and the emergency delivery of a baby. The little miracle fights Julian with claws and tail in an effort to resist coming into the world. Once the hissing bundle is safe in the mother’s arms, Julian checks the time.

It’s well past lunch. No word from Gul Dvoll yet. If anything, Julian simply wants to thank her for chipping open the breach in the proverbial dam. Strange that she hasn’t yet sauntered by the infirmary to press him for more information.

On his break, Julian checks his messages. A brief note from Dvoll awaits him, written in obvious haste: “Doctor Bashir. Negotiations with the Federation have concluded. By the time you read this, I will be on my way back to Prime. I must praise your Chief O’Brien for his help in the repairs to my ship. Please give him my warm regards. Speaking of commendations, it seems I am to receive one from the Detapa Council upon my return. I will be in contact as soon as I am able.”

“Well, blast,” Julian mutters. He confirms her departure later, when he crosses the Promenade to the docking ring where he last saw the Prakesh. Instead, he finds a Talarian freighter in its place. A meeting in Odo’s security office clears up his remaining questions: Dvoll managed to work over Starfleet until they agreed to let her take the higher ranking Maquis with her for trial on Cardassia. Commendation, indeed. Julian can only hope the lot of them, including Eddington, receive a fair trial.
“I wouldn’t count on it, Doctor,” Odo tells him. “Everyone who goes to trial on Cardassia is proven guilty.”

“You mean guilty until proven innocent,” Julian corrects.

“I mean guilty.” Odo shoots him a mild look over his stack of reports. “In the Cardassian judicial system, the trial is only ceremony. The accused is pronounced guilty ahead of time. I almost miss the simplicity of it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Julian says later over dinner in Quark’s, pointing an accusatory fork at Serot. With Dvoll gone, Serot is the closest thing to a Cardassian he can find to browbeat over this sham. “You can’t call that justice!”

“My dear, such Federation ethnocentrism! Perhaps the Cardassians favor a more simple method of justice. After all, why bother with a trial for the guilty?”

“Why have a-- Serot, I can’t believe I’m explaining this-- the entire point of a trial is to determine if a person is guilty, preferably in fair and transparent fashion. Wait. Are you playing devil’s advocate, or do you sincerely believe all that rot?”

Serot gives a shrug. “You sound so surprised. Were you not listening to me when I warned you about Cardassian ruthlessness?”

“I was, only I thought you exaggerated.”

“Have I ever had a penchant for melodrama?”

Julian smiles, holding the quip on his tongue, and Serot catches on with a knowing smile of his own. Then it fades as something behind Julian grabs Serot’s attention. Julian turns.

Kira winds through the tables, Bareil behind her. She catches sight of them just as Serot straightens and gives her a smile that shows all his teeth. Bareil nods back, hand raised in a wave, and moves to join them. Kira reels him away before he can get far. They disappear into the crowd.

Serot turns his attention back to his food without a word. Julian presses his lips together. Change of subject, then. “So. Did you have a chance to finish *Hamlet* yet?”

“As of late I’ve had little to do but read, considering my distinct lack of clientele. Not a single customer since yesterday. No, I take that back. A Nausicaan did wander in earlier this morning. He asked to use the facilities. I should specify that he was rather drunk.”

Serot’s self-deprecating smile takes the edge off, but it’s difficult to find levity when so many people are currently staring at them. “It’ll get better,” Julian says, taking hold of Serot’s hand. He feels Serot relax underneath the touch of skin. “What did you think of it? The play, I mean. It’s always been one of my favorites of Shakespeare’s.”

“I can’t fathom why. Putting aside my usual criticism of the human tendency to kill off protagonists--really, were all your writers aspiring murderers?”

“Catharsis,” Julian says. On more than one occasion, they’ve gone round and round about the predominance of the ‘happy ending’ in Bajoran literature.

“I’m having difficulty pinpointing why this is considered a tragedy. If young Hamlet had simply done as his father asked and killed his uncle in act one, there wouldn’t have been so much bloodshed.”
“That’s actually a commonly held view, that because Hamlet dawdles—”

“Hesitation I can understand, but this isn’t a tragic flaw. It’s cowardice.”

“Over the murder of his uncle?”

“An uncle, my dear, who murdered his father and the rightful king of Denmark.”

“Sure, but Hamlet had no proof of that beyond the word of a ghost. That’s the entire reason for the play within the play.”

“Are ancient Earth spirits known for lying about such things?”

Julian smiles. “They’ve been known to cause mischief among the living.”

“Yes, I’m remembering the spirits from that tiresome Charles Dickens story you leant me last year.”

“I thought you liked A Christmas Carol!”

“Did I? I must’ve been being polite. Back to young Hamlet. Regardless of his misgivings, Claudius did murder the king. Hamlet should’ve listened to his father’s request for revenge and carried it out immediately.”

“No second thoughts?”

“None at all.”

Julian doesn’t point out that this sounds like a decidedly Cardassian perspective. “I’ll keep that in mind the next time a spirit orders me about.” Which, considering where he’s currently posted, isn’t too far-fetched. Quark chooses that moment to amble over to their table, interrupting his thoughts with the clatter of dishes.

“How was everything, gentlemen?” he asks, clearing off their plates. His mouth forms a sharp-fanged Ferengi smile. Julian nods with a perfunctory “Great, Quark,” to usher him away, but the barkeep persists. “Any dessert for you tonight?”

“I’ve noticed the doctor eyeing the Delvan fluff pastry all evening,” Serot says with a smile so smug it makes Julian laugh.

“Two forks,” Julian adds. “I’m feeling generous today.”

“One Delvan fluff pastry, two forks,” Quark mutters as he jots down the order, his tone underlining how he feels about the concept of sharing.

“Oh, and Quark,” Serot says, “when you get the chance, I’d like to put in another order of those worms you brought me last week. On second thought, let’s make it a recurring delivery.”

“The crabworms? You finished them already?”

“I must hand it to your supplier. The freshness was just as advertised.”

“You didn’t--” Quark’s eyes flick to Julian before settling back on Serot, “—eat them live, did you?”

“Quark, I’m surprised. I’d think a cultured man such as yourself would know there’s no other way to eat crabworms. It’s an acquired taste, to be sure, and takes some skill to crack open the claws with one’s teeth before they can do damage, but it’s well worth it. I’ve found they’re perfect when dipped
in Kamoy syrup. It offsets the bitterness and becomes a rather savory delicacy.”

“Huh.” Quark scratches the back of a lobe. “A delicacy, you say. I never thought-- I’ll have to try that.” He bows and rushes away.

Julian waits until Quark is out of earshot to stare at Serot in amazement. “You were having him on.”

Serot raises a shoulder in an elegant shrug.

“You better warn him before he tries dipping any live insects in Kamoy syrup,” Julian says. “I’m worried he’ll soon pay me a visit to the infirmary. With his tongue bitten off.”

“Now _that_ would be a real tragedy.” A thought seems to strike Serot then, and he leans forward. “It occurs to me that there’s a reason why this play seems so familiar. Have you ever heard of the Cardassian practice of shri-tal?” When Julian can only shake his head, intrigued, Serot continues, “It’s a deathbed ritual. In one’s final moments, a Cardassian reveals his deepest secrets to his closest family members before passing on, in the hopes that they will exact revenge upon his enemies.”

“How very Cardassian,” Julian says.

“Indeed. It’s such an honored practice, in fact, that there’s an entire genre of literature devoted to it. They’re fanciful stories, much like your human horror tales. Usually, a character dies before getting the chance to divulge his secrets, and haunts his relatives from beyond the grave until his wishes are carried out. Only with all his enemies dead can the spirit be laid to rest. In other stories, the family ignores the wishes of the deceased, and suffers the consequences.”

“Like our dear friend Hamlet.”

“Felled by poison, dead with the rest of his loved ones, leaving Fortinbras to capture the kingdom.”

“So by your interpretation--” Julian says, then corrects himself when Serot starts to protest, “Cardassian interpretation— _Hamlet_ is a cautionary tale about what happens when we don’t listen to our elders.”

“Fathers, specifically.” Serot turns to peer out the viewport. “It’s a patriarchal society, I’m afraid. Loyalty to one’s father is as obligatory and unquestioned as—” He frowns, trails off.

“As what?” prompts Julian.

Serot flinches, as if suddenly stricken by the sound of Julian’s voice. The color drains from his face and he looks everywhere at once, searching for something, not finding it.

“Serot? What’s wrong?” Julian reaches for his hand.

Serot stumbles up, gripping the table for support. “I-- excuse me.” He staggers away, nearly colliding with patrons and tables in his haste to get out of the bar. It’s not a graceful exit, and Julian can feel the curious eyes and antennae of onlookers shifting from Serot and onto him.

Julian rises to follow after just as a waiter comes by with the Delvan pastry. “Sorry, I, ah-- have Quark put it on my tab!” he says, and hurries down the stairs. He’s closing in on the exit when Odo’s voice calls after him.

“Doctor Bashir. Is everything all right?”

It takes all of Julian’s patience to slow down. He wheels around to where the constable is standing at
the bar, beside the ever-present Morn. “Yes, Odo.” Julian claps his hands together. “Everything’s just grand!”

Odo harrumphs, and there’s no doubt in Julian’s mind that he saw Serot flee moments ago. It’s a wonder Odo didn’t chase after him. “You know better than to run when it isn’t an emergency,” Odo says instead, like they’re at the community pool, appraising Julian carefully. He waves a hand of dismissal.

Julian fakes a suitably chastened expression and rushes out of Quark’s and onto the promenade. He glances around, zeroes in. Serot hasn’t made it far; he’s using the wall for support, staggering as if he’s taken a phaser blast to his ribs. As if to justify Julian’s faith in humanity, a woman is following after Serot, frowning in concern, one hand outstretched but not touching him, ready to steady him should he fall. He keeps lurching on in blind determination. When Julian trots over, he can hear her offering to call for medical assistance. It takes multiple reassurances that he’s a doctor for her to nod and continue on her way.

Julian catches Serot gently by the arm. “Serot. Hey. Slow down. Where are we going?”

“He’s trying to get away,” Serot says through gritted teeth and squints into the distance. He laughs. “He thinks he lost me.”

“Who? Who’s trying to get away?” When Serot only ignores him, Julian tries another tack. Serot looks ready to faint, and sheer force of will is the only thing keeping him upright. “Serot, stop. Whatever you’re seeing, it isn’t real. You’re on the promenade. With me, Julian.” And come morning, everyone on the station will think we’ve both gone absolutely mad.

Serot hesitates. “Julian? What are you doing here?”

Julian keeps his tone light, amused, to hide the worry. “Trying to collect my boyfriend after he walked out on me at dinner, if you must know.”

Still clutching his side, Serot casts a glance over his shoulder. “Then-- then he isn’t dead? I didn’t kill him?”

“No, no, you didn’t kill anybody. It isn’t real, and you aren’t hurt.”

For the first time, Serot looks at Julian. He gives his side an experimental pat, checking for imaginary wounds, and straightens. “Oh,” he whispers, and with a shiver sinks against the wall. “Oh. I saw it. Julian, I saw it. I cut his throat.”

“It’s not real,” Julian repeats, gathering Serot into his arms. At least, Julian adds with a grim press of lips to Serot’s neck, not anymore.

“I shot the other one.”

“Shh. C’mon, love. Shh.” Julian feels a pair of eyes on the back of his head. Behind them, outside the entrance of Quark’s, Odo stands sentry, hooded eyes peering in their direction. Julian pays him a nod and murmurs to Serot, “Let’s go home.”

Julian wants to call for a site-to-site transport, just to spare them the walk, but it isn’t a medical emergency, and the movement of one foot after the other seems to eventually calm Serot down enough that the trembling dies to the occasional tremor. Yet he remains dazed from whatever horror he’s just experienced.

Cut his throat. Shot the other one. Please, Prophets, Julian begs, calling upon Serot’s gods for
mercy, please let that be the worst of it.

There’s something odd about hoping that the deliberate extinguishing of another sentient life—murder? self defense?—is the worst Serot’s memory has to offer. Julian feels the dread pooling in the pit of his stomach. He ignores it and, once home, plies Serot with cup after cup of hot tea. Serot sits at the table and drinks it, staring ahead, vacantly.

Had Serot known this was coming? Julian imagines the Orb, its doors thrown open and slamming Serot with atrocity, countless cruelties inflicted by his own hands. No wonder he’d gone nearly catatonic in the face of it. Now he has to experience it again, one at a time, vibrant as the day the memory was forged. Julian has to thank the mutability of human memory.

Julian presses his palms flat on the table and watches Serot hug himself. Tell me. Don’t leave me standing here to imagine what you’ve done. No: what he did.

“I won’t think any less of you,” Julian whispers, at last.

“Ha.”

“I mean it. I won’t.” Julian taps the tabletop with his palm. “I love you.”

Serot turns away and curls a fist in his hair. “I want to sleep.” He looks at Julian from the corner of his eye. It’s a question.

Julian nods. He isn’t surprised that it takes two doses of ambizine to put him down this time. Tucking the hypospray back in the drawer, Julian mentally calculates how long it’ll take before it stops working entirely. He doesn’t like the answer.

He also isn’t surprised when he arrives in the infirmary the next morning to find his nurses gathered together and whispering. They go silent the instant he appears and fake nonchalance, puttering with their instruments, trying to look busy. Julian joins in the farce. He pretends not to notice.

There’s only so much he can take before he flees his own infirmary to pay Ops a visit under the pretense of welcoming Jadzia back to duty. Julian makes a show of checking her for injuries inflicted while on vacation. “Come on, Jadzia,” he teases, “I can tell when someone is covering up a nasty sunburn.”

“I am a little sore,” Jadzia confesses with a grin, “but it has nothing to do with the sun. And, no, I don’t want you trying to heal me.”

They go back and forth until Jadzia notices that Julian has kept his back pointedly turned on Kira since arriving in Ops. He catches the raised eyebrow, but only shakes his head. Now isn’t the time to hash out that mess.

O’Brien spares him the explanation by choosing that moment to appear. “Hey, Bashir. Mind if I swing by your quarters this evening to take a look at that console?”

“Finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, Chief?” Julian asks.

O’Brien casts the ceiling a fearful glance. “You’re gonna curse me.”

That’s why he can’t help but laugh when O’Brien calls him over the comm an hour later to cancel the appointment. “Replicators are on the fritz,” he mutters. “It’s those damned Cardie voles by the looks of it. Chewing through the wires. Sorry, sir. You know how the commander gets when his raktajino tastes even a smidge off.”
“Maybe I should never have opened my big mouth.”

“You can say that again.”

Julian tries to laugh it off, but even if it isn’t meant to, the rebuke still stings.

He’s just signed off when his comm chirps again.

“Odo to Bashir. Medical emergency on the promenade.”

Julian feels his world lurch. It spins out from under him. Odo doesn’t say it, but it’s in his voice, punctuated in uncharacteristic unease. Serot.

Blood pounding loud in his ears, Julian slaps his combadge to answer affirmative and grabs the nearest medical kit. If he takes off at top speed, he can make it 1.67 seconds faster than a site-to-site transport.

He rushes past a wide-eyed Jabara and sprints out the infirmary, squeezing between slow walkers and hurtling over obstacles as fast as long legs and enhanced muscles can carry him, drawing gasps and startled yelps from pedestrians.

There’s already a crowd outside, herded by security officers, when Julian skids to a halt in front of Serot’s shop. The crowd parts for him, and Julian tugs on his unflappable doctor’s persona. It’s all that keeps him from panicking at the sight of the shattered windows. His boots crunch on glass as he climbs in, stepping over a toppled mannequin to catch Odo’s eye.

The persona helps keep Julian’s voice level as he says, “What happened? Where’s--”

It doesn’t prepare him for the splattering of blood, Bajoran red.
Odo makes room as Julian rushes over to Serot. He’s sprawled on the floor, hair fanned out, face slick with blood. Out cold.

Throwing open his medical case, Julian works fast, channeling mindless rage into quick, learned movements. From the blood-trail, he can tell that someone well intentioned carried Serot away from the shattered window and onto the blanket, now soaked crimson. Probably Odo. Well intentioned, but stupid nonetheless.

Julian has already pieced together what happened, but Odo explains anyway.

“From what I can tell,” Odo begins, “there were two people. One threw a chair through that right window. Another threw a chair through the left. Only I doubt our culprits were aware that Mister Pela was standing behind the mannequin at the time.”

“Right now I don’t care what their intention was!” Julian snaps. One of the chair legs must’ve caught Serot in the face: it sliced an eight centimeter gash across, cutting down to the bone, narrowly missing his eye, and knocked him unconscious. Besides that and the cuts from the broken window, that’s thankfully the worst of his injuries. No fractured bones (as far as he can tell without a tricorder), no major arteries severed. Julian’s already staunched the wound. An hour in surgery, and Serot will be fully recovered. And, knowing him, lamenting the loss of a new suit.

Odo takes Julian’s temper in stride. “We’re questioning the crowd for suspects. At this time of day there will be many eyewitnesses. It shouldn’t take long to find whoever was responsible.”

“But you will find them?”

“Of that you have my word, Doctor.”

Julian nods. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

He isn’t the type to nurse vendettas. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind has always been a favorite aphorism. But dressed in surgical red and knitting intraoral mucosa, Julian questions his own self-righteous principles. It was easier to hold onto them safe in Federation space. Some pinnacle of human perfection he is, entertaining thoughts of revenge while bringing subcutaneous tissue and skin together, joining and making whole again.

“He did nothing to deserve this,” Julian says afterward, back in uniform, pacing Sisko’s office. He stops, jabs a finger at Odo. “This never would’ve happened if you’d done your job!”

Odo’s eyes widen. Sisko cuts in, “Lieutenant, do you have any reason to believe that Odo was neglecting his duties as security chief?”

“I--” Julian winces and glares at the ceiling. “No, but--”

“Then it doesn’t seem fair to blame him for this unfortunate incident, does it? It’s my understanding that Mister Pela’s recent behavior has been causing some tension on the station. Is that correct?”

“Nothing so extreme as to warrant this kind of reaction.”

“Had he expressed any concern over his safety? Did anyone threaten him?”
“No,” Julian says, looking down at his own hands now. He should’ve seen the possibility for violence lightyears away. It was in the air, thick in every dirty look. Boiling beneath the surface. “I didn’t think they’d turn on-- on their own kind.”

Odo clears his throat. “Sir, from preliminary interviews and my own reading of the situation, this wasn’t an orchestrated attack. I’ll know more once I have the suspects under custody, but until then I’d like to assign a security detail to Mister Pela. Just to be safe.”

“What do you think, Doctor?” Sisko asks.

Julian doubts Serot will take kindly to a security officer following him about-- it’ll likely only worsen his troubles-- but he agrees to the offer nonetheless. If Serot wants to dismiss them, that will be his decision. He tells Sisko as much.

Odo has left Ops and Julian is about to head back to the infirmary when Sisko calls him over.

“In light of recent events,” Sisko says, “I’ve decided that the station could use a resident counselor or two. I’ve put in a request with Starfleet. They should be dispatching someone within the next few weeks.”

“Thank you, sir,” Julian says with a sudden overflow of gratitude. “I’m trying my best, but Serot could really benefit from an expert.”

“Who said anything about Mister Pela? I was talking about you, Doctor.”

“Me, sir?”

“Mister Pela is of course welcome to the counselor’s services-- I’m sure he or she would be a great help to your investigation. But it’s my job to make sure my people are taken care of. I don’t want anyone burning out on me. It’s obvious that this situation has been just as hard for you as it has for him.”

Julian takes issue with that assessment; he isn’t the one suffering through random disturbing flashbacks or getting a chair to the face for his sartorial choices. But he takes the sentiment to heart with a bow of the head and a “yessir.”

A comm from Nurse Jabara informs him that their patient is showing signs of waking. Fourteen minutes earlier than he’d predicted. This time, Julian keeps his urge to run in check: two shows of superhuman speed in one day will be pushing his luck. When he crosses the threshold to the infirmary, he has his first order ready. “Nurse, prep twenty CCs of ambizine.”

Standing at Serot’s biobed, Nurse Jabara lifts an eyebrow. “Are you sure, Doctor?”

The question makes Julian bristle. Until he spots Serot sitting up, rubbing his temples in an apparent daze, but definitely not screaming or scrambling for the nearest exit. He looks almost calm. It’s a surprising but welcome sight. “Belay that, then,” Julian says, and comes over to gently stroke Serot’s newly-repaired cheek with the backs of his fingers. He smiles when Serot’s eyes flutter closed. “How do you feel, habibi?”

“How do you feel, habibi?”

“Like I’ve been run over by a Klingon bird of prey.”

“Not surprising, since you took a rather impressive blow to the head.” Julian shines a light, inspecting Serot’s pupils, and once again pines for his medical tricorder. “You seem better now, though you aren’t making it easy for me to tell one way or another. How many fingers am I holding up?”
“Three. What happened?”

Julian gives him the rundown. There isn’t much to tell. Serot listens, fingers absentmly probing his face as if the flesh holds a memory of the trauma it sustained. “Do you know who could’ve done this?” Julian asks. He sifts through a shallow tub of Serot’s belongings and passes him his earring. “Do you have any suspicions? Did anyone threaten you?”

Serot fastens the jewelry with practiced ease. “I assure you, no one has spoken a word to me.” He glances around the infirmary, one hand still cupping his face. “I don’t understand why anyone . . .” He shakes his head.

“It’s because you’ve been dressing like a Cardassian,” Jabara blurts.

Serot looks at her, taken aback either because she spoke, or because she had the nerve to state the obvious. Julian can’t tell. “My dear, I am a Cardassian.”

“I know,” Jabara says, “but as far as everyone else knows, you’re a Bajoran who’d rather be a Cardassian. One who thinks the Cardassian way is better. You may as well fly a Cardassian flag wherever you go. It’s a blatant political statement you’re making, and, ostensibly, an indictment on their lives. You’d be offended too, if you were them.”

Serot begins to protest, then tilts his head. “I see what you’re saying.”

“None of that justifies the use of violence,” Julian says.

“I agree!” says Jabara. “I’m only trying to explain that it’s more complicated than a difference in clothing style.”

“Then what do you think I should do?” Serot asks.

She regards Serot for a beat, as if evaluating his sincerity. “Because of the Occupation, Bajor is full of hybrid children. The ones that survive to become adults-- I don’t think they’ll ever be accepted, no matter where they go. Not completely. You at least get the chance to choose.”

It’s a half-hour of methodical, manual inspection and tests before Julian is confident that Serot hasn’t suffered a traumatic brain injury. The urge to push him under one of the high-powered scanners is strong, but he doesn’t want to risk the chance of the wrong eyes falling on the readout screens. Discharge is further delayed when Odo appears with a security officer in tow and pesters Serot for a statement. His smooth features furrow in a scowl when Serot can’t remember anything beyond what he had for breakfast.

“It probably doesn’t matter at this point,” Odo says. “We’ve apprehended the individuals responsible for the attack on you and your property.” He passes a PADD to Serot, and Julian rounds the biobed to take a look himself. “Mrina Loval, and his romantic partner, Jophen Ussa. They’ve been living together on the station for three years.”

“Ah,” Serot says, and his lips turn down. “They’ve been customers of mine since they moved here from Bajor. Miss Jophen was in just two weeks ago to commission a wedding dress. I told her I was unfortunately not up to the task at the time. She seemed disappointed.” Serot smiles wryly. “I suppose she was angrier than she let on.”

Odo rolls his eyes. “Please try to take this seriously, Mister Pela. Both claim that they planned only to intimidate you. Neither admitted to intending to attack your person, though from their account it seems that it was Jophen Ussa who threw the chair that injured you. I’m charging them with malicious destruction of property, assault with a dangerous weapon, and disturbing the peace.”
“I appreciate the effort you’ve put forth, Constable,” Serot says, passing back the PADD and sliding off the biobed, “but I won’t be pressing charges. Financially compensating me for the broken windows would be optimal, but barring that an apology should suffice.”

“What?” Julian says. “Serot, they tried to terrorize you. You might not believe it, but they could’ve killed you! Is this some kind of show of Bajoran martyrdom? Because if it is--”

“Mister Pela,” Odo interrupts, “Surely you realize I can press charges against your behest.”

“I’m hoping you’ll do nothing of the sort, Constable. And, no, Julian, this is not about my own righteousness. There is simply nothing to be gained by exacting revenge. Not in this case. It won’t deter anyone from acting out against me. In fact, it’ll only make my situation worse.”

Odo looks mystified by this logic, but agrees to Serot’s wishes, on the provision that he allows a security officer to accompany him for the next seventy-eight hours.

The aforementioned security officer is a mustard-colored shadow trailing behind them as Julian escorts Serot back to their quarters. “Call me naïve,” Julian begins when they enter the turbolift, drawing a timely snort from Serot, “but I think you’re making a mistake.”

Serot doesn’t immediately reply. When he does, his voice is strained. “You accused me just yesterday of supporting extrajudicial execution as a method of revenge.”

“They’re not mutually exclusive concepts. I’m beginning to wonder if you harbor some disdain for due process.” Julian means it as a lighthearted jab, but again no response is immediately forthcoming, and he notices that Serot’s respirations have increased by twenty-eight percent. Alarmed, Julian grasps Serot by the arm. “Are you all right?”

Serot’s eyes flick back and forth across the door. He jumps the instant the turbolift begins to slow and shakes off Julian’s grasp to inch closer to the door. When it hisses open at the Habitat Ring, he’s out and beckoning Julian with a smile. “Coming, my dear?”

Julian rubs the bridge of his nose and sighs.

That night, when Serot makes his customary request for a sedative, Julian weighs his options. On one hand, now isn’t the optimal time to begin tapering-- they’re only a third of the way through Parmak’s recommended regimen. On the other: Julian can see moderate withdrawal syndrome on the horizon. He feels Serot’s keen attention on him as he ponders the replicator.

Best to take the cautious route. Something with a long half-life. Julian recites his code and synthesizes improvoline. It pops into the hypospray.

As Serot’s breathing slows and evens out, Julian relaxes. Success. He tiptoes around the bed and crawls underneath the covers, taking care to not make a sound. Wrapping one arm around Serot’s waist, he nuzzles close and whispers, “Goodnight.”

Later, incoherent muttering cuts through Julian’s dreaming. He doesn’t register it at first, lost in the white mist of sleep. Then there’s a shout and his brain catches on. Scrambling up, Julian blinks through the darkness. “What? What-- what’s wrong?” He presses the headboard’s control panel, activating the bedside lamp.

At the far corner of the bed, Serot squints and turns away from the blast of light. “Julian.”

“Sorry.” Julian shuts off the lamp and rustles in the dark until his hands find Serot’s shoulders. He’s trembling. “Hey,” he says. “It’s all right, I’m here. Bad dream?”
“I’m fine.”

Julian heaves a long-suffering sigh and leans forward to rest his cheek between Serot’s shoulder blades. “Of course you are. That’s why you woke up screaming and are shaking like a leaf. Well, since you’re just fine, my work is done here. I’ll go back to sleep, then.” He waits. Serot doesn’t take the bait. Julian closes his eyes. “You used to share everything with me, Serot. Why can’t you just tell me what’s wrong? What are you afraid of?”

“I’m not--” Serot snaps, then catches himself. He turns around and sinks into Julian arms with a sharp intake of breath. “I’m sorry, my dear. I’m sorry.”

Startled by the sudden apology, Julian tightens his grip around Serot. “It’s quite all right.”

“I’m beginning to realize that I-- my counterpart--”

“Yes?”

“He-- I--”

“You?”

“We--”

“Serot.”

“I, perhaps, had a less than idyllic childhood.”

Julian releases a bark of laughter. All that wind-up, for that revelation?

Serot cringes in his arms.

“You didn’t have one before,” Julian points out, rubbing apologetic circles along his back, “and you turned out rather well, in my opinion.”

“I’m a grown man, clinging to another man like a child. Clearly, I’m well-adjusted.”

“I don’t mind.”

“You revel in any opportunity to nurse after me.”

“I don’t enjoy seeing anyone suffer, least of all you.”

Serot goes quiet, and Julian comforts himself in their mingled, slow breaths, and the warmth enfolding him. When Serot tilts his face up to meet Julian’s, it’s an offering. A peace offering. Julian takes it with the firm press of lips. Kisses him again, deeper, when the hint of a whimper escapes Serot’s throat. Julian guides him down into the pillows.

The chance for sleep is shot by then. Julian manages to scoop their wily Cardassian lizard from his aquarium and they take turns letting him crawl across their hands, passing him back and forth like an ancient Earth post-coital cigarette. Little claws scrape the back of Julian’s knuckles. They watch him dart over the bedclothes, scurrying up and down the peaks and valleys of their legs.

He doesn’t expect the exhaustion to sneak up on him. Hours later, Julian finds himself facedown in the bed with artificial morning light streaming from overhead. Serot is gone. Has been for a long time, Julian figures.
Julian checks the shop first. The lights are on, but the lone figure inside is slightly built, dressed in red. Major Kira. She drags a sweeper across the floor, sucking up glass and debris, her brow wrinkled in concentration. Julian smiles and hurries on before she can spot him.

When Serot isn’t easily found, Julian opts to give him his space. After all, he has a bodyguard looking after him, and not even the rowdiest Bajoran would dare face off with Constable Odo. Besides, we wouldn’t want you to think I enjoy nursing after you, would we?

Mid-morning, Odo bursts into the infirmary with Serot’s bodyguard at his elbow. Sans Serot. “Doctor Bashir. I take it you haven’t seen Mister Pela, have you?” says Odo.

“Hello to you too, Odo. Why? Is he in trouble?”

“He paid a visit to the brig this morning to greet his attackers.”

“He did what?”

“As far as I can tell, everything was resolved equitably. There were no problems with the encounter, but afterwards he evaded my security officer. We have yet to find him.”

Julian manages to keep a straight face, somehow. “Serot. Evaded him.” How do these people even have jobs? “Odo, you make it sound as if he were some kind of sneaky genius. Are you sure your man wasn’t simply distracted and lost track of him?”

The incompetent security officer in question pulls a face. Odo looks askance at Julian. “He agreed to my terms, Doctor,” Odo reminds him. “Seventy-eight hours. I would think as his partner you’d be more concerned over his well-being.”

The comment is underhanded, and it stings. He’s spent the past months worrying over Serot. Spying on his every move like an overbearing parent is the last thing either of them needs. Fine, Odo. You don’t like me? Well, I don’t like you either! “I’ll let you know if he turns up. In the meantime, I’m sure you could find him if you tried. It’s your job, after all, isn’t it?”

He’s asking for trouble. But Odo takes the dismissal with a customary harrumph and heel-turn, permitting Julian to resume sequencing Bajoran microbial DNA.

He’s so absorbed in his work, he doesn’t notice Jadzia paying him a visit until she taps him on a shoulder. “I heard about what happened,” she says, smiling as he jumps, one hand settling on his forearm.

Julian shrugs, touched by her concern but unsure what to do with it. “Honestly, I wonder if this station is the safest place for us anymore.”

“Well, before you make any hasty decisions, Julian, I want you to talk to me first. I’m here. If there’s anything either of you need, ask.”

He smiles and promises to keep her in the loop. Even stranger is when Chief O’Brien appears in the infirmary, ostensibly healthy and all limbs in working order. “What can I do for you, Chief?” Julian asks from his terminal.

O’Brien focuses on a readout screen and fidgets. “This is some mess, isn’t it?”

“I’d say. I’ve been analyzing the mutation of genes for the past six hours in the hopes of attenuating this strain of--”
“Not that. I mean what happened to Pela.”

Julian feels his brows rise.

O’Brien clears his throat. “Me and Keiko, we wanted to say we were sorry. Did they catch the bastards that did it?”

“Serot doesn’t want to press charges.”

“What? Why the hell not?”

Julian laughs at the forcefulness of the question. It’s a sentiment they can both agree upon, and he accepts the chief’s unexpected support with startled thanks.

“I better be off,” O’Brien says at last. “These malfunctions on upper pylon three won’t repair themselves. Bloody voles. Don’t give a damn how far they’re putting me behind.”

When Julian comes home for the evening, the security officer is standing guard outside their quarters. So they tracked Serot down after all. He gives the man a nod as he types out his passcode on the door.

He finds a Serot-sized lump in the bed, underneath the covers. Julian sits on the corner. Odd for Serot to be asleep at this hour.

“Welcome home,” says the lump.

“You’re awake,” Julian says, then covers his eyes with a hand. *Brilliant deduction, Doctor.* “So, how was your day? I heard you went on a little adventure after you visited the brig.”

“My dear, I’ve been here all day.”

It’s such a blatant lie that Julian can only sit and blink at the audacity of it. The shock lingers in the back of his mind even as he forces himself to ignore it and move on. “Any preferences for dinner? I’m feeling like Rigelian six-bean casserole myself.”

“I’ll take it here, thank you.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. Wasn’t it you who gave me a dressing down worthy of a Starfleet admiral for having my breakfast scone in bed? Civilized species take their meals at the table, remember?”

“I’ve more than earned my cred as a civilized man. Now, if you’re through pointing out my hypocrisy--”

“No,” Julian says as he stands, “I wouldn’t dream of letting you compromise your deeply-held beliefs in etiquette. If you want your dinner, you’ll have to come to the table and have polite conversation with me.”

As he awaits a response, Julian worries he’s pushed too hard. This isn’t like Serot, to so petulantly mope about. Perhaps prodding him into continuing his daily activities is the utterly wrong tactic.

Underneath the covers, there is an indrawn breath, drawn out long, followed by an exhale. It signals that Julian has won.

They eat in silence, Serot barely acknowledging his food or his company. Motor reflex reliably brings fork to mouth, albeit at a pace that would bore a tortoise. He doesn’t seem to have the energy to chew, much less enjoy the meal. His focus is on the viewport and the flecks of stars. *Cardassia*
again, Julian thinks with some jealousy. Serot is gone, and wherever he is now doesn’t seem like a fun place.

Still, Julian wishes he were invited.

Peering at the window, Serot frowns and pats at his face. He pokes the skin around his eyes and mouth, runs a finger down his nose. Julian’s made similar motions in the mirror as of late, as he nears the dreaded age of thirty. He immediately recognizes the movements and shakes his head at the obviousness of it. Serot hasn’t been pining after Cardassia; he’s been staring at his reflection.

The silence is too much. Julian has to break it. “You’re becoming vain, Serot,” he says.

Serot doesn’t seem to hear him, and Julian returns to picking at his food, unsure what to do. Repeat his statement? No, it was too dumb to be worth repeating. Whistle and wave a hand in front of Serot’s face? That would be childish.

Serot stands and crosses the room to dump his plate in the reclamation port— he has the presence of mind to manage that, it seems. Julian follows his movements with his eyes. Serot U-turns, and disappears to the bedroom. The door hisses shut behind him.

“Thank you for dinner, Julian,” Julian mumbles, gathering his own plate. “Oh, you’re quite welcome. It was no trouble, really. The replicator did all the work. But you know, it’s nice to be appreciated every now and again.”

With the quarters cleaned and tidied, Julian lowers himself into a chair and powers on his terminal. He knows he’s in for long wait, and continues to work on a PADD as the console sets to hailing, once every ten minutes. Parmak doesn’t disappoint. It’s close to 2500 when the Cardassian blinks at him, well-dressed and groomed but clearly recently woken. “Doctor Bashir, good evening to you.”

They go through round after round of pleasantries before Julian can segue into the tale of his current crises. Several times, he catches himself showing more than doctorly sympathy for his patient. He dials it back like a professional, remote and detached, before babbling away again. He must think I’m a buffoon.

Whatever Parmak thinks, he smiles just as politely. “His behavior sounds perfectly normal, given what you’ve told me. The depressive symptoms he’s experiencing are situational, and will resolve once he’s fully adjusted to the treatment.”

Julian glances to the closed door of their bedroom. “And you’re sure of that?”

“You have to bear in mind that Cardassians don’t experience memory as humans do. Or as Bajorans do, for that matter. For us, we see our pasts as clearly as our present. It might be jarring for him, but he’ll stabilize once his brain resets to its natural equilibrium.”

“If that’s the case, then no wonder he’s been acting like this. The memories he’s experiencing haven’t sounded too pleasant.”

“Perhaps, but the dezothomide affects more than memory. His brain was programmed to mimic a Bajoran’s, down to his metabolic processes. How he regulates his hormones, his temperature, his circadian rhythm, his emotions, how he reacts to stimuli, how he perceives his surroundings— all of this will revert to its prior state.”

“And all of which could be explaining his behavior,” Julian finishes. “I’d be able to narrow it down and begin to help him if it weren’t for those damned implants.”
“You still haven’t removed them?”

Why will be the next question, and because of that Julian is hesitant to answer. He’s operated on colleagues and close friends alike, but even with full confidence in his own abilities, Julian doesn’t know enough about Cardassian anatomy to go digging in Serot’s organs. The implants are numerous and well-integrated, and to remove them would require many hours of surgery.

“No,” Julian says. “I’m afraid I haven’t.”

“I was recently informed that within the upcoming months my services will no longer be required at this dreary outpost.” Parmak smiles. “I’m finally going back to Cardassia.”

“Really? That’s great news! Congratulations.”

“I only mention it because my return may coincide well with his treatment. When he reaches the point of equilibrium, you can imagine that living in his current form will become intolerable. On my way home, I will endeavor to convince the captain to make a stop at your station, if you’ll have me.”

Within the upcoming months. Julian hopes that Serot-- and he-- can last that long.

In the meantime, Julian finds himself little more than a bystander to another’s suffering. Standing idly by has never been something he could tolerate. Better to get in the way and bungle it all up than do nothing at all.

But here he is, thumb-twiddling. Serot doesn’t even need him for the sedatives anymore; despite rarely leaving the bed, he seems to have given up on sleep. Every time Julian returns home-- for a break, for lunch, to retrieve a forgotten stylus, to obviously check on him-- Serot is awake but unmoving under the covers.

By the second day of this routine, Julian sets his arms akimbo. “Will you be venturing out of our quarters anytime soon?”

He winces. It’s too late to take the words back.

“And get violently assaulted in public again? I’ll pass, thank you.”

“Whatever happened to being unable to afford keeping your shop closed?”

“I’ve decided,” Serot says, “that I’m fine.”

“Fine?”

“With replicated clothing.”

Julian’s face falls. In some cases, waiting for help is worse than knowing none is coming. In the privacy of his office, when his mind wanders on the loose thread, Julian worries over it until he feels a sting in the corners of his eyes. He doesn’t allow it. This is a burden he needs to bear without complaint.

But by the third day, he stops by the foot of the bed, where Serot is still hiding. His fist closes around the corner of the comforter, ready to rip it free, expose every secret. “Tell me,” he hears himself beg, “please tell me what’s wrong.”

“Julian.” Serot’s voice is muffled, wary. An equal plea. “Go away.”

“I won’t. Not until you talk to me.”
Through enhanced senses, Julian can hear the lizard kicking sand as he burrows in his terrarium, the buzz of the air recycler, the murmur of a holoprogram in the neighboring quarters. The wet noise of Julian forcing saliva past the lump in his throat. Serot isn’t going to answer. He’ll have to be forced.

Julian tugs at the covers. A threat. “We--” Julian’s throat makes an ugly noise. He has to blink rapidly, staring at the ceiling, until it clears. “You used to tell me *everything.*”

“Julian, really, I don’t have time for your clichés about how we don’t talk anymore.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, am I interrupting something important? I didn’t know you were solving all the galaxy’s problems under there!” *No, no, not this. I don’t want to start a fight.*

Serot hisses.

“Serot, I--”

“Get out.”

“No. This is my room, too, and I’m not going anywhere.” Would it be childish to stomp his foot? Julian stomps his foot. It feels fucking *brilliant.* “We’re going to fix this, Serot. Together. Right now.”

Serot is up, across the bed and a centimeter from Julian’s face, glaring at him. “There is *nothing to fix,*” he snaps, and Julian is struck by how disheveled he seems. Eyes bloodshot. Hair wild and unshaven. Like he’s been camping under there for weeks, rather than days. “You already *tried,*” Serot adds.

“Fair enough,” Julian says, raising his hands and ready to back down. “It was a poor choice of words, but we can’t go on pretending nothing’s bothering you.”

“Julian, please. Leave it alone.”

“Yes happening.”

“You’re better off not knowing.”

“Isn’t that my decision to make? Serot, I’m not a child.” Foot-stomping aside. “I’ve figured out that you must’ve done some nasty stuff in your past life. But if you’re afraid that I’m going to stop loving you because of it-- you’re wrong.”

“Unfortunately, that has not been my experience.”

“Yours, or his?”

Serot blinks slowly, then turns away to crawl back under the covers. “Does it matter?”

Yes. No. Oh, who even knows? With a last-ditch huff of frustration, Julian follows him into the cocoon of bedsheets.

If you can’t beat them, join them.

He intends to continue his tirade from inside the nest, but something stops him. Maybe it’s an unspoken rule that this is neutral territory. Maybe it’s how ridiculous he’d feel pestering someone from underneath a mound of blankets. Maybe he’s too tired for fighting. Either way, Julian surrenders.
He relaxes in Serot’s radius of body heat, relieved when he isn’t pushed away. I’m going to keep nagging you, Pela Serot, Julian promises, and I won’t stop until you believe me when I say I’m going to keep loving you.

Julian sleeps. He dreams.

He’s in surgery, with a patient arresting on the table. His fingers are clumsy as they fumble with a laser scalpel, bloody, half-buried in the patient’s torso. His hands move on their own, out of control. They cut into the patient, slicing flesh and severing arteries. He can’t stop. The more he tries, the more damage he does. He pleads frantically for help, but the nurses only stare back. Sisko is suddenly in Julian’s face, thundering at him, looking ready to wring his neck--

Julian rolls awake and reaches for the stale water on the bedside table. His inner clock pegs the time as 01:00. He isn’t surprised when he spots Serot’s side of the bed empty (and made: the covers are smoothed over, the pillow fluffed and awaiting the return of its owner). Figures that the second Julian encroaches on his blanket fort, Serot would clear out. Muttering to himself, Julian searches his chest of drawers for something passable enough to wear in public.

Odo is prowling the promenade, but it doesn’t take much for Julian to avoid him. After their last encounter, asking about Serot’s whereabouts isn’t bound to go over well. Quark’s is bustling even at this late hour. The Dabo tables are overflowing with the recent arrival of Tellarite traders. It’s with some regret that he notices the holoprojectors. The springball tournament is in full swing, so to speak, and they’re missing it. Julian slumps into a barstool and exchanges a nod with Morn.

“What can I get you, Doctor?”

Julian looks up into Quark’s expectant face. “Oh. Ah, surprise me.”

“Let’s see what I can do.” Quark reaches under the bar and sets a glass of blood-red, steaming liquid in front of Julian. “Surprise.”

“What is it?”

“Volcanic spew. Don’t look at me, I didn’t name it. Those Tellarites have been ordering so much of the stuff, I’ve had to keep it on hand. You want something else?”

“No, no, it’s fine.” The drink is at least keeping his hands warm. Quark moves off to tend to another customer. Julian’s eyes wander to the holoprojector above his head broadcasting the game. He takes a tentative sip of the Tellarite drink. It tastes like malted strawberries. Not bad, he decides.

“Cardassians. They’ll break your heart.”

Julian chokes on his drink and coughs. “What?”

Quark has reappeared. He rubs water marks from a glass and sighs. He’s fixed on a table across the bar. On anyone else, Julian would’ve taken his expression as wistful. Julian follows his gaze, expecting to find a particularly sparkly brick of latinum, and instead catches sight of three Cardassians murmuring amongst each other.

Frowning, Julian turns back. “Who are they?”

“You haven’t heard? I thought you were part of the senior staff.”

“Yes, well, I’ve been rather preoccupied lately.”
“No kidding. You see that woman over there? The pretty one, in the white dress? That’s Natima Lang. She and her friends came aboard the station this afternoon.” Quark pauses in buffing the glass. He gives Julian a wink. “We used to be lovers.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, the usual. Didn’t work out. You should know how it is.”

“That’s not very-- hold on a minute, what is that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t act like you don’t get it. Everybody knows you and Pela are on the rocks. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Until what?”

“Til you break up, obviously.”

“Who’s saying that?” Julian demands, one hand clenched around his drink. Quark shrugs and blows a circle of hot breath on another glass. “Our relationship is just fine, Quark,” Julian adds. “In fact, it’s never been better, and anyone who thinks otherwise can bring it up with me.”

“Uh-huh,” Quark says. “The last time you two were in here, he stormed off before dessert.”

“That-- wasn’t exactly what happened.”

“And that’s why he’s currently enjoying himself in one of my holosuites, while you’re down here, drinking by yourself at one in the morning.”

“Serot’s here? Which holosuite?”

Quark exchanges a glance with Morn. “See what I mean?”

Julian rolls his eyes.

Less than five minutes (and some latimum) later, the holosuite doors whirl open and Julian steps into the sweltering heat of a Cardassian evening. He’s been through enough of these simulations to recognize the planet’s singular smell. Nothing a human would normally notice-- perhaps not even a Cardassian-- but to Julian the air is pungent, faintly acidic. Like vinegar, recently spilt. The red sunset casts long shadows over the city, and as the holosuite arch fades behind him, Julian feels himself drawn in.

He crosses the sprawling campus of a university. Young Cardassians sit regally on the grass, readers propped in their laps, rapt in their own holographic arguments. Julian smiles. It doesn’t matter that they stop to stare at him; the sight of them takes him back, for the briefest instant, to San Francisco. Then it’s gone, and the stares are becoming uncomfortable. He hurries past.

The street opens into a flower garden, and Julian marvels at the artistry of the design. He’s always thought of Cardassians as austere, more concerned with function over form. Art, when it exists, is only there to advance popular doctrine. Not to simply please the eye. The Cardassians in his preconceptions don’t have the patience for gardens. Shows you how much I know.

Julian catches himself unconsciously searching the crowds. He couldn’t have gotten far. The holosuite wouldn’t simply dump him in the middle of Cardassia City without good reason. Julian squints past gray face after gray face. It doesn’t take much searching to find his quarry. There: on the pedestrian bridge overlooking the garden. Serot is sitting at a wrought iron table, watching the people
Julian follows the crowd until he’s underneath the bridge. Serot’s eyes glance over him, move away, then snap back in a double-take so comical that Julian can’t help but grin. “Mind if I join you?” he calls up.

There’s a scrape of metal on stone as Serot pushes out a chair with his foot.

The way up isn’t marked, and Julian finds nothing but dead ends before deciding to follow a small child waddling up the correct footpath, carrying a box of glazed teacakes in his arms. Daylight is seeping away when he finally reaches Serot’s table and takes the proffered chair.

Together, they watch the city lights wink on. Below, the garden is even more stunning by lamplight.

Julian grabs the mug at Serot’s elbow and sniffs. Not rokassa, to his relief. He’s about to drink when he notices Serot watching him. “Ah, may I?”

“Feel free, my dear.”

Julian takes a gulp and—good god, it’s fishy and salty and cold—he spits it out, nearly spraying a woman and earning horrified mutters from passers-by. He mentally tallies the amount of times he’s been felled by a Cardassian beverage and turns to glare at Serot. The bastard looks positively tickled. “What is that?”

“Only fish juice.”

“Fish juice?” It lives up to its revolting name.

“I found the odor rather offensive,” Serot explains, biting his lip so hard that it might bleed, “so I had it removed.”

“And you couldn’t warn me?”

“Why, and miss your most delightful reaction?”

Julian shakes his head, grimacing as the foul taste lingers on his tongue, and laughs. He laughs hard, until tears run down his face and Serot slowly joins in. The Cardassians are glaring, but let them, Julian thinks. He grabs Serot’s hand and, intertwining their fingers, brings it to his chest. Serot smiles and squeezes back.

Julian rests his head on Serot’s shoulder and watches the people come and go. His face hurts from laughing so hard.

Presently, Serot shifts in his seat. “This place features heavily in my memories,” he says.

“Good ones? The memories, I mean.”

“Mostly.”

Julian inhales a slow breath, taking in the scents of countless dinners wafting through the air. His eyes settle on a couple sitting close together on a bench, knees brushing, their heads tilted to one side as they converse. That’s the closest to a public display of affection Julian has seen from Cardassians yet. He remembers then what Quark said. “Serot,” he whispers. “We’ll be all right, won’t we?”

“In what way?”
“You and I.”

Serot pulls him closer. “I’m sure of it.”

*Right as rain. Safe as houses.* Julian buries his face into Serot’s shirt. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, I should be the one apologizing, my dear,” Serot says. “You’ve been remarkably patient with me, and I’ve caused you nothing but grief. I’m truly sorry.”

“We’ve both had a hard time of it. But the worst is over now.”

There’s a low bark in the distance, nothing like a dog’s. Julian wonders if it’s one of Dvoll’s riding hounds. From her ugly fabric roll.

After a time, the busy streets empty of people. Soon even the city will be deserted. Julian sits up and claps his hands together. “Hey, if we head out now, we might be able to catch the tail-end of the quarter-finals.” Julian gives his brows a suggestive waggle. “Your friend Wenna Juso is playing.”

Serot crosses his legs, all feigned disinterest. “Is he.”

“Aren’t you the least bit interested in whether his ‘backhand’ has improved?”

“My dear, I have no idea where you get these ideas of yours.” But he’s already out of his chair and pulling on his jacket.

Julian smiles and follows after. “Computer, end program.”

They stay at the bar until closing, long after Wenna Juso has bungled his match. In protest, Serot flicks a sand pea at the holoprojector; someone in the back shouts, “Nice shot” as it bounces off Wenna’s best feature.

Julian takes the next day off. He’s hungover from too many volcanic spews and spends the morning cradling his head and paging through *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It’s a tossup over whether the generational drama will appeal to Serot’s increasingly Cardassian tastes, or if the incest and magic will have him running for the hills.

He’s lost in a particularly engrossing passage when his terminal beeps.

He gives the screen a lazy tap and straightens at once. “Gul Dvoll.”

“Doctor Bashir, I apologize for neglecting your correspondence for so long.”

Julian frowns. He hasn’t sent her any messages, and it hasn’t been *that* long since they last spoke. “It’s quite all right. I assumed you were busy with your commendation.” *And the executions*, he doesn’t add.

“Oh, yes, that.” Dvoll glares at some distant point. “Central Command has decided, in light of our recent victory, to assign me a posting outside the demilitarized zone.”

“You don’t sound terribly pleased about that.”

“Legate Ocett seems to think it’ll do wonders for my career. This is an opportunity to reverse my downward trajectory. Who am I to question her wisdom?” She waves a hand, sweeping the subject away. “I won’t bore you further with the matter. Tell me, how fares our Mister Pela?”

“Up and down,” Julian says, carefully. “He’s back in the shop today.” He hesitates, then forgives
ahead: might as well get straight to the point. “When you came by the other night, you seemed disturbed by something.”

“I can’t say I know what you mean, Doctor. I thought we had an enjoyable evening.” When Julian begins to argue, she cuts him off. “I’d use a different word. Confused, perhaps. No, disconcerted. Yes. That’s better.”

“I’d like to know why, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“If you must. There were a few discrepancies in Mister Pela’s account that caught my attention. That’s all. For instance, he alluded that he was born in the service class. While that wouldn’t bar him from advancing in the Order, as it would in other professions, it does raise interesting questions.”

“Such as?”

“He carries himself with a refinement that is absent in the service class. Of course, that could be an affectation of his programming, but if it isn’t-- members of our service class are simple of taste and habit, Doctor. The subtleties of Cardassian culture are lost on them. To be honest, when I’d first discovered he was your so-called dissident, I had planned to introduce him to my niece, once he returned home.” She rolls her shoulders, that hope evidently dashed.

“That’s it?” Julian says, opting to ignore the stink of ingrained Cardassian snobbery and yet another rebuke on his relationship. “People surmount all sorts of obstacles in their upbringing. That can’t be all that surprising.”

“On Earth, humans have no respect for classifications. That works well enough for your species. But on Cardassia, one knows his place in our society, and knows better than to pretend he’s anything else. Not everyone can become a doctor, even on Earth. Only a fool would try.”

“Well, that’s bloody depressing,” Julian mutters.

“I’ve always found it comforting. Cardassians never waste time worrying about our potential.”

The door chimes, and Julian shoots Dvoll an apologetic glance before calling out, “Who is it?”

“O’Brien, sir. I’m ready to take a look at that computer of yours. Is now a bad time?”

“Not at all, come in, please.” The door swishes open and O’Brien enters to stand awkwardly by the terminal. Julian turns back to Dvoll. “Sorry, I’ve been waiting to get this done.”

Dvoll’s smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes as it usually does. “Another time, Doctor. Chief O’Brien.”

The screen flashes the Cardassian insignia as the comm is cut. Julian backs out of his seat, giving O’Brien a wide berth to take over the computer. He hovers around, watching O’Brien ready his tools and remove a panel from the terminal. Then he retreats to the rock slab and picks up his reader. O’Brien’s tools click as he works.

“How are the voles?” Julian asks.

“Persistent,” O’Brien says. “Major Kira’s been helping me with the ugly buggers, but it’s no use. They’re nesting in our wires. Problem is, even if we were able to clear out their central nest, there’s no telling how many other secondary nests there might be.”

Julian smiles as an idea occurs to him. Oh, Chief, you’re going to love me for this one. “If you use a frequency that the voles find intolerable, you might be able to drive them out of their nests. A
directional sonic generator should do the trick, I’m sure of it.”

“We tried that,” O’Brien says, to Julian’s dismay. So much for getting in his good graces with one brilliant plan. “Quark nearly made my ears bleed from all his screaming. What’s weird is that we’ve been getting system failures in places where there haven’t been any vole sightings. It’s like they’ve got something personally against me. On the plus side, at least there don’t seem to be any in here.”

“Thankfully. I don’t think Serot would appreciate a horde of rodents running underfoot and chewing at his clothes.”

O’Brien grunts and continues to fiddle with the wiring in the console. “There, that should do it,” he says, and affixes the panel back in place to type into the terminal. After a moment, he frowns. “Do you know his passcode?”

“Passcode? I’ve never seen him use one. I always warned him that he should. I guess he decided to take my advice.”

“Well, he’s got a three-level identification set up on this thing. I can bypass it, but that’s gonna take a lot of my time.”

“There’s no need for that. I’ll just comm him.”

Serot sounds more than happy to speed the process along, and five minutes later breezes through the door. “Chief O’Brien,” he says, “how kind of you to help us with this little problem.”

“Just doing my job.”

“May I?”

O’Brien spreads his hands in a gesture of be my guest.

Serot smiles and takes O’Brien’s place at the computer. “I’m afraid I’ve never been interested in security protocols,” he says, sliding his spectacles from a pocket and placing them on the bridge of his nose. He taps out a few hesitant commands. “I might’ve become a tad overzealous. Now, let’s see if I can remember.”

“Please tell me you didn’t forget your own passcodes,” O’Brien mutters.

“I make no guarantees.” After several moments of trying different combinations, he bursts out, “Ah, there! That seemed to work.”

“Great, now if you wouldn’t mind--”

Serot raises a finger. “If you’d indulge me, Chief, I believe I know just where the files are.” The screen is a blur of popping windows as he sifts rapidly through directory after directory, too fast for Julian to follow. He taps out a series of commands. Suddenly the screens wink out one at a time. The computer chirrups. “Hmm,” Serot says. “That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“What was that?” O’Brien rushes to the console. “What did you just do?”

“I’m sorry--” Serot backs away with a look of apology. “I must’ve hit the wrong key.”

O’Brien stares at the computer screen, then back to Serot.

Julian draws forward. “Is something wrong?”
"The files are gone!" O’Brien snaps. “All of them. He deleted them!”

“There must be a way to get it back—”

“You don’t understand, sir. That was the secondary backup. There’s nothing else.” O’Brien fixes Serot with a glower. “You brought me out here to do your dirty work, didn’t you? I hope you’re happy.”

“Now, hold on, Chief,” Julian says, “it was just an accident!”

“If you believe that, then you’re even more daft than I thought. I saw him. The damned Cardie did it on purpose!”

“Why, Chief,” Serot says, “you sound positively disappointed in me.”

O’Brien shoots Serot one more glare before tossing his tools into their box. He slams the case shut and heads for the door.

“Wait!” Julian shouts. “Where are you going?”

“To tell Constable Odo about this.”

And then O’Brien is gone.

“We’ve got to stop him,” Julian says. He tugs at his hair and looks around frantically. “If he tells Odo— oh, god, he won’t believe you. He’ll think you’re impeding his investigation. We have to go before—”

Serot catches him by the arms and holds him fast. “Julian, let him go.”

“We can’t! Odo is going to arrest you!”

“Listen to me, Julian. Everything will be fine.”

“How can you possibly know that? Wait, did-- did you plan this?” Julian sucks in a shaking breath and looks at Serot. Hard. Serot looks back, eyes shining with alertness, his mouth set in a grim determination Julian has never seen in him before. “The truth, Serot.”

“The truth,” Serot repeats. “After you told me how Chief O’Brien intended to resurrect the backup systems, I had an inkling I’d have to destroy those files first. Only my—” Serot presses two fingers to his temple. “My mind had to settle first. I had to stall for time.”

“The voles,” Julian says.

“Oh, there is indeed a vole infestation. But it has been greatly exaggerated. You’d be surprised how much damage one can do with a pair of blunt scissors.” Serot makes a snipping motion with two fingers and favors Julian with that strange, foreign smile.

Julian rubs at his face as he mentally adds vandalism to the list, along with obstruction of justice. Best not to mention that part to the Chief. “Why?” he whispers. “If we’d just cooperated, surely—”

“Julian, we can’t let Odo proceed with his investigation. You have no idea how much trouble we’re both in.”

“I wonder why! Could it be because you’ve never told me?”
“Suffice it to say, if Odo got a hold of those journals, we’d never see each other again.”

Julian opens and closes his mouth. He doesn’t trust himself to speak.

“The Bajorans would convict me rather easily of espionage. It isn’t a crime they take lightly. You’ve seen yourself how they treat even suspected collaborators. If they didn’t execute me outright, I’d spend my life in a Bajoran prison. I can think of few things more unpleasant. Then we should consider all the people I’d be implicating in the process-- all the innocents who unknowingly provided me with information over the years. If we told the truth, we’d be ruining their lives. And then there’s you, my dear.”

“Me?”

“You’d be drummed out of Starfleet, at best. At worst, sent to one of the Federation’s penal colonies. For treason.”

Julian swallows. “I take it, then, that you remember what you wrote in those journals.”

Serot folds up his glasses and pockets them. “Every word.”

“And you really are a spy. For the Obsidian Order.”

Serot’s expression is pained. Julian knows he wants nothing more than to deny it. “Was, Julian. I never intended any of this to happen! Please, tell me you understand what I’m doing.”

“I swore an oath to Starfleet, Serot. It included telling the truth, at all costs.”

“I know.” Serot glances to the door, then sits at the edge of the desk. All that earlier calm seems to be gone now. “If you’d rather uphold your oath, I’d understand. I’ll admit to everything, as long as you promise not to implicate yourself in the process.”

“And send you to prison? I couldn’t! I’d never be able to live with myself! You don’t deserve to be punished for someone else’s crime. There must be another way. If we could find the proper precedent, we could prove to the Bajoran High Magistrate that you’re not responsible for what the Obsidian Order made you do. You can’t convict someone who wasn’t of sound mind. It wasn’t your fault. It was all Garak.”

“My dear,” Serot whispers, “I am--”

“You’re just as much a victim,” Julian interrupts before he can hear the end of that sentence. “I’m sure someone will help us, and if I can convince Doctor Parmak to testify-- Serot, this is better. We don’t have to compromise our moral fiber to keep you out of prison. This isn’t Cardassia. You’ll get a fair trial.”

“While I’m sure the Federation would be happy to indulge your thought experiment as to whether I’m one person or two, the Bajoran courts will be less than patient.”

“Then we’ll convince Sisko to try you under Federation law. I just need time to prepare.”

“Even if your plan were to work-- which I sincerely doubt-- an abundance of time is not something I have. I’m sorry, Julian, but we’ll have to do this my way. Soon enough, Constable Odo will come through that door and arrest me for tampering with evidence, obstruction of justice, or whatever he sees fit. From there, Commander Sisko may decide not to do anything, but I find it more likely that he’ll make do on his threat to contact the authorities on Bajor.”
Julian winces. “And then?”

“There will be a preliminary hearing. You may be called upon to testify, but you shouldn’t feel pressure to perjure yourself on my account. I’m hoping the arbitrators will choose not to indict me, but all things considered—” Serot gestures to himself, and Julian understands: he’s a Cardassian in Bajoran form. That’s probable cause enough.

“And should your case go to trial, you’re banking that there won’t be enough evidence to secure a conviction.”

“Precisely.”

Julian runs through the calculations. None of them end with Serot getting off with a slap on the wrist. There’s a sixty-two percent chance of a not guilty verdict on an espionage charge. That’s the most optimistic calculation, factoring in sympathetic ears and serendipity. More likely, circumstantial evidence against a Cardassian will be more than enough to convict him. Julian doesn’t know much about Bajoran law—note to self: learn—but he’s certain Serot is right about one thing: it’s a punishment measured in death. Or decades.

If Serot manages to clear the espionage charge on Bajor, there’s a twelve percent chance the Federation ignores double jeopardy and takes him to trial under its own jurisdiction.

Then there’s the issue of Serot’s citizenship, and whether the Bajorans would even allow him on the station once his secret is out.

And what if the Cardassians become involved? I need to call back Gul Dvoll. I’m going to owe that woman my soul by the end of this.

The amount of unknown factors are myriad. Julian feels his legs begin to give out.

“Julian,” he hears Serot whisper, and then Serot’s hugging him, so tight he can hardly breathe. Julian’s trembling and can’t stop. He clings to Serot’s shirt as the first sob escapes his throat. Serot strokes his hair. “Shh. You have to trust me, my love. When this is over, we’ll be free. It won’t hang over us any longer.”

“If you’re wrong—”

“I’m not.” Serot pulls away to search Julian’s eyes. “Still love me?”

That he has to ask breaks Julian’s heart. “One hundred percent. Love me?”

“Utterly.”

The door emits a mangled chime as the door lock is overridden. That’s the only warning they get. A second later, Odo appears in the doorway, flanked by security guards.

“Mister Pela,” he says. There’s a glint of metal cuffs in his hands. “I think you know why I’m here.”

Serot gives Julian a tender squeeze before letting go. “Ah, Constable, you’re just in time.” He offers his wrists. “Shall we?”
“When do I get to see him?”

Julian’s question hangs in air turned stale from the many bodies gathered around the conference table. It’s Sisko who answers it. “According to the High Magistrate,” he says, “the Bajorans sequester the defendant until the end of the hearing. Until then, he’s only allowed to meet with his appointed counsel.”

“You mean he can’t attend his own hearing?” Jadzia says. “That’s--” She casts a glance to Kira and plasters on a hasty smile. “Different.”

Sisko gives a shrug. “You can see him all you want after the hearing, Doctor.”

Julian worries at his lower lip, rolling it between thumb and forefinger. Afterward isn’t good enough, but it doesn’t look like he’ll have a say in the matter.

This is quickly turning into a nightmare. Julian knows he’s Serot’s best shot at counsel. Sure, he’s never defended a court case in his life, but for the past four days he’s done little else but read Bajoran legalese and watch Sisko go back and forth with that sod of a Bajoran High Magistrate. If given a fighting chance, he could have the Bajoran legal system memorized back, front, and upside down. Possibly better than most of the Bajorans who fancy themselves arbitrators.

But the Magistrate has made it clear: Julian is to be called as a witness, and witnesses are barred from serving as representatives to the court. Much like preventing defendants from being present at their own hearings, it’s a rule born from ethics long outmoded. There’s nothing he can do to stop it.

After Serot’s arrest, Julian was caught in a state of panic, internally screaming as he put on a brave front. Or, to be more accurate, tried to. Vedek Winn had appeared on the station so fast, Julian swore he could smell the puff of brimstone. She had sat beside Serot in his little cell in the brig and smiled at him, sickly-sweet, telegraphing her intent to destroy him. Then she’d leaned over to gently pull at his ear. She wrenched her hand away.

“Oh, my,” she said, making a fuss, going so far as to pat her own face as if Serot’s pagh had offended her religious sensibilities. She caught Julian peering at them from around a corner. “Doctor Bashir, this really is a delicate security matter. Would you please leave us?”

Julian had slunk out of the brig and made his way to Ops. Already he could see her angle. The election for Kai was fast approaching, and Vedek Winn would find a way to spin this to her advantage. Perhaps she would take a hard line against the Bajoran traitor/Cardassian spy. Sway the arbitrators into giving him a harsh sentence. Come out looking saintly and tough on threats to Bajor. It was a position that would appeal to many Bajorans.

The moment the turbolift had slowed, Julian had jumped over the railing and chased Sisko across Ops like a lunatic. An insubordinate lunatic hellbent on court martial. “Commander! How could you
just sic the Bajorans on him like that?” he’d shouted. “They’re going to throw the book at him, and it’s going to be all your fault! I bet if it had been your son, you would’ve handled this internally!”

Ops had gone silent as a graveyard. Someone dropped a tool on the metal grates, and it was louder than a thunderclap.

Sisko had lowered his raktajino mug. “Lieutenant, I understand why you’re upset. That’s why I’ll allow you fifteen seconds to adjust your attitude before I have you confined to quarters.”

Julian’s rage hadn’t lasted that long. He leaned heavily on the nearest station and sucked in a breath as the gravity of his mistake sank in. “Commander,” he’d whispered, “I know you never cared for me, and that’s all right, but you can’t, you can’t take it out on him.”

Sisko had pointed a finger at Julian and jerked his thumb to the office. Julian did as he was told. Once the doors had closed behind them, Sisko laid into him. “First of all, Lieutenant, unlike Jake, Mister Pela is a Bajoran citizen. Maybe not for much longer, but right now this is their jurisdiction. Secondly, I already pushed the boundaries by stalling this long. It was a risk I was willing to take on your behalf. Remember that? Of course that means now I have to face the provisional government and explain to them why the Federation has knowingly harbored a Cardassian spy. Not for days, but for months!”

Julian had shaken his head, opened his mouth to protest.

Sisko plowed over him. “And to make matters worse, he destroyed evidence in an ongoing investigation! He embarrassed Constable Odo, and he embarrassed me! That is entirely on him. He knew he’d have to face the consequences when he did it.”

“I’m sorry, Commander, I--”

“And lastly: I won’t abuse my power to rescue an enemy spy from our allies. You can count on that. But--” Sisko’s face had softened. “But you shouldn’t have to fight this alone. Despite what I might think about Mister Pela and his methods, everyone deserves a good defense. You’re welcome to whatever resources you need. Within reason.”

It wasn’t the help Julian had expected, but it was something.

He’d retreated to his quarters, sitting with his head between his knees, urging himself to calm down. Failing that, he harkened back to his studies with Isam Helewa on ancient meditation. Yes, that would do the trick. Thirty quick breaths, one long one. Julian held the last breath, then repeated the rhythm until the panic dissipated into a dull ache.

When he had returned to the brig a half hour later, the Vedek was thankfully gone. Serot sat in the corner of the cell, hands folded in his lap. He smiled when Julian stood outside the forcefield. “Well, you look unharmed. I heard the strangest rumor that you’d started a fistfight with Commander Sisko.”

“News gets around fast. It wasn’t quite that bad, but let’s say I’m lucky not to be sharing that cell with you.”

“All for the best.” Serot had crossed his legs. “It’s cramped enough as it is.”

“I can’t get over how bizarre it is to see you in there.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have time to grow accustomed to the idea.”
Julian had sunk down to the floor and closed his eyes. There was a rustle of fabric, and when Julian looked up, Serot had come to crouch beside the forcefield. Their faces were centimeters away. Julian longed to touch him.

“Julian,” Serot said, his eyes begging, “go home. You need to rest.”

Julian had fought him over it. Try as Serot might to convince him he’d be fine, Julian knew better. If only Julian could stay. It wasn’t even an hour before Odo returned from regenerating. The constable wasted no time making it clear that he wouldn’t tolerate Julian loitering around after visiting hours. Julian had no choice but to go back to the quarters that suddenly felt too big, too hot, and too empty.

Come morning, Julian learned that Serot was gone, whisked away on a transport to Bajor.

*Three more bloody days.*

Now Gul Dvoll drums her fingers along the conference table. She leans back in her chair and inspects the ceiling. “While I protest Bajor’s refusal to allow Cardassia to handle this matter ourselves, I will accept it. Grudgingly.”

“You don’t have much of a choice,” Kira points out, with obvious glee.

“Then as compensation for this slight, I propose that I oversee Mister Pela’s defense.” When Kira barks out a laugh, Dvoll sits up. “Did I say something funny, Major? As the only Cardassian here, I shouldn’t have to point out that I’m best equipped to defend him. I assure you, I have many years of experience adjudicating, and I know the functions of the Obsidian Order better than all of you put together.”

“I appreciate the offer,” Julian says, “but I can’t imagine the former Prefect of Bajor would be welcome in the courtroom.”

Kira mutters under her breath, “*She isn’t welcome on the planet.*”

Dvoll waves a hand. “A minor complication. Major Kira should be able to convince that Vedek lover of hers to allow me to speak before their primitive excuse of an arbitrator panel. After a few words with me, I’m confident they’ll see the error of their ways.”

“This might come as a shock to you, Dvoll, but there’s no way in hell I’m helping you make a mockery of our justice system!”

“Then whyever am I here?”

They’ve been at it since setting foot in the conference room, baiting each other back and forth. Sisko puts a stop to it with a smile. “I can answer that. Gul Dvoll, I invited you here for a special reason. I need you to run interference with the Cardassian government.”

Dvoll tilts her head and blinks, likely puzzling through the universal translator’s explanation of the sports metaphor. Then the good humor drains from her face.

Julian worries that she’s about to storm out. He wouldn’t blame her; it isn’t the most illustrious duty for a gul, but desperately needed. She’s already done enough, delaying her patrol, then putting Glinn Damar temporarily in charge of the *Prakesh* to continue on to the Demilitarized Zone, without her. Julian wants to interrupt just to beg her to consider it, but he holds his tongue. Mouthing off to the gul will break Sisko’s fragile patience with him for sure.

At last, she says, “Very well, Commander. I’ll keep Central Command suitably preoccupied for
you.”

Julian closes his eyes. That’s one hurdle cleared, at least.

“One question, however. If I am an unsuitable candidate, who will be providing counsel for Mister Pela?”

“Me,” Kira says.

Julian’s head snaps up. Dvoll laughs. “Major,” she says, “I had no idea Bajoran trials were resolved through brawling!”

Jadzia cuts in before Kira can explode again. “I don’t know, Dvoll. I think Major Kira can be pretty persuasive when she wants to be.”

Julian can’t believe it. Had Sisko planned on this? Was this his intent all along? It must be some kind of joke, or revenge for Julian’s earlier indiscretion. Resources, he said! Of all the people to defend Serot, Kira is the most ill suited candidate. She’s hot-headed, doesn’t know a thing about the legal process--

Sisko moves on to other matters. Namely, the three Cardassian dissidents that have sought refuge on the station. Julian is too focused on his own problems to devote his attention, and Gul Dvoll seems to have that situation well under her control.

When the meeting is over and the others gone, Kira lingers, tapping at a PADD. “We better get started now if we’re going to make the deadline to file. Should we do it here, or in my office?”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Kira looks at him. She shakes her head and returns her attention to the documents. “Saving Pela’s skin. What’s it look like?”

“Yes, but why?”

“You want to do this now? The hearing is in three days, Bashir. We need to figure out a strategy and get your story nailed down.”

“Not until I know what’s going on between you two. What’s really going on. Some days, you act like the best of friends. And then there’s the rest of the time, when you can’t stand to look at him! Why is that, Kira? I think I have a right to know.”

“It doesn’t matter right now.”

That isn’t the non-answer Julian wants to hear. “You’re impossible.”

“Me? If it bothered you so much, why didn’t you ask him yourself?”

“He evaded the question. Just as you’re doing now, I might add.”

“Fine.” Kira tosses the PADD onto the table and plops into a chair. “Let’s make this quick.”

“Grand,” Julian says. He settles into the seat across from her.

Kira seems to ponder her clasped hands for a moment. “I was in the resistance ever since I was a teenager. Every once in a while my cell would have business on Terok Nor, so I’d tag along. That’s how I found out about him. His shop is one of the few things about this station that’s never changed.
Even then, it felt like he’d always been here.

“You have to understand, the Cardassians didn’t just let Bajorans open a shop. Pela was one of three who were allowed to have a real business, and the other two were known collaborators. They kept their shops by ratting out other Bajorans or outright supporting the Cardassians. Pela, though-- I couldn’t figure out how he managed it. At the time I just assumed he was better at hiding his connections.”

“Do you suppose the Obsidian Order had something to do with it?” Julian asks. He imagines the invisible strings the Order must’ve pulled to get Serot a prominent shop on the station, all without anyone, even the Prefect, finding out.

“I didn’t know that at the time. I just had a gut feeling he was working for the Cardassians, and it drove me crazy that people liked him. Trusted him, even. Not only the Cardassians, but the resistance fighters. My own cell leader called him honest! I had to find a way to prove I was right about him, before he led anyone into a trap and got us killed. So I started watching him.”

“Did you find anything?”

“I followed him around and bugged his quarters. He directly worked for the Cardassians by cleaning and mending their uniforms, and Dukat seemed to like him, but that was the worst I could find. When that came up empty, I assumed it was because he did the Cardassians’ dirty work while I was gone. So I had my friends feed him bad intelligence. I guess the Obsidian Order was closely verifying everything he sent them, because nobody ever took the bait.

“And, I hated to admit it, but he helped the resistance, too, in his own way. Sometimes he gave us clothes. And he had a system with the mannequins up front. We’d use them to communicate with each other, depending on what they were wearing. It was always small things like that, never anything that could really tie him to us.

“Then Gul Dvoll took over. She didn’t play Dukat’s old games. He was the kind of paternalist bastard that liked to call the Bajoran people his children, but he really thought of us as his pets. Dvoll was different. She was paranoid. As far as she was concerned, we were the enemy and every collaborator was a potential spy. The first thing she did was round up the collaborators and send them to ore processing, including those two shopkeepers. It was a death sentence. I was ecstatic. I was sure he’d finally get what he deserved.”

“Wait,” Julian interrupts. “You mean to tell me you never found evidence he was working for the Cardassians, and you still hated him?”

“I couldn’t shake my instinct,” Kira says, without a hint of defensiveness. “It never went away. And I was young. I waited and waited, but Dvoll never came after him, and I knew I had to take matters into my own hands. So I went to his shop and had it out with him.” Suddenly, Kira smiles. “It was the first time we’d spoken to each other.”

Julian can’t help it. He smiles too. “What did he say?”

“A lot, as you can imagine. It turns out he knew who I was, and that I’d been watching him. He wasn’t exactly what I’d expected. I remember he lectured me on how I’d let the Occupation rob me of my trust in others. He might’ve been right, but I didn’t want to hear it. I called him a coward, and a fool, and--” Kira rubs her forehead, “worse. And after all that, do you know what he did? He gave me a book.”

“Let me guess.” Julian scans through his memory of Serot’s favorite Bajoran novels. “The Te’nari
“Orphan.”

“Is it about a little girl who goes to war and eats a dead hara cat?”

“That’s the one.” Leave it to Serot to pass along that depressing tearjerker to a young woman he’d just met. At least it has a happy ending.

“I never liked reading for fun, but I couldn’t put it down. There was a part, where she goes back home to bury her father and-- it hurt to read. I’d been spying on Pela for years, and he’d figured me out, while I’d gotten him wrong. I started to get what the others saw in him. He knew everybody who came and went on the station, and it didn’t seem like it, but he was smart. That only made me madder. He had all this talent, and he was wasting it mending clothes.

“There was a makeshift temple for the workers, and we’d sometimes go together. The others had tried to get him to join the resistance, but I was sure I’d be the one to convince him. I begged him for weeks, but he wouldn’t pick a side. He spouted off some stupid platitude about nonviolence and said this was how he’d survived for so long.

“Surviving was never good enough for me. We might’ve become friends, but I couldn’t get over how he’d let me down. Of course, now I know the Obsidian Order must’ve built that into his personality. They must’ve wanted him sympathetic to the cause, so we’d trust him, but never enough to get involved. But at the time . . .”

“In a way,” Julian says, “your gut instinct was right, wasn’t it? Then why would you still want to help him?”

Kira sighs. Her words come slow, as if reluctantly dragged from her. “I told you, Bashir, it doesn’t matter. I don’t know what he did for the Cardassians, and I probably never will. All I know is that he helped me. And he’s still my friend. I might regret this later, but for now-- it’s the least I can do for him.”

That, Julian can accept.
Chapter 18

“It shouldn’t be taking this long,” Kira mutters for the third time in the past half hour. Around them, the Ashalla Court is an orderly bustle. Once, before the Occupation, the building must’ve been a sight to behold. It had served as minor headquarters to the Cardassians, and as a result had been heavily bombed during the withdrawal. Now scaffolds hold up crumbling walls. A portion of the high-domed ceiling has been blown away, and a forcefield keeps out the pattering rain.

Bajorans stroll across the lobby-- some as individuals, some as pairs, and some as entire extended families-- to disappear into appointed courtrooms. Holoprojectors display the proceedings for everyone outside, should they bother to view them.

Julian has taken to inspecting the tips of his boots instead. This late in the evening, most of the courtrooms sit empty as the day winds to a close. They’re one of the last people standing beside the terminal, awaiting a verdict.

“My father wanted me to go into the legal profession,” Julian says.

Kira raises her head to look at him. She resumes pacing, heels making loud clicks on the scuffed granite floor.

The terminal beside them beeps. It recites their case number in a cool, mechanical voice and spits out a ticket. Kira snatches the paper and reads it. Julian waits. There can’t be more than three words on the slip, but Kira continues to stare at it. He shuffles his feet.

Kira crumples the paper in her fist and throws it into the adjoining rubbish bin. She kicks it, sending the bin skating across the floor into a row of benches and scattering balls of paper everywhere. It bounces and rolls, rattling loudly until coming to a stop, a large dent creasing its middle. People pause to stare.

“Let’s go,” Kira says.

Julian doesn’t ask where they’re going; he doesn’t have to. His heart hammers in his chest as he follows her out of the building and down a flight of stairs leading to the underground tram. This will be his first time setting foot in Ashalla’s short-term detention facility. Kira hasn’t been forthcoming about what to expect, and Julian’s already overactive imagination works to conjure the worst possible scenarios.

The tram screams through the tunnels and the people inside sway with its gentle back-and-forth movements. It slows only to disgorge passengers. Nobody comes aboard. By the time they reach the outskirts of the city, they’re the only ones aboard. Julian tries to think of something to say, anything to occupy the silence, but Kira’s icy expression makes him reconsider.

The detention facility is square and gray. It sits in a field encircled with high fences. The Cardassian lettering on the sign has been blasted to near illegibility. If there’s an updated Bajoran one, no one has yet put it up.

The guards wave Kira on through, but stop Julian for registration. Once they’ve been scanned for weapons and cleared, a guard leads them into a small room. Its only furniture is a table and three chairs. Kira straddles a chair, but Julian can’t imagine sitting for a second longer. All he’s done the past week is sit. He bounces on his heels and pretends to take interest in a portrait of the High Magistrate hanging on the wall.
Julian jumps as the second door opens. Another guard leads Serot into the room and Julian feels his face light up at the sight of him. Serot smiles back, just as widely, and pointedly rolls his eyes at the guard, who seems to be taking his time removing Serot’s cuffs.

Once he’s freed, Julian rushes forward to embrace him. He stops short as the guard glares at him, one hand on the phaser at his hip. “What?” Julian says. “I can’t hug him?”

“No touching,” says the guard.

“This isn’t prison! He’s only been accused of a crime, not convicted!”

The guard casts him one last warning look and leaves.

“That’s ridiculous,” Julian adds for anyone listening in from the comm, sure the guards are closely monitoring them for any forbidden activity. Like touching, apparently.

Serot tilts his head and whispers as if telling a secret, “My dear, you look even more lovely than I remember.”

Julian grins, forgetting his irritation at once. Might as well make the best of the situation. “I’ve missed you terribly. Have they been treating you well?”

“That would depend heavily on your definition of the word.” Sitting down, he tugs at the front of his gray-green uniform. “The dress code leaves much to be desired, the food is lacking in flavor, and I pine for the ability to shower without someone watching, but I have had the opportunity to do a great deal of meditation.”

“I’m sorry,” Kira says.

“My dear Nerys, you have nothing to be sorry for! I may not have been there, but I was able to watch every minute of the proceedings. You argued for me quite eloquently. I’m honored to have your help. And Julian--” Serot almost grasps Julian’s hand, holds off. “What you said was moving.”

Julian bows his head. In the courtroom, he’d been passionate in his love and belief that Serot was fundamentally a kind and moral person who would never knowingly commit espionage, but later had felt a tinge of embarrassment at how public the declaration had been. Everybody had seen it. “It didn’t do you any good, I’m afraid.”

“They had it out against you from the start,” Kira adds.

“We knew from the beginning it was a long shot.” Serot says. “There was little chance of the panel not indicting me, especially after arbitrator Lonvel joined the trial.”

“That man is a bastard and has no right to serve Bajor.”

Serot’s smile is patient. “I take it by now the station is a-flutter with the news of my arrest.”

Julian was afraid he’d ask that. It was bad enough that the courtroom had been full of lollygagging Bajorans eager for a spectacle, but it had quickly spread to Deep Space Nine. “Everyone seems to claim that they knew you were a Cardassian all along,” Julian says. “It’s been ugly, but nobody’s had the gall to say anything to my face. Yet. Quark started a betting pool on your hearing, of course. To make matters worse, I’m now down five strips of latinum.”

“How foolish of you. My dear, you should’ve used your considerable knowledge of my case to your advantage.”
As he laughs, Julian notices a micro-expression of pain cross Serot’s face. “You’re injured,” Julian says. “Where?”

Serot and Kira exchange a glance.

That only makes Julian angrier. “Major, you knew?”

“It’s only light bruising—” Serot begins.

“He’s a Cardassian, Bashir,” Kira says simultaneously. “What did you expect? That they’d treat him like royalty?”

“I expected the guards to do their damned jobs!” Julian shouts, hoping, praying, they overhear.

“Julian.” Serot’s voice is soft and pleading, and bloody hell if that look never fails to make Julian weaken. “I may not be a Starfleet officer, but I’m fully capable of taking care of myself.”

This isn’t about Serot’s ability to take care of himself, but now isn’t the time. Grudgingly, Julian nods. Once he has his temper back under control, he asks, “How do you feel—” he raises his brows, “—otherwise?”

Serot catches on. “The doctors have been good about accommodating me in my treatment. Oddly enough, I feel more like myself than I have in a long time.” A wry smile pulls at his lips. “Now, if you can smuggle in my sewing tools, my mood would be greatly improved.”

Julian laughs. “I’ll bake them into a cake for you.”

Privately, Julian shakes with worry about how Serot will fare—alone, trapped with Bajorans who hate him simply due to his species. Had it been the inmates who had attacked him, or the guards? Damn Kira and Serot for acting like this is normal and not worth fighting over, and damn them for likely being right.

The guard re-enters, cuffs in hand, signaling the end. Kira and Serot nod goodbye, and Julian does the same. Then a wicked thought occurs, and before he can think better of it, he wheels around and kisses Serot hard. Serot’s muffled groan sends a thrill of triumph through Julian’s stomach. He lets the kiss linger a second longer, and when he pulls away, Serot’s eyes are still closed.

As he and Kira make their way back to the tram that will eventually bring them to the runabout, Julian can’t stop grinning. That look of sheer pleasure on Serot’s face. To hell with those guards and their arbitrary rules.

Kira scowls at him. “You’re an idiot.”

“That’s not very nice.” Julian keeps smiling. “I don’t see what the big deal is. I got away with it, didn’t I?”

“Of course you got away with it! What did you think they were going to do, punish you?”

The words cut into him like laser scalpels. The thrill in his stomach turns into tight knots.

Kira shakes her head as they board the tram. “I swear to the Prophets, you can be a self-involved brat sometimes.”

Garak had called him a brat too, hadn’t he? It adds an extra sting. She’s right, of course. He hadn’t thought. He’d only done it to stroke his own ego. Julian covers his face and lets the tram sway
around him.

Back on the station, in his quarters, Julian picks at his food. Vegetables emigrate from one side of his plate to the other. He’s aware of Gul Dvoll across from him, trying to cheer him up with anecdotes and puns. *I’m a terrible host. The least I can do is force a smile.*

Dvoll sighs. “Doctor, I can tell there is no getting your mind off this matter. Despite what Major Kira might have you think, Cardassia will protest any punishment the Bajorans invoke on our citizen. We will fight them until he’s extradited back home.”

“Where he’ll face Cardassia’s own garden variety punishment, I’m sure.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. It depends on Central Command, and the Obsidian Order. They might look upon him as a hero. Or a failure. I can’t say for sure. Either way, you should rest assured that he will not be spending the rest of his life in a Bajoran prison.”

“I appreciate that, but I don’t think you understand-- Serot doesn’t want to go back to Cardassia. At least, I don’t think he does. Garak might have other opinions, but I don’t quite care what he thinks right now. This is more or less his fault.”

“A novel idea, being one’s own scapegoat. But Doctor, what makes you believe that Mister Pela has the right to enforce his desires over Mister Garak?”

Julian laughs without humor. “That’s the question, isn’t it? Who is the real one? If both are, then who is in possession of his-- for lack of a better term-- soul? I don’t think either of us believes in the concept, but you see what I mean. Frankly, after all this time, I’m still unsure.”

“I’d argue that it’s simple. Mister Garak preceded Mister Pela. His desires supersede all others.”

“Yes, but *Mister Garak* relinquished his right to dictate his wishes when he became someone else.”

“You can don as many disguises and assume as many aliases as you want. It doesn’t change who you are, fundamentally.”

“This is hardly the same thing as wearing a fake mustache.”

“A fair point, Doctor, but in the end, there is one aspect we have not yet addressed. Mister Garak’s intention. Did the Order intend for him to stay on Terok Nor for the remainder of his life, or did Mister Garak expect to someday return to Cardassia and resume his normal duties? Before you answer, consider this: we know for a fact that his was a long-term assignment. Otherwise the Order would not have gone to such an extraordinary effort constructing a disguise. But could they have reasonably expected him to go ten years without being discovered, much less decades?”

“Maybe,” Julian says, “Garak never expected to make it home. Maybe he expected to be killed once he was discovered.” Even as he says it, Julian knows he’s grasping at straws.

Dvoll seems less than swayed. “Not to undermine my own point, but this is moot anyway. Without the Order’s interference, there is no way to unbury Mister Garak. Even Doctor Parmak’s treatment may never have accomplished that.” Dvoll takes a bite of soufflé. “If Mister Pela finds Cardassian intervention in his life unsatisfactory, there is another option.” She raises her eyes. “He can renounce his citizenship.”

Julian lays down his fork. “I’m surprised the Cardassians even allow that.”

“We don’t, typically. It’s rare indeed. We expect loyalty from our people, Doctor, and
overwhelmingly they’re proud to give it. Even those dissident Cardassians didn’t dare it. But this is a unique situation. I have to warn you, however: this is not to be taken lightly. To even consider it is to beg denaturalization. If Bajor revokes his citizenship, he will be rendered stateless.”

“But he’d be free to become a citizen elsewhere,” Julian says. His mind spins with the possibilities.

“At high cost, Doctor. He’ll never be welcome on Cardassia.”

“I’d have to discuss it with him.”

“Of course. And should he choose to pursue it, I’d be happy to help you navigate the bureaucracy.”

“Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but why would you help us?”

Dvoll sips her wine and smiles. “Perhaps I’m a fool for love.”

That night, as with all the nights since Serot left, Julian arranges the pillows along one side of the bed, constructing a form he can clutch as he sleeps. Kukalaka, down from the shelf, sits vigil behind him.

The next morning, he resumes his duties.

“I mean,” the young Bajoran woman says from her perch on the biobed, legs swinging and nearly kicking Julian in the process, “how could you not notice?”

“You’d be surprised,” Julian says. He’s had nearly two weeks to grow accustomed to the questions and the running commentary from nurses, patients, and street vendors. What he wouldn’t give for the station to suffer a sudden and bizarre catastrophe right now to distract the residents from his personal life. “The good news is it only looks like a minor fracture. Rock climbing, you said?”

“But you’re a doctor. How could you not notice? We’re so different from Cardassians! Unless--”

She makes a face. “Did they--”

“Yes,” Julian says, slamming down the medical tricorder and grabbing the bone knitter, “the answer to your question is yes. Top-notch job! Fully functional! Fooled even a bloody doctor! And no, I couldn’t taste the difference. Despite what everyone may think, I haven’t sampled every offering in the quadrant!”

Behind him, a nurse gasps. Julian closes his eyes and prays for a hull breach to suck him into oblivion. For her part, the young woman shrugs and seems satisfied with the answer.

Julian’s comm goes off. The USS Hood has arrived. He’s more than happy for the diversion.

His guests have just disembarked when Julian crosses over to the docking ring. He glances down at the dossier, even though he’s already memorized every word. The three of them form a circle exchanging handshakes. “Betazoid, right?” Julian asks the older of the two women, purposefully getting it wrong, as he grabs their bags.

“Half,” Troi corrects. Her black, wavy hair is cut in a bob beneath her ears. Her dark eyes are incisive as she adds, “But you already knew that.”

Julian manages a sheepish smile. Best not to lie in front of the half-Betazoid, then. He turns his attention to the Trill cadet bouncing on her heels and twisting her head this way and that to take in the Cardassian architecture around them. “Lieutenant Dax wanted me to pass on that she’d be stopping by after her shift to welcome you aboard.”
Tigan’s eyes widen. “Really? Oh. What-- what should I say?”

“Hello might be a good start. No need to worry. She doesn’t bite.” Julian leads them across the promenade, playing the good host as he narrates history and stats and makes chitchat. He doesn’t let his eyes linger on the darkened tailor shop. “Counselor,” Julian says, “Thank you again for relocating to DS9. I know it isn’t the most optimal of postings, especially coming from a fine ship like the Hood.”

“Actually, Doctor, I’m looking forward to the change of pace. Besides, the Hood didn’t need two empaths. Deanna has made an incredible first officer. It would be silly for me to expect her to give that up when I can practice counseling anywhere in the galaxy. Don’t get me wrong, serving with family has its advantages, but it can also get--” Troi pauses as she searches for the word. “Awkward at times. Do you have siblings, Doctor?”

“Only child.” Thank god. His parents would’ve jumped at the opportunity to foul up another human being.

Troi gives him a passing look. He’s about to wonder if she picked up on the errant emotion when she says, “I know what it’s like to have difficult parents. Believe me. Mine can be very overbearing. But once you realize that you can’t control their actions, you learn to manage your own reactions to them.”

“I find putting fifty-two lightyears between us is just as effective.” Julian leads them onto a turbolift for the Habitat Ring. Out of the corner of his eye, he catches Cadet Tigan fixing him with the most doe-eyed expression ever to appear on a humanoid. When she notices him looking, she straightens and locks her eyes on the ceiling.

Troi smirks. When they reach the assigned quarters, she relieves Julian of his burden. “If you ever want to find a more long term solution for dealing with your parents, Doctor, you know where to find us.”

“My, you do work fast.” Julian smiles. “You should fit right in.”

Troi nods, taking the compliment as it was intended. He isn’t keen on Sisko’s advice that he work through his issues with a professional, but it’s a relief to have a counselor on hand nonetheless. Now he has someone to refer his patients to when they need help he can’t provide.

Back in his empty, too-hot quarters, Julian pulls on his pajamas and readies the bed. Kukalaka has just been put in place when there’s a loud pounding on the door. Julian drops the bear and picks him back up. The chime rings, followed by more impatient pounding. Julian shakes his head.

Who on Earth--

“Open up, Bashir!”


Julian lets her in. “Major--”

“Get dressed. We’re going back to Bajor. I’ve already got the runabout. It’s ready to go.” Kira huffs at him. “Well, go on, get moving!”

Julian hops to it, yanking on a fresh uniform and chasing after her. His first thoughts leap to Serot in a holding cell of miscreants, bruised and bones broken, but Kira dismisses his worry with a quick wave of the hand, like he’s wasting her time even asking.
Anyone else would use the ample travel time to Bajor to “explain on the way.” Kira makes no effort, muttering to herself on the runabout, and on the tram.

It’s only one word, spoken with disgust. “Lonvel.”

The guards at the detention facility take her demand for an emergency meeting seriously. Serot is barely out of the handcuffs when she slams the PADD on the table and says, “Read it.”

Serot looks between Kira and the reader, then to Julian. When Julian shrugs, equally stymied, he takes up the PADD and, holding it up at arm’s length, reads.

Julian sighs and turns to Kira. “Really, Major, what is the meaning of all this?”

“Not now, Bashir.”

Serot flips over the PADD. “I won’t do it,” he says. “Take this insult back to young Mister Lonvel and send my regards.”

Kira scoffs. “Then you’re a fool.”

“He’s trying to manipulate me for his own political gain.”

“Of course he is! They all are! Only Lonvel is giving you the best deal.”

“What deal?” Julian cuts in, losing his patience.

“Arbitrator Lonvel sent me a message offering Pela a plea deal,” Kira says. “All he has to do is plead no contest to the espionage charge and provide Lonvel with a list of Bajoran collaborators in the provisional government. If he does that, the panel will drop all the other charges and give him a reduced sentence.”

“I resent his assumption that I know of any collaborators in the provisional government,” Serot says.

“But you do,” Julian says, “don’t you?”

“That isn’t the point.”

“Explain it to me, then,” Julian says, slowly. Someone at this table can’t be hotheaded. “Because I honestly don’t see the problem. We’re talking about Bajorans who turned on their own people, aren’t we? Wouldn’t you say they deserve whatever is coming to them?” In his periphery, he catches Kira nod.

“People make mistakes,” says Serot. “Especially when they’re trying to survive.”

“They’re nothing but opportunists,” Kira says, “and I’m too tired to be having this conversation with you again. Listen to me, Pela.” Her face softens as she amends, “Serot. I know you’re holding out hope that the panel will exonerate you, but that isn’t going to happen. They don’t care that there’s no evidence. You’re a Cardassian. Nobody’s going to be protesting in the streets when they lock you away. Nobody’s going to care that the trial wasn’t fair. It’s only going to be me and Julian. You’re facing fifteen years to life, Serot. This might not be the way you wanted it to go down, but a year or two in a medium security prison is a good deal. It might be your best chance. You should think hard about taking it.”

Serot looks down at the PADD. When his eyes settle on Julian, the question is a heavy weight between them.
Chapter 19

The courtroom is so packed with Bajorans that Julian expects a springball tournament to break out. Front row center in the public viewing area, Julian is close enough to catch whiffs of Kira’s perfume. It’s the only flair she’s added to her usual appearance. He has to fight the urge to lean over the divider and take Serot’s hand to offer one last comfort.

There’s a muttering through the crowd as the arbitrators amble in to take their seats behind the long, elevated desk. Once settled, the most senior of the arbitrators calls the court to order. The room falls silent.

Thankfully, Bajorans are as no-nonsense about judicial matters as they are about everything else. There are no ceremonies or drawn-out procedures. Julian takes a deep breath, tamping down the nervousness as the senior arbitrator reads the charge. “For acting in the territory of Bajor as an agent of an enemy government without notifying the Magistrate, Mister Pela, how do you plead?”

Kira rests a hand on Serot’s shoulder. With obvious reluctance, he approaches the lectern, looks to the panel of blue-robed arbitrators, and then glances over his shoulder. He searches the crowd until their eyes meet. Julian tries his most supportive smile.

Serot turns back. “Thank you, your honors,” he says, so softly that everyone leans forward, “I plead no contest.”

The minor hubbub dies out as the senior arbitrator addresses her cohorts. “Have we reached a settlement?”

“Yes,” squeaks a voice, and a man stands. More of a boy, really. The sight of Lonvel and his still-babyfat cheeks reminds Julian of all the rude and obscene questions he’d lobbed during his examination. Julian has to consciously keep from grinding his teeth as Lonvel continues, “The people of Bajor have agreed to drop the charge of willful destruction of evidence with intention to disrupt an investigation. For the crime of espionage, the sentence is six months to two years at the Gallitep correctional facility, during which the defendant is prohibited from making any contact with the Cardassian government without prior approval from the Magistrate. The defendant is hereby stripped of all rights to citizenship and is prohibited from entering Bajor or her territories once time has been served.”

_Persona non grata._ That hadn’t been in the plea bargain.

Serot leans over to Kira, and Julian reads the question on his lips: “Forever?”

Kira lowers her head. Serot looks like he’s been slapped.

Julian can’t get the image out of his head the rest of the day.

It’s two weeks before he’s allowed to visit Gallitep. He sends Serot a message each day-- sometimes, more than one; Serot is permitted that, but he’s been deemed too much of a security risk to go near any communications equipment. Julian’s letters go unanswered, but, he hopes, read.

The condolences of everyone around him are hard to bear. Especially when they come from O’Brien. Deep down, Julian can’t blame the man for doing his job-- he likely would’ve done the same in O’Brien’s place-- but he can doubt his sincerity.

Gallitep is a towering, frightful monstrosity, a labor camp known even beyond Bajor as a site for
unspeakable horror during the Occupation. To reform it into a facility to house Bajor’s enemies only seems fitting. What Julian sees is clean, austere, dark. The visiting area of the medium security wing is made up of rows of booths with sound-dampening forcefields separating the inmates from their guests. Julian is instructed to sit in one to the furthest left. The room opposite him is lit, but empty. He takes an earpiece from its holder and fastens it. His eyes drift around, onto the spires overhead.

When Serot comes through the door, Julian jumps out of his chair in joy at seeing him unharmed. Serot rushes to him, all smiles. He has his hair up, and his uniform-- darker, drabber-- is well fitted. It brings out his eyes. Serot goes for his own earpiece, clearly familiar with the routine. Despite never mentioning it, Kira must’ve already stopped by.

They look at each other, smiling, unsure where to begin. Julian hovers a hand over the forcefield. “Hello.”

Serot does the same. “My dear Julian.”

“Did you get my letters?”

“I enjoyed each one. All thirty of them.”

All right, so maybe he wrote more than once a day. It’s then that he notices the parchment-wrapped package in Serot’s hands. “Is that for me? What is it?”

“Patience, dear.” Serot takes a seat, and Julian follows suit. “You don’t know how good it is to see you.”

“I must say, you look more cheerful than I was expecting.”

Serot’s sidelong smile can only be described as sly. “Never underestimate the power of optimism. My situation may seem bleak, but I try to look on the bright side. I have a bed in a dormitory, rather than a cramped cell. The manual labor, while taxing on my back, provides me with ample exercise and fresh air. I want to absorb every ray of sunlight before I can never set foot on this planet again. What else? Ah. I’ve also been allowed into the community garden. I planted a Terran tomato seed.”

“Good god, Serot. It’s bad enough you’re in here. The last thing we need is your sentence extended for murdering innocent tomato plants.”

“It would only be manslaughter. And my plant is doing well, thank you. As of today, she’s towering over her siblings. Do have some faith in me.”

“Terribly sorry,” Julian says, and laughs. The ache in his chest feels less acute, knowing Serot isn’t miserable. “It’ll only be six months before you’re up for parole. You’ll be good, won’t you?” Julian bats his eyelashes, knowing he looks fatuous, not caring. “For me?”

“Only if you continue to write me. But you needn’t worry about me staying out of trouble. I recently made friends with a Breen. At least, I think I did. It’s impossible to say for sure. Since then, I’ve noticed the slurs and propositions have dropped to almost tolerable levels. I’m sorry, my dear, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Julian lets out a long breath and groans. “It’s all right.” He has to keep himself from asking the knee-jerk questions he doesn’t want answered. He can’t bear to put too much thought into it. “I’m sorry you have to go through this,” Julian says. “I know I said it in my letters, but I want you to hear it: I think you made the right choice.” When Serot only closes his eyes and shakes his head, Julian returns his hand to the forcefield. “I love you.”
“And I love you. Here—” Serot turns to place the bundle into a slot. There’s a whirl of machinery as it’s scanned. It tumbles out the other side, into Julian’s waiting hands.

Julian brings the package to his face and inhales. It smells fresh, of paper and ink. Inside the parchment is a stack of thick pages, neatly folded. “Oh.” Julian clutches the papers to his chest. “You wrote back. Thank you, Serot.”

“I apologize for the anachronism, but it’s the only way I’m permitted to communicate. If you could do me a favor, I had an incident with a PADD and have been summarily banned from using even rudimentary reader devices.”

Julian nods, understanding the request. “I’ll scrounge up some books for you, though I can’t promise they’ll be any good.”

“Believe me, my dear,” Serot says, eyes rolling skyward, “anything would be much appreciated.”

On the tram ride back to Ashalla, Julian curls up in a seat and reads. The papers are full of poems. Most are about him. They’re written in elegant Bajoran script, and Julian is glad he’s secretly mastered the language. He catches subtleties that he would otherwise miss if he relied on the universal translator. It’s clear that a guard read the poems beforehand; there’s an occasional word or line redacted, bizarrely deemed inappropriate, but whoever did the proofing didn’t know much about paper. When Julian holds the page to the light of Bajor’s sun, the words underneath shine through.

The first poem is dated after Serot was taken to Bajor, and describes his feelings so honestly that Julian keeps looking around. Once assured that no one is reading over his shoulder, Julian settles in, grinning and covering his face. Julian misses his stop. On his walk to the runabout, he collides with a pillar. So much for enhanced reflexes.

He’s back on the station and well into a bottle of brandy when he finishes the last poem. Julian flops onto his bed and whines. He blames the flush in his cheeks on the alcohol, and blames Serot for riling him up when there’s nothing he can do about it.

The next morning, Julian catches sight of an El-Aurian man standing in front of Serot’s darkened shop, holding a round suitcase between his hands. “I’m afraid he isn’t on the station,” Julian tells him.

The man keeps staring into the shop. “You’re Serot’s partner. Doctor Bashir. We’ve never been introduced.”

Startled by the casual use of Serot’s given name, it takes Julian a moment to recover. “It seems so. And you are?”

“Where is he?”

“You haven’t heard?”

This time, the man turns and smiles. “I may be a listener, Doctor Bashir, but I arrived on the station ten minutes ago. I haven’t had time for Deep Space Nine’s infamous gossip.”

And Serot’s shop was the man’s first destination. “Bit of a long story, that.”

“I’m sure I can glean it from someone. Tell me, how is the regnar?”

“The what?” Julian blinks. “Oh, the lizard! He’s fine, I guess. I think he can tell that Serot’s gone. The little bugger isn’t nearly as fond of me, but we’re sort of stuck together. How did you know
about that?”

The man looks a mannequin up and down, back to barely acknowledging Julian’s presence. “I suggested he buy the regnar off me.”

“Then you must be his El-Aurian trader friend.”

“Serot did mention that you’re clever,” the man mutters, and before Julian can react to the jab, he adds, “Did the regnar help with his memories?”

For a second time, Julian finds himself caught off guard. “He-- Serot told you?”

“No. He didn’t.”

“Then . . .” Julian shakes his head. “You already knew?”

“From the moment I first saw him.”

“I don’t understand. If you knew, why didn’t you say something?”

“To whom, Doctor? He was unaware of his true nature, and it wasn’t my place to illuminate him. It was never my place. When I saw him last, however, I sensed that something had changed.” The El-Aurian taps the glass thoughtfully. His attention goes across the street. “If you should require any rare goods, Doctor Bashir, I’ll be setting up in Quark’s for the rest of the week.”

With that, the man hurries across the promenade and disappears into the crowd.

“Cheers,” Julian says to his retreating back.

Well, that was odd.

He puts the El-Aurian out of his mind for the rest of his shift. It’s easy enough, with three emergencies in the span of six hours to keep him busy. But as he leaves the infirmary and has no choice but to pass the tailor shop, Julian’s eyes settle on the holographic sign above Quark’s.

As Julian crosses into the bar, he detects a dip in decibel levels as conversations peter out. He’d hoped by now everyone would’ve lost interest in him, moved on to the next victim of sensational misfortune. No such luck. Tugging on his last vestiges of indifference, Julian nods to a wide-eyed and gaping Morn and makes his way to the dabo tables. From this vantage point, he can survey the full panorama of the bar.

There. The El-Aurian has set up shop on the second level, his goods taking up nearly half the space. He must make a tidy sum for Quark to tolerate him using so much real estate at the expense of his bar patrons.

“Long time, no see, Doctor,” says Quark from behind him. “Can I get you anything?”

Faraway, Julian dismisses the question with a wave. “Quark, what do you know about that man?”

“Who?” He twists, following the subtle flick of Julian’s eyes. “Gideric? I’ve been letting him sell here for years. Not much of a conversationalist, but he knows how to bring in the latinum. He’s harmless. Then again, I said that about your boyfriend, and look how that turned out.”

Julian shoots him a sidelong glare.

“If you’re prowling for men,” Quark rambles on, not heeding the warning, “there’s plenty around. I
bet Captain Boday over there would buy you a drink if you asked nice.”

“That’s why I come to you for all my dating advice, Quark,” Julian says, and heads up the stairs. As Serot once claimed, the El-Aurian does indeed have a small zoo of exotic animals. There’s an aquarium of glowing aquatic life, and cages occupied by crawling and hopping creatures of varied sizes. A multicolored bird squawks and kicks pellets of food to the bottom of its holding field. Julian draws close. “Hello, little fellow.”

In the middle of a purchase with a customer, Gideric says, “That variety of Klingon bird will take your fingers clean off if you give her a chance.”

Julian snaps his hand away, forcefield be damned. “Why on Earth would anyone keep one, then?”

“One of this life’s many mysteries,” the El-Aurian says, enunciating every syllable and rolling his eyes in Julian’s direction. “Ornamentation, perhaps.”

It’s so catty, Julian feels the hairs on his nape stand up, and he has to fight the urge to bite back an equally scathing retort. He has a feeling this is a battle he’s already won. Instead, he ambles closer, picking up knickknacks and shaking them. Many of them are Terran in origin. “I take it you’ve heard the news by now?”

“I have. The people of this station never disappoint. Can I help you find something?”

“Do you happen to have any books?” Julian glances around. “Physical ones, I mean. Something our mutual friend would like?”

“Not on hand. But I do have some on my ship that might appeal to his personal taste. You would be a better judge of that, of course. I’ll be done here in about an hour. You can find me then.”

Julian has grown used to brush-offs. This one doesn’t faze him. “I was thinking something along the lines of philosophy.”

Gideric audibly sighs. “You have a question to ask me, Doctor.”

“I have more than one, but you haven’t seemed interested in answering them.”

A woman lays down a green elephant statue on Gideric’s makeshift counter. For a moment, he’s focused on the transaction, taking the customer’s thumbprint and bidding her goodbye with a smile that dies the instant she turns around. To Julian, he says, “My trade requires me to travel across the quadrant. We went months without seeing each other. He made it clear that he would never leave the station. We left it at that. It was never serious.”

Maybe not for one of them. “Ah,” Julian says. What else can he say?

The El-Aurian stands abruptly, rounding the table, and for an alarming second Julian expects the man to actually hit him. But he comes to a stop at Julian’s side and looks over his shoulder, at the object he’s holding. Julian hadn’t realized he’d wandered to the jewelry section, but here he is, holding a gaudy crystal necklace. “I’m not going to steal it,” Julian protests.

Gideric looks him in the eye. “He wants to marry you.”

Julian sets down the necklace.

“At least, he did. He was too afraid.”
“He told you that?”

“That’s the second time you’ve asked me that question.”

“Right. Sorry.” Shaking off his surprise, Julian smiles at the idea: Serot, wanting to marry him. Incredible. He can’t help but feel that the El-Aurian has offered him an awkward truce. “Thank you. For telling me.”

The El-Aurian retrieves a box and begins packing away his goods.

“I think,” Julian continues, “Serot would like it if one of those books came from you. Personally. He could use all the friends he can get right now.”

Gideric whirls around. This time, it’s Julian who’s caught him off guard.

Later, Julian taps a hardcover of Andorian metaphysics against his thigh. “He seemed so sad,” Julian says. “Bitter, too, but mostly sad. I didn’t know what to say.”

Troi adjusts the PADD in her hands. “Do you have an idea why Serot never mentioned the relationship to you?”

“Serot was never open about his past relationships. Up until today, I’d thought ours was the only one that wasn’t a planted memory. Maybe Gideric was telling the truth and it wasn’t serious. Then again, it’s hardly relevant. I never told Serot about all the men I dated.”

“That’s a healthy way of looking at it. Have you given any thought to how you feel, now that you know he intended to propose?”

“You could say that,” Julian says, laughing nervously and leaning forward to fish into a pocket. “When I was on the El-Aurian’s ship, searching through his book collection, I couldn’t stop looking at his jewelry display. There was just so much of it.” He plucks out one of the gold bands. He turns it, admiring the play of light on its surface. “It felt odd to buy them from him, but now that I’ve got them-- I want to do it.”

Troi raises a brow. “Marry your boyfriend, you mean.”

“I know it sounds rash-- he’s in bloody lockup, for god’s sake. And the past few months have been-- well, you know. That must be why he lost his nerve. I’m not saying we tie the knot right this instant. We can wait until he’s out. Have a real ceremony. You think I’m mad, don’t you?”

“Not at all. But whenever making a big decision like this, it’s always best to go over your reasons first, and make sure they’re the right ones.”

Behind Troi, Tigan rests her chin in her hands and murmurs, “I think it’s romantic.”

“Why, thank you, Ezri,” Julian says.

Troi casts the cadet a glance. To Julian, she says, “How do you suppose he’ll react?”

If Julian knew the answer to that, he wouldn’t be so damned anxious.

For several weeks, Julian rehearses what he’ll say, and talks himself out of it in the process. What if Serot hadn’t lost his nerve, but had changed his mind? What then? But Julian knows he’s being silly; Jadzia tells him as much. “Just ask him,” she says over the rim of her blood wine. “What’s the worst that could happen?”
Rejection, that’s what.

It’s a summer evening on Bajor when he and Kira make the trip to Gallitep. As she and Serot chat, Julian can hardly concentrate. The hard labor and sunlight have done Serot good: he’s lost weight and picked up a tan. Bajor’s sun has bleached golden highlights into his hair. As Serot smiles, describing the state of the community garden, Julian simply grins, utterly besotted. For a heart-stopping moment, Julian forgets Serot is in prison and there’s a barrier between them.

“I can’t believe you’re so upbeat about this,” Kira says once Serot’s finished boasting about the fashion show he’s put on with his newfangled friends, who Kira jokingly refers to as his flunkies. “You adapted far better than I expected.”

“I’m merely endeavoring to make the best of the situation,” Serot says.

“Well, watch your back. This isn’t some kind of fashion camp. None of these people are your friends. They’ll turn on you the second it benefits them.”

“Ah, Nerys,” Serot says with open fondness, “always looking for clouds in every silver lining.” His attention shifts to Julian. “Is something on your mind, my dear? You’ve been unnaturally quiet.”

Julian rouses himself with a blink. “Unnaturally? Can’t have that, now can we?” He dips a hand into his pocket for courage. Where to start? “I-- I know this isn’t the most romantic setting, but-- this isn’t me formally asking, so much as asking to ask you later. When you get out, I mean.” Here he goes, babbling like a fool. “Sorry, I’m--”

“He’s trying to ask you to marry him,” Kira interrupts.

“Major! I was just getting to that!”

“You could’ve fooled me.”

Ignoring her, Julian weaves his fingers together in a plea. Serot’s eyes are wide. “Well, what do you say?”

“Julian,” Serot whispers. “You realize you’re asking to marry a convict.”

Julian pointedly glances about the prison. A few rows down, one of the guests is having a meltdown. “I noticed.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want? My goodness, what would your parents say?”

“It would rather put them into a tizzy, wouldn’t it?” Julian indulges in a brief smirk at the thought. “Their son, married to a convicted spy. Well, I don’t care what they think. Or anyone else for that matter. And you shouldn’t, either. I love you, Serot. I want to be with you.”

“And I, you, but--” He closes his mouth, seemingly at a loss for words.

“I haven’t yet heard a no.”

Serot glances away, but now he’s smiling. It’s been a while since Julian has seen him shy. There are few things more endearing.

“Engaged to be engaged” is a term Julian had often heard bandied around. Now it keeps him cozy at night as the lonely weeks go by, reassuring him where even Kukalaka can’t. The giddiness is
difficult to contain, but he wields it like a shield against the doubters and naysayers around him.

Even lightyears away, over the comm, Gul Dvoll seems to notice the change. “You’re more yourself, Doctor. Does filing paperwork lift your spirits?”

“Maybe you’re having an effect on me.”

“You’re too kind, and an abysmal liar. I’ve sent you the last of the forms. Have Mister Pela sign them in triplicate. Once I submit them to their respective agencies, he’ll have officially renounced his citizenship from the Cardassian Union. You’re still certain this is what he wants?”

Julian nods. “It’s the only way to get him Federation citizenship.”

“And sever any remaining ties with his true heritage,” Dvoll adds, but all the condescension is gone from her voice. This time she seems to understand. “I’ve been hearing some interesting rumors out of Bajor. Is it true that there have been a string of resignations in the provisional government?”

It isn’t a secret, so Julian has no qualms about answering. “That’s correct.”

“And both Vedek Bareil and Winn withdrew their candidacy from the Choosing Ceremony”

“Bareil’s no longer a Vedek, either,” Julian adds, though Winn is still hanging on. Kira had been heartbroken. Up until a week ago, she’d been sure he’d be the next Kai. But she can hardly complain about the unforeseen consequences, can she? Collaborators were nothing but the worst kind of opportunists, after all.

“How unfortunate, and such an odd coincidence, for all these sudden resignations to take place only three months following Mister Pela’s mercifully light sentence.”

Julian meets Dvoll’s thin, insinuating smile with one of his own. “Isn’t it?”

Dvoll bows her head. They understand each other. When the communication ends, Julian secures his terminal and glances at the chronometer. Lunch time. He’s gotten so used to eating alone, it feels bizarre to take lunch somewhere other than his desk.

O’Brien is waiting for him at the Replimat, in a corner table. Waiting might be an overstatement—he’s already halfway through his sandwich. He stops chewing long enough for Julian to retrieve a tray, and begins talking between bites of his Reuben. This is another jarring experience. O’Brien. Talking. With him. Civilly, even. What a difference a near-death experience in a Cardassian prison can do.

Granted, O’Brien isn’t exactly gushing friendship, but Julian knows the significance of the gesture. He’s trying. So Julian slurps noodles and listens. Because if there’s anyone on the station who can come close to sympathizing right now, it’s him.

There isn’t much Julian can offer beyond reassurance, but O’Brien doesn’t seem to want anything more.

The chief has bowed his head in thanks and returned to Ops when Julian receives the comm. Odo, asking if Julian has a moment to meet in his office.

A knot of dread tightens in his chest. He goes.

Julian’s already apologized, profusely, for being a pain in the neck and generally making Odo’s job hell in the months leading to Serot’s arrest. Odo had accepted the apology with a nod and waved him
away. When Julian had tried to hug him, Odo had shifted his arms out of sight and turned stiff as a board.

Julian hovers in the threshold of the Security office. “What can I do for you, Constable?”

Odo closes the gap between them with two long strides. “Nothing, for now, Doctor. I merely wanted to pass on some disturbing news. I have several contacts within the Bajoran penal system. One of them recently informed me that there was an incident at Gallitep.”

Julian swallows. “Go on.”

“According to the preliminary report, a woman allegedly attacked Mister Pela last night in the dorm’s lavatory with a knife improvised from scrap metal. There had been an altercation the previous evening in the dining hall—”

“Is he alive?”

“He was injured, but it seems he’s already been released from sickbay. They’re holding him in isolation while they investigate.”

Julian releases a breath and runs his fingers through his hair. “I was afraid something like this would happen. They never should’ve put him in general population. A Cardassian in a Bajoran prison. Those guards better keep that woman away from him, or I swear, Odo, there will be hell to pay.”

Odo gives him an odd look. “I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“What do you mean?”

“During the fight, the report states that Mister Pela snapped his alleged attacker’s neck. She’s dead, Doctor.”
Chapter 20

Serot paces the enclosure, pulling at his hair. “I can’t go back to isolation, Julian. You have no idea what it’s like.”

“You’re right,” Julian says, “I don’t. I don’t have the foggiest notion what you’re going through. But I know it’s for your own safety.”

“Safety!” Serot scoffs. “That cell is so small I can hardly breathe!” Serot stops, shakes his head, and resumes circling. “I’d much rather be stabbed again!”

“Please don’t say that.”

“I was wrong to think I could ever handle this. All his memories were clouding my judgment. A lot of help they’ve done me in here! I murdered that poor girl, I’ve ruined any chance I had at getting out early, I’m denied any social contact beyond that quack, and worse of all I keep remembering. Every night, he haunts me. I can’t sleep. I have nightmares. No matter what I do, I’ll never be free of him. I was a fool. I’m not-- I’m not strong enough for this.”

Julian lets the words settle over them. In the booth to Julian’s right, a Bajoran woman is softly sobbing.

“First of all,” Julian says, presently, “what you did was self-defense. She wasn’t some poor girl. She was hell-bent on killing you. And she very well might have, if your instincts hadn’t kicked in when they did. Secondly, the parole board knows what happened. They saw the security footage.”

_I saw the security footage_, he doesn’t add. He shivers at the memory.

The warden’s thick finger had traced the screen, following the progress of the Bajoran woman about to meet her fateful demise. Behind Julian, Odo read aloud from a report. “Ro Laren, age thirty. Daughter of Ro Talia and Gale. She spent most of the Occupation in and out of labor camps. You might find this interesting, Doctor: it says here she applied to Starfleet, but never made it past the entrance exam.”

On the screen, Ro crept closer, makeshift knife drawn, to where Serot was washing up in the corner. The brief tilt of his head was the only indication that he’d registered her presence before the fight began. “How did she wind up in Gallitep?” Julian whispered through his constricted throat, unable to look away.

“She pleaded guilty to three counts of criminal homicide,” Odo said. “Bajorans she suspected of collaborating with the Cardassians. She was transferred out of maximum security last year for good behavior.”

Julian had one or two opinions about _that_ assessment, but he couldn’t speak. He’d clamped a hand over his mouth, looking on as Serot brutally disarmed the woman, sending the knife flying across the lavatory. The rest was a grotesque pirouette of movement. Julian could almost hear the sickening crack of fracturing cervical vertebrae. “Look how fast,” the warden said, rewinding the footage. “See? You know how much force it takes to snap a humanoid neck like that?”

It isn’t an image Julian’s likely to forget.

“Everyone’s agreed that you did nothing wrong,” Julian continues. “Everyone except you. Now, please, Serot, sit down.”
Serot glares at the chair, but takes the seat anyway. After a moment, he favors Julian with the wry smile that’s been increasing in frequency. “Did you know, when the guards led me to the visiting area, my fellow inmates gave me a significantly wide berth?”

“From what I know of prison, which is admittedly not much, isn’t that a good thing?”

“I’m a tailor. I don’t relish being feared. Julian, even if you’re right and this has no bearing on my case, I still—” he pitches his voice low, as if divulging a secret, “—killed someone.”

“I know.” Julian isn’t sure what else to say. He’d be equally distraught were he in the same position. “I know.”

They look at each other for a long time. “My poor tomatoes are going to wilt from neglect,” Serot says.

“You’ll plant new ones, when you get home.”

“Julian, perhaps you should reconsider this plan of yours.”

Julian feels a stab of worry, deep in his chest.

Serot leans forward. “Do you really want to marry a monster?”

“You’re not a monster,” Julian hisses. “No matter what you do, you’re not. Do you think I perjured myself at your hearing? I was telling the truth. And I’ll say it again: you’re a good man.”

“You don’t know him the way I do.” Serot straightens. “He’s always going to be with me. We’ll both have to accept that.”

It’s the truth, cold and hard.

It’s another week before Gallitep’s administrators release Serot back into general population. Julian doesn’t approve of the decision, but there’s no denying that Serot’s mood is much improved for it. As much as can be expected, at least. He’s still agitated, still in prison, but the next time Julian visits, the hopelessness is gone. The sunshine and chance to be with his so-called friends does him good.

That must be why, when Serot reports the first good news they’ve had since this mess started, he doesn’t appear altogether thrilled. “The administrators have decided to transfer me,” Serot says, flipping through a new book Julian’s brought him, “to serve the remainder of my sentence on Deep Space Nine. They claim it’s for my own safety. After all, I’m such a high-profile prisoner. However, I think we both know a certain someone managed to wear them down with his stalwart persistence.”

Julian grins. His latest letter to Gallitep’s headquarters had been rather persuasive. “This certain someone-- would he happen to be impossibly handsome?”

“One could say so. I’ve found him to be impossibly smug.”

He’s hitting all the right notes to come off as teasing, but Julian knows him too well. There’s a sadness lingering. “This is good news, Serot,” Julian murmurs. “We’ll be able to see each other every day. Aren’t you happy?”

“I will most definitely not miss this prison.”

“But you’ll miss Bajor,” Julian finishes.

Serot nods.
There are countless other planets out there-- ones that are equally as beautiful and culturally vibrant as Bajor. Someday we’ll find one that feels like home to both of us. But that is a minor consolation for someone about to lose his fictitious homeland. So Julian hovers his hand over the forcefield until Serot follows suit, joining their palms as best they can. Serot is released into Odo’s custody within the week. When Julian arrives in the brig to welcome him home, more or less, Odo is in the process of providing Serot with his first meal.

“It’s perfectly natural to admit it, Constable,” Serot is saying, and Julian can feel the sass in his voice. “I can tell you missed me.”

“Is that so?” Odo places the tray on the sliding shelf that serves as the cell’s only table. “What makes you think that?”

“Let’s just say I saw it in your eyes.”

Odo huffs and backs out of the cell. He raises the forcefield. “I assure you, Mister Pela, whatever you think you saw, it was not me regretting your absence. Try to stay out of trouble this time, won’t you? Gallitep will be sending people to check in on you every now and then, and I’d hate to have to send you back because you weren’t behaving yourself.” Odo turns just as Julian takes a tentative step forward. “Doctor Bashir. What’s that?”

Julian raises the copper bucket in his hands. “Oh, this? It’s a gift. For you, Odo.”

“Me? Why?”

“I saw it in a shop and thought you’d like it.”

Julian is sure Odo’s suspicion can see through him, down to the skeleton. “What do you want, Doctor?”

“What makes you think I want anything?”

“As you humans like to say, I wasn’t born yesterday. Doctor, I’m not letting Mister Pela out of his cell unless it’s a medical emergency. I’m under a strict directive from the Bajoran Penal System.”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” Caught out, Julian pushes the bucket into Odo’s hands until he’s forced to take it. “I was hoping, maybe, you could--” he raises his brows, “--let me into his cell. Just for a short while?”

Inside the cell in question, Serot lowers his fork and looks at them.

Odo snorts and walks past Julian. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, but I’m not running a brothel. You’ll have to wait until Mister Pela’s time has been served. Consider your request for a ‘conjugal visit’ denied.”

When he’s gone, Serot takes a delicate bite of food. “It was a valiant effort, my dear. But you really shouldn’t antagonize my jailers.” He wipes his fingers on the napkin over his knees and fusses over folding it into a perfect square. “I take it that since I’m now in the station’s custody, you’re once again my attending physician?”

“That’s right.” Julian tries to keep the hurt out of his voice when he adds, “Do you not want me to be?”

“It’s a matter of some new symptoms. Do you recall how I mentioned that since--” He puffs out his cheeks, leaves it at that. “The nightmares?”
“You’re still having them?”

“They’ve gotten progressively worse. Sometimes I’d wake up on the floor, or across the dormitory.” Serot hesitates. “Promise me you won’t be alarmed.”

“I’m a doctor, love. I’ve seen everything.”

Serot takes a breath and rolls up his sleeves.

Julian inches closer. The skin along his arms is splotched purple and green from deep contusions, crisscrossed with red lines where the skin has been broken. Scratched.

A cold chill runs down Julian’s spine. *New symptoms,* he’d said.

“It isn’t just my arms.” Serot tugs down his sleeves without making eye contact. “One of the inmates saw me. He said it was like I was trying to rip my own skin off in my sleep. Could it be from the treatment?”

“I don’t know,” Julian says, mind racing with possible causes. “The dezothomide is cumulative; it needs time to build on itself in order to be effective.” It doesn’t make sense. He’d been stable for months now. “There’s no telling how your brain chemistry’s been affected until I’ve performed a scan and compared it to the original.”

Serot nods. “If I stopped the treatment—”

“Not until I’ve isolated the cause and ruled out all other possible remedies. It may be a reaction to the stress you’ve undergone in the past few weeks. Stopping the dezothomide could very well worsen your condition.” Short term, he needs to get his dermal regenerator and conduct a thorough examination. Longer term: monitor Odo’s security footage while Serot sleeps. “We will figure this out, Serot. I promise. In the meantime, I want to bring Counselor Troi on board.”

“No, thank you, dear. I had my fill of counselors at Gallitep.”

“This one’s different. Kestra’s an empath, and she’s very good. I assure you, she’s not a quack.”

Serot hugs himself and shakes his head.

“Please trust me, Serot. I think she can help.”

Eventually he grudgingly agrees to speak with Troi “for a little while,” but only if Julian is allowed to sit in. In the meantime, Julian performs his exam, healing with the dermal regenerator as he goes. The majority of the contusions and abrasions are to Serot’s arms and torso, but he’s taken trauma to the skin and subcutaneous tissue everywhere, to varying degrees.

More concerning are the bruises along his throat, hidden under his high-collared tunic.

One for every finger.

*Garak, you bastard, what are you doing?*
Chapter 21

I draw on multiple sources for inspiration here (please see the end notes in Chapter 23 for details), including *A Stitch in Time*. While I like ASiT well enough, this is a divergent alternate universe, so I've borrowed some aspects and discarded the rest. The result is a sort of backstory amalgamation, so there's no need to have read the source material.

Just to be on the safe side, **warnings for** child abuse and violence ahead.

Mila is broad-shouldered and sturdy, a study in service class efficiency. She can crack regova eggs in one hand, her fingers manipulating the orange-speckled shells as she separates yolk from albumen. The greenish yolk plops into a narrow cup, while the white dribbles into the mixing bowl. Perched on the counter, the boy mimics every gesture with his own egg, warmed between his hands. It’s far too big to maneuver in one palm. He can’t fathom ever being able to crack them like she does.

Finished with the last egg, she turns to the boy and extends a hand. He clutches his egg to his chest. He wants to hatch it and raise the chick until it’s big, he tells her.

They both know he isn’t allowed pets. Mila smiles indulgently. “You silly boy, these eggs aren’t the hatching kind. They haven’t been fertilized. Now, give it here.” She makes a beckoning motion, and he reluctantly surrenders his prize. “What would you have even done with a regova?”

He’s put a great deal of thought into it. Tolan once said that regova are smart, capable of learning commands. “Teach it tricks,” he says.

“Of course,” says Mila. She’s about to crack the egg when there’s a click of a door upstairs. They both freeze in place. At the fall of footsteps, she grabs the boy underneath the arms and sets him on the floor.

She doesn’t need to tell him; he rushes out the back and half crawls, half slides down the too-high stairs and into the cellar. Pushing the overturned crate against the door, he climbs up to hit the door-release button and makes his way outside.

Tolan is already working, bent over a flowerbed, wide-brimmed hat keeping Cardassia’s sun at bay. The boy sits beside him in the grass, careful not to get dirt on his pants. “Good morning,” Tolan says, and passes over an unwieldy, shiny spade. “Ready to earn your keep?”

The boy nods and starts digging. He’s mindful to keep the holes evenly spaced as Tolan instructs, never too shallow nor too deep. Tolan drops the bulbs in covers them with soil, quizzing the boy as they work. “And why are we careful never to overwater?”

“Because they’ll rot,” the boy says, “and won’t grow.”

“Very good.” Tolan smoothes the boy’s hair. “Very good. We’ll make a gardener of you yet.”

The boy beams at the praise. Inside the manse, Mila calls him. He thanks Tolan and hurries into the kitchen. The air is redolent of the fried eggs, and he’s hungry, but he waits as Mila scrubs him down.
before setting him at the servant’s table.

Once fed, Mila takes his hand and leads him through the neighborhood. She sets a leisurely pace so he can keep up and points to the towering homes. “Who lives there?”

Stopping, the boy thinks. “Glinn Mel-- Mel--” He frowns and looks to her for help. As always, she offers nothing but an expectant stare. “Melok?”

“And who else?”

The boy names off Glinn Melok’s wife and two children, but forgets the recently arrived infant. Mila is uncharacteristically forgiving of this oversight, and reminds him, under her breath so no passersby can overhear, that the child is a bastard. “Like you,” she adds.

There was never a danger of the boy forgetting. He’s bad, like a rotten flower bulb, and will never be as good as the other children of Cardassia. When Mila had sat him down and told him of his unfortunate birth, he’d cried until Tolan swept him off to bed. Tolan said it wasn’t his fault, but that only made the boy cry harder.

The boy feels like crying now. A sniff escapes, and Mila begins to frown. “Tired,” he complains, tugging at her skirt. It’s halfway true.

She picks him up and carries him easily. They continue the game, Mila asking who lives where, or what part of a house has changed since their last walk, and the boy, cheek pressed against the smooth scales of her neck, tries his best. Mila hums in approval. Once they reach the open-air market, she buys him three squares of hard candy as a reward.

He’s about to pop one into his mouth when a skimmer flies low overhead. Mila tenses in its shadow. She presses a hand to the back of his head and takes off running. He protests the jostling, but quiet when she hisses him silent. As she weaves through stalls and the crowds, the boy clings around her neck.

He loses track of where they’re going, or how far she’s been running. Suddenly, they’re somewhere dark and noisy. When she speaks, her voice is cold in the boy’s ear. “I wouldn’t.”

“It’s a mistake,” comes a man’s voice, and the boy turns his head just in time to see him fall over. The man lies very still, like he’s pretending to sleep.

“He’s not moving,” the boy says. “Is he hurt?”

Mila lowers him back to the ground. “He’s dead, Elim.”

“Will he get back up?”

She fires the disruptor again, and the man disappears, leaving behind a black shadow. The boy looks around, trying to pinpoint where he might’ve gone. Mila hides the disruptor in the folds of her clothes and takes his hand. “Let’s go.”

When Tolan tucks him into bed that night, the boy tells him about the candy—green and blue (the boy saved a piece just for him)—and the man who fell down. Instead of reacting with interest, as the boy expects, Tolan sets his jaw and strides up the stairs. The boy can hear Tolan arguing with Mila. They go back and forth until a third voice interrupts. There’s no more yelling after that.

In the first years of his life, the boy sees the master only in glimpses, caught between the cracks of doors or from the shadow of tall furniture. When the master is home, the boy knows to stay quiet and
out of sight. Sometimes, the man brings guests, and Mila is called upon to tend after them, cooking and carrying drinks. The boy doesn’t mind. He can play for hours in the cellar, huddled with his dolls and ships, sending them off to fight and patching them up later with his toy medkit.

“Oh!” Julian interrupts. “I had a toy medkit, too!” Except he ate the hypospray canisters.

Serot and Troi look at him. Julian lowers his head and sheepishly waves Serot to continue.

In the evenings, Mila sits him in her lap and together they work through the puzzles she brings. Then she reads him histories, the books borrowed from the manse’s dusty library. On the days that Tolan is out caring over the city’s gardens, she instructs the boy on the maintenance of her disruptor. When his fingers are strong enough to pull back the trigger, she takes him to the clearing behind the manse and points to a line of stumps. The weapon is too heavy and he keeps trying to give it back.

“Mila,” the boy says, “why do I have to learn this?”

Mila casts a glance to the house. “One day someone will try to kill you. Don’t you want to be able to protect yourself?”

“I’ll tell them not to kill me.”

She smiles and gives his elbow a nudge. “If only it were that easy. Now hurry up and aim properly, before you drive me to insanity with your silly questions.”

When the master is gone, which is often enough, the boy has the run of the common areas and yard. He chases the voles, scrubs the floors alongside Mila, and helps Tolan plant Vulcan stinging ivies beside the trellises. “It isn’t hot enough here for them to thrive,” Tolan says, “but in ten years, they’ll be magnificent.”

“Why do we have to wait?”

“Patience,” is all Tolan says.

The boy sits underneath the manse’s dark porch to watch the other children play in the street. On his braver days, he reminds Mila that he’s been good, and she takes him to the communal play area.

She sets him in the far corner, beside the geometrical figures and the statue of Legate Osnek. He manages to slowly migrate, inch by inch, to where the long-limbed and regal-necked children are drawing on slate towers. When Mila notices, she murmurs apologies to the parents, head inclined to underline her sincerity, and escorts him back to their corner. He waits until her attention is on their surroundings, her eyes scanning the crowd, to wander back. It takes a year of her scolding to finally break him of the habit.

Sometimes, Mila says, “You’re just like him.”

Other days, when the boy has been especially willful: “I don’t know where you came from.”

One such evening, as she mutters the words, a voice replies, “My dear Mila, I think you have an idea.”

She nearly throws the boy off her lap in her haste to stand. “Sir, I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you call for me.”

“That’s because I didn’t.” The man takes another two steps down the stairs, making no sound on the usually creaky steps, and stops to peer at them.
When his gaze falls on the boy, the boy remembers the rule and ducks behind a chair.

“Not even four standard years, and he’s already running scared of me,” the man says, and he sounds amused. “As he should be.”

“I’m not scared of you,” says the boy, because he isn’t.

“Be quiet, Elim!” Mila snaps.

“Inherited your tongue, hasn’t he?” the man says, rounding the chair until he has the boy cornered. “As well as your ineptitude for hiding, it seems. Has Mila yet taught you the lesson of what happens to impertinent little boys?”

The boy shakes his head, having never heard the word before. Mila is inching closer to him. Behind the flat, expressionless lines of her face, her eyes are wide and alert.

“Then,” the man says, “it’s about time we see to your education.” He turns back to Mila. “Asyeda seems to miss you, my dear girl. She’s requested you come to dinner tomorrow evening. Bring the--” he gives a dismissive wave, “child.”

With that, the man leaves. Mila gives the boy a rough tug to the arm and drags him to bed early. He can’t sleep, so he stays awake, listening to the footsteps upstairs and Mila’s pacing. When Tolan arrives, the boy can hear them whispering back and forth in the corner, beyond the curtains separating the room.

“If we begin now,” Tolan is saying, “we can get him to your safehouse on Goralis II.”

“Are you listening to yourself? It’s impossible. There will never be any hiding from him.”

Tolan falls silent. The boy thinks the argument is over and rolls on his side. A moment later, Tolan whispers, “You give up far too easily, Mila.”

“And you have no idea how dangerous Enabran can be.”

“All the more reason to get him out of Cardassia, while we still can!”

The boy doesn’t want to leave, but keeps quiet, for fear of revealing he’s heard their entire conversation. He falls asleep, and when he wakes up to Mila’s voice, he’s still in his little bed encircled by tall gray drapes.

She is a flutter of activity. The master is gone, and she uses his absence to usher the boy from one tedious errand to another. He squirms as a strange man cuts his hair, and fidgets as another strange man takes his measurements for new clothes. “When I’m through, he’ll be the most dashing little fellow in the room,” the tailor boasts, and pats the boy’s cheeks.

“I don’t want dashing,” Mila says. “Dashing won’t work. He must look shrewd.”

“Shrewd? Him?” The tailor looks the boy up and down. “Madam, I’ve been known to work miracles with cloth, but--” He turns back to Mila and hesitates. He seems to catch on to her desperation and releases a sigh. “Then again, I suppose I could use a challenge.”

Back at the manse, she dunks the boy into a tub of scalding water and scrambles his delicate juvenile scales until he yelps and tries to scramble away. She holds him down. “Hush,” she says as she rubs a balm over the reddened areas. “There, that isn’t so bad.”
He rests his chin on his knees and pouts. “Don’t want to.”

“You may as well get all this childishness out of the way now, because I won’t be tolerating any of it tonight. It’s important that you’re on your best behavior. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.” After a time, he adds, “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why is it important?”

“Because. Because he’s an important man.”

“I don’t care. He’s mean and he yells at you.”

“That’s beside the point. You don’t have to like him, you only have to behave yourself. Remember about minding your elders?”

“I’m not afraid of him.”

“How fortunate for you. Well, I am.”

“Why?”

“Oh, for the love of the great gul, Elim! Because he can take your life whenever he wants, that’s why! Now sit still and be quiet!”

The boy looks up at her in surprise. Slowly, he figures out what she’s really saying, between the lines. He beams at her, triumphant. It’s another second before Mila realizes her mistake. She sighs and shakes her head.

“Yes, yes,” she mutters, and massages oil into the boy’s scalp with more force than necessary. “You’re very clever.” She tightens her grip on his hair and forces him to look her in the eye. “You are not to let anyone else know, Elim. Ever. You won’t talk about it with me, or Tolan. No one. This is serious. Do you understand?”

Still smiling, the boy nods as best he can with his hair caught in her fist.

Now the boy cannot contain his excitement. He can’t sit still as Mila dresses him, and she nearly rips his newly tailored clothes in her frustration to get him into them. In the transport, she notices him bouncing restlessly in the seat beside her. “He’ll never acknowledge you,” she says. “Nothing you do will ever impress him, or change his mind. The best you can hope for is that he spares you long enough to take some joy out of life.”

The boy has learned when to nod, solemnly, like he’s taken the advice to heart. The ride to Lakat is long and he has time to think. In the books Mila reads him, each child is precious to Cardassia. And although the boy knows he’s not as valuable as the others, even the lowliest stone has its place. He’s done being naughty. Only bad children are cast away. As long as he’s good and obeys every word, his father will love him.

But as the transport pulls up to the massive house shrouded in ancient trees, the boy falters. It takes three hard yanks on the arm for Mila to drag him out. “Behave,” she hisses, and the boy remembers his promise to himself. He follows her.

A servant greets them at the door, and Mila exchanges words with him like they’re old friends. He
leads them inside, to the courtyard, where two older children toss metal disks of various sizes and shapes against a pyramid of tiered prongs. The older boy is intent on his task, ignoring the girl as she mocks him in a lilting voice. When they catch sight of the boy, they exchange a glance and continue on as if he’s become invisible.

Mila gives the boy a push in their direction. He flinches and shakes his head until she backs off, leaving him on the steps to watch the older children squabble over the game. They’re a pair of redrats—hissing and spitting—teaching the boy a host of new vocabulary until another servant calls them inside.

That’s when the boy sees her. If Mila is a study in sturdiness, this woman is her opposite. Not dainty, but elegant: as she glides into the room, she commands fine-detail perfection, down to the indigo hatchwork in her chufa, to the embroidery of her gown. The master’s wife.

Mila calls her Asyeda.

When her attention falls on the boy, her smile is sudden and radiant. “Hello, Elim,” she says. Hitching up her gown, she crouches until they’re eye level. “You may not remember me, but I held you when you were only a baby.”

“You did?”

She nods. “Mila left you with me, for a time, while she got a few things in order.” Behind Asyeda, Mila looks away. He wonders why that would make her sad. “I almost kept you,” she adds, her smile wicked now, “but look at you, in your little suit. How dashing!”

Without thinking, the boy throws his arms around her neck and hugs her. She gasps. Mila is immediately at her side. “I’m very sorry, I don’t know what’s gotten into him. Elim, you let her go this instant!”

Chastened, the boy begins to loosen his grip, but Asyeda holds him close and picks him up. “It’s all right, Mila. I was merely surprised. Do you have a good grip, little one? Good. What’s say we see the grounds, hmm? Say goodbye to your mother, dear. We’ll see her again at dinner.”

Asyeda turns, and the boy looks over her shoulder. Mila scowls at him, arms akimbo, and points a warning finger. They both know it’s only by sheer luck that he isn’t sitting in a corner right now, begging forgiveness from the Union for disrespecting his elders. The boy smiles and nestles closer against the woman as she carries him outside.

Cardassia’s sun is beginning to set behind the mountains, casting the slanted trees and their long, billowing leaves in an orange glow. There aren’t many trees left on the planet, and as she passes one, the boy reaches out to touch its trunk. The bark scrapes his hand. He snatches it away. She gives his palm a soothing rub between thumb and forefinger.

She climbs a hill and turns, giving the boy a perfect view of the ancient, vine-covered house. By now, he can easily recognize the shape of the surrounding flower garden as Uncle Tolan’s work.

“Did your mother ever tell you about the Obsidian Order?” she asks, suddenly. When the boy shakes his head, she readjusts him in her arms and continues walking. “It’s one of our oldest institutions, supposedly dedicated to protecting Cardassia. Founded in that house’s basement, thousands of years ago, if Enabran is to be believed. Of course, the house has seen many renovations in the intervening years, but its structure is the same. My father, your great uncle, passed it on to us when he died.”

Her boots crunch on the dry grass as she approaches the stable. Inside, something big makes a
snorting noise and the boy tenses as he catches sight of the monstrous creature in its pen. “You must not see many riding hounds in the city,” she says, drawing close to the beast. It raises its great head and tastes the air, its large yellow eyes peering at them. She pets behind its ears and intimates for the boy to do the same. “Go on. He likes children.”

The hound’s fur is soft, gray-green. The creature makes a pleased huff and slaps his flat tail against the ground, startling the boy. Asyeda laughs and unseals the pen; she sets the boy on the hound’s broad back and keeps him steady with both hands, never letting go. “I have others,” she says, “but he’s my favorite. I used to race them. I started riding when I was only a few years older than you. When you’re bigger, I could teach you. Would you like that?”

The boy nods and keeps petting. The hound seems to bask in the attention.

“Why did your mother scold you like that, when you hugged me?”

He thinks about it. “I’m too old.”

“But you did it anyway.” She smiles. “I didn’t realize until now how desperately I needed it. Once, I would’ve given anything to have my children hold me like that. Now, I’m sure I’d jump out of my skin.” She smoothes his hair. “Cardassia needs more sensitive souls. We wouldn’t be occupying other worlds and making enemies of the quadrant if there were. There’s no need to be stern and cynical when it’s just us, is there?”

The boy shakes his head.

At dinner, despite Mila’s protests, she holds the boy in her lap and whispers encouragement when he hesitates. What would you like to eat? Pick anything. He points to the dishes he suspects contain the largest proportion of sugar, and is surprised when she piles them onto her plate and spoon-feeds him. Mila looks on, eyes wide, her food untouched.

At the head of the table, opposite them, the master scowls. “Asyeda, put that boy down. He’s fully capable of feeding himself.”

“Maybe so, but there’s hardly anything wrong with babying him, now is there?” She nudges the boy’s mouth with the tip of the spoon. He obediently opens.

“I wouldn’t get too attached, if I were you.”

She isn’t paying attention, instead whispering to the boy as he fidgets under the man’s stare. “See the sour downturn of his mouth?” she says. “Enabran was born like that. He never had a childhood, so he feels nobody else should, either.”

The boy can sense the man’s simmering anger in the hardness of his eyes and the set of his jaw. Suddenly, he fears for Asyeda. Then the look is gone, and Enabran is playfully interrogating the children about their schoolwork. His eyes occasionally flick in the boy’s direction. Mila is unmoving, staring down at her plate.

After dinner, they linger over dessert. The boy absorbs every second of Asyeda’s attention, and she lavishes it with enthusiasm. She jokes about keeping him, and although the boy would love nothing more than to stay with her in the big house with the docile riding hound, he knows it would hurt Mila. It isn’t her fault. Neither of them belong here.

It’s dark when Mila says her goodbyes, takes his hand, and leads him outside. The wind screeches and howls through the trees and slams into them as they huddle together, inching toward the waiting ground car. It’s so loud, they almost don’t hear him shout her name.
“Mila!”

She turns. Enabran stands in the open doorway, the interior lights glowing at his back. The wind catches his hair and he holds out an arm to protect himself from the wind. He squints against it.

“Leave the boy here,” he says.

Her grip on the boy’s hand tightens. His cry is drowned out by the wind. “It’s late, Enabran,” she says. “He needs to be in bed.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mila. Asyeda is preparing a bed for him as we speak. Go on, back to the house. Enjoy some time to yourself. You’ve more than earned it.”

“Enabran, please.”

“Now, now. I won’t hear any more of it. Get in the transport, Mila.”

The boy looks between them. He almost begs her to let him stay, but thinks better of it. He can already feel her wavering, in the tremble of her hand. Her eyes still on Enabran, she lets the boy go. She turns and climbs into the ground car without another word. It pulls away and disappears into the dark.

“Come on,” Enabran says, beckoning the boy inside. “You’re not afraid without her, are you?”

“No, sir.”

The bed Asyeda prepares is meant for an adult, but she tucks him tightly enough that he feels secure. She sits at the edge of the bed, chattering about everything they’ll do come morning. It’s only the man’s shouting that finally draws her away. She kisses the center of his chufa and calls the lights.

The sun has only started to rise when Enabran drags him from bed and into a private skimmer. The boy hasn’t had time to wash or put his clothes on properly, much less have breakfast, but he’s too excited about sitting up front behind the console-board to mind. Enabran brings the skimmer to life and navigates it with one hand, taking bites of rulot toast from the other. “Don’t bother with that,” he says when the boy fiddles with the safety harness. “Just relax.”

Settling back, the boy watches the blur of scenery. The sharp angles of Lakat disappear behind them. Enabran tweaks the controls, lightly dusted with crumbs. The skimmer veers from the rest of traffic and their surroundings turn brown and sparse. In front of them, the triangular mountains grow larger.

After a time, the boy’s stomach begins to growl. Enabran brings the skimmer to a halt away from the winding road. He helps the boy out and sets a brisk pace up a narrow path, slowing intermittently to let the boy catch up. The air is thin and cold and windy, and when Enabran finally stops before a rocky cliff-side, the boy is coughing and gasping and happy.

“Do you see that?” Enabran says, pointing at a hazy sphere of jagged buildings.

The boy is too stunned by the view and the wind battering his frame to do more than nod.

“That’s the heart of Cardassia.”

The boy climbs closer to the edge until he can see the full panorama. Below, a line of soldiers jog through the rocks. He shouldn’t be up here, but he doesn’t know why.

“Come here, Elim.”
It’s the first time the master, his father, says his name. The boy comes. Enabran rests a hand on the back of his neck and they look out in silence. The wind makes the boy’s eyes water.

The boy loses his balance.

When he opens his eyes again, he feels wet. Every breath brings sharp, stabbing pain. He can only move his eyes, and all he sees through the blur are rocks and open sky. He panics as he realizes he was stupid enough to fall, and now he’ll be here forever.

A young soldier is puffing around a corner when the boy can keep his eyes open no longer.

“We’re only postponing the inevitable,” a woman says. “What do you think will happen, Ghila, once he’s healed?”

“If his sire had brought him here himself,” agrees another, “it would be different.”

Three days of intense pain. The boy spends much of them under as the doctors continue the laborious task of putting him back together. It’s only then that they decide he’ll live. Still unable to leave the hospital bed, the boy lies on his back, ignoring the toys the doctors have provided him, and thinks. He thinks, and he worries about who will come to claim him.

As required in such situations, the doctors trace his legally recognized progenitor. On the fourth day, Mila appears at his bedside. She looks stricken by the sight of him, and when he glares at her, she shrinks down and hisses, “I told you. I told you.”

Despite him being too old, she picks him up and carries him out.

Back in the cellar, surrounded by the familiar, the boy recovers. He’s relieved to discover that the master is not in the house. “He was promoted,” Mila says. Tolan is always hovering close, bringing him food and gifts, looking as guilty as if he pushed the boy himself.

“I want to go to Goralis II,” the boy tells them.

Mila and Tolan exchange a glance. She begins to shake her head, but Tolan interrupts. “If this—” he makes an expansive gesture, “is so important to you, Mila, then stay. I’ll take him.”

“And what will you do, grow orchids? Goralis II can’t sustain weeds.”

“Leave me to worry about that. Enabran doesn’t yet know he’s alive. You’re always talking about survival. Well, let the boy survive.”

The boy knows she won’t agree. There’s something that keeps her here, something on Cardassia that she wants to give the boy that he can’t get on a remote colony. That night, she shakes the boy awake. “Are you done being stupid?” she says.

“Yes, Mila.”

“You can’t go begging me for help. You have to protect yourself. Prove that you have more value to him alive than dead. I did, with my sire. That’s the end. We’re not running.”

She’s gone before the boy can answer.

When Enabran returns from his trip off world, he looks at the boy in open astonishment for the briefest moment before turning to his housekeeper. “Mila, why is this child hobbling around? Take him to a proper medical facility.”
With the master’s promotion taking him off-world, the house is vibrant in his absence. The boy continues as he did before, playing without fear. But Enabran always returns too soon, and hiding doesn’t work for long. Enabran seems to relish the boy’s terror, and takes to ordering him to complete tasks far beyond his years. He instructs the boy to carry heavy objects and dictate messages. He dismisses Tolan’s every offer to step in. “I’m teaching him the valuable lesson of determination. Have you seen how fast he’s learning to read? I think I’m on to something, dear Tolan.”

The boy is obedient, but even the stinging memory of the rocks isn’t enough to keep him from questioning the purpose of his tasks. “You should know better than to ask why,” Enabran warns, and it’s enough, for a time.

It’s the eve before one of Cardassia’s most well celebrated festivals when the boy’s inquisitive nature prevails. His question is trivial, one Mila would endure with a long-suffering sigh, but Enabran stands abruptly. The boy shrinks back, but the master doesn’t raise his hand. He calls in Mila and orders her to sit and be quiet. Then he calls Tolan.

“He’s an impertinent brat,” Enabran says once he’s described the boy’s crime, “and you’re as much to blame as Mila. Correct him.”

Tolan wavers, and the boy feels an uneasy shift. With Mila, correction meant the recitation of oaths followed by silent contemplation. Tolan has never overseen his discipline before. The boy comes over when Tolan asks, and begins apologizing for his lapse of respect. It won’t happen again. He’ll be good. Anything to make this stop. Mila looks on with a distance now familiar.

Tolan’s shoulders relax at the boy’s apologies, but Enabran only scoffs. “I didn’t ask for a show of remorse, did I?” He pushes something into Tolan’s open palm. “None of you are leaving this room until that boy understands.”

“I can’t,” Tolan says. His eyes dart frantically around the room. “I can’t.”

Enabran sits behind his desk, and the boy knows he’s willing to stay there all night.

The cylinder in Tolan’s hand deploys into a rod, so fast that Tolan nearly drops it. There’s a pleading in Tolan’s eyes, begging forgiveness, but the only thought in the boy’s mind is a frantic, bewildered question.

It hurts, and the boy remembers the rocks.

The boy knows what lessons he’s to learn: one, that he is alone and no one can help him. Secondly, that he should never question. He takes the first lesson to heart. The second, he resists, even as every breath is used to convince Enabran that he’s learned it.

It’s many months and the boy’s wounds have long since healed when he decides to test his limits again. His reading is good enough that he no longer needs an electronic aid, and he delights in the new skill, stealing away into secret spots to follow the words. This day, he pretends to forget his chores. When Mila calls after him, he shouts back, “I’ll do it later!”

He isn’t surprised that Enabran overhears. The master drags him from his hiding spot, hard enough to wrench arm from shoulder, but the boy isn’t afraid. Tolan is out working and won’t be around to punish him.

The moment Enabran shoves the boy into the house, Mila disappears into the cellar.

“Very clever of you, Elim, waiting until Tolan was absent,” Enabran says. “But there’s a hole in
your logic. You see, I can call upon Mila whenever I like. And I’m not above beating you myself. But not today. I have innumerable tools at my disposal.” He unseals the door of the supply closet and gestures.

The boy looks inside. It’s dark, but he’s never been afraid of the dark. He looks up at Enabran. That’s it?

“It’s all in the mind,” Enabran says as he shoves the boy inside.

The locking mechanism clicks behind him.

The boy settles against the shelves of cleaning implements and bottles of solution, using his hands to find an empty spot on the floor, and folds his legs against his chest. The mustiness tickles his nose, but it’s quiet, and he won’t have to do his chores. He’s won.

It seems that way for the first two hours. Then it becomes unbearable. The floor is cramping his legs and his back, he can never find a comfortable position, and the air has grown hot and thick. If he had a book, if he could see his hands, the boredom wouldn’t be so bad. Worse, he’s starting to get thirsty.

Tentatively, the boy bangs on the door. “Let me out.” He waits a moment and decides his pride isn’t worth the discomfort. “Please.”

He presses an ear to the door and waits. Nothing, not even the faintest rustle of movement.

The boy tries again, banging harder this time, shouting louder. When his throat begins to burn and his fists sting, he gives up and waits. When he’s recovered, he starts up again.

The air is getting thicker, and it’s hard to breathe. His mouth is so dry, his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. When he bangs on the door, he throws his body into it, and he screams to be let out. The replying silence is indifferent.

That’s when he panics.

There’s no telling how long he’s in there, begging, promising to do whatever it takes, when Enabran finally opens the door with the easy press of a button. The boy collapses at his feet, his eyes chapped from dried tears. “Get up and do your chores,” Enabran says.

Despite Mila’s claims that she can oversee the boy’s work, Enabran insists on watching him clean every inch of the kitchen. Only a call on the comm finally draws him away.

“I’m sorry,” Mila whispers to the boy, and the unexpectedness of it makes him cry anew. “I’m sorry,” she repeats, moving to help him clean the tops of the cupboards that he can’t reach, and he knows that the apology is for everything that came before, and everything that’s to come.

Enabran still prefers to use Tolan for every minor infraction—when the boy forgets a “sir,” or slips and breaks a glass, or fails to recall a fact he learned the previous day. The boy knows that Tolan is being punished, same as him. For what, the boy doesn’t know. Tolan pleads with Enabran every time, even though they all know that he’ll never relent. Still, the boy resents Tolan for it. For hitting him, but also for making the boy pity him. The boy can handle the lacerations and fractures. He can’t handle putting Tolan in pain, and being to blame for it.

“I can’t do it anymore,” Tolan says one night as Mila runs the regenerator over the boy’s split eyeridge. He threatens to leave before he can do more damage, talks about fleeing to the safehouse by himself. She ignores him. It isn’t the first time they’ve gone through this.
“Please don’t go,” the boy begs. “I’m not hurt. Please, Uncle Tolan? Stay?”

Tolan stays. Bad as the beatings are, the pain isn’t what sticks in the boy’s mind. The closet is never far. Even when he only has to retrieve a tool, the boy feels a shiver of cold. His chest constricts and he begins to panic. He can’t get out of there fast enough. Enabran seems almost eager to toss him in whenever he shows a hint of disobedience.

Each time is worse.

Mila continues the lessons, grilling him into memorizing every minute detail of his surroundings. At the park, she encourages him to study each child, to put himself in their place, and imagine their hopes and fears. “Do you see that girl, playing in the sand?” Mila dips her chin. “Make her cry. In three words or less.”

The boy looks at the girl. She’s his age. Dirty. She’s playing by herself, minding her own business, and has been for a while. He doesn’t want to do it. But when he looks at Mila, her expression is hard and expectant. He pushes off the bench and walks over.

Later, the girl’s tears haunt him. Making her cry had been easy, but--

“I feel bad,” the boy admits as they walk home. He’s afraid to look at Mila.

She doesn’t appear angry, however. “As you should. You had power over another person and you exploited it to hurt her.” When he begins to protest, she only speaks over him. “Yes, I asked you to do it. And an excellent job you did. You should feel pride, as well as shame. Enabran considers empathy a weakness, but it’ll make you more effective at the work.”

“What work, Mila?”

“Whatever work he chooses for you.”

In a way, the badness of hurting the girl had also felt good. Rewarding. He liked being on the other side. But the boy won’t admit that to Mila, and only occasionally to himself.

As the temperature in Cardassia City comes to its yearly peak, a tutor arrives to prepare the boy for the entrance examinations that will decide which boarding school he will attend. From dawn until late in the evening, the stern lector instructs the boy on Kardasi and planetary geography, on morality and ethics, on history and civics, on mathematics and military strategy, with Enabran comming in every two hours to check his progress.

The boy spends the third day in the closet after expressing his disinterest in the Union’s border disputes with the Talarian Republic. “This will only put you further behind, Elim,” Enabran calls through the door, voice raised to be heard over the boy’s sobbing. “You’re already at a disadvantage because of your lowborn genes.”

The boy begins to shout back they’re your genes, but closes his mouth.

“What was that, Elim?”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“I’m not obligated to sponsor your application. I should send you to a service class school. You could become a gardener, or sew uniforms for the military. Would you prefer that? Is this too hard for you, Elim?”
The boy knows that how he answers will drastically change his fate. He wipes at his face and takes a deep breath to keep the trembling from his voice. “No, sir. I’ll try harder. I want to be better. Thank you for helping me, sir.”

There is no answer from the other side of the door, but with Enabran silence can be a fortuitous sign.

The lessons continue. During his brief breaks in the day, the boy sits in the dirt, digging holes with Tolan’s spade. He captures lizards he spots crawling in the bushes and gently carries them over to the line of holes. He drops each one in and buries them under mounds of dirt. Sitting on his haunches, he watches the dirt shift as they fight to escape. The ones who make it are the victors. The ones who don’t have their graves ready-made.

Many weeks later, when the boy has finished his last exam, Enabran calls him into his office. He pries open a smooth black box and spins it in the boy’s direction. It’s a disruptor. Once Enabran gives an encouraging nod, the boy pries it from the box. It doesn’t take long to spot that it’s only an imitation. It’s too light, the materials slipshod compared to Mila’s disruptor. “It isn’t real,” he says.

Enabran laughs. “Of course not. You’re much too young for the real thing. Perhaps in two years, if you show aptitude.”

The boy feigns interest as the man instructs him in its operation, rolling up a sleeve and firing on the inside of his arm to demonstrate its relative harmlessness. The toy only raises a purple welt over Enabran’s scales. The boy isn’t impressed, but he accepts the disruptor with the expected gratitude.

He takes it into the yard outside Enabran’s office window and pops from the bushes to blast holes through leaves and burn harmless circles into rocks and tree trunks. It isn’t long, however, before the practice turns tedious and he searches for more challenging targets.

A familiar shriek draws the boy’s attention to the sky. Overhead, a pair of small green narawak fly in tandem. They’re fast; the boy aims for the air in front of their hooked beaks and squeezes the trigger. He’s sure he’s missed, but when he returns to aim again there’s only one left fluttering in the air.

The boy spots the patch of green up ahead, in the scrub. He runs for it and kneels down. The narawak doesn’t move. After a moment of hesitation, he picks it up and inspects its chest, looking for the telltale signs of breath. There is none.

“Oh,” the boy says. He lays the narawak back and tucks his knees under his chin.

He stops whimpering when he hears Enabran’s footfalls. Enabran comes to a halt behind him. The boy feels him surveying what he’s done.

“You said it couldn’t kill,” the boy says.

“My dear boy, you saw yourself what it did to my skin.” Enabran leans down and taps the boy’s temple. “You should’ve thought. Come on, get up.”

Disruptor in hand, the boy follows him around the back of the manse and past the clearing where Mila first taught him to shoot. A path leads them through a field of wilting larish and to a stream thick with industrial runoff. Enabran cautions him against stepping in the water and points into the thin, bent trees. More of the green narawak hop and flutter from the branches. The boy smiles and looks up at Enabran.

“You did nothing in the grand scheme,” Enabran says. “They’re only animals. Go on. Show me what you’ve learned.”
The boy’s face falls. “You mean--”

“You already killed one in flight. This should be easy for you.”

The boy looks between Enabran and the narawak twittering their mocking song to each other. His first impulse is to scream, to scare them away to safety, but the boy buries the impulse. That’s the way of foolishness and failure. He grips the disruptor tightly and picks out an unfortunate victim.

The narawak drops from its branch in a trail of feathers.

“Very good!” Enabran whispers, even as the narawak’s death cuts across the boy’s heart. “Very good, Elim.”

There’s a tugging of a smile, and a glint of approval in his father’s eyes. The boy basks in it. It’s withheld affection, shot intravenously. Plucking his strings, pulling, playing him. The boy knows it, and he raises the disruptor because there’s a chance, one chance, it might reappear.

“Enabran,” the boy says, taking aim again, “watch.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

**Warnings for** child abuse, violence, and domestic servitude.

As the boy strides through the door, luggage in hand, his eyes zero in on the intruder: a pink-skinned humanoid scrubbing the kitchen floor. Her hair is the color of copper, a tangle of ringlets falling over her face as she works. Her head is lifting in the boy’s direction when he steals out of the room and into the hallway.

He finds Mila in the cellar, folding clothes. “Elim,” she says, taking him by the arms and bending a knee. She looks him up and down in open amazement.

“Mila, who is that girl in the kitchen?”

“Girl? Ah, you mean Kesset. A Bajoran orphan, gifted to Enabran by some low-ranking gul. Of course, now he’s my problem. Really, Elim, you can’t tell the difference between a female and a male Bajoran?”

The lack of ridges doesn’t make it easy. “I’ve never seen one in the flesh before.”

“You’ve been away at that school a long time. They’re all the rage now.” Mila rolls her eyes and guides the boy by the shoulder. “Come upstairs and talk with me. That boy is nearly useless, but he does know how to make decent redleaf tea.”

“How do you know he won’t poison it?”

Halfway up the stairs, Mila turns to look at him. She smiles.

The boy keeps a close eye on the Bajoran, following him through the house as he completes chores that were once his own. For a member of a species known for its impudence and lack of discipline, Kesset is remarkably reserved. What little he does say is spoken in Kardasi so thickly accented that it mangles the language. He claims to be ten standard years—three years older than the boy—and states, flatly, that his parents died in the initial bombardment. Both he and his sister (now employed by a glinn in the Coranum sector) had been away with relatives on the other side of Bajor at the time.

Kesset refuses to tell him his real name, and isn’t persuaded even after the boy tries to slap it out of him.

Even Mila admits she doesn’t know.

Enabran wouldn’t allow a creature into the house without knowing for certain it wouldn’t slit his throat. But the boy is wary to trust an alien named after a Romulan slang word. *Kess’it: red-brown, ruddy, lower than dirt.*

The boy hasn’t been back on Prime for a full day when Enabran sends an encrypted comm message, requesting the boy join him in Lakat. The boy holds no illusions that the master is eager to see him. Enabran will want to ensure that the boy’s education is progressing as planned. Not that Enabran doesn’t already know; he’s the first one to see the boy’s marks.
“Be sure to congratulate him on his promotion,” Mila says as she sends a communication to the runabout in orbit. He didn’t know it was possible for Enabran to be promoted any further.

An hour later, he beams down to the house to find a party in full swing. Well-dressed functionaries mill about, drinks in hand, chatting and dancing. Enabran emerges from the crowd and gives the boy an up and down glance. “I hear the third planet treated you well,” he says. “Go on back to the servant’s quarters and get dressed. It looks like you’ll have to replicate a new uniform.”

With that heartfelt greeting out of the way, the boy does as he’s bid. As he passes Asyeda, she lowers her glass and turns from her entourage of admirers to smile warmly at him. He smiles back.

Uniformed and equipped with a serving tray artfully arrayed with spheres of noodles coated in yamok sauce, the boy weaves between the functionaries. He watches the crowd from his periphery, one arm extended, eyes averted to the floor. He’s still small enough that he charms the adults— they stoop to fondly rub his chufa as he passes— but not so adorable that he distracts the guests. Once, years ago, they’d forgotten all semblance of conversation to coo and fawn over the little waiter. Enabran had raged at him for turning a perfectly good gala into a spectacle.

Two Bajoran girls have since joined the staff, it seems. They’re stiff and uncoordinated with their trays. The boy doubts they have the same mission. “Why should the front lines have all the fun?” a man proclaims loudly, resting his hand on a girl’s backside. The boy’s insides twist in revulsion.

It’s well past his bedtime when the party winds down and Enabran dismisses him. The boy is tired and cranky, but he sits on the floor of the servant’s quarters and taps out a report. Once finished, he encodes it with a ciphertext algorithm and slides the reader underneath the darkened door of Enabran’s office.

“I didn’t think your writing could become any more overwrought,” Enabran tells him early that morning between bites of soufflé. “But you’ve proven me wrong.”

The boy gambles. “I’m always happy to teach you new words, sir.”

Enabran raises an eyeridge. The comment is brazen, but the fact that the boy isn’t already locked in a closet tells him more about the quality of his report than anything out of Enabran’s mouth. The boy relaxes slightly.

“It isn’t the length of your words, Elim, but that you use two, sometimes three, when one will suffice. Otherwise, it’s a satisfactory attempt.”

After breakfast, the boy cleans for hours alongside the Bajorans. When his work is done, he takes one of Asyeda’s younger hounds out of its stable and practices his aim from its back. He rides in circles around the yard, vaporizing targets, aware of Asyeda watching him from her balcony. He remembers years ago, before boarding school, when he first learned how to ride.

Asyeda had wanted to teach him herself, but Enabran had silenced her with a look and ordered her back into the house. Once she was gone, Enabran led out a hound bigger than the docile one the boy first met. As Enabran explained how to mount it, the boy couldn’t keep his eyes off the drool dripping from the beast’s flat teeth. Enabran had sighed, exasperated, and grabbed the reins as if to declare the whole thing a failure, but the boy ran up and threw himself into the stirrups, grabbing leather and fistfuls of fur until he’d hoisted himself into the saddle.

It was high up, but the boy had fallen from higher.

And fall he did. “To the stump,” Enabran had said, pointing, but the boy couldn’t make it halfway
before the beast’s long strides tossed him off. He’d climbed up again and again, getting increasingly dusty and bruised, until he finally brought the hound past the stump to where Enabran was standing. Smiling, Enabran had lifted the boy, exhausted but triumphant, from the saddle. He held the boy’s hand as they walked back to the house.

It’s one of the boy’s most cherished memories.

After a dinner spent at the servant’s table, listening to the morose, broken Kardasi murmurings of the two Bajoran girls, the boy is called into Asyeda’s private room. She pats the empty spot beside her on the high-backed sofa. Together, sewing laid out in their laps where they last left off, they catch up. It’s a rather ugly quilt they’re making, its edges curled and jagged from the boy’s early seams, but it doesn’t matter. Here, Enabran’s hold over them is almost tenuous.

He tells her about his classes, the overbearing lectors, and the brainless future sycophants they’re turning out. Attempts to make friends have been met with failure. It’s hard, nearly impossible, when he’s stuck with the identity Enabran fabricated for him: third son of a larish farmer. His classmates were aghast by his very existence.

Asyeda keeps her eyes focused on her work. “Well, Elim, I’d hardly want to be your friend either if you thought I was a brainless toady.” She lowers her fabric to smile at him.

“That’s because you’re not,” he says, but the boy understands what she’s saying. Reign in the arrogance. Work more on the charm. A question comes to mind, and he opens his mouth, then reconsiders. Not now.

They move on to happier subjects: the latest plays and symphonies Asyeda’s attended, the books she’s read. The boy’s head is full of Romulan conjugations and deontological ethics, and he’s content to line up his stitches and listen to her soft, melodic voice describe the plot of the latest repetitive epic. He’s sure his envy is all over his face, because Asyeda pauses and says, “When was the last time you read for pleasure?”

He shakes his head. He can’t recall.

“I thought so.” She crosses the room and crouches before a bookshelf. “Ah, this should do. Poetry,” she proclaims, passing over a thin little book. “That should be enough to knock some of those stuffy facts out of your head.”

The boy pulls the book to his chest. “You’re trying to sabotage me!”

“Oh, I think the Mogrund has a better chance of taking you.”

“He already did. He told me I’m an obscenity to Cardassia’s moral fiber.”

“Shouldn’t you know better than to listen to a silly old spirit?”

“Well.” The boy smiles. “You did enjoin with him.”

That strangles a laugh from her throat. They’re on dangerous ground now. To speak ill of Enabran is akin to summoning the dead. They give the door a nervous glance and wait, listening. A moment later they hear Enabran in another room, shouting. But not at them. A pair of voices yell back. The boy’s older siblings.

The fight goes on for a time before terminating in silence. The boy releases a breath. Is Enabran as cruel to his legitimate offspring? It’s impossible to know. The boy’s siblings have never spoken a word to him, either in greeting or contempt.
As if picking up on his thoughts, Asyeda whispers, “They’re not his children.”

The boy’s eyes snap toward her.

“Not by blood. I mean, of course they’re blood related—” She stammers suddenly, shaking her head. “They’re my children. Mine, and my first husband’s. He was killed— it must be ten years. But Enabran didn’t sire them.”

Oddly, that only makes the boy feel worse. All the benefit of legitimate parentage, without the strain of Enabran’s expectations. They’d gone to plush schools, where the elite trained the next generation of Cardassia’s bureaucrats. They were never sent off-world, never woken up at dawn for drills, never lectured on proper surveillance techniques, never locked in a closet for asking simple questions—

The boy feels himself unravel, until he’s doubled over and trembling with the weight of it. “I don’t know what— I don’t—” He gasps for breath. He’ll never make it out. He’s distantly aware of Asyeda’s arms around him, pulling him close. “I don’t know what he wants.”

“Shh.” Her fingers stroke his hair. Then she nudges him. “He’s coming.”

The boy scrambles to the other side of the sofa. When Enabran steps into the room, they’ve picked up the quilt and are amid a discussion on the use of flouncing in a popular clothing designer’s signature style. He rolls his eyes, but he turns and leaves.

The next two days pass all too quickly. They make the most of their time together, sewing and viewing the latest sanctioned feeds on what the Federation considers high fashion, always making their own running commentary. At the end of the second night, Asyeda presses her palm to his and kisses his cheek. “Beware the Mogrund,” she says.

He arrives back in Cardassia City to find Kesset sleeping in his old bed.

A voice tells the boy to let it go. He can easily find another spot to rest, and he’ll be back on Cardassia III in three days. But this is an alien, and not just any alien, but a Bajoran. The boy is low in the hierarchy— he’s well aware— but surely he’s higher than this creature. Only sheer weariness keeps the boy from overturning the bed and throwing him onto the floor.

In the morning, as Mila and Tolan sit at the servant’s table, the boy eats blocks of dry rations and watches Kesset prepare breakfast. The Bajoran fumbles with the eggs and looks over his shoulder at the boy. The stove is making his forehead and cheeks shine. “We’d be better off with the replicator,” the boy says, casting a glance to the mess Kesset is making. “It would be faster, and wouldn’t include your drippings.”

Kesset bristles. “I’m sorry.” He swabs at his face with a sleeve. Disgusting. “I can’t help it. Your planet is hot.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is!”

They squabble back and forth until the boy loses his patience and shoves Kesset out of the way. He breaks the eggs quickly, one eye ensuring that Kesset is paying attention. Not that it’ll do any good; the Bajoran can’t seem to hold two thoughts in his head at once. If Kesset weren’t a gift, Enabran would’ve sent him back to Bajor, or worked him to death. Bajorans must coddle their children well into adulthood. “Didn’t your parents teach you anything before they died?”

Kesset turns the color of thinned blood. But he doesn’t take the bait.
“You must be glad they’re dead.”

That sparks a sharp intake of breath, and Kesset’s eyes widen in outrage. The boy tilts his head, anticipating Kesset’s reaction, goading him with his eyes, but Tolan is out of his seat in an instant. “Elim! He’s done nothing to deserve you tormenting him!”

The boy gives Kesset one last look before returning to the table. Mila pours him tea.

Later that day, when Tolan is gone and Kesset is charged with painting the manse’s exterior, the boy follows him outside. The boy mocks Kesset’s poor grasp of Kardasi grammar and the sloppiness of his work, but the Bajoran only ignores him. Not easily dissuaded, the boy considers his options. He has innumerable tools at his disposable. Closing the distance between them, he rips off Kesset’s silly earring, dangles it under his nose, and flings it into the bushes. Kesset dives after it. The boy ticks off the time as Kesset scours through the shrubs on hands and knees. Twigs cling to his red hair. After ten minutes, Kesset’s eyes light up in relief.

“Oh, good,” the boys says, clapping his hands together, “you found it!” He snatches the earring from Kesset’s hand and tosses it into a different set of bushes.

After the fourth time watching his earring fly through the air, Kesset collapses into the dirt and cries. He hugs himself and rocks forward, tears streaming down his face in a fit that chills the boy in its cross-species similarity. Through the sobs, the boy can make out one heavily accented word: “Chut’o, chut’o, chut’o.”

All the triumph the boy feels for breaking the Bajoran dies in a flash.

Enabran pays a visit to the manse that evening, and the house is a whirl of activity as Mila helps him prepare for an upcoming trip off-world. The boy isn’t sure what possesses him to barge into Enabran’s office, but suddenly he’s in the middle of the room. Enabran stops packing and scowls. “Elim, get out of--”

“What do you expect from me?”

Mila drops the files she’s holding. It’s a blatant obscenity-- the worst he could devise on such short notice; any child old enough to form complete sentences knows better than to ask such questions about their future, especially from their sire. Enabran’s ridges go dark with rage. The boy stares back at him, radiating every ounce of contempt in his body.

This is it, the boy thinks as Enabran advances. He hears Mila begging, but his eyes are on Enabran’s fist swinging out.

The boy awakens in darkness. The throbbing in his skull tells him that he isn’t yet dead. At first he thinks he’s been buried alive, and then the familiar musty stench of the closet hits him, hard as Enabran’s fist. There’s muffled crying through the other side of the door. In horror he realizes that Mila is taking the brunt of the punishment for his disobedience. It isn’t her fault, but no matter how hard he beats on the door, he’s powerless to stop it.

Two days. If the boy is still alive, then that means Enabran won’t let him miss his transport for Cardassia III.

Waiting is easier said than done, and practice does him no good.

When the door finally opens and the boy collapses on the floor, he’s half-mad and delirious with thirst. There’s a thump of the boy’s duffle bag dropping beside his head. “Get up,” Enabran’s voice says. “Your transport is here.”
The boy nods and crawls on hands and knees, squinting as his eyes sting from the burst of light. Through the dizziness and blur of tears, he zeroes in on Kesset. Crouched on the kitchen floor, one arm elbow-deep in a bucket of soap suds, Kesset meets his eyes. A hint of a smile tugs at Kesset’s lips.

The boy has never hated anyone as he hates Kesset at that moment.

He nurses that hatred throughout his remaining years of boarding school. It waxes and wanes like Cardassia’s three moons, but he never loses sight of it.

During that time, he’s shuffled to five different schools. Enabran fabricates a unique background to memorize for each one, ranging from the orphan of a soldier to the firstborn of a trader. Each dossier is accompanied with a primer on what accent he should use, and he has the duration of the transport to become passable at it. Once he’s comfortable in his new identity, his first letter home is always to Asyeda. She writes back twice a week, without fail.

As he’s sent to every corner of the Union, the boy learns to adapt to the climate and vastly different teaching methods. He picks up Bajoran as a third language, and none of the lectors think twice about it; the Occupation is ramping up at breakneck speeds, and everyone has taken note. While his fellow students relentlessly mock the Bajoran language, he revels in how, like Kardasi, the words naturally align into poetry.

Federation Standard is his fourth choice, and he dabbles in it simply for its practicality. But it’s a dull, heartless language, the literature he practices translating as naive as its native speakers.

Every year, after dismissal exams, the boy returns to Cardassia City.

As Kesset performs his chores, the boy chases him up and down the house, testing his Bajoran, alternating between insults (“your perspiration rivals the Morfan Sea”) that earn him irritated glares, and recitations of poetry. The poetry seems to affect Kesset more than the jabs about his nose wrinkles; he slumps forward as he works, lost.

The boy repeats the process the next year, armed with more advanced vocabulary. By the third year, his Bajoran is as fluent as his Romulan. He reads from Bajoran holy texts, adding his own commentary, and talks, and talks. Kesset listens, captive audience that he is. His eyes mist, but he never replies.

After five years of this, Kesset finally musters the courage to speak. There’s a dusting of fur along his jaw and upper lip, the same russet color as his hair. “Why are you doing this to me, Elim?” he asks in his lackluster Kardasi.

Smiling, the boy shuts the book and lays it at Kesset’s feet. His smile widens when Kesset gingerly grasps the corner of the book like it’s a soiled rag and carries it, sprinting, across the hall. He throws it so hard into the reclamation port it bounces out. Kesset makes a pathetic whimpering noise and picks it up again. When the book finally dematerializes out of existence, his shoulders relax.
Kesset is a blank slate for the boy’s creative impulses, and when Tolan is away, the experimentation begins. He discovers that pinching the soft flesh of the Bajoran’s arms will make him shriek like a vole with its tail caught in a trap. The boy kicks him, trips him, and fabricates tortures he’s witnessed inflicted on Kesset’s sister. He sends Kesset on pointless and degrading errands. Kesset knows better than to question his orders.

The sight of tears is a thrill to be chased. The boy mutes all hesitation under justifications: Kesset is incompetent, this is what Mila would want, someone needs to keep the stupid Bajoran in his place.

One day, when the boy’s latest punishment has successfully left Kesset whimpering in the cellar, he turns to find Mila storming toward him. Before he can open his mouth, she grabs the boy by the ridge of his right ear and drags him behind her. She throws him into Enabran’s empty office.

“Face the wall,” she snaps.

Terrified, the boy obeys at once. She commands him to lean forward, arms outstretched above his head, until his full weight is on his fingertips.

“This isn’t like you,” she begins.

The disappointment in her voice and the stinging in his fingers immediately break him. The boy begins to tremble. She’s right. Of course, she’s right. Tears run down his face, but he doesn’t dare move.

“Pain should always have a purpose. You never inflict it unless you have no other choice.” She hisses him quiet before he can defend himself or apologize. “What have I told you, Elim? Sentiment is the greatest weakness. That goes double for its converse.” She stands there for a time, watching him struggle, the muscles in his arms spasming, before adding, “Hatred is a pathetic emotion. It’s for the mindless fools in Central Command. And to hate someone weaker than yourself? I’ve taught you better than that.”

The boy whimpers with the effort to stay aloft.

“If you fall, so help me, Elim, I’ll throw you into the closet myself.”

She keeps him that way until the burning pain has him screaming, and only then does her mask of dispassion crack, just a little. The muscles in his arms give out from under him. When he collapses, the terror of the closet-- on top of the pain-- sends him into a panic. His head swims and his vision tunnels. Maybe, maybe it’s the walls that are shrinking. He’s certain he’s about to die. With that final thought, he blacks out.

The ordeal leaves his arms useless for the next three days. It’s two weeks before the inflammation has gone down enough for him to hold a spoon. Mila assures him that there’s been no permanent nerve damage, but his arms continue to tingle with remembered pain. Nobody asks what happened, although Tolan appears unsettled whenever the boy can’t suppress a wince while trying, and failing, to lift his arms. For his part, Enabran seems content to stay out of it.

It’s justice served that Kesset is tasked with the embarrassing role of caregiver. He dresses and undresses the boy with a bland, almost professional detachment, as if they’ve been doing this all their lives. He must know the hows and whys; neither of them remark on it. Kesset’s lips twitch the first time the boy mumbles an awkward “please,” and full-on grins when he hears a “thank you.” The boy’s pride resists at every turn, but he swallows past it.

By the fourth day of helping the boy conduct every aspect of personal hygiene, Kesset seems to
register that he’s been well and thoroughly declawed. At the breakfast table, Kesset stirs yamok sauce in the tojal just the way the boy likes it, and imitates the hum of a galor-class starship as each spoonful zooms to dock in the boy’s mouth. The boy can’t help it; he laughs. Kesset’s self-satisfied smile is a contagion.

It’s not enough. Not yet. But it’s a start.

* * *

The Emergence Ceremony is pomp and fanfare, an eight-hour speechcraft about coming of age as a Cardassian adult, of becoming part of the unifying whole. The boy idly scans through the crowd. There are no familiar faces, no empty seats. The boy’s eyes lift to the rafters above his head. Wherever Enabran is, the boy has no doubt that he’s watching.

He finds himself back on Cardassia City within the week. Secondary school is behind him. And although the boy doesn’t feel it, at the age of fourteen, he’s become a man. When he arrives, Enabran gives him little more than a passing glance, busy with matters more pressing than the boy’s future. It doesn’t matter. The boy has long resigned himself to Enabran’s whims.

Besides, there’s something else on his mind. The house is thick with pheromones, and each time the boy looks to Tolan or Enabran for any sign that they’ve detected it, they appear unaffected. The scent is nothing like a Cardassian woman’s. This is blatant, overwhelming to the point of causing nausea. The boy wonders if it’s because he’s only recently developed the ability. Perhaps his awakened vomeronasal passages are too sensitive.

He escapes outside for fresh air, but the source of the stench is kneeling in the flower garden, skin reddened from the sun, sweating profusely as always. Kesset catches sight of him and jerks his chin in a beckoning motion.

The boy is careful to keep upwind. Not that it does him much good.

Kesset stands and dusts off his hands on his pants. “Will you walk with me?”

The boy would rather cut off his own tongue and eat it, but he nods and follows Kesset through the garden, past the trellises thick with Vulcan stinging ivies, staying three paces behind him. The urge to taste the air is unbearable, but he keeps his jaw firmly clenched. Kesset might only be a Bajoran, but it’s still rude.

“My sister is pregnant,” Kesset finally blurts out. “Mila told me. She’s due in another month.”

The only surprise the boy feels is that it took so long. “What charming news, Uncle Kesset.”

Kesset shoots the boy a dirty look. “What will happen to it?”

“That depends entirely on the sire. Assuming he takes responsibility, which I highly doubt. Most likely, it’ll be killed directly after birth. In the event that it’s permitted to live, well--” The boy shrugs. “Mother and baby will be sent back to Bajor.”

“Is there any chance both of them can stay on Prime?”

“In a gul’s house? Really, Kesset, how long have you lived here?”
Kesset winces. “I’d only hoped . . .”

“I’m well aware what you’re hoping for, but sending them to Bajor is the best of possible outcomes. Believe me.”

“Will you tell me what they decide?”

“However would I be privy to that information?”

“Oh, for Prophet’s sake, Elim. I’m not that dumb. We all know where you’re going after your Emergence.”

“Do we.”

At the boy’s tone, Kesset stops and turns. He looks surprised. His eyes lower until he’s inspecting a bush of pink metya flowers. He makes a ludicrous show of checking to see if they’re truly alone. The boy already knows that they are. Presently, Kesset whispers, “Is Enabran--”

“No.”

“Then your--”

“Dead. Probably while out killing your father, if that makes you feel better.”

“It doesn’t, actually. I don’t know why you think it would.” Kesset plucks off a flower bud and throws it to the ground. “If it makes you feel any better, at least you had your coming of age. I missed my Itanu a long while ago.”

The boy thinks a moment as he recalls the depiction of an ih’tanu ceremony in Sun Over The Bridge Senha. Sentimental drivel, Bajoran novels. Nothing but crying and praying and lovemaking. He much prefers the stories that focus on the strife caused by the D’jarra.

“Stay here,” the boy orders and hurries from the garden and into the house.

When the boy returns, bowl in hand, he climbs onto the raised step surrounding the elta blooms and instructs Kesset to kneel before him. Kesset shoots him a wary glance, but knows better than to argue. He drops to his knees.

“Now,” the boy begins, smoothly switching languages, “imagine I’m a vedek.”

Kesset’s head snaps up. The boy keeps his expression placid, serious. No mocking here. Kesset nods and bows his head.

“I’m a vedek,” the boy repeats, warming up to his story, “and this is the temple at Undalar, overlooking the cliffs of your homeland.” He grasps Kesset’s right earlobe. “Do you know the words, my child?”

“I-- I don’t remember them.”

“Repeat after me, then. I, Nevin Ronish, son of my mother Nevin Tomo--”

Kesset’s eyes widen. He looks to the boy, who gives a dismissive wave. He’s known his real name for years now. Recovering, Kesset takes a breath and speaks in Kardasi. No trust whatsoever. “I, Nevin Ronish, son of Nevin Tomo, my mother--”

“On this day, my fourteenth birthday--”
“Today, on my fourteenth birthday—”

“And under the watchful eye of the Prophets, my friends, and family—”

“And under the gaze of the Bajoran Prophets, my friends, and family—”

“I hereby announce that I am ready to become a man.”

“I do hereby announce my intent to become a man.”

The boy releases Kesset’s ear— all for the best, as the smell of him is making the boy lightheaded— and holds out the bowl. Damn Bajorans are absolutely obsessive about ritual bowls. “Drink.”

Kesset downs its contents in one gulp and nearly chokes. “Kanar?”

“I’m afraid I was all out of springwine.” The boy smiles. “Well? How do you feel?”

“My tongue is numb, but otherwise, the same. By the way, you make a lousy vedek.” But he’s smiling, too. Kesset reaches behind the boy and tugs a white bloom from its winding vine. He moves to place it in the boy’s hair.

The boy easily blocks Kesset’s wrist and scowls. “That’s an elta blossom! When you give that to someone—”

“—it means you wish them death,” Kesset finishes. “How long have I been on this planet, Elim?”

Evidently the question is rhetorical; he tucks the bloom into the boy’s front breast pocket and gives it a pat. Then Kesset grabs him by the back of the neck and kisses him, firm and tight-lipped. Kesset pulls away. “See you around,” he says.

Blinking rapidly, the boy watches him retreat.

Later, he scrubs his face until the scales are raw, until every bit of mammalian scent is gone and he feels whole again. The house is a complete loss. Kesset’s scent is everywhere. It makes the boy want in a primeval fashion. He wants to strip off every layer of clothing and roll around in the sand until he’s lost all semblance of self. He pulls at his hair. Oh, once, just once won’t hurt—

He tastes the air.

It knocks the wind out of him. For a horrifying instant, he’s drowning.

He must’ve groaned, made some kind of perverse noise, because a second later he hears it: Enabran, laughing. The boy feels his insides twist in mortification, and he sits up to cover his face in his hands.

“Tolan,” he hears Enabran say, “come here.”

The boy goes cold with fear. He wouldn’t have Tolan beat him for this, would he? They haven’t played that game in years. Surely he’s too old for that? It isn’t his fault. There’s something wrong with him. His senses are out of sync. He needs to see a doctor.

But when Tolan calls for him, the boy finds him empty-handed, his eyes on the night sky. “If there were Bajorans on Prime when I was your age,” he says, presently, “I’m certain I never would have made it to Emergence. It’ll get better. You’ll learn to control it.”

In that, Tolan is right.
“It’s a disgusting practice,” Asyeda says over kotra and rokassa juice. “Besides the pragmatic reasons that we don’t have the resources to support the influx, there are the moral ramifications. It’s tantamount to slavery.”

“Is that why you dismissed your Bajoran servants?”

“Bajor is their home. It may not be as safe, but those girls never asked to come here.” She contemplates the board, fingers twitching over her pieces. “There was no right decision to make. They’re a conquered people no matter where they go. Vole fighting is a rotten sport, so I choose not to play it.”

Ulan Corac’s words are still fresh in the boy’s mind. The character in question, Okar, had been lamenting the inexorable condition of the Union, complaining that there was no way for one man to prevent the horrors he saw around him. His solution had been isolation, to remove himself from the society he couldn’t change. It was a temporary solution; a Cardassian is nothing without his people. “Okar decided to play, in the end,” the boy reminds her.

“Only by force.”

“He could’ve committed suicide.”

“That isn’t a choice, Elim.”

The boy is taken aback by her misunderstanding of The Never-Ending Sacrifice. Suicide had been Okar’s ultimate choice. It dripped from every page, always in the back of Okar’s mind. The hypo was in his uniform. He’d come close so many times. But he eventually recognized the cowardice of his self-exile and returned to Cardassian society. Perhaps he never fully agreed with all the Union did, but that was the point. Self-effacing sacrifice. How else is the boy supposed to read it?

They focus on the movement of their game pieces scratching across the board. The boy zeroes in on her legate and takes it. It’s the first time he defeats her at kotra. By honest means, at least-- she’s let him win countless times over the years. They celebrate his victory with kanar, each pouring a glass and handing it to the other to solidify their trust.

“Do you still have that dress?” the boy asks, finishing the last drop.

“Are you asking to tailor it yourself? My darling, it would require hours of work. Someone in town can take care of it.”

“I want to show you what I’ve learned. Remember that tailor’s daughter? I made friends with her. At first she was resistant to revealing his secrets, but I managed to persuade her that it was for the common good. We practiced on our uniforms. Where is it?”

“Back of the closet. The light blue one. With the crystals. Nothing untoward, I hope?”

The boy peers into the closet. There it is, in the far corner, the crystals sparkling orange in the dim overhead lights. “And risk expulsion? Enabran would shoot me dead.”

“He’d do nothing of the sort.”
You’d be surprised, the boy thinks. He’s often wondered if Asyeda had any inkling about what
Enabran intended for him that afternoon, a decade ago. The possibility haunted him. But she’s never
shown a sign that she suspected, much less knew, what transpired. To Asyeda, her husband is no
crueler than the average Cardassian man.

The boy plots his entry and exit route, calculates how long it’ll take him to grab the dress and get out.
His chest is tight in anticipation. The longer he waits, the worse it’ll get.

“Do you see it?” Asyeda calls.

The boy rushes in. He emerges seconds later with the dress slung over a shoulder, out of breath but
no worse for wear. “Found it.”

He has to replicate the tools he’s missing, but soon he has the dress prepped over the desk that serves
as his makeshift workbench. The other servants look on with curiosity, stopping to peer over his
shoulder and pester him with questions about what institution he’ll be attending. “I’m studying to be
a tailor,” the boy lies, and bats his lashes when they look between him and the dress with incredulity.
They make no effort to challenge him, however.

By the end of the day, the gossip is that he’s failed out of secondary school and will be mending
dresses for the remainder of his miserable life. To the boy, it doesn’t sound like a horrible fate.
Asyeda’s dress is a challenge, but it’s a refreshing change from the physical and mental training. Like
Tolan and his plants, it’s nice, almost soothing, to work with his hands.

No, an apprenticeship wouldn’t be bad at all.

Another servant interrupts his thoughts. “There’s a man at the door for you.”

It’s an odd statement. Although the boy is indeed on the official house roster as an occasional
servant, he’s never had a guest. Few people know he’s here. Moreover, the house is in the center of a
sizable plot of land, reachable only by passing a series of security arrays, or directly through
transporter. The latter would have breached the security perimeter. Someone must’ve known he was
coming.

The man at the door wears a black and gray uniform. A disruptor hangs prominently from his hip.
The boy’s mouth goes dry. He must look a mess: hair in disarray, multicolored pins sticking from his
shirt. He’s still holding his seam ripper in one hand.

The man inclines his head, full professional courtesy despite the boy’s appearance. “Mister Elim
Garak, I presume?”

When the boy indicates the affirmative, the man extends a data tablet and leaves without another
word. He closes the door behind him.

After a moment, the boy keys on the tablet. The words blend together. It takes several re-readings for
him to digest them.

“What does it say?”

The boy looks up. Asyeda stands in the middle of the staircase, clutching the railing. Her expression
is pinched with worry. He lifts the reader into her grasp and turns to go back to his sewing.

“Bamarren,” he says.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The last vestiges of warmth are seeping from the scrubland as Cardassia’s sun dips below the horizon. Shivering, the boy holds the regnar to his chest and strokes its elongated head with a thumb. The lizard is calm in his hand, calming him in turn. Behind him, to the east, the boy detects the whisper of fabric and the faint plod of wandering footfalls. He easily recognizes the searcher’s gait and smiles. It’s the only reason the boy doesn’t pull back into the shadows.

Eight’s footfalls draw closer until he stops behind the boy’s rock. Ever taciturn, he sits without so much as a greeting, but the boy can sense his warmth; Eight is relieved to have found him. And, really, there must be something out of alignment with the universe, because it’s Eight who breaks the silence. “I thought you wouldn’t let me find you.”

The boy reaches back to grasp Eight’s hand. They entwine fingers. You didn’t betray me, he wants to say. Instead, he whispers, holding up the regnar, “I’m letting him go.”

Eight leans in, fingers squeezing, until his chest bumps the boy’s back. “Why?”

“He taught me how to survive out here. This place is where I found him. It’s time for him to go back home, where he belongs.” The boy brings the regnar to his face, as if he’s talking only to it. “Beat One Charaban for me, Eight.”

“Is there something you know that I don’t? You haven’t even spoken to the Prefect yet. You might still become One. And if not, if it’s me-- Two isn’t so bad, is it? We’ll beat him together.”

“A lovely sentiment, Eight, but I won’t be making Level Two.”

“You’re quitting?”

“I don’t believe I said that.”

Eight grabs the boy’s shoulders with a fierceness. “You’re not getting kicked out. They wouldn’t. I don’t care what Charaban said about you. You’re too good.”

The boy smiles without feeling. How to explain the depth of his intuition? He’s told Eight a great deal over the past three years, but it’s impossible to communicate his utter lack of will in this matter. He was never meant to finish Bamarren. Whatever is intended for him never required it.

That makes him impossibly sad-- he would’ve been good, one of the best-- if only. It isn’t the arrogance talking. But even as his chest tightens with resistance, he knows he has to let it go. Pure thinking doesn’t include what might have been, Enabran had once said. A lesson from the closet.

Taking Eight by the hand, the boy leads him to the rocks where he first caught the regnar. With a last affectionate stoke along its head, the boy sets it into the scrub. The lizard doesn’t take off immediately, but ripples like a cloaking warbird, blending into the rocks. The boy can still see it bobbing its head.

Together, they make their way back to the institute, shivering and huddling close. Eight has gone reticent again. This might be their last time alone together, the boy realizes with a flash of bitterness.
Eight gives his arm a tug, pulling the boy from his thoughts—on Charaban, on his uncertain future—and into the brush. Eight’s eyes glint as he throws his arms around the boy’s neck. They sync their breaths and align energies until, united, they disappear into the grass.

The boy prepares all morning for the evaluation, clearing his mind, readying for the worst. Inside the Prefecture, he stands away from the others. He’s the last one to be called. When the attendant ushers him into the office, the First Prefect is not behind his desk, but hovering beside the door.

“Ten Lubak,” says the Prefect, “Director Tain would like a word with you.”

A second man in the room turns around, and it takes all the boy’s training not to show his surprise when the man favors him with a friendly smile. “Hello, Garak,” he says. “Won’t you sit down?”

* * *

This is unfair, he thinks as he cleans out his compartment with a composure he doesn’t feel. He leaves Bamarren without a backwards look at Eight. One, he corrects himself. One Lubak now.

The boy can’t bear to think about Eight; he’ll never love anyone like that again, of that he’s sure. He rolls his eyes in disgust. This entire situation has made him maudlin. As he boards the shuttle, bag slung over one shoulder, he is certain One Ketay is calling out his former designation. The shuttle doors seal together and drown out her voice.

Director Tain had called it an opportunity, but it stinks of failure.

It’s a long ride back to Cardassia City. As the shuttle flies over, he can pick out thousands of differences. The world has carried on without him.

Of course it has. What else would it have done?

He’s mentally exorcised all sentiment from his brain by the time he reaches Enabran’s residence. Then the door opens, and Kesset’s face lights up. Nobody has ever looked so happy to see him. Curly hair grows like red moss over Kesset’s cheeks and underneath his chin. He’s wearing an expensive suit of Cardassian embroidering, and the boy wouldn’t be surprised if it’s his best outfit. All to answer the door. He’s more round about the middle, and as Kesset hurries forward to take his luggage, the boy realizes with a surge of pride that they’re of the same height. He might even be taller. Kesset has towered over him all his life.

The boy inclines his head and smiles. Kesset mirrors the gesture.

Both Tolan and Mila embrace him and lead him to the servant’s table. They sip redleaf tea as the boy describes the last three years in broad strokes. The training was grueling, he tells them, and competitive, but he did make friends. Keeping his attention ostensibly on his teacup, the boy describes Eight fondly, and notes the way Kesset shifts and tightens his grip on his own cup. How interesting.

As the sun begins to set in the evening, the boy escapes outside to stretch out under the garden’s lone tree and read. Kesset had been following him around the cellar as he unpacked, volunteering his “services” with all the subtlety of a Vulcan amid pon farr. The boy had dismissed him in clipped tones, and, after a time, Kesset had taken the hint and left.

He’s halfway through the novel when there’s a crunching on the well-manicured grass. Kesset plops down beside him. The boy continues reading. Sighing, Kesset scoots closer until the boy can feel
breath on his neck ridges.

“You got even uglier,” Kesset murmurs. “And you’re still scrawny. No wonder you failed out of that school.”

The boy smothers the urge to smile. A clumsy attempt at flirtation, and that’s being generous. He remembers that day in the garden when Kesset had slipped the elta blossom into his pocket. That had been nicely done. Not that it would do any good. Coupling with a lower species for sexual gratification happens often enough, but to do it regularly— that would be as heinous as taking a riding hound as a lover. It’s a crime against the State.

Eyes still on his book, the boy pushes Kesset away with one hand.

Kesset frowns. “Why?”

“Use your limited intellect, Kesset.”

“Wait, are we still flirting?”

“Even if Enabran didn’t find out the instant we went to bed, rest assured that Mila would.” They both know where her loyalty lies. “She’s watching us right now. I suggest you move away. Slowly.”

With a morose look, Kesset rolls clear until his back is turned. “I’ve missed you,” he hisses, as if in pain, and it startles the boy. “They wouldn’t even let me write to you.” He claws in the dirt, digging rows five at a time. “Prophets, Elim. I want you.”

The boy can’t deny that a tendril of desire goes through him at the declaration. All that warm, pliant skin, with its fur and sweat, strange and alien, his. It would be good, maybe even worth it. “Kesset,” the boy says, not unkindly, “you don’t know what you’re saying. You’ve been in this house too long. I’m the only person remotely your age you’ve seen in ten years.”

“Don’t patronize me, Elim, please. You might’ve traveled all over the Union, but you don’t know everything.”

“Is that so?”

Kesset sits up. He inspects the dirt lodged beneath his fingernails. “The only person my age I’ve seen? You believe that? You, with that cynical lizard brain of yours?”

The boy analyzes him sidelong, ‘cynical lizard brain’ following the trail of clues. So Kesset has been with other people their age, then? He doubts any of them would be Enabran’s usual guests; besides, Enabran has been doing less business at the residence as of late. No, Kesset is implying--

Of course. The boy’s lips pull against his teeth in a grimace. A blind spot: how could he be foolish enough to think Enabran above passing his ‘exotic’ servant around like morsels of buttered zabu steak? A common practice on Bajor, perhaps, but Bajor is the end of civilization. This is Cardassia Prime.

“You’re angry,” Kesset says.

Sometimes the quickest way to convince someone to talk is to let them fill a silence. The boy stares into the garden. He traces orchids with his eyes and turns it over and over in his mind.

“Mila took me,” Kesset begins, describing the setup as if it were a romantic interlude. She dropped him off at the location-- a legate’s residence overlooking the Margat sea. Big windows, setting sun,
picturesque. She told him to mind his hosts, but to observe his surroundings closely. Monitor every
detail, every exchanged word between the participants, but never draw attention.

Oh, a familiar game, indeed!

Mila had taken care to make him presentable. She’d done her best to corral his baffling hair and find
him suitable clothes. Bajorans grow faster than Cardassians, and over the years she’d often
complained about how quickly his clothes needed replacing. If Kesset had any doubts about her
intentions, they vanished when she spritzed him with her perfume. “Will that work?” he’d asked,
alarmed.

“It can’t hurt.”

Kesset had expected this, he tells the boy. When his parents died, he and his sister had been passed
from one Cardassian keeper to the next. Even when he was small, he’d known about the brothels,
and when he arrived on Prime, he’d come to terms with the fact that he’d end up in one. That he
hadn’t was sheer luck. This seemed like the best of both worlds: an excuse to escape the house and
the toil of scrubbing, and a chance to see other Bajorans. Maybe he’d even see his sister.

“I wasn’t forced into it, you know,” Kesset says, with a defensive glance in the boy’s direction. “She
said I could call for her if I felt uncomfortable.”

The boy is well versed in Mila’s concept of a “choice.” There’s always a wrong one.

Enabran had taken the boy to a similar spectacle before he left for Bamarren. While the common man
would never fathom such extravagance, the upper echelons of the military were well versed. The
guls and glinns and legates had pooled together their Bajoran trophies, buffed and painted and
scenting by the bucket while the bureaucrats perused with eyes and hands. The moment they had
crossed the threshold of the great house, Enabran disappeared, getting lost in the crowd, never to be
seen for the remainder of the night.

The boy had been disoriented by the sight of so much bare, hued skin. The smell made his head hurt
something fierce. He’d wandered, unsteadily, eyes wide, until a short Bajoran girl hooked a brown
arm around his and asked if he wanted to split a bottle of kanar.

The kanar helped dull his overworking vomeronasal organ. From what he recalled, the girl had been
quite the conversationalist, pouring for him as they skipped across topics. He’d made her laugh, even
as he observed the wrinkles on her nose doubling in number, then tripling. He’d rested his head in
his arms to briefly stop its swimming, and the susurrus of the party had fallen away.

He’d woken up underneath the table to the prod of Enabran’s boot, hungover, his clothes wrinkled,
and his virtue woefully intact.

“It was never as bad as you think,” Kesset says. “Everyone was always friendly to me.”

“Oh, I’m sure they were the height of decency!”

“The only person on this planet who was ever cruel to me, Elim, was you.”

The boy bristles. “That’s--” Perhaps a valid point. “A little unkind, don’t you think?”

“We wouldn’t be talking like this if I didn’t forgive you.” Kesset extends a hand.

Mila has left her post, retreating from the window to pursue some other task. At least as far as the
boy can tell. He takes Kesset’s hand and lets himself be pulled into the grass.
Almost reverently, Kesset traces the ridges along his face, slowly enough that the boy could easily bat his hands away. After a time, he does. He leans in until he can whisper, nearly too quietly for himself to hear, “Give me two weeks. I can have you on a transport to Bajor. I’ll forge the documents and change the transporter logs. Enabran won’t know you’re gone until you’re halfway there.”

Kesset pulls away. “What?”

“Let me do this, Kesset. You don’t belong here. The longer you stay--”

“I’ve lived here longer than I ever did on Bajor! This is my home.”

The boy jumps to his feet, rolling his eyes to the sky at Kesset’s stubbornness. “You’re alone and miserable and you don’t know what you’re saying.”

“And you’re patronizing me again! Elim, please, I appreciate what you’re trying to do for me, but I can’t leave. When Enabran finds out what you’ve done, he’ll kill you.”

“What do you think will happen when you’re no longer useful? Have you seen what we’ve done to our planet? We used to be like the Bajorans, Kesset. Once, our people were friends. And now, look!” The boy kicks at the grass. “It’s a marvel Tolan can even grow this! Is it any wonder why we had to conquer you? If you stay here, you’ll be killed.”

“You don’t know that,” Kesset says. “There’s nothing for me on Bajor. I want to stay here.”

The unspoken words, with you, hang in the air. The boy is disgusted by them, even as he’s touched by their sincerity. Kesset might be deluded by loneliness, but he is certain of his feelings. Although the boy has often felt unloved, he knows it isn’t altogether true. Eight had been far too practical to be moved into such sentiment, but Asyeda does love him. Of that he’s sure. And Tolan cares for him insomuch as the boy simultaneously frightens him. As for Mila-- well, a Cardassian mother is not a force to be trifled with.

Still, the boy doesn’t understand how Kesset can maintain unconditional loyalty to someone who doesn’t deserve it.

* * *

“Being free of that cold and heartless institute will do you good,” Tolan says, scooping more soil into the hole they’ve dug. Crouched beside him as they plant Edosian orchids along the base of a monument, the boy listens to Tolan’s ramblings with one eye trained on the crowd. “Did I ever tell you about the Hebitians?” he asks.

Countless times. The boy settles down for a borderline heretical lecture on Cardassia’s ancestors--flying in the face of every known and documented fact. A lecture that will invariably segue into another on the virtues of honest labor. He knows Tolan is disappointed in him. The reminder is unnecessary. But Tolan is a creature of habit.

“Kesset is quite taken with the Oralian way,” Tolan says when he catches the boy tuning him out.

That does it. “Really, Tolan, it’s entirely your right to dislike me, but there’s no need to be rude about it. If Kesset has wound his way into your esteem, perhaps you should adopt him. What an interesting family you two would make.”
Tolan lowers his spade. “I don’t dislike you.”

“But you don’t like me, either.” It’s an effort to keep the emotion from his voice.

“You’ve become distant, Elim. Cold. You used to have the warmest spirit. You loved to read. Do you remember-- you wanted to become a scholar. And, if I’m permitted the brief nostalgia, you once enjoyed gardening with me. You didn’t act as if it was beneath you.”

“Ah, now we’ve arrived to the source of your complaint. I’m terribly sorry, uncle, for being unable to dig in the dirt alongside you.” He gives Tolan a look. “You lost that chance with Goralis II.”

Tolan’s face hardens into a mask. Before, the boy might’ve been mortified by his own disrespect, but he’s long past fretting over the Tarlak sector’s groundskeeper. He’s caught sight of Mila in the crowd, winding her way toward them. Standing, he dusts dirt off his knees and bids his uncle a cordial farewell. Tolan seems too stricken to return it. The boy strides across the square to meet her.

“That looked unpleasant,” Mila says, changing course.

“It was a long time in coming.”

“One of these days, Tolan is going to spout his spiritual nonsense to the wrong person.” She turns down a path that opens into Imperial Plaza, setting a frustratingly leisurely pace. The boy sticks to her heels. “You cannot afford any distractions at this stage.”

The people around them change as they amble closer to the Assembly building. There are no children playing on the grounds, no benches, no one gathered to chat. At least a thousand people, perhaps two, each one absorbed in the process of moving from one point to the next.

“I know you didn’t always approve of the methods I used in rearing you,” Mila says, and the boy begins to protest out of impulse. She silences him with a glance. “Don’t lie to me, Elim.”

She leads him past a pair of doors and into the bowels of the Assembly building. They take a surreptitious route through a dormitory and then into a communications hub where young Cardassians work at their terminals, muttering into headsets, listening to the chips in their ears, so focused on their tasks they don’t seem to notice the two of them pass. The boy suppresses a shiver. So this is the Obsidian Order.

Mila reaches an access point and taps in a series of codes. From there, it’s into a turbolift and down a hallway. At the last door, she passes the boy a data rod.

He pockets it; he wants to say something, but she’s already through the door, moving briskly now, and he has to hurry to keep up.

The office is dusty. Whoever is in charge of housekeeping has been remiss. Behind the desk, Tain sits at its edge, reading. He looks up with the same joviality he’d shown at Bamarren. “Ah, Garak. Welcome. Thank you for bringing him in, Mila. You may go.”

In a move he’s seen countless times, she leaves without giving the boy a second glance.

“Well, Garak,” Tain begins. He uncorks a bottle of blue kanar and pours two glasses. “It seems the rest of your future is at hand. Of course, you realize now why we had to remove you from that school. You’ve learned the fundamentals. The rest will come from the field.”

The boy accepts the kanar and takes a drink, buying time. Tain has stopped speaking and will expect an answer. “I’m ready to serve Cardassia, Director Tain. When do I begin?”
“Immediately. You’ll start as a junior probe by shadowing some of our best operatives. Unless you find the prospect of information extraction—” Tain dips his chin and smiles, “—somehow repellant.”

Tain gives him three days to put his affairs in order.

The boy spends all of them in Lakat. The first morning, he basks alongside Asyeda as she stretches out on her slab. At sunset, he challenges her to race after race around the property, laughing with his heart in his throat as they try to shove each other off their mounts at top speed.

Enabran puts him on servant duty for that evening’s meal. It’s not an unusual request; the boy has been waiting the dinner table since he was strong enough to carry the trays. But it still stings of one last rebuke before he sheds the husk of his old life. He’d hoped, maybe childishly, that Enabran would let him eat at the same table, just once.

Back in servant’s blue, the boy oversees the preparation of the meal, ensuring every step is perfectly executed down to the place settings. Once dinner is served, he stands to the side, out of the way but within hearing distance, always ready to refill a glass or bring out another course. Asyeda and Enabran sit beside each other, intent on their plates, never so much as bumping elbows as silverware scrapes and clacks. The boy centers his breathing. Every chattering thought becomes a whisper until all that is left is clarity.

“Elim, why don’t you tell Asyeda about your new position serving Cardassia?”

The question jars the boy back into his body. Asyeda twists in her seat to look at him, her eye ridges raised, expectant.

The boy clears his throat. “It’s only as a junior analyst, for the Bajoran division at the Ministry of External Relations. The subchancellor said he was impressed by my language skills and knowledge of the culture.”

Asyeda beams. “That’s wonderful, Elim! I always knew you were clever. What did Mila and Tolan say? They must be ecstatic for you!” She turns back to her husband. “Isn’t that wonderful news, Enabran?”

“Of course,” he says.

* * *

Limor Prang is as dour as his permanently expressionless face suggests, and the boy hopes he isn’t looking into his own future. To be professional and detached is laudable; to be boring is not. But as Operative Prang leads him from one lesson to the next within the Order’s headquarters, the boy knows he’ll do well to pay the man close attention.

In the course of his day, the boy notices five other junior probes, each one shadowing their own operative. Two are recently promoted trainees-- boys who had been rescued from the streets of Cardassia and brought to the Order at a young age to live and train. The third is another service class recruit. The fourth and fifth probes are older, middle-aged gentry amid a serious career change.

Prang doesn’t submit the boy to the same orientations and grueling tests he hears the other probes complaining about. Instead, Prang instructs the boy to sit quietly in the interrogation chamber and observe as he questions prisoner after prisoner. No matter who is in the chair-- men, women, sometimes children-- Prang never touches them. He raises his voice, he threatens, he smiles, he hisses in their ears and stares them down, running a gamut of emotions so quickly it makes the boy’s head
spin, but he never strikes them. Some sessions last as little as ten minutes, others up to twelve hours before Prang passes the prisoner off to another colleague. “It’s all about your ability to read another person, Garak,” Prang tells him. “Questions?”

The boy always has at least five.

Other days, Prang takes him to the simulator. There, he orders the boy to pore over massive quantities of personal recordings and crack codes to find evidence of wrongdoing, all within the allotted time. In other simulations, the boy has to evade capture by dozens of holographic assailants who chase him through a dense and foreign city street. In another, the boy finds himself amid the wreckage of an escape pod and has to build makeshift incendiaries from what he can salvage. His favorite challenge, by far, requires him to fabricate counterintelligence to enemy spies. If the boy fails, he’s sent home for the day to his assigned living quarters: a lonely room in the most squalid corner of the city, above a butcher hawking yesterday’s raw zabu meat.

By the third month, he’s sampled enough sem’hal stew to be something of a connoisseur.

He’s finally beaten his personal record in the dreaded “pain tolerance” simulation when Prang terminates the program and helps the boy to his feet. “Do you need anything?” he asks as the boy struggles to stand. “Water?”

The boy accepts a glass with a nod of thanks.

“I think you’re ready for something else,” Prang says, with as much mystery as one so bland can achieve. Once the boy can walk, he leads the way into a large, multi-tiered room arrayed with monitors and, thankfully, chairs. There must be at least a thousand screens, each one showing a bird’s-eye view of the Order’s interrogation chambers. A supervisor circles the deck as the agents attend their stations.

Prang dismisses two agents on duty and gestures for the boy to sit. For a time, all they do is watch. Row one, column one: an agent paces before his bound prisoner, flapping his hands wildly. Row three, column eight: a woman does push-ups in an otherwise empty room. Row seven, column three: two agents stage a mock execution on a prisoner whose head is covered by a shroud. Row six, column four: the boy feels his stomach clench and he averts his eyes. He only forces himself to look back when he realizes that Prang is now watching him.

Then his eyes fall to another screen, drawn as he catches sight of an anomaly. A woman towers over her seated prisoner, whose jaw has been propped open with a bite block. She runs a device over his exposed teeth, causing him to jerk and, by the looks of it, scream. The boy leans forward, frowning as he tries to place her. It hasn’t been that long, but of all the places he’s expected her to end up, it certainly isn’t with the Order.

“May I patch into the room?” the boy asks.

Prang nods and keys the comlink. “Senior probe Beherik, this is Agent Prang.”

“Go ahead,” comes the familiar voice, confirming the boy’s suspicions.

“Hello, One Ketay,” the boy says.

On the screen, Palandine straightens. She switches off the device in her hand and presses a finger to her ear. The boy can hear the man whimpering behind her. “Ten Lubak.” She smiles. “I heard you’d joined up. Sorry I haven’t had the chance to drop by and say hello. I’ll have to remedy that, won’t I?”
And drop by she does, waking him up in the quiet hours of the night by repeatedly ringing the door. When he blearily lets her in, she gifts him with one of her smug smiles and pushes into the room to set a container of battered rokat on the wobbly table. “I’m leaving for Bamarren in the morning,” she explains between bites of fish. “I’m part of a rather vigorous training program the Order has for us Level Three interns.” She pushes her plate aside. “Tain should’ve let you finish. The place doesn’t feel the same without you.”

The salt in the wound no longer affects him. “I’m sure you’ll adjust.”

“I had a talk with Prang after you left. He thinks you’re ready for your first interrogation. A word of caution-- don’t get too clever for your own good.” When he puts on a show of faux outrage, she shakes her head. “I know you, Garak. That sort of thing will only get you in trouble in the early levels.”

“Then I’ll be sure to keep my thinking securely in the box.”

“If only I could believe you.”

He smiles. After a beat, he takes her hand. “How is Charaban?”

“The same, as always.” Palandine seems to contemplate their joined hands. “He will never be a match for either of us. But you can’t expect me to believe you care about our dear friend Lokar.” Her glance is more knowing than the boy would like. “Pythas Lok is fine, you tender-hearted sap. He’s a good leader, as we all expected. If he doesn’t fall into the same traps you did, I bet the Order will recruit him once he reaches intern level.”

It’s happy news, and the boy relaxes knowing that Eight is indeed excelling in his new role. He well and truly earned it. And if Eight could join the Order, it would mean only waiting a few more years.

He thanks her, sincerely, and she gives his hand a squeeze.

* * *

“And what makes you think the interrogation wouldn’t have worked, Garak?” Tain says, and he seems affable enough-- more curious than angry-- but that can change any second. “You didn’t even attempt it, which, correct me if I’m wrong, was your assignment.”

“It wouldn’t have worked,” the boy repeats again, scrubbing to get the last of the blood from his hands. Tain had pulled him from the interrogation chamber before he could clean up. Luckily enough, the basin beside the wet bar seems to exist precisely for this purpose. His suit, however, is ruined. “Sir, you assigned me a decorated infantry gul of the Second Order. Standard interrogation would’ve accomplished nothing.”

“So you assumed because he’d seen combat that you could skip a step and bloody up my carpets?”

The boy dries his hands and turns. When he’d first seen the gul, he’d known he’d been set up to fail. The gul’s dossier made it plain: he’d been held and tortured by the Klingons for three months, and subsequent debriefings had confirmed he’d told them nothing. If that didn’t qualify as a “hard case,” then nothing did. The boy had to gamble-- accept the failure, or prove that he could extract the information another way. “It wasn’t an assumption, sir, it was instinct. I saw it in his eyes, Tain.”

“Him laughing and calling you a child likely didn’t help matters for him, either,” Tain says.
“No, perhaps not.” The boy begins to feel the first prickle of real fear. “You know I’ve been playing at torture since I was small.”

“You mean your Bajoran servant. Your enthusiasm for childhood bullying doesn’t automatically make you an experienced interrogator.”

“Yes, sir, but you wouldn’t have pulled me out of Bamarren if you thought I was soft.”

“You seem to misunderstand the purpose of this challenge, Garak.” Tain circles around his desk, swirling the kanar in his hand as he goes. “This had nothing to do with your willingness to perform the work. What you did was a common error in our more exuberant new recruits.”

The boy can’t help but wince a little at that.

“You want to prove yourself. I understand that. You weren’t meant to succeed at the interrogation. The test was that you recognize your limits and send him off to Prang. You may be working alone for the majority of your tenure here, Garak, but you’re still one part of a whole. One Cardassian among billions. I need to know that I can trust you to follow my directions.”

The lesson is well retained. Quietly, almost a whisper, the boy says, “I want nothing more than to please you, Tain.”

Tain nods and pats the boy’s shoulder before moving past. “I believe you, Garak. You’re dismissed for the day. Tomorrow I’ll expect you to follow my instructions to the letter.”

The boy is making his retreat when Tain stops him. “Oh, and Garak? Ripping out a man’s scales may be effective, but there’s nothing wrong with taking some joy out of your work. A little finesse will get you far.”

Finesse he can manage.

Within the year, the boy has developed a reputation for subtlety in the interrogation chamber, and although he isn’t hesitant to throw his naked detainees into cold rooms and prod them with painsticks when reticent, breaking them with words alone is a point of pride. He prefers the artistry of mind games, undermining his subject at the deepest level until the inevitable unwinding. Sleep deprivation and a well-timed Betazoid chime speeds the process along.

Once in a while, he passes Mila in the hall, or spots her exiting Tain’s office with a tray. They acknowledge each other with a nod. He wonders, sometimes, what her role is within the Order, but his lowly security clearances fail to gain him access to her file. Nobody seems eager to put forth their theories, which is a rarity. Despite its dedication to the truth, the Order is not averse to internal gossip. The boy suspects it’s because each agent’s background is restricted to only the highest level operatives.

There are rumors about everyone— from the likely (“I heard Prang killed his father. By poisoning his tea, no less!”), to the scandalous (“Before he joined the Order, Nekor was prostituting himself up and down the Munda’ar Sector.”), to the downright vicious (“Beherik’s unable to bear children. How does she live with herself?”).

Above all, the strangest and most whispered rumor concerns Tain himself. Hidden in oblique glances and couched in ambiguous, roundabout phrases, the agents hint at the director’s ineptitude at, of all things, murder. Tain can concoct a brilliant assassination, they insist, but is less than useless when it comes to its execution. So to speak. “If he’s ever killed anyone,” the boy overhears one day to a round of nervous tittering, “it was likely accidental.”
The boy is skeptical at first-- how did Tain become the head of the Obsidian Order without blooding his own hands? But if there’s anything he knows about Tain, it’s his ability to delegate and inspire loyalty. Each one of his underlings are ready and willing to kill for him.

That’s why, when the boy receives the message from Tain, he feels a rush of gratitude. The file is only two lines in length, but it doesn’t disappoint. He’s been waiting a year for it. Its arrival signals that he’s close to shedding his probe status. He’s going to make Tain glad he entrusted him with this task.

The target is a middle-aged scientist, traveling along with the rest of the Klingon delegation on their recess from recent diplomatic relations. The boy tracks them to a peninsula in South Forbella, where they promptly check into a hotel in Lakarian City. Once he’s intercepted the delegation’s itinerary, the boy sets up shop in a tidy little apartment complex under an assumed name and begins work on a new suit. As he stitches, his window grants him an unobstructed view into the target’s hotel room across the street.

Each day, while the rest of the delegation drunkenly ambles to the amusement center, the target remains in his room, working at a console, bodyguard at attention beside the door. He eats lunch on the balcony, as if to taunt the boy. Afterward, accompanied by his bodyguard, the target walks two blocks to the squat, two-person public transporter on Jifon street. It’s two hours before they beam back and return to their room.

On the third day, as the target is making his lunch request from the replicator, the boy adds the finishing touches to the jacket and gathers his tools. The transporter room’s interior is cramped, but he keeps steady with slow, five-count breaths. He’s resealing the deck’s innards and restarting the safety override when the Klingons shove past his barricade and glower at him. “Are you through with your tinkering, boy?” the target bellows. “I’m late! Move!”

The boy smiles and obediently steps aside. “You’re in luck. I just finished.”

It takes a good quarter hour for the fire to die out.

Later, the boy sits in a crowded bar overlooking the ocean, committing each word of Tain’s newest communication to memory. The other operatives often spoke of the transformative power of killing another sentient being. “Life changing,” Palandine had called it, with a smirk. Perhaps if their bodies had come into physical contact, or if his victim had been another Cardassian, a worthy opponent-- he isn’t sure what he expected, really. As it stands, the boy feels decidedly untransformed.

Still, he gives a silent toast for Cardassia and downs his kanar. When he finally emerges from the bar, the sun is dipping red-orange between Lakarian City’s buildings. Heavy bells toll from a building to his left, marking the end of the day. A breeze picks up between the high rises, carrying with it a flutter of thousands of white strips of paper. The boy tastes the air. It’s redolent of smoke and seawater and mekla blooms. He clamps his mouth shut. The mixture of sugar and salt doesn’t agree with him.

A child is grabbing handfuls of paper out of the air, to the disapproval of her parents. A skimmer must’ve accidentally lost its cargo. A nightmare for sanitation. The boy dips down to catch a slip that’s wound around his ankles. The words catch his eye, and he feels his throat constrict. Cold lances through his chest.

He turns. Others around him are picking up the papers and muttering, frowning, shooting each other baffled glances. With one last helpless look around him, the boy starts stuffing the slips of paper into his jacket, one fistful at a time.
When he arrives to the house in Lakat, the servants let him in. They seem puzzled by his sudden appearance, but the boy ascends the stairs without paying them a second glance. He finds her in the window alcove of her bedroom, barefoot, her attention on a book, a half-eaten dumpling in one hand.

Asyeda jumps up, smiling. “Elim, dear. I wasn’t expecting--”

He pushes her back into the chair and shoves the paper in her face. She begins to protest the rough treatment, but he shakes the paper until she looks at it. Her eyes glance over the page. She looks away.

“You recognize this, don’t you?” he says.

She opens her mouth, and he can see from the flick of her eyes that she wants to deny it. “Where did you find that?”

“Is that really the question you’re going to ask me?” The boy throws the paper onto the table. Suddenly he’s so angry he can’t think of the words he wants to say. They come out in a stream. “Do you realize what you’ve done? Not only have you publically rejected standing Cardassian policy, you’ve conspired to incite civil unrest!”

“We did no such thing! Every one of our letters was about peaceful assembly--”

“The first step toward civil unrest.”

“That’s nonsense and you know it. Calling for an end to the Occupation is not revolution, it’s common sense. How can you not agree with me? You must see the horror of what we’re doing to the Bajoran people every day in the Affairs office. Doesn’t it affect you?”

The boy looks down at the letter. “Do you know how I figured out it was you? We’ve written to each other for so long, I could hear your voice when I read it. You may as well have signed your name. And here, you write, ‘the Occupation might benefit Cardassia in the short run,’ and then you go on to misquote The Neverending Sacrifice: ‘but is it worth the cost of our soul?’ You always get it wrong.”

She smiles, faintly. “I prefer it my way.”

She won’t apologize, despite his insistence that she come forward, admit fault, and turn over her co-conspirators. Not even the possibility of leniency will sway her. Instead she takes his elbow and steers him until he’s sitting in her too-small lap. “You know I’m right,” she says. “You know we have to do something.”

He’s back in headquarters that evening, getting each slip of paper tagged and in the process of identification. “You’ve uncovered quite a nest of dissidents, Garak,” Tain says as he looks over the boy’s work.

Of the several hundred copies he’s gathered from the street, there are thirty-two separate screeds—thirty-three when he adds Asyeda’s. The boy makes another note on that: thirty-three, a number symbolic with moral purity among the Hebitians.

The boy watches as Tain’s attention settles on Asyeda’s essay; it’s the only one the boy has yet managed to identify. Tain shakes his head and mutters something that sounds like, “Of course.”
Although they’re alone, the boy lowers his voice anyway. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“For what?” Tain says with a slow blink. “You’ve done good work in the service of Cardassia, Garak. That’s nothing for you to be sorry about.” He takes a step back to inspect the papers with an obvious expression of disgust. “Clever of them, disseminating their tripe in Lakarian City, during the peak of tourist season.” He glances at the boy. “I want all thirty-three of these dissidents and their accomplices, Garak.”

The boy knows how Tain will want it done, what role he’ll have to play. It’s clear from the essays that the dissidents intend to hold a demonstration in Imperial Plaza, on the Day of Founding. The easiest option is to let them have their silly rally. Central Command will round them up on sight, along with anyone else foolish enough to join in. But if easy is what the boy intended for his life, he would’ve left those papers in the street.

“Then I better go back to Lakat,” the boy says, “and apologize to Asyeda for the way I overreacted.”

Tain nods. “Coordinate with Operative Prang and senior probe Beherik.” It’s a dismissal, and the boy is backing out of the room when Tain makes his characteristic addendum. “And Garak, be mindful of where you’ve placed your legate.”

The boy smiles, appreciating the phrase for what it is: advice laced with threat.

Once he’s out of the Assembly building and arranging transport, however, the boy’s enthusiasm wanes. He paces the enclosure as the technician dials in the coordinates. Trust and betrayal are the tools of his chosen trade. If he doesn’t like it, he can go back to digging in the dirt with Tolan. And Asyeda isn’t blameless here; idealistic and foolish as she may be, she isn’t stupid. She was aware when she penned her little claptrap that it was bound to get her in a great deal of trouble.

The relief that crosses Asyeda’s face as he takes her hands nearly weakens his resolve. She accepts his apology with a shake of the head and crumples into a chair. “I was afraid you hated me,” she whispers, gulping air to keep from crying.

“I could never hate you,” he says. “I’m only concerned about your safety.” And it’s true enough. Everything he tells her is true enough, down to his willingness to hear her out. He holds her hand and coaxes her into taking sips of tea until she’s regained her confidence and is no longer worried he’ll storm off in a rage.

From there, she does all the steering for the both of them.

The greatest hurdle is finding a cause for his continued appearance in Lakat, which he explains away as a vacation from the External Relations office. “Do you really want to spend all your free time with an old woman?” Asyeda asks, and although she says she’s enjoying his company, he makes the tactical decision to return to Cardassia City for a day. Mila doesn’t appear surprised to see him, despite his yearlong absence, and greets him with a nod and a smile.

The house is the same, down to the scent of regova eggs and cleaning solution.

“I would avoid Kesset, if I were you,” Mila says when she spots the boy looking around. “His sister died several weeks ago.”

“What happened?”

She shrugs, a gesture that translates into does it matter? “He’s calmed down somewhat, but he’s even twice as useless as before.”
Kesset is in the cellar, pushing a cleaner back and forth over the same patch of flooring. He doesn’t notice the boy until he’s standing beside him. Kesset starts as if he’s seen a spirit, then throws the cleaner down to embrace the boy. “Why haven’t you visited?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t had time,” the boy lies. Tain is generous about giving him holidays off, but he’s opted to work them.

“Bajoran Affairs must keep you busy,” Kesset says in a voice dripping irony. “You haven’t been sleeping.”

Kesset can be irritatingly perceptive, when he wants to be. Every night, while half of Cardassia sleeps, the boy sits at his table, sewing to the tune of folk music playing in the adjoining apartment. Often, the threads of his thoughts get caught in his stitching, and before he knows it he’s made a mess of his work. He could save it if he had the patience; instead he rips the seams apart between his fists to start over again.

“I made something for you.” The boy delves into his bag and withdraws a shawl hued in sunset oranges and reds. Draped over Kesset, it brings out the color of his hair, just as expected. Kesset pulls it around himself. “It’s...” He falters.

“Hideous?”

“I didn’t say that! It’s very-- very--”

“Hideous,” the boy finishes. It’s an eyesore to anyone with the correct aesthetic. Similar wraps were highly fashionable among Bajoran men before the Occupation, and the boy had intended to point that out, as a reminder of his earlier offer to send Kesset home. Instead, he finds himself leaning closer and saying, “It’s hideous. It suits you, Kesset.”

Kesset’s mouth falls open. After a moment, he regains his composure and turns away. He picks at the shawl with a disdainful sniff. “It was obviously incompetently made. How like a Cardassian, to give someone trash and expect gratitude.”

“How like a Bajoran, to expect better than you deserve.”

“Oh, well, Elim, if I don’t deserve it, then you can take it back!” But Kesset only tightens his hold on the shawl and looks over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised.

The boy smiles.

* * *

Palandine and the boy spend the afternoon and evening submitting the images he’s gathered into the Order’s massive database. It’s slow going, tedious, and the computer frequently turns up false positives, further delaying the process. Tain is waiting, and they’ve only identified eight names of thirty-three. Palandine is quick to remind the boy how many that means they have left, as if he can’t count.

By the time the process has dragged on into early morning, they’re sniping at each other over their terminals.

“That’s enough!” Prang interrupts, and it’s a testament to their stress level if even his mask of
indifference is slipping. The boy and Palandine point to each other to show who started it, but he’s already halfway out of the room. “You two bicker like a pair of enjoined redrats. Contact me when you’ve finished the job.”

When he’s gone, they get back to work, this time in silence. They have only six names to go, and the boy looks to the number with increasing relief. This ordeal is almost over. Tain will have his names--enough to make the arrests--and this dissident cell will be dead before its first demonstration. The boy can already taste Tain’s approval.

The strain of staring at the screen is making his eyes blur. He rubs at them, and he’s aware that the action draws Palandine’s attention. “Do you think,” he begins, then reconsiders. She watches him, waiting, but he waves it away. Even if she’s his friend, he doesn’t trust her. Not with this.

He’s spent many nights turning the situation over, struggling to devise how to get Asyeda out. There are ways, oh, there are ways, but all of them demand that he betray the Order--betray Tain and Cardassia--in the process. It’s such a waste. Even if the anti-Occupation movement were to gather supporters, it would never be a threat to the Union. Central Command will break every protest. The voices of dissent will inevitably die out. Hunting them down preemptively like this is unnecessary.

The thoughts are naïve. He hates them for even flitting through his brain. They’re born from weakness and sentiment, never to be spoken aloud. He’ll always love Asyeda, but Cardassia comes first. By letting her conscience overshadow the good of the Union, she betrayed it, and that’s unforgivable.

It’s several hours later when they emerge from the databases, haggard and tired, but triumphantly bearing the identities of all thirty-three dissidents. They immediately bring the report to the director’s office. Tain gives it a glance-over, likely looking for familiar names, before passing it to Prang. “Everything appears to be in order,” Prang says at last.

The boy releases a breath. Good. The sooner he can get back to interrogations, the sooner he can get his mind off how he’s destroyed the one person who cared for him without expecting anything in return, who never tried to mold him into anything but perhaps decency, who doesn’t deserve years of hard labor, or, worse--worse--

“Beherik, you’re dismissed,” Tain says.

His mind elsewhere, the boy begins following Palandine to the door.

“Not you, Garak.”

The boy halts. His bafflement must be written all over his face because Palandine exchanges a glance with him and shrugs. When the boy turns around, he’s schooled his expression back to something more servile. “You still need me, sir?”

“According to your report, your dissidents have one final meeting planned before the Day of Founding.”

The boy nods, warily. “Tonight, yes.”

“You still need me, sir?”

“According to your report, your dissidents have one final meeting planned before the Day of Founding.”

The boy halts. His bafflement must be written all over his face because Palandine exchanges a glance with him and shrugs. When the boy turns around, he’s schooled his expression back to something more servile. “You still need me, sir?”

“According to your report, your dissidents have one final meeting planned before the Day of Founding.”

The boy nods, warily. “Tonight, yes.”

“The Order will make the arrests then. I want you there to be our eyes and ears, in case anyone tries to--” Tain gives a careless wave of the hand with a sidelong glance at Prang, “--make an escape.”

You fucking bastard. The boy fights to keep his hands from clenching, from striking the smugness from Tain’s face. Fear and loyalty keep him choke-chained, even as Tain’s knowing smile seeks to test his limits. Fuck you straight in the cloaca.
Both of them are eyeing him now. “While I think it’s sensible to have me there, sir,” the boy says, his voice strained in his ears, “wouldn’t it be quicker to arrest them at their homes and places of work?”

“Quicker, yes, but it also leaves an increased room for error. It requires greater coordination. And in the meantime, while we’re dragging people from their homes and waking half the neighborhood, who knows what might happen? One dissident might manage to warn another. We can’t have that, can we?”

All this work, and Tain still doesn’t trust him. It rankles down to the soles of his boots.

He returns to Lakat that evening to find Asyeda in the middle of packing. She greets him with a press of palms. “We have the house to ourselves tonight,” she says as she stuffs away a bag of toiletries. “Enabran is out working.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That I’m going to visit Hitka and the baby, of course. Don’t worry, he won’t check up on me. When I get back, all I’ll have to say is, ‘Oh, Enabran, she’s learning to crawl, isn’t that lovely?’ and his eyes will glaze over, and the matter will be forgotten. I love the man, sometimes, but he can’t scent anything that isn’t below his nose.”

They take dinner together in her bedroom. It’s unorthodox, and with Enabran gone, a tad unseemly. The boy shoots her a coy smile over the spread. “Really, Asyeda. What will the servants say?”

“Luckily,” she says, brightly, “their minds are not nearly as filthy as yours, my dear.”

“I would not be so sure about that.”

The meal is pleasant enough, the two of them exchanging memories of Enabran’s old (and unfortunately late) chef Zalkany, and his penchant for colorful, blunt language he’d picked up as a military cook off-world. The boy is sharing one of Zalkany’s favorite four-line *ik’shana* folk poems— the one which first taught the boy the basics of sexual reproduction— when he notices the strain in Asyeda’s smile. It draws the boy’s concern.

“Are you having second thoughts?” he asks. He only hopes he doesn’t have to convince her into taking this last, condemning step.

“It’s only nerves,” she says, and calls in the servants to clear away the dishes. “We should be going.”

The light transport to Cardassia City is cramped with commuters, even at the late hour. Everyone aboard is engaged in conversation with their neighbor, and they join in until the railroad reaches their stop several hours later. The boy lets Asyeda lead the way, as he had during their first outing. If there’s any change in venue, his beacon will promptly inform Tain of his new whereabouts.

He needn’t have worried; Asyeda takes them back to the same building and down a flight of stairs that opens to a sub level. An old man stands guard at the entrance, the group’s lone and pitiful attempt at a scout. His name is on Tain’s list, too. As before, the man presses his palm to Asyeda’s and lets them inside.

The room is damp with barrels of kanar crowding half its floor space. The dissidents and their accomplices— younger relatives, in most cases— occupy the other half as they sit in a semi-circle around an Oralian shrine.

Once everyone is assembled, the ringleaders begin hashing out the particulars of tomorrow’s march through Imperial Plaza, including what to do should the Obsidian Order make an appearance. The
boy focuses on his breathing, a four-count inhalation and exhalation, retreating in his seat. The conversation flows around him, but he’s far removed from it.

The bang, when it comes, startles them into silence. He’s the only one who doesn’t jump. For a moment, they sit dumbfounded and disbelieving. Then the chaos begins.

Asyeda is the first to her feet. She grabs the boy by the arm and hauls him up. “There’s a hatch,” she hisses, dragging him behind her. Around them, the others scramble and shout. Stupid and uncoordinated. They never had a chance.

Tucked behind the barrels is a portal in the floorboards. Asyeda throws it open one-handed. Before the boy can stop her, she’s shoved him through. At the sudden loss of footing, he stumbles, nearly falling down a darkened staircase before she grabs him again. She pulls him along a corridor like an errant child, ignoring his protests. “Asyeda!”

“This way,” she says.

He digs in his heels, forcing her to stop. When she lets go of his arm to turn around in confusion, he catches her by the wrist. They stare at each other in the dark, breathing hard. Above them, there is a thumping of boots and the muffled cries of traitors resisting arrest.

“Elim,” she whispers, “we have to go.”

She doesn’t try to tug free. He doesn’t let go. Her eyes flick back and forth over his face as she tries and fails to understand.

“Elim--”

Voices draw closer, and then the corridor floods with light. They squint against it. Agents meet them from all sides, disruptors drawn only on Asyeda.

She doesn’t seem to notice. Her eyes are on Tain, winding his way past his agents and smiling. “Here they are,” Tain says, amiably, and the boy envies his ability to maintain such an unflappable attitude. The boy releases Asyeda’s wrist and takes a step back, allowing her and Tain to exchange a long glance. It’s only then that she makes the connection.

“How long?” she asks Tain.

“Since the beginning, my dear.”

She looks between him and the boy with widened eyes before turning to the boy. Her expression is broken, pained. “Elim,” she begins, and it’s a plea. Not for forgiveness, or help, but for an explanation. It cuts him deep.

The boy can only stare back, offering nothing.

Whatever Asyeda is looking for, she doesn’t find it. The pain ebbs from her face, leaving behind a coldness that’s even worse to bear. With one last glare in the boy’s direction before the agents escort her away, she turns--

--and spits in his face.

The boy winces as it catches him underneath the eye. To his left, he hears Tain chuckle, and a moment later feels a square of fabric being pushed into his hand. The boy uses it to wipe at his face.
“Come along, Garak,” Tain says, still sounding terribly amused. “It’s time you and I had a drink.”

* * *

This time, when Tain gives him the day off—paid—as a reward for his service, the boy takes it. Tain has also seen fit to promote him to agent. He should be overjoyed. He is overjoyed.

With the money he’s saved, he should take a skimmer out to a mountain resort, hire some company, and celebrate his good fortune while relaxing in a sauna. It’s what the other agents claim to do in their limited free time. But that’s never been his style. Instead, he finds himself back in the house in Cardassia City.

From his look of concern, Tolan must sense something amiss, but he seems to takes note of how Mila, always the wiser of the two, is staying out of the boy’s way. Tolan follows her lead, fixing a pot of choban tea that’s “there if you want it,” and disappearing into his shed.

The stress makes the boy cold. It begins in the pit of his stomach and spreads into his extremities, sinking down to his bones. Even the scalding tea fails to warm him.

He wanders into the garden, letting the sun scorch his ridges as he admires Tolan’s ability to turn inhospitable dirt into living art. What if flits through his mind again, and the futility of it fills him with a shaking rage.

“Mila said I should leave you alone,” comes Kesset’s voice and he’s beside the boy, leaning too close.

The boy bristles at his presence. “You should listen to her,” he warns, and steps deeper into the garden until he’s treading in the bed of twisting pink and yellow Vulcan stinging ivies. The boy remembers how they’d been nothing but groundlings when he was a child, how Tolan had lovingly trained the reluctant vines over the years to climb the trellises.

“Ah, Elim, careful-- you’ll hurt them!”

The ivies ruined, the boy moves on to the delicate yald’ana shrubs. He stomps them down. The snap of shattering branches is a satisfying balm. He glances over and laughs as he finds Kesset pulling at his hair, eyes misting and making a familiar whimpering noise. “Go away, Kesset,” the boy says, and stoops to rip out the Edosian orchids by the roots. They’ve always been his favorite. He throws them across the yard.

He’s turned his attention to the Bajoran lilies when Kesset grabs him, pinning his arms down in a tight hug. “Stop, Elim, please!” He gives the boy a shake. “Stop. Why are you acting like this?
What’s wrong?”

The boy thrashes. He can’t breathe. “Let me go, Kesset!”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong!”

The boy breaks free and swings out, punching Kesset so hard he feels another crack, this time of bone. Kesset collapses to his knees and spits out a tooth. He looks up at the boy with open shock, one hand on his broken jaw. There’s no hatred underneath it-- just plain, stupid terror. Even now, when he should know better, the damned Bajoran seems incapable of anything else.

“I told you,” the boy whispers, cradling his now throbbing fist. He hates how shaky his voice sounds. “I told you.”

Kesset only stares at him, not understanding.

Movement catches the boy’s attention. Tolan’s appeared in the ruins of his garden, likely drawn by their shouting. His eyes are on the Edosian orchids at his feet, the torn shrubs, the sky-- everywhere except the boy-- as if he’s physically incapable of looking at him.

The boy walks past and into the house. From her seat in the kitchen, Mila’s expression is unreadable, but he has no doubt that she’s seen everything. The boy continues out the front door, closing it behind him.

A week later, when they pass in the Order’s cavernous hallways, Mila tells him that Tolan has left Cardassia Prime on a transport. For Goralis II, of all places.

Not that it matters. The boy never sets foot in that house again.

* * *

Serot pauses to take a sip of water.

“I think now might be a good place to stop,” Julian says, gently.

“I--” Serot clears his throat. His voice has been on the verge of giving out for the past half hour. “I’m all right. I can keep going.”

“No,” Troi says, before Julian can argue with him. “Doctor Bashir is right. You’re emotionally and physically drained. You should rest. We can pick this up another time.” Smiling warmly, she adds, “You did very well.”

Serot acquiesces with a nod. Julian stands up, stretches, and gathers together his and Troi’s chairs to deposit in the storage closet. When he returns, Serot has wrapped the covers around himself, but is still sitting up, waiting.

Julian calls over Odo to lower the forcefield and administers the improvoline. “Goodnight, love,” Julian whispers.

Serot slurs out a reply; whatever it is, it isn’t coherent.

With one last glance, Julian follows Troi out of the brig. “What do you think?” he asks as he falls into step beside her. “Frankly, I don’t know what to make of it. I have at least a thousand new questions for him!”
“It’s a lot to take in,” Troi says, “but it isn’t about what we think. It took a great deal of courage for him to get as far as he did today.” She hesitates.

“But?” he prompts.

“But I’m sure you noticed he never once referred to Garak in the first person.”

“I can’t really blame him for wanting to distance himself from all that.”

“His disavowal of his own self is part of the reason why he’s having so much trouble adjusting. If he could accept his past for what it is, it would do him a great deal of good. But we’ll work on that. Doctor, now that he’s more comfortable, it would be best going forward if you sat out the rest of our sessions.”

Julian isn’t surprised by that. After all, there’s no medical reason for him to be intruding on Troi’s time with her client, fiancé or not. He’d lobbied for her to join the station because he’s aware that this is far beyond his expertise as a doctor. Still, it’s difficult to turn this over to her (albeit capable) hands.

Of course she picks up on that. “I’ll continue to confer with you when medically necessary, and when he allows it.”

“Oh, it’s all right. I want to be there, but like you said, this isn’t about me. I only wish I could do more to help.”

“What you’re doing now is nothing to sniff at,” Troi says, giving his arm a squeeze, and he feels gratified to hear it. They’re approaching the infirmary when she stops in the middle of the promenade. “There’s one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Serot was generally truthful in what he said. As far as I can tell without directly reading his thoughts, that is. But there were times when I sensed that he was being evasive, maybe even deliberately obfuscating the facts.”

“You mean he was lying?”

“Not lying, per se. Misleading. Dissembling.”

“About what?”

“I couldn’t pin it down to specifics, it was only a general feeling. But I’m certain he’s hiding something. Something he doesn’t want us to know.”

That sounds a great deal like lying to Julian.

Julian shakes his head. *Dammit, Serot. Can’t you tell we’re trying to help you?*

Chapter End Notes

The "narawak" is adapted from Andrew Robinson's short story "The Calling."

The concept of Tain having a family (which he also, shockingly, treats like garbage)
comes from the previously-mentioned Obsidian Gothic.

Most stories treat Mila as Tain’s mistress and Garak's birth as accidental; I prefer the idea that she was never romantically involved with Tain, and instead used him to further her line/own agenda without the need to marry. This is done best in bmouse's On the Importance of Family. <3

On Cardassia, the children of unwed parents hold few rights until they reach the age of majority. That's tragic. That Tain is incompetent at murder is bitterly amusing. Both ideas were inspired by Survival Skills.

Lastly, the idea that Tain makes Garak memorize many fraudulent identities comes from Flowering.
Chapter 24

“Doctor,” nurse Jabara calls from the threshold of his office, “you have a visitor.”

Julian frowns; he hasn’t been expecting anyone, and his next appointment isn’t for another hour. He swivels in his chair and blinks in surprise at the Cardassian man standing in the doorway. Julian looks him up and down, trying to place the familiar features, the long black hair. The man tilts his head, seemingly content to let him figure it out.

Last Julian saw him, it was on the small screen of his desk. Grinning, Julian rises to cross the room. “Doctor Parmak.”

“I do apologize for my unexpected appearance, Doctor Bashir, I--” Parmak stiffens as Julian grabs his hand and gives it a shake. His mouth falls open.

Julian lets go at once. “Ah! Uhm, sorry about that. Old human greeting. I didn’t mean-- I hope I didn’t offend you.”

“It’s quite all right.” Parmak smiles kindly in that polite Cardassian effort to set Julian at ease, and it mostly works, though he still feels like a dunce. “I’m afraid I haven’t had much contact with humans. Or any non-Cardassians, for that matter.”

“Well, you’re sure to see all types while you’re aboard the station.” Julian takes note of the heavy-looking bag propped against the door, no doubt containing all of Parmak’s worldly possessions. “Have you been assigned quarters yet?”

“Not yet. But if you don’t mind, Doctor Bashir, I’d prefer to see our patient first.”

Julian smiles at his dedication. He has a feeling they’re going to get along splendidly. “All right. Nurse Jabara,” he calls out, “I’m off to the brig. I should be back shortly.”

Parmak follows him from the infirmary with a sidelong glance. “Did the trial not go according to plan?”

Has it been that long since they last compared notes? Julian winces. “That’s one way of putting it,” he says, and catches Parmak up as quickly as he can: on the trial, on Gallitep, on Serot’s deadly encounter with Ro Laren, on the disturbing and seemingly subconscious self-harming. When they reach the security office, Parmak surrenders his luggage to the officer manning Odo’s desk. She takes her time looking over his medical equipment, making sure nothing can be jury-rigged into busting out their captive, before handing it back and waving them through.

Four Bajorans stand outside the forcefield of Serot’s cell. Julian smiles, pleasantly surprised that the station residents would pay him a visit. Then he notices their body language: hands on hips, arms crossed, scowling. One of them is the old nutter Mister Tima. Inside his cell, Serot passes a sewing wand over the hem of a dress, ostensibly the picture of calm. But his posture is rigid, distressed.

Whatever the Bajorans are saying, they cut off mid-sentence as Julian closes in. He doesn’t have to warn them to sod off; they cast last reproaches to their captive audience and shove past. “Look at that,” one mutters, “the Cardie-lover found another spoonhead. Is he collecting them?”

Parmak’s eyes go wide. Such reflexive hatred must not be common within Cardassia’s borders. But he recovers quickly. “You weren’t exaggerating, Doctor Bashir,” he says, “when you said I’d see ‘all types.’”
Julian gives him an apologetic look. He’ll find a way to make it up to him later.

As Serot catches sight of them, he leans back and sighs. “Ah, Julian, what happy timing.”

“Who were those people, Serot? What did they say to you?”

“Oh, my loyal fan club?” Serot smiles. “They do enjoy watching me work.”

“They’ve done it before? Why didn’t you say something? Odo needs to put a stop to this immediately. They have no right to come in here and harass you!”

“I will say this about prison: when people want to make an accusation against you, there isn’t a forcefield protecting either party. It does make for much more equitable interactions.” Serot’s eyes flick to Parmak. “My dear, aren’t you going to introduce me to your guest?”

Julian hazards a glance at Parmak; if his surprised look is any indication, Serot’s overly familiar greeting didn’t get past him. Well, that cat left the bag at warp speed. “Sorry, where are my manners?” Julian says with a touch of sarcasm. He’s well aware that Serot is changing the subject, but now isn’t the time to argue. It’ll have to wait. “Serot, this is Doctor Parmak.”

They incline their heads in Cardassian fashion. Julian flags down a security officer to get the forcefield lowered, and Parmak steps through. Julian remains outside the cell. Only one person in at a time, and all that rubbish. Serot never takes his eyes off Parmak as the Cardassian doctor stoops to remove his equipment from its carrying case.

Parmak unfolds a device bulkier than Julian’s own medical tricorder and begins to scan.

“I admit, Doctor,” Serot drawls, “I’m rather offended that you don’t recognize me.”

Parmak’s scanner goes still in his hands. “We’ve met?”

“Then again, I can’t really blame you, can I?”

Julian gets as close as the forcefield will allow. “Serot, I’ve said Doctor Parmak’s name countless times, and you never once indicated that you knew him.”

“I didn’t, at first,” Serot says. “And when I remembered, it hardly seemed relevant. Julian, Doctor Parmak here was Tain’s personal physician for a number of years.”

Parmak loses his grip on the scanner. Serot catches it before it can tumble to the floor. Julian looks between them in surprise. Dvoll’s dossier on Parmak had failed to mention that he’d ever worked for the head of the Obsidian Order-- not that it would’ve made any difference to Julian at the time. He’d been desperate to find a Cardassian doctor. Any Cardassian doctor.

“Nobody--” Parmak audibly swallows, and it’s impossible to miss the tremor that goes through him. Cautiously, like Serot might lunge forward and bite him, Parmak raises his shaking, gray hands. The left hovers over Serot’s forehead while the right covers the lower half of his face, forming a frame around Serot’s eyes. Parmak frowns and tilts his head. “Yes,” he whispers. “Yes, I remember you!” He gives a short puff of laughter, hands dropping to his sides. “We must’ve met a handful of times. You were his-- his protégé, weren’t you?”

“Something to that effect.”

“You played kotra together, in his office. He called me in once, complaining of chest pains--”
“Ah, yes. The man had an abysmal diet.”

“You were making a joke, threatening to move his pieces if he didn’t recover fast enough.”

“I was only trying to lighten the mood.”

“And he was getting so angry! I kept telling him to relax--”

“He threatened to have my hands amputated!” Serot glances in Julian’s direction. “Tain took his games very seriously.”

“And you kept provoking him! I was sure you were trying to give him a heart attack.” Parmak studies Serot for a beat. “Then I saw it in your eyes. You were terrified.”

Serot’s smile dims.

“It must’ve been months later,” Parmak continues, “when I realized I hadn’t seen you in a long time. Honestly, I was afraid to ask. So many of you would just . . . disappear. I assumed you’d been killed.”

Left out, Julian feels a spike of frustration. Parmak hasn’t been here ten minutes, and already Serot’s referring to Garak in first person, all without noticing. Julian clears his throat, jarring them from memory lane.

Parmak looks up. “Yes, right.” He recovers his scanner and resumes passing it over Serot’s body. “You, my friend, are a testament to Mindur Timot. He’d be very pleased with himself if he knew how well you’re holding up.” To Julian, Parmak elaborates, “Timot was one of the Order’s leads at the Applied Science Directorate. While I was working for Tain, I gained a passing familiarity with his work, although my fascination was with the cranial implants he was developing. I think, yes, there-- I’ve managed to calibrate my instruments to pick up on their unique signatures.”

Parmak spins the readout toward Julian. Although he can’t decipher the Cardassian text, the images are unmistakable. There’s a separate readout for each subdermal implant, glowing orange in better detail than what his own high-powered scanners can detect. “They’ve already begun to break down,” Julian notes with a frown.

“Which is normal,” Parmak says as he catches Serot’s alarmed expression. “The crystalline compounds were built to degrade over five years. After that, they’d begin to fail. No harmful effects; they simply stop performing their function. Timot built your implants differently. From the current rate of degradation-- are we guessing twelve years now, Doctor Bashir?”

“Give or take,” Julian agrees.

“Assuming that’s correct, I’d estimate your implants have another three years left in them.”

“After which time,” Serot says, “I’ll need to have them removed?”

“Perhaps. You could also choose to leave them as they are. Or even have them replaced.” Parmak glances between him and Julian. “That’s entirely up to you.”

Julian can feel Serot’s eyes on him, lost, looking to him-- as his doctor, as his partner-- for guidance. Bloody hell if Julian isn’t ready for that kind of responsibility. It isn’t my choice, he wants to say. We’ll make it work no matter what you decide. How can he know which option will make Serot happiest? To continue living as the Bajoran Serot isn’t in the skin they’ve both grown fond of, or to revert to his Cardassian appearance and its myriad knowns and unknowns? If there’s one thing Julian
can surmise, it’s that living as a visible Cardassian on a Bajoran space station will not be easy.

It’s the type of decision that will require discussion, the weighing of options, and probably best not hashed out in DS9’s brig, in front of the thieves and drunkards very obviously listening in.

After Julian’s shift, he invites Parmak to his quarters for the Cardassian equivalent of chicken potpie. Even replicated, the zabu meat is tender, and the chopped larish is a welcome substitute for peas. It’s the closest Julian can get to being hospitable without challenging his taste buds overmuch.

Parmak had seemed flustered by the invitation, and Julian had to scan his mental database, wondering if he’d committed a faux pas against Cardassian etiquette. Okay, maybe inviting a stranger into the quarters he shares with his currently absent boyfriend is a bit suspect, but they both need to eat, and the infirmary isn’t a dining hall. And, okay, maybe the Replimat or Quark’s would’ve been more socially-acceptable forums, but Julian isn’t an idiot; he knows the second he’s seen having dinner with a handsome Cardassian man, the station will be rumbling with the gossip that he’s caught a malignant strain of “lizard fever.”

If the nature of Julian’s relationship with Serot had been ambiguous before, it’s now glaringly obvious. Their quarters scream that a Cardassian lives here. Still, Parmak doesn’t let on that he’s noticed the decor or the change in temperature. Instead, he eats his meal, seemingly content to let Julian guide the conversation where he wants it to go.

And guide it he does. “–Of course, that’s the first thing I checked. Serot’s brain scans are much the same as they were months ago. There’s no indication that he’s reached the equilibrium you predicted. He hasn’t regressed, either, but he doesn’t seem to be making progress. I thought perhaps the prison wasn’t giving him the external stimuli he needed, but even Troi’s last few sessions with him haven’t brought any significant breakthroughs. I need to do something. The improvoline is keeping him from hurting himself, but it’s not a solution.”

Parmak slices into his pie with delicate cuts. “It seems that he’s plateaued.”

“I could pull him off the dezothomide–”

“I wouldn’t recommend it. We don’t yet know for sure if his progression is permanent, and in his current state he’s far too unstable to risk it. The self-harming aspect bothers me. In some of Timot’s earlier patients, it wasn’t uncommon for those awakened even under standard means to have psychotic breaks. Let’s just say that you’re lucky he’s well-monitored.”

For a moment, Julian is too stunned to speak. “Do you think that’s a possibility here?”

“Doctor Bashir, if your experimentation with the alpha-wave inducer demonstrated anything . . .” Parmak trails off meaningfully.

Right. How could he forget that little disaster? If it proved anything, it’s that Serot’s inner psyche is hardly the picture of mental health. Julian nods. “You wouldn’t happen to know of any other magical remedies beside the dezothomide, would you?”

“Luckily, magic won’t be necessary. The dezothomide should suffice, with one minor change.”

“We increase the dosage,” Julian says.

It’s a risk, but without the desegranine, they’re low on tried and tested alternatives. Troi seems to agree. For his part, Serot doesn’t protest their assessment or even ask a question. He rolls up his right sleeve and offers Julian an arm.
The hypospray hisses against Serot’s skin. Julian exchanges a glance with Parmak on the other side of the forcefield. The Cardassian reassures him with a nod.

They don’t have to wait long for the first effects of the increased dosage. That night, while Julian is in the throes of sleep, a comm from Odo cuts through his dreaming. “Doctor Bashir-- Odo to Doctor Bashir--”

“I’m awake! I’m awake!” Julian scrubs at his face and sits up. He fumbles for his communicator. “Bashir here.”

“Doctor Bashir, you have a medical emergency in the brig.”

He’s out of bed, tossing on a robe and patching through to Parmak in an instant.

Minutes later, Parmak joins him in the turbolift, smoothing errant strands of black hair and stifling a yawn with the back of his hand. When they reach the security office, Odo leads the way into the brig. “It started five minutes ago,” Odo says.

There’s no need for him to finish. Julian can hear the half-sobbing, half-whimpering through the door. Once it’s open, he rushes down the hall to Serot’s cell to find him doubled over on the floor, fingers laced behind his head to pull himself into a tight ball. Odo waves over another security officer and keys off the forcefield, allowing both Julian and Parmak inside.

Julian kneels and, placing a hand on Serot’s shoulder, grimaces as his fingers meet sticky dampness. He’s soaked in sweat. “I’m here, habibi. Where does it hurt?”

“Can’t--” Serot hisses as a spasm overtakes him. “Not-- in front--” He gasps. “In front of--”

Parmak turns. “Chief of Security Odo, would you mind allowing us some privacy? Only for a short while. Feel free to raise the forcefield, if you must. I don’t think your inmate will be attempting escape tonight.”

Odo grunts. Once they’re gone, Julian rubs circles between Serot’s shoulder blades, trying to encourage him to sit up. “It’s just us now. Tell me what’s wrong.”

With a shuddering breath, Serot unlaces his fingers and rises just enough that Julian can spot the source of his distress-- and embarrassment. “It’s ripping me in half,” Serot cries before folding in on himself again. “Please, Julian, I don’t care how, just get it out! Please.”

Julian frowns. It’s one thing to have a painful erection, but not like this. Before he can ask his next question, Parmak says, “Doctor Bashir, I think I understand. If I’m correct, the increased dose of dezothomide has renewed his old neural pathways.” A wince of sympathy crosses Parmak’s face as Serot whimpers. “His penis has everted inside his body.”

Normally folded and dormant, now pushing against his internal organs. “God, Serot,” Julian whispers, and delves into his medical kit for an analgesic. “I’m so sorry. Can you-- try to retract it?”

Serot shakes his head. He relaxes when Julian administers the hypospray.

“Either the pathway isn’t strong enough,” Parmak says, “or his muscles have atrophied.”

“Then if we weakened the pathway, maybe--”

Serot’s fingers clamp around Julian’s arm. “No.” He takes a trembling breath. His eyes are glazed over and faraway. “It needs to be done.”
“Then we should prepare for surgery,” Parmak says.

It’s another hour of hashing out logistics with Odo and downing mugs of raktajino before they’re cleared to proceed. To Julian’s relief, Odo doesn’t resist the necessity of the procedure or make a fuss about the placement of his security personnel. “If you say so, Doctor,” is all he says, and instructs his team to remain outside the infirmary, out of the way. “Alert me when the surgery is over.”

He handcuffs Serot to the biobed.

“I suppose I should be flattered by the constable’s distrust,” Serot notes with an experimental tug of his wrist. The cuffs hold.

The timing could not be better; only two nurses and a technician are manning the infirmary at this early hour of the morning. As they prep, Julian quickly discovers that Parmak has no difficulty finding what he needs. He’s right at home amid the Cardassian equipment. “I can take care of everything from here,” Parmak tells him, gently, and although Julian knows it’s nothing but a generous offer for rest, he isn’t about to hand over the infirmary to another doctor. His place is here.

Still, Julian knows his limits. While the cosmetic aspect of the surgery is routine enough, the rerouting of Cardassian reproductive and digestive tracts requires a great deal of precision and expertise. Given adequate time, Julian could do it himself, but with Parmak here, it makes sense to surrender to experience and allow the Cardassian to take the lead.

Once Serot has been lulled into unconsciousness, they’re ready to begin.

Parmak reaches for the laser scalpel and gives Julian a glance. Behind Parmak’s red face mask, Julian can see the raised eyeridges, asking a question. Julian feels a twinge of embarrassment at his concern. He’s performed countless procedures similar to this, but he has to admit that Parmak is only looking out for him, and wouldn’t be double-checking if he wasn’t personally involved with the patient. Julian nods. He’s ready to proceed.

The laser scalpel pops and crackles as Parmak guides it across flesh, burning hair follicles and slicing through tissue, sending puffs of smoke into the air. Parmak talks as he works, his voice keeping Julian grounded as he focuses on his own task: removing the minuscule implants scattered throughout Serot’s body and throwing off their bioscans.

It’s an hour into the surgery when Julian extracts the last implant. “Got you, you little bugger,” he mutters, tossing it into the bin with its mischief-making brethren. Julian refreshes the biofunction monitor and frowns over the new readings. “His endorphin levels are abnormally high. The delta-wave inducer should be keeping them elevated, but not to this extent.”

Parmak emits a noncommittal grunt. “His endorphin levels were elevated before we induced sleep.”

“What? How would you know that?” Julian tries to keep any accusation out of his voice as he continues, “I never saw any indication of this on his previous brain scans.”

“That’s because you never observed his brain after the wire had been activated.” Parmak switches on the autosuture and bows his head in concentration. “Surely you must’ve noticed the implant in his postcentral gyrus.”

Julian looks over the biochemical readings again, beginning to understand. “That implant— it triggers a rise in endorphins?”

“When he passes a certain threshold of pain, yes. It produces an euphoric, sometimes ecstatic state. That’s why he was suffering from penile tumescence when we arrived. The pain put him into an
unfortunate positive feedback loop. There’s no need for concern, Doctor Bashir. His body has long grown accustomed to the increased endorphins. These types of cranial implants are common in Obsidian Order agents.”

Cranial implant. Endorphins. Triggered by pain. He doesn’t like any of it.

“That explains a few things,” Julian says, mostly to himself. Yet one more secret that Serot has kept from him. He should really make a list.

It’s another two hours of painstaking work until Parmak is ready to close, and an additional hour before the external reconstruction is complete. Afterward, Serot sits propped up, his lower body wrapped in a biomimetic sheath while his altered flesh stabilizes. Julian slaps the backs of his hands each time he tries to peel back the foil and peek underneath. Serot flops against the biobed, cocooned and defeated. “Now I know how hasperat must feel,” he complains.

Julian laughs. He’s forgotten how good that feels. After a moment’s hesitation, he leans in to kiss Serot, hard, suffusing it with all his pent-up worry and lust and love. Serot gasps against his lips, but Julian only kisses him again.

When they pull apart, a faint blush has spread across Serot’s cheeks. “My dear, there are people.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve picked up some dull Cardassian aversion to public affection. Because if you have, my dear Mister Pela, I will make it my life’s work to break you of it.” Julian weaves their fingers together. “I can’t wait until you’re out for good. I miss touching you.”

Serot’s blush deepens. It will be hard, never seeing it again.

“There were no complications that I can yet identify.” Parmak is saying from behind the biocomputer, “but I’d recommend keeping him under observation here for another twenty-six hours, at least until we’re sure everything is working as it should.”

A touch on the cautious side, but Julian isn’t about to argue with anything that keeps Serot out of the brig. Odo will not be pleased by the news, but he’ll live.

Parmak steps around the room divider to approach Serot’s biobed. “Have you made a decision, Mister Pela, regarding the rest of your alterations?”

“I—” Serot looks to Julian. “I don’t know if I’m ready yet. Must I decide now?”

“Of course not,” Julian says, squeezing his hand. “You can take all the time you want. You don’t have to change anything if you’re not comfortable.”

“And nothing is irreversible,” Parmak adds. “I must return to Cardassia soon, but Doctor Bashir may call on my assistance should he need it. Luckily, now that we’ve gotten the major surgery out of the way, anything else you elect will be mostly cosmetic. As for the rest of your treatment, I don’t expect you’ll be encountering any more unpleasant surprises as you did today.”

Serot’s eyes widen meaningfully. “I’m exceedingly grateful to hear it.”

Two days later, Julian escorts Parmak to the docking ring where his transport to Cardassia is waiting. “Thank you,” Julian says. “For everything. I know how much of a risk you took, helping us. It means a great deal to me, and to Serot.”

Parmak inclines his head, acknowledging the gratitude only indirectly. He adjusts the medkit slung over his shoulder. “If it isn’t too personal a question, Doctor Bashir, is your involvement a recent
development?"

Julian smiles. It’s a wonder Parmak waited this long. “You’re the first person to ask permission before inquiring into my personal life. We were together for almost a year before this whole thing started.”

Parmak nods and, hesitantly, reaches out to clasp his hand. “I wish you both the best of luck.”

Julian takes the sentiment to heart.

He stays to watch from the viewport, arms folded behind his back, as the transport pulls away from the station and goes to warp. It’ll be half an hour before the staff meeting. He strolls from one docking ring to the next, smiling thoughtfully as people hurry back and forth, carrying luggage and kissing loved ones goodbye. Through the din of chatter, he can hear Quark arguing with a trader over a requisition order.

Julian glances out another viewport and freezes in place. The docked ship is familiar. Cardassian, _galor_-class. _The Prakesh._

When he strides into the security office, Odo scowls at him from under smooth brows. “You’ll have to get in line, Doctor,” he says with a huff. “Gul Dvoll is already visiting with him, and she made it clear she was not to be disturbed.”

“Did she say what this is about?”

“She declined to provide that information.” Odo swivels in his seat and indicates a monitor behind his desk. “It’s too bad you had me remove the audio surveillance in his cell. It looks like an interesting conversation.”

Both Serot and Dvoll are animated, speaking with their hands as they argue. Serot keeps slapping his chest for emphasis, then points to the floor. Dvoll paces along the forcefield, sneering, and Julian can easily read the words enunciated on her lips: “foolish” and “human.”

Then she goes still. For a long moment all they do is stare at each other.

Julian can’t read their alien body language, but it seems they’re communicating something. He glances over to Odo, but the constable only shrugs, one hand propped under his chin as he continues to observe the interaction.

A blink later, Dvoll is gone and Serot is calmly embroidering a sleeve.

There’s a hiss of a door and Dvoll steps through. When her eyes fall on Julian, she doesn’t seem surprised to see him. He opens his mouth, but she cuts him off. “Doctor Bashir, I’ve fulfilled my end of the bargain.”

“What bargain?”

“You asked me for help, and I provided it, despite my every attempt to make you both see reason. I come bearing news of my success.” Dvoll tilts her head. “The Cardassian Union has accepted Mister Pela’s request to renounce his citizenship.”

“Oh. What did Serot say?”

She rolls her eyes. “He thanked me. The fool refuses to acknowledge the mistake he’s made, or that he’ll live to regret it. I tried. I reminded him what he’s giving up, but he’s under the impression that
you’re worth it.”

Julian can’t help but grin widely, even if Dvoll looks distinctly unimpressed with the level of Serot’s conviction. He glances over to Odo, who is listening with interest, then back to Dvoll. “I appreciate your concern, Lurin. But I think we’re going to be just fine.”
The promenade is a cacophony of clattering and shouting, filled with the scent of brewed raktajino, Lurian spiced stew, and burnt incense wafting down from the temple. Serot should be in their quarters right now, celebrating his release, not winding through DS9’s crowds during lunch hour. But he’d been insistent. “I need to see it,” he’d said, and that had been that.

Julian shoots him a worried glance. Serot is clearly overwhelmed by the mass of people and their stares. His eyes seem to be everywhere at once, taking in his surroundings, trying to absorb it all. A few times he has to stop and simply look. It’s too much too soon after six months inside one sterile cage after another.

It feels like an eon before they finally arrive. When they do, Serot gasps, blinking as if he’s sure the shop will pop out of existence. “It’s still here,” he says.

Julian looks at the tailor shop. The lights are off, casting the mannequins in shadow, but it’s otherwise just as Serot left it. Julian runs a hand down Serot’s hip and pulls him close. “Where else would it be?”

“I don’t understand. I checked my finances prior to my arrest. There was no way to cover the cost of the lease even another month. Oh, my dear Julian, please don’t look at me that way! I couldn’t possibly put that kind of burden on you. So I signed the space over to Quark. He’d been hounding me about it for years anyway. He claimed he was going to open an Argelian massage parlor.”

“Unfortunately for Quark,” Sisko calls out, smiling as he strides over, “I didn’t feel the station needed a massage parlor. Zoning issues aside, let’s just say I’d rather not attract that kind of clientele.”

Serot gapes at him. “Commander, you did this? Why? Any number of merchants would’ve paid a tidy sum for this space.”

“You’re right,” Sisko says. “But I had a feeling I should let you hang onto it for a while, in case you got your parole. And since you’re barred from leaving the station for the next year and a half, I thought it’d be best if you had something to keep yourself occupied.”

“And out of trouble,” Serot finishes, returning Sisko’s smile now. “Thank you, Commander. That was most thoughtful of you.”

“And kind,” Julian adds.

“Don’t mention it.” Sisko turns to go, then raises a finger. “Actually, I could do with a new suit. Rumor has it there might be a wedding coming up.”

“Of course, Commander. Once I’m settled in, I’d be delighted to make you something for the happy occasion.” Once Sisko has disappeared back into the crowd, Serot says, “Does everyone know about this plan of yours?”

“I only told Major Kira,” Julian says. “You should remember. She was there.”

“And she passed along the news to Lieutenant Dax.” Serot’s eyes flick around the area. A number of people are gathered on the upper level of the promenade, leaning over the railing and watching them. Evidently satisfied with what he’s seen, Serot takes Julian’s hand. “I think I’m ready to go home.”
Julian can’t keep the stupid grin off his face as he tugs Serot along the corridor. Serot plays it coy, not outright resisting, but following much slower than necessary, trying but failing to hide the smile pulling at the corners of his lips. “Come on,” Julian whines.

He’s about to start pouting when Serot yanks him sideways into a shadowy accessway. Startled, Julian lands hard against Serot’s chest with a grunt. Before he can utter a word, warm lips meet his, cutting off further thought. This is unexpected, but definitely welcome. Grabbing at Serot’s tunic, Julian opens his mouth to let in Serot’s probing tongue. Serot moans in the back of his throat and gives Julian’s bum an encouraging squeeze.

They exchange desperate kisses, Julian grinding against Serot’s hip until he begins to feel lightheaded. He tugs at his uniform collar. Serot is immediately to the rescue, undoing the zipper and placing more kisses and bites up and down his neck. “Oh, god,” Julian whispers, eyes rolling back, “you can’t possibly want to have a go at it here.”

“Why not, my dear?”

“I’m not sure—oh, there, yes—but public sex might be a parole violation.”

“You make a salient point.”

“I usually do.” He gasps as Serot nips his collarbone. “Then again—”

Julian’s communicator chirps. “Dax to Bashir.”

Sighing, Julian gives it a tap. “Bashir here.”

“Is Pela with you?”

The question throws him off. “Well, yes. I took the week off so I could spend—”

“Think you two can swing by Quark’s around nineteen hundred?”

There’s no hiding the hint of mischief in her voice. Julian knows her too well. Great, what could she possibly be scheming? “I don’t know, Jadzia, I had a whole evening planned—”

“Come on, Julian. Just for an hour. Then you can have him all to yourself. It’ll be fun, I promise!”

Before Julian can protest, Serot chimes in. “We’ll be there.”

“Good! We’ll see you then. Nineteen hundred, don’t forget! Dax out.”

Julian squints at him through the darkness. “You didn’t have to agree to that, you know. She probably has some kind of dreadful party in the works.”

The moment thoroughly ruined, Serot helps Julian zip up his tunic. “But she did promise it to be fun.”

Back in the shelter of their quarters, Serot takes his time reacquainting with his surroundings, greeting the regnar with a smile, running his fingers over the furniture, and sniffing the flowers Julian’s set out on the table. He then excuses himself to take a “long, solitary shower.” Julian decides he can understand the desire for privacy after so long without it, even as he wants nothing more than to join him. So he waits, silently ticking down the minutes with growing impatience until the tap shuts off. Minutes later, Serot steps out of the refresher with a robe tightly cinched about the waist. He crosses the room to contemplate his closet.
Julian hovers beside the bed with a hopeful smile. Serot glances over. “My dear, if you wouldn’t mind.” He makes a walking motion with two fingers and nods to the door.

Julian stares back at him, jarred by the sudden coldness after the ravishing he received in the corridor. The hurt must be written all over his face, but Serot doesn’t back down. Sighing, Julian retreats from the room and drifts into the common area to replicate tea.

The tea is cold by the time Serot finally emerges, wearing a suit of gold and purple. The cut is strangely geometric and symmetrical, a style Julian is beginning to associate with Cardassians. Serot adjusts the cuffs and raises a questioning brow.

“I like it,” Julian murmurs, and he means it.

“I do apologize for the delay.”

“Yes, well, we better get a move on before we’re late.” Dammit, he wasn’t quite successful at masking his petulance this time, if Serot’s surprised look is any indication. Julian extends his arm in what he hopes is an apologetic gesture, and relaxes when Serot takes it.

When they arrive at Quark’s, Jadzia hops up to take Serot by the shoulders and steer him into a seat beside Kira. “You’re the guest of honor,” she says.

They’ve pushed multiple tables together to accommodate everyone. Counselor Troi and Cadet Tigan are the first to offer their congratulations, followed by Sisko, O’Brien, and even Keiko. “Really,” Serot protests as Kira offers him a brief embrace, “you act as if I earned a medal of valor.”

“Dax will take any excuse to go drinking,” O’Brien says, raising his glass in her direction. “Not that I’m objecting, mind you.”

Jadzia leans across the table to favor Serot with a warm, compassionate smile. “Don’t sell yourself short, Pela. You took responsibility, and you served your time. That’s a big deal. Think of this as a celebration for starting over. It isn’t easy, living in your own shadow. I should know.”

“A very wise observation, Lieutenant,” Serot says with a nod, “but at least you had the advantage of being reborn as a lovely young woman.”

Keiko laughs. “Did you want to be a young woman?”

“That’s not the only reason why we’re here to celebrate,” Sisko says. “Mister Pela, I have it on authority that your application to become a Federation citizen is due to be accepted within the next few days.”

That’s unexpected and welcome news. Before Julian can voice his relief, Quark scoffs from behind them and lays down a tray of drinks. “And just when you were getting interesting, too!” He shows off rows of pointed teeth as he dangles a glass of thick black liquid beneath Serot’s nose. “So, Pela, this parole the Bajorans have you on-- did they ban you from enjoying alcoholic beverages?”

Serot takes the glass and peers into its depths. “No, I’m merely prohibited from possessing any weapons or communicating directly with anyone in the Cardassian Union. Save for a few exceptions. Quark, this is kanar.”

“I can see why they made you a spy,” Quark mutters, and gives a shrug when he catches Julian’s glare. “You are a Cardassian, aren’t you? Or would you rather I got you a root beer?”

“This is fine,” Serot says, to Julian’s surprise, and takes a careful sip.
By the time dinner arrives, Serot is already on his third kanar. He’s holding it well for someone who’s only indulged in the occasional glass of springwine in the last twelve years, but Julian can tell the difference. His eyes shine as he outright giggles with Kira over some fond memory, and he’s overly loud while chatting with Jadzia and Sisko across the table. They’re equally as rambunctious and don’t seem to mind. When Quark deposits the fourth glass, Julian is relieved that Serot is too busy roping Odo into the conversation-- reassuring the constable with animated hand gestures that there are no hard feelings-- to notice it.

It’s nearly twenty-three hundred hours when they, at last, call it a night. “These two lovebirds probably want to get reacquainted,” Jadzia says, elbowing Julian in the ribs.

A microexpression of fear crosses Serot’s face, there and gone at once, and the realization hits Julian like an awakening slap. Of course. How could he have been so dense to have missed it?

The walk back to their quarters is done in silence. Serot is steady on his feet but still has the glazed-over expression of the highly intoxicated. If he’s nervous, he isn’t letting on. Shields and facades to protect himself. Julian blames Garak for that.

“Computer,” Julian calls out as the door slides open, “lights, sixty percent.” The room brightens and Julian toes off his boots. To his right, Serot eases himself into the rock couch and rubs at his face. Julian unloops his belt, tosses it to the floor. “You must be tired.”

“I have some energy in me yet.” Serot’s tone is flirtatious, but there’s no missing the trepidation underneath.

“Even so, maybe it’d be best if we turned in for the night.”

“Already?” Serot frowns. “My dear, we’ve waited so long. You’ve been brazen about your desires for the past week. In fact, you’ve lead me to believe that your condition is on the verge of terminal.”

“Oh, believe me, Serot, I know. But I want you to be comfortable.” When Serot doesn’t reply, Julian lowers himself to the floor until he’s kneeling between Serot’s legs. “I was there, you know. I’ve already seen everything.”

Serot looks away. “Not like this.”

That’s true; they aren’t in the sterile environment of the surgical suite, separated by doctor-patient objectivity. Julian rubs his thumbs in circles over Serot’s knees. “You’re right, it’s not the same. How about this-- we’ll go as slow as you like. No rush. If you need to stop, just say the word.”

“With the lights out.”


Serot’s breath catches against his. “That’s a laudable sentiment, but you’ll find once--”

“That’s not what you say,” Julian teases, “when someone says they love you.”


“Boorish, really.”
“Callous,” Serot agrees.

“Cold-blooded.”

“Now, now! There’s no need for name calling!” Serot grasps Julian by the shoulders, and soon they’re kissing again. “See?” he whispers. “Do I feel cold to you?”

Serot’s mouth is hot and wet against Julian’s. He’s the furthest thing from cold. But Julian isn’t about to let up. “Then say it.”

Serot turns his head, breath tickling Julian’s ear as he mouths the words. “I love you.”

Julian feels his grin widen as his heart does a backflip in his chest. “Damn right,” he says, and drags Serot from the rock couch and into the bedroom.

There’s some disagreement over the definition of “dim,” and Serot fusses over the lights until his body, stretched out on the bed, is cast shadows and silhouette. For now, he can hide. Julian wiggles free of his remaining clothing and joins him, covering Serot like a blanket and angling his hips as strong arms encircle him, pulling him close. Julian is content to stay this way, framing Serot’s face between his hands and kissing him, being held, the taste of kanar more palatable when delivered by Serot’s tongue.

Slowly, Julian works at the buttons of Serot’s tunic and huffs in frustration when they turn out to be ornamental. Taking pity on him, Serot twists a few hidden clasps and shrugs free, exposing his skin to Julian’s roaming hands and lips.

It isn’t until Julian is combing his fingers through Serot’s curling chest hair that he notices the differences. “You’re bigger,” he says. Serot tenses underneath him, and he hastily adds, “Not in a bad way! The muscles in your shoulders, and here, in your pectoralis major-- they’re more developed than I remember. Not too obviously, but I haven’t seen you in so long--”

“I am aware.” Serot gestures to his discarded tunic. “That was the only suit that fit.”

“I imagine.” Julian prods at his right deltoid in fascination. “Unless you’ve been upping your pushup routine, I’d attribute the increased muscle growth to your Cardassian hormones returning to normal levels. If I were to guess, I’d say you’re close to reaching--”

“Julian.”

“Right, right. Sorry. Shutting up now.”

Julian bestows a last peck on the deltoid and kisses a line down Serot’s stomach until he reaches the waistband of his trousers. There’s a fine tremor going through Serot now, and though he hasn’t breathed a word of protest, Julian knows they’re on shaky ground. Careful, he cautions himself. As he unhooks the fastenings, one by one by one, the anxiety and anticipation becomes a stifling weight in his chest. It’s important-- for Serot, for the future of their relationship-- that he get this right. If not, he’ll have to earn Serot’s trust all over again.

He’s tugging, gently, at the waistband when a hand goes to his head, stopping him. Julian looks up, but he can’t make out Serot’s expression in the darkness.

Serot gives a nod.

Julian’s mouth has gone dry. He nods back.
The trousers land in a pile at the foot of the bed. A second later, Julian is atop Serot again, exchanging hungry kisses while his hands explore. His nails rake over the soft skin of his sides, causing Serot to gasp and arch back. He’s still trembling, but he’s warming to it, moaning as Julian sucks and nibbles up and down his neck. “Julian,” he groans at last, “Julian, please.”

His legs splay in offering. Julian tries to look into his eyes, but they’re shut tight. Before he can ask if he’s sure, Serot catches Julian’s wrist and guides his hand, down, past the smooth, warm skin of his belly.

The first row of scales is a jarring contrast. It isn’t the change in texture-- the scales are fine and smooth in their own reptilian way, blending almost seamlessly into Bajoran skin, but they don’t radiate heat like the rest of Serot’s body. Beneath him, Serot audibly swallows. The fingers around Julian’s wrist loosen, giving him free rein.

Julian keeps his touch light, fingertips brushing over the well-defined ridge and the fanned, armored scales of the penile sheath, slick and hinting at what lies inside. Serot twitches as a finger caresses its circumference, then hums approval. So far, so good.

Back on the path, Julian follows the ridge lower, lower, pressing until he finds the spot where the scales give way. Julian remembers Parmak’s advice, how the doctor’s clipped tones and narrowed eyes had underlined his discomfort in sharing such sensitive information with a non-Cardassian. Sucking two fingers into his mouth to wet them, Julian pushes until he feels resistance. Serot’s reaction is immediate: his breath speeds up and his hips buck for increased contact. An encouraging sign. Julian kisses his inner thigh and murmurs, “Can you focus for me, love?”

Julian knows it’s difficult for him to flex the reconstructed muscles, but Serot gasps through it, fisting the bed covers and trembling until the scales around Julian’s fingers yield, allowing him to push deeper inside. There are ridges here, too, the heat gripping him so tightly it makes Julian lightheaded with want. But he keeps his attention on Serot’s every whimper and plea. “Too much,” Serot hisses between panting breaths, “I can’t-- I can’t--”

Of course, it’ll take time before the awakened nerves can handle the stimulation. Julian withdraws his fingers and offers his tongue instead, smiling as that prompts a howl and a stream of blasphemies against the Prophets. He doesn’t let up, savoring the embossed texture of the scales, the taste and scent of him so alien yet familiar it fills Julian with joy and relief.

Serot growls low in his throat. His fingers sink into Julian’s hair. “I’m about to-- I can’t stop it, I need to--”

“Do it,” Julian says.

He can’t fathom how, much less why, Serot’s kept himself pent up this long. Misplaced embarrassment, Julian guesses. Whatever the reason, it must be a special kind of torture, because when the pressure finally snaps, Serot throws his head back and everts with a strangled cry.

As Serot lies there, sprawled and struggling to catch his breath, arousal curved against his belly on full display, Julian sits back on his haunches and gapes. His eyes rake over it, up and down, reading every glistening scale. No, the surgical suite did not prepare him for this. At all.

Serot lifts his head. Something on Julian’s face must not meet his approval, because he frowns and reaches for the bed sheet. He’s pulling it over himself when Julian rouses from his trance. He rips the sheet away and throws it to the floor with the rest of their clothes.

“No,” he says, and it’s the last word he speaks for a long time.
Much later, when they’ve both been sated, Julian dreams.

A Jem’Hadar soldier stalks him through the ruins of the Defiant. Julian only catches glimpses of the monster—scaled, face wreathed in horns, weapon drawn. Blood rushes in Julian’s ears as he tries to evade capture, but it’s no use. The soldier grabs him by the shoulders and shoves him against the wall. He shouts, but the barrel of the gun is underneath his chin, and then--

Softly-spoken Kardasi words whisper past Julian’s ear. Fingers stroke his hair, coaxing him back into his body. Julian swallows and presses his face into Serot’s shoulder as the dream, the nightmare, falls away. Serot continues to rock him back and forth like a child, murmuring in Kardasi, until Julian loosens his grip.

“This is a change,” says Serot at last. “Me, comforting you.”

“It’s that blasted Dominion simulation. I can’t seem to get it out of my head.”

“You mean this has been happening, ever since?”

“Off and on.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s silly, after everything you’ve--”

“It’s not silly.”

Julian nods, too tired to argue. He remembers how the Jem’Hadar had grabbed him by the throat in Quark’s bar, the look in his eyes. Not even real. The Founders had violated his mind, made him think for the briefest moment that the station had been destroyed, and Serot along with it. But it’s over, done. Sighing, Julian settles back into his pillow.

“I’m here now,” Serot says. “Go back to sleep, my love.”

Nestled and warm, it isn’t hard to drift off. When Julian wakes again, it’s morning. For the first time in six months, he finds a solid body beside him. He smiles and nuzzles closer, burying his nose into the fall of Serot’s hair. “Mm, I can’t tell you how much I’ve missed this.”

Serot pulls Julian’s arm tighter around his chest. His voice is slurred with sleep. “Oh, and why’s that? Have you been sworn to secrecy?”

“On my mother’s grave.”

“What a quaint idea. Should that stop me from interrogating you for details?”

“Not unless you wish harm on your future mother-in-law!”

“My future--” Serot turns around until they’re nose-to-nose. “My dear Julian, isn’t it common for humans to have a formal engagement before making such pronouncements?”

“Typically, yes. Patience, my dear Mister Pela. I’ve got it all planned out.”

“When?”

“Soon enough.”

“Ah.” Serot rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “More secrets.”
“I’m allowed a few of my own, you know.”

“Then I’ll leave you to your scheming.” Serot kisses Julian’s temple and makes an attempt to roll out of bed. He doesn’t get far; Julian holds him down, keeping his hips pinned with one arm. Once he realizes he won’t be escaping so easily, Serot tries another tactic, whispering sweetly, “I really should be getting up, my love. I promised Nerys I’d meet her for breakfast, and I intend to open the shop afterward.”

“Already? Serot, you haven’t been out of the brig for twenty-six hours yet. Nobody would mind if you took it easy for another day. Stay here and rest.”

“Rest is precisely the last thing I need. No, I have to make it clear to everyone on this station that I’m back and I’m staying.” Serot looks up at him, his eyes bright and earnest. “Please, Julian. I apologize if you had a day of indolence planned, but nothing would make me feel better than resuming my normal routine. I need to be useful again.”

There’s no way Julian can refuse him. He doesn’t stand a chance against those eyes. “I’ll allow it,” Julian says, tapping his chin. Day of indolence, indeed! “On one condition. You find yourself an assistant.”

Serot smiles. “Who do you have in mind?”

Granted, Julian would rather spend his shore leave mapping every hidden scale on Serot’s body—preferably on Risa’s famous Temtibi Lagoon. But vacationing away from Deep Space Nine isn’t an option. Besides, he’s always enjoyed watching Serot work. And, if Julian is being honest, he hopes that his presence will keep the station residents on their best behavior.

For the first hour after Serot activates the open sign, the shop is quiet, and Julian makes himself useful by helping with inventory. The work is monotonous and perhaps a tad below his pay grade, but he can easily keep up with the task while he watches Serot from across the room—bent over his spreadsheets, spectacles perched on his nose. Occasionally, he catches Serot’s eye from over a display of scarves or blouses, and they exchange a smile.

No, it isn’t Temtibi, but at least they’re together.

Through the windows, Julian glimpses people strolling along the promenade and taking notice of the shop. Soon, the customers are trickling in, garments slung over their shoulders. “Oh, Mister Pela, I see you’re back,” says one woman, drawing out a wrinkled green sweater. “My nephew tore a sleeve this time. How soon can you have it repaired?”

Serot has only begun to record the order when a man appears with a pair of slacks that require letting out.

Within the hour, a line trails out the door, with no sign of letting up. Julian has to weave through the customers to reach Serot, where one woman has made two sizable piles of clothes on the counter—one for alterations, the other of new purchases. “It looks like someone has a six-month backlog,” Julian remarks as he goes by.

Serot shoots him an exasperated look. “One would think I’m the only tailor within five light years.”

“No, it isn’t Temtibi, but at least they’re together.

“On the bright side, at least they’ve forgiven you for the crime of being Cardassian.”

“Yes, well, as I always say: never underestimate the power of a fashion emergency to bring together the species.” They’re running him ragged, but underneath it Julian can tell he’s enjoying himself.
The bustle continues well into the evening, and Serot has no choice but to call a moratorium on new work orders until he can catch up. As they close the shop for the night, they still can’t believe the reversal. “Did you have any idea this would happen?” Serot asks.

“I hadn’t a clue,” Julian says. *Everything we’ve been through this past year has made me cynical,* he realizes in dismay.

Despite stifling an occasional yawn, Serot seems to be in good spirits and doesn’t complain about Julian blatantly steering him in the opposite direction of the Habitat Ring. That is, until they’re inside the loud, jovial chaos of Quark’s bar. Serot gives him a look that demands an explanation, and fast. “Julian.”

“We’re just going for a short walk, love,” Julian says, flashing his most winning, get-away-with-murder smile. He’s had this moment planned for months, plotted every nuance and calculated each probability. All that work, and his heart is still a rapidfire metronome in his chest. Across the bar, he exchanges a nod with Quark and leads them upstairs.

The unspoken communication has not gone unnoticed, if Serot’s sidelong glance is any hint. But he only quirks his head and follows, playing along.

The holoprogram is up and running as they enter, the slosh of lapping water reaching Julian’s ears as the door fades into an outcropping of rock. Straight ahead, the sun is red and setting over the lagoon, turning the sky a picturesque orange. Behind them, the blue domes of the weathered buildings are just as he requested. Quark’s people do good work.

Taking Serot’s hand, Julian leads the way across the beach.

“The water is much calmer here than in San Francisco,” says Serot, peering into the distance where an old sailboat is listing against the horizon. Gingerly, he bends down to dip his hand into the water. His face lights up. “Warmer, too.”

“That was the Pacific Ocean.” Julian slips off his shoes and rolls up the cuffs of his trousers. “This is the Aegean Sea. A small island in the nation state of Greece, to be exact.”

“Ah, the home of your friend Hippocrates! I admit, this is a welcome surprise. When those doors opened, I was afraid you’d brought me to Cardassia again. But if I recall correctly, my dear, aren’t you from a different island?”

“Britain’s beaches can be absolutely stunning, but they’re cold and windy. Nothing like this.”

“Then you don’t miss it?”

Julian glances away, suddenly embarrassed. “I wouldn’t go that far. I find the problem is, when you visit somewhere often enough, you can’t help but think about everything else that happened there. Too many memories. This place, though--” Julian stretches his arms to encompass the lagoon around them. “I’ve only read about.”

“You’ve never been here?”

“Never had the chance. I rather like that about it. It doesn’t remind me of anything, good or bad.”

Serot nods. He understands. Of course he understands.

They follow the cliffs for a time, Julian recounting every factoid he can about the island’s history as the warm water laps his ankles. When a comfortable lull falls, Julian feels a nagging question come
Serot shrugs, as if the matter is of no importance. “He joined the Order some time after I did.”

“You bloody well know that’s not what I meant. It’s an honest question, Serot. I think I have a right to know the truth.”

Serot releases a long sigh. “You’re asking me if we were romantically involved. It isn’t as simple as that. We were both rising stars in the Order.” His voice drips with sudden scorn. “They called us the ‘sons of Tain.’ You can’t imagine the amount of power that brought us. There had to be a degree of decorum. We never went on missions together. In fact, we were rarely on the same planet. Tain saw to that himself.”

“He didn’t approve?”

“Oh, it wasn’t uncommon for members of the Order to fraternize. But we were his top agents. Tain no doubt feared if we spent too much time together, we’d conspire against him. My loyalty never wavered, but Tain didn’t become head of the Order by trusting anyone.”

“Then,” Julian says, repeating his question, “what happened?”

“A long-term assignment became available, and I decided to take it.” Serot raises a brow and smiles. It falls away as he continues, “Pythas was furious. It was the first time I’d seen him so demonstrative in his feelings. He outright begged me not to go.”

“But you did anyway. Why? That’s the one thing that doesn’t make sense to me. You were at the top of your game, and you loved Cardassia. Why would you leave it behind?”

Serot’s expression is mild. “What do you think?”

Perched on the rocks, a man swings a fishing rod into the lagoon. “I think you were tired,” Julian says. “You dedicated your life to becoming this person, to serving a cause you believed in. But at some point you realized it wasn’t enough. You’d accomplished so much, but you were alone and you were lost. So when this assignment turned up, you saw it as an opportunity to start over. On your own terms.”

Julian glances over. Serot has stopped to watch the fisherman, too.

“Only you weren’t brave enough to leave your old life behind,” Julian says.

“My dear, I hope by now I’ve made it clear that I have no intention of going back to Cardassia.” Serot circles his arms around Julian’s waist. “I never cared for Pythas Lok as deeply as I love you.”

“Good.”

“He was a terrible conversationalist.”

“Poor wanker didn’t stand a chance against me, then, did he?”

“Quite. Besides,” Serot continues, his eyes twinkling, “I’m legally obligated to stay.”

“Then I suppose it would be redundant to offer you another binding contract.”

“On the contrary! Cardassians relish bureaucratic redundancy.”

Julian laughs, relaxing against Serot’s chest before dropping to a knee in the sand. “I love you.” He
squeezes Serot’s hands to underline the force of his words. “You’re the most charming, clever, and fascinating man I’ve met, and all this has made me realize I can’t bear being away from you. I want you to always be in my life.” Julian takes a breath and holds it. “Will you have me?”

Serot looks down at their joined hands. “Oh, Julian,” he whispers, voice choked with emotion. Wincing, he lowers to a crouch until they’re eye level. “My dear, you’ve enriched my life in ways you can’t begin to understand. Every day, I thank the Prophets that our paths crossed as they did. Of course I’ll have you.”

Julian releases his breath and smiles as he’s filled to the brim with joy. “Thank you. I’m sorry, but your people are as secretive about their marriage rituals as they are about, well, everything else. I couldn’t find a single example of Cardassian proposals.”

“That’s because there aren’t any. The Hebitians possessed a rich culture surrounding marriage, but with the exception of a few holdouts, we abandoned them in favor of more straightforward enjoinment ceremonies. But if it’s ritual you want—” Serot reaches into a breast pocket and withdraws a chain of gold, patterned with smooth, multicolored stones.

“A bracelet?”

“A betrothal bracelet, to be exact. If we were following proper protocol, it would’ve been preceded by a pledge bracelet, but unfortunately I was remiss in my duty. May I?”

Julian nods, mouth suddenly dry, and offers his wrist.

The bracelet is loose and lightweight, its chains cool against his skin. “Julian,” Serot says, stroking his palm and smiling, “ja’ital, ji ahkayah ola oreloril.”

“Oreloril,” Julian repeats, mesmerized. “Serot, I don’t have—”

“Your pocket, my dear.”

His pockets are empty, but Julian dips into them anyway and freezes as his left hand closes around cold metal. “You sneaky bastard,” he says into Serot’s smug, reverse pickpocketing face. Even with his enhancements, Julian hadn’t noticed the addition. “How did you do that?”

Serot blinks slowly, pure innocence. “Do what?”

Julian shakes his head and looks the second bracelet over. It’s identical to his own, only longer to accommodate Serot’s wider wrist. “These are lovely. How’d you get them on such short notice?”

“Nerys was kind enough to have them made while I was indisposed.”

He’ll have to thank her later. With an awkward smile, Julian takes Serot’s left hand where it mirrors his right, and is rewarded with a nod of encouragement. Julian secures the bracelet over his wrist and recites, “Serot, ja’ital, ji ahkayah olpa oreloril.”

Serot’s fingers weave between Julian’s, clamping their hands together in a bruising grip. His right fist grips Julian’s hair, dragging him forward. Julian gasps at the sharp, unexpected pain before he’s silenced by a forceful kiss. Serot pushes him down.

They pull at fabric and buttons and roll in the wet sand until they’re half-naked and out of breath. Serot emerges the victor. He celebrates by pinning Julian’s wrists above his head and biting his neck and shoulders, trailing red indentations and soothing them with his tongue. The rough treatment makes Julian yelp, leaves him dazed and aching. He arches back, straining for more contact, but
Serot only growls and bites him again, sending another jolt up his spine.

“Oh, god,” Julian groans. If this keeps up, he’ll be black and blue for a week.

Serot lifts his head and opens his mouth, as if to speak. Then his eyes flutter closed and he takes a shuddering breath. Tasting the air, Julian realizes. Tasting him. It’s unbelievably alien, and erotic in a way he never would have fathomed.

Still pinned, Julian nips at Serot’s ear, hissing, “What ghastly manners, love.”

That earns another growl. “I can’t help it,” Serot says, leaning down to kiss him. “Your smell is so...” He shakes his head and kisses Julian again, seemingly beyond words. The grip on his wrists is loosening, and Julian seizes his chance, ripping the fastenings of Serot’s half-opened trousers and freeing his prize.

Serot’s moan is strangled as he bucks into Julian’s fist, but Julian doesn’t let go. In the waning light of Earth’s sun, Serot is lovely: dusky pink, textured in ridges where he was once smooth, heavy and glistening wet. It isn’t long before they’re wrapped around each other and Serot is filling him, pounding the air out of Julian’s lungs with every thrust.

When the sand begins to scrape Julian’s skin raw, Serot places a tender kiss on his forehead and rolls onto his back. Julian rides him to completion, staring into the blue-domed cliffs and grinning.

Later, he’s thankful the sand is only holographic. It’s gotten everywhere.

The rest of Julian’s shore leave is a blur of friends and coworkers and patients and strangers congratulating him on his impending nuptials, and Julian fighting off Jadzia’s efforts to arrange “competing bachelor parties.” The holdouts continue to warn that he’s making a mistake, foretelling certain doom and how “that Cardassian will eventually show his true colors,” but those people are curmudgeonly station inhabitants—old and easily ignored.

While Serot tackles his backlog, Julian helps around the shop, running inventory, stacking boxes of supplies in the back room, folding clothes, and ringing up customers. Julian can’t keep the smile off his face. He never thought the time would come when he’d be deliriously happy about something as mundane as organizing fabric swatches while prattling along with his fiancé over the Bajoran novelist Rila Moand’s latest offering. More bodice-ripper than serious literature, that one, but Serot insists on seeing grandiose symbols and archetypes in every silly plot point.

Each night, they close the shop and follow dinner with enthusiastic lovemaking. With every dose of the dezothomide, Serot seems more comfortable in his skin. He no longer shies away from the light or Julian’s exploring hands. Julian is more than happy to let him lead the way, and his patience pays off: weeks later, Serot finally begs Julian to take him. There’s no hesitation, only open desire in his eyes. Julian forces himself to be gentle, to go slow, but Serot has no such restraint. “Harder!” he snarls, and when Julian complies, he writhes and screams so loudly that Julian fears a security team will break down the door.

The following morning, Julian brings Serot into the infirmary for his weekly brain scan. As he stands before the computer, comparing the readings to those previous, then to the baselines Parmak provided, Julian finds himself smiling at the results. “I have good news,” he says as he returns to where Serot is waiting on the biobed. “All your brain functions are behaving well within Cardassian parameters.”

“You mean,” Serot whispers, as if speaking loudly might reverse the results, “I can stop taking that damned drug of yours?” He can’t seem to believe it. “It’s over?”
Julian hugs him. “It’s over.”

They celebrate in Quark’s at their usual table, and it’s only fitting that Cardassia’s star is gleaming in the viewport. Julian still worries that some secret, buried part of Serot will miss it, but he only gives the star a passing glance, an almost friendly nod of farewell, before turning all his attention on Julian. It’s as if the axis has shifted. Serot takes his hand and smiles with such fondness that Julian could fall in love a thousand times again.

Back in the comfort of their quarters, Julian pads into the bedroom carrying a mug of steaming tea in each hand. The regnar is a gentle weight atop his head, and he’s careful not to jostle the little fellow as he walks. He finds Serot stretched out on the bed, naked and reading. Julian glances over his shoulder as he passes over the tea. “What’s that you’ve got there?”

“A catalogue Quark sent me. He’s trying to upsell me on the services of a Tellarite baker he claims ‘works miracles with buttercream.’” A cake shaped like a vedek’s hat appears on the screen. Serot pages past it. “You still insist we must have one of these?”

“It’s tradition,” Julian says, reasonably. He settles on his side of the bed, Tarkalean tea cradled in his lap. “I’d never make you forsake your two dozen ceremonial bowls.”

“I’m eternally grateful for the Federation’s cross-cultural sensitivity.”

“I wouldn’t be so sarcastic if I were you. You’ll be one of us soon enough.” Julian rests his chin against Serot’s warm, bare shoulder to watch the carousel of cakes go by.

He’s well and truly thankful that Serot is taking care of the haggling aspect of the wedding. Even after two years on the station, Julian still hasn’t gotten the hang of it. Suppressing a yawn, he points to the cakes he likes-- they aren’t all distasteful-- and smiles as he feels the lizard rudely scurry down his face and onto Serot’s chest.

The regnar does a set of eight pushups in Julian’s direction, and he can’t help but think the message is bugger off. Threat transmitted, the lizard settles down, his scales rippling to match the color of his surroundings. Birds of a feather, and all that. “Oh, I see how it is,” Julian says to the traitor. “I thought Vrin and I bonded rather well while you were gone, but he’s still daddy’s little boy, isn’t he?”

“He has good taste.” Serot reaches down to stroke the regnar’s head. “Why Vrin, of all names?”

Julian laughs. “I’ve been wondering the same thing myself.” He’s never considered himself a gender essentialist, but it was still a surprise that Serot would give a male regnar a woman’s name. Perhaps even Serot can’t recall the reason. “I mean, it’s a pretty name, but wouldn’t Errith have been better?”

Serot frowns, like someone waiting to be let in on the joke. “Why would that be better?”

“Because--” Julian backpedals rapidly. “Okay, not Errith, then. If you don’t like Vrin, how about something more Cardassian? A Cardassian name for a Cardassian lizard.” He laughs again, more nervously this time, because Serot is staring at him like he’s lost his mind. “What about Mila?”

Serot’s frown gradually melts into a patronizing smile. He gives Julian’s hand a pat. “My dear, I’m afraid your brilliant mind has left me behind again. What does this have to do with the regnar’s name?”

Now it’s Julian’s turn to be confused. For a moment, he searches Serot’s face. Then the realization hits, and his amusement dies. “Serot,” he whispers, “Vrin was your mother’s name.”
“You said I’d already reached equilibrium!” Serot grips the sides of the biobed. His voice is laced with hurt and accusation, but Julian knows better than to take it personally.

“You have,” Julian says in his most calming, most doctorly tone. He taps at the readout screen and analyzes the results of the last battery of tests. As his eyes run over the brain scans, he scours for signs of neural activity in the prefrontal cortex, where the Cardassian brain predominantly retrieves autobiographical memories.

They’ve spent the past two hours methodically going through Serot’s false memories, one after another like they’re pages in the diary Garak purged from the computer banks. Luckily, Julian knew enough about his patient to draft an ad hoc test with ease: all he had to do was bring up a memory from Serot’s fabricated past and test the response. The expression on Serot’s face as he struggled and failed to recount each event was enough to predict the results: most of the scans show no indication of memory retrieval. Childhood and adolescence are gone. Young and middle adulthood are sporadic, the memory recall random. And deteriorating. It’s only a matter of time before they, too, have eroded entirely. It isn’t the news he wants to give his soon-to-be husband.

Behind him, there’s a swish of fabric as Serot slides off the biobed. “Julian?”

“From what I can gather, you’ve lost roughly seventy-four percent of your false memories.” Julian turns around to find Serot staring at the brain scans, wide-eyed. “It was an unavoidable side-effect of the treatment.”

“You knew this would happen?”

Julian presses his lips together. He can’t lie. “It was always a possibility, Serot. With experimental treatments like this, we can only estimate the risks and hope for the best outcome. You knew that. Considering what we were up against, I’d say we were lucky.”

“Oh, yes, I feel very fortunate.”

Julian forges ahead. “I think I’ve pinpointed the reason. Since Cardassian memory is largely eidetic, you couldn’t hold two conflicting memories at once. One pathway had to be weakened. It happened so gradually, and we were so focused on your emergent memories that you never noticed what you were losing.”

“Then,” Serot says, “we can’t reverse it?”

“I’m afraid not. The treatment has run its course. From here, the pathways will continue to degrade until there’s nothing left. I wish I could offer a timeline, but frankly your guess is as good as mine.”

Serot rubs his forehead and takes a shuddering breath. “It hardly seems fair. When our agents were activated with the desegranine, they maintained both their implanted and genuine memories.”

“Which is likely why so many of them had psychotic breaks.”

Serot actually laughs. “Yes, I recall that being more common than I would’ve liked, but I’ve prided myself on having a disciplined mind.” He glances about the empty exam room, as if searching for something, before favoring Julian with a grim smile. “Well, my dear, it was lovely while it lasted.”

“Dammit, you’re making it sound like a death sentence!”
“Isn’t it?”

Julian grasps him by the shoulders and squeezes hard to emphasize his words. “Don’t you see, Serot? When this started, you were terrified that Garak’s memories would destroy you, that you’d become someone neither of us recognized. But you’re still here. What does that tell you?”

“That it will happen soon enough.”

“I rather doubt that. They might’ve been crucial to your identity in the beginning, but you’ve had twelve years to become who you are. That’s not going away just because you’ve lost thirty-some-odd years of false memories. You’re your own person. You did that. Not the Obsidian Order, not Garak. You did.”

Serot stares back, eyes narrowed, as if trying to divine a lie. Then he looks away, blinking rapidly. “I don’t know, Julian.”

“Trust me.” Julian reaches up to smooth strands of blond hair that have come loose in the past two frustrating, anxious hours. “You don’t need them.”

There’s nothing Julian can do now; with the dezothomide discontinued, the trajectory of the treatment is beyond his control. If there are any other unexpected side effects, he’ll treat them as they come.

It’s an odd comfort as they retire to bed for the night. Serot pretends to sleep, but his grip on Julian’s waist is too tight, his breathing too uneven. It gives him away. Whenever Julian drifts awake, startled by an unpleasant dream, he’s still there, silently worrying.

Julian can hardly blame him for being scared.

Days later, a mid-level bureaucrat in Starfleet red arrives on the station. Julian only catches a glimpse of her on his way to the infirmary. It isn’t until lunch at the Replimat that Serot explains, twirling a datarod between his fingers and placing it on the table between them. “She came by my shop this morning and performed the ceremony right there.” Serot looks both amused and profoundly mortified. “In front of everyone.”

Passing by with a tray in one hand, O’Brien slaps him on the shoulder. “Welcome to the Federation, Mister Pela. We have no shame.”

For the next two weeks, Julian’s spare time is lost to the minute and excruciating details of wedding planning. One night, Julian watches Serot do nothing more than vacillate for hours between two shades of pale cerulean. Another evening, Julian sets down a hologram of artfully arranged Vulcan hydrangeas and looks his beloved in the eye. “Keiko says this is the last revision, Serot. She’s not a bloody florist, you know. She volunteered to do these centerpieces out of the goodness of her heart.”

Serot stares down at the hologram, lips pursed.

“So help me, Serot, I’ll replicate a dozen roses and stuff them in a pot.”

The threat is a tad cruel, but it has its desired effect: Serot surrenders with raised palms. While Julian can understand the need for perfection, it’s beginning to drive him to insanity. He’s not a fan of weddings-- hell, he once expected to live out his days a free-wheeling bachelor-- and he certainly has no strong opinions on what style of suit he should wear, much less the flavor of the cake. There is only one thing he knows for sure: who will not be invited.

“I don’t understand.” Serot tells him, gently, “they’re your parents. They seem like--”
“They’re not lovely people,” Julian snaps. “And for the last time, they’re not welcome.”

That’s usually the end of it, but this time Serot continues to protest. “Yet you’ve failed to provide a reason why. Julian, my dear, they’re your family. They must care enough to--”

“For someone preaching family solidarity, Serot, I haven’t seen your parents on the guest list.” Julian retrieves the PADD and pointedly taps at its screen. “Shall I send off an invitation to your father? I’m sure he’ll be overjoyed to see you married off to a human.”

For a moment, Serot looks at Julian like a kicked puppydog. Then he glances away and inclines his head. “Touché. I have been hypocritical, haven’t I?” His smile takes a brittle quality as he politely excuses himself to the living room.

Julian lowers the PADD and begins to call after him to apologize. But Serot has already opened a book, putting on airs that he’s unaffected. Julian curses himself. It was a stupid, thoughtless comment. For all he knows, Serot might want his parents here, no matter their misdeeds molding him into an assassin and torturer and locking him in closets. They might even be dead, and he’s just twisted the knife by reminding him of that fact.

It isn’t as if Serot doesn’t have a good reason to be curious. He’s right: Julian’s given him no explanation for the icy relationship with his parents. Meanwhile, Serot has shared his worst secrets, and here Julian is, still clutching to his own. It certainly isn’t fair to Serot, or to the future of their relationship.

He’s going to be my husband. He has a right to know.

Julian isn’t afraid of Serot’s reaction. There’s no doubt in his mind that Serot will accept him for the broken mistake against nature that he is. Serot will always love him, no matter his flaws and perfections. Julian stares down at the PADD full of names and flexes his jaw. He works his lips into what he’ll say. He’s rehearsed a dozen permutations of this speech: the many ways to break the news to the man he loves that he isn’t what he seems, either.

Julian looks back to where Serot is quietly reading.

The words don’t come.

He’s a coward. After everything, he’s still a coward. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Julian returns to charting the antigenic drift of the latest virus sweeping the station, disgusted with himself but unable to do anything about it.

To his relief, the subject of Julian’s parents seems good and forgotten when Kira joins them the following evening to go over the Bajoran wedding rite. The process sounds simple enough: while the prylar leads the blessing, the happy couple drinks from a ceremonial bowl and exchanges a few words in the language. All Julian has to do is show up and avoid dribbling wine over himself. He can handle that.

“I can have the bowl specially made on Bajor,” Kira is saying. “I know a potter who does beautiful work with green clay. She can have it done within the week, if we put in the order now.” She twists in her chair to peer across the room, where Serot is pacing. “Pela? What do you think?”

Serot stops and shakes his head, whispering, “I can’t do this. It doesn’t feel right.”

Julian straightens in alarm. “What?”

“It doesn’t feel right,” Serot repeats, tugging at his earring.
“What the hell are you talking about?” Kira says. “What doesn’t feel right?”

For a moment, Serot seems at a loss for words. He crosses the room and takes Kira’s hand. “Nerys, I’m sorry. I know you worked hard on this, but we can’t have a Bajoran ceremony.”

“Why not?”

He tilts his head. “We both know the answer to that.”

Kira looks down at their joined hands, and Julian fears an explosion is imminent. Instead, she nods once. “All right. We can talk about it later.” The corners of her mouth twitch into a small smile. “You not thinking about having one of those Cardassian enjoinments, are you?”

“I’m afraid the thought has crossed my mind.”

She rolls her eyes. “Then I’ll tell Quark to replicate all the raktajino he can.” Her attention flicks to Julian. “You’re going to need it.”

When she’s gone, they look at each other over the expanse of the table.

“I hope you’re not upset with me,” Serot says, sitting down.

“Of course not. Why would I be?”

“Surely you’ve noticed that I’ve been changing my mind a great deal lately.”

“Once or twice.” Smiling, Julian crosses over to climb into Serot’s lap. “A wise man once taught me the virtue of patience. Besides, I want you to be happy.” He buries his face in the spot between Serot’s neck and shoulder and bestows a lingering kiss to the skin there. “Now, what’s a Cardassian enjoinment like, and how many bowls shall I order?”

There are no bowls, but a single pillar of steel and carved sandstone featuring the Cardassian emblem and the Oath to the State. The enjoinment requires each party to recite the sanctioned pledge to the Union and Family, an hour-long affair whose only embellishments account for the rank and class of the participants. “It has more in common with Cardassian funerary rites than a celebration,” Serot says, covering Julian’s yawn with a hand. “Of course, as neither of us are Cardassian citizens, perhaps a Hebitian ceremony would be more appropriate. I’ll have to do some research, but it should fit nicely with your human traditions. From what I remember, there’s dancing and dressing up—things that may appeal to your sense of . . .”

“Fun?” Julian supplies with a grin. A Cardassian ceremony it is, then, but without the trappings and baggage of Garak’s Cardassia. “I think I’d like that,” he says.

Serot smiles fondly at him. “I was hoping you would.”

Days later, they’ve only begun to assemble the requisite masks and commission the shrine when a battered rescue buoy emerges from the wormhole. Jadzia decodes and analyzes the distress signal. It’s Bajoran, originating from a planet in the Gamma Quadrant where Julian and Kira once helped set up a hospital. New Bajor, the settlement the Dominion recently obliterated, massacring the colonists in a brutal attempt to send the Alpha Quadrant a message: keep out.

Sisko is quick to point out that the colonists may have launched the beacon during the attack. Worse, it may be part of a Dominion trap. But there’s also a chance for survivors, and Sisko immediately convenes a rescue mission. With casualties likely, Julian packs his away bag. The USS Defiant’s sickbay is still woefully undermanned and poorly stocked, but he’s made progress since their
previous journey into the Gamma Quadrant.

As Julian strides to the docking ring, bag slung over his shoulder, Serot follows at his heels. “Be careful,” he insists. “Last time--”

“I know,” Julian says. Turning, he takes Serot’s hand and brings it to his cheek. “I’ll be quite all right. Really.” Once again, he’s going to be the last to board, but he doesn’t care. “Commander Sisko doesn’t expect to run into the Dominion out there, and either way I’ll be in sickbay the whole time. It’s the safest spot on the ship.”

Serot isn’t nearly as amused. “I think you’re using this as an excuse to squirm your way out of the wedding planning.”

Julian laughs. “You’ve caught me. I fabricated that rescue beacon all by myself.”

Serot gives him an odd look.

“What’s wrong?” Julian says.

“Noth--” He winces. “I’ve brought nothing for you, my dear.”

“How about a kiss?”

Leaning forward, Serot obliges, and Julian can’t ask for a better parting gift.

He promises to return within a few days, well aware that he’ll be in serious trouble should the mission be delayed by a single minute. Once the **Defiant** has crossed through the wormhole, Julian settles before a terminal and prepares a message. Just in case. If he misses the wedding due to his untimely death, the least he can do is apologize in advance.

As the **Defiant** creeps into the Kotha Tremali star system, passing the remnants of New Bajor on the way, Jadzia performs a long-range scan. Standing at the edge of the bridge, Julian gapes at the sight on the viewscreen. The planet is decimated, blanketed by craters. The colony is nothing more than the charred ruins of a budding city, with no signs of life beyond green patches of forest.

Then Jadzia locates it-- a distress call, one system over. It’s faint, but it’s enough. When the **Defiant** reaches the fourth planet, Jadzia twists in her seat and grins. Six lifesigns and one crashed Bajoran scout ship, clearly the recipient of some heavy fire. “It’s them, sir,” she says.

The planet is habitable, but barely, with a thin atmosphere and a low partial pressure of oxygen. The magnesite dust storms are interfering with the transporters, leaving Julian with no choice but to take a shuttle down to the surface with Jadzia and a nurse in tow.

Once the shuttle touches down, Julian tracks the survivors to a shallow cave where they’re huddled together, shivering and gaunt. Each one is suffering from hypoxia, the seventh colonist (an elderly woman, now buried a hundred meters to the south) already having succumbed. He’s herding them into the shuttle to begin treatment when Jadzia stoops down to shut off the signal beacon. “You’re lucky we found you,” she says, “and not the Jem’Hadar.”

“That was a risk we were willing to take,” says one of the survivors, his voice muffled by the oxygen concentrator.

Julian glances up into the yellow, dusty sky. He hopes Jadzia didn’t just tempt fate.

With the survivors stabilized, Jadzia brings the shuttle into the planet’s orbit. They’re halfway to the
Defiant’s shuttle bay, open and waiting, when the Jem’Hadar fighters decloak around them. Dropping his tricorder, Julian vaults into the seat beside her at once.

Sisko’s voice bursts over the comm. “Hurry up, Old Man!”

“I’m going as fast as I can!” she shouts.

Come on, come on, Julian repeats, holding his breath as the Defiant’s bay grows larger in the viewport. He can almost feel the scarab-shaped Jem’Hadar warships powering their phased polaron beams. Moments later, the shuttle lands, much harder than Julian would’ve liked, just in time for the Jem’Hadar to fire their first round. The Defiant rocks starboard as the polaron beams punch straight through their worthless shields.

Then he senses the subtle flare of the engines as the ship goes into warp, leaving the planet and the Jem’Hadar behind. He exchanges a smile with Jadzia and comms O’Brien for a site-to-site transport into sickbay.

The colonists are settled into their biobeds when he feels the Defiant stutter around him, a hiccup that goes unnoticed by everyone else. They’ve dropped out of warp. Why?

Julian waits for the explanation. Later, as he stands on the bridge watching Sisko and O’Brien argue, he gets it. The warp core is down, along with main impulse. Meanwhile, the cloaking device works only intermittently before randomly cutting out. O’Brien suspects the damage from the polaron beams must’ve thrown a bug or two in the ship’s systems, but he won’t know for sure until the diagnostics come back. “That’s what you get for running a prototype into battle,” O’Brien says.

Sisko gives him a sidelong look and sets his arms akimbo. “I need that cloak up now, Chief. We’re still in Dominion territory. Sitting dead in the water is one thing. I won’t be a sitting duck.”


Julian follows him down to engineering. “Is there anything I can do to help, Chief?”

His shake of the head is definitive. “Not unless you can run a few million calculations in your head at one time.”

Julian’s good, but not that good.

The colonists are understandably nervous. After Julian releases them from sickbay with clean bills of health, they gather around the viewports, on the lookout for Jem’Hadar warships. By the middle of the second day, O’Brien has the cloak running again, to everyone’s relief. It’s another day of troubleshooting before he’s identified the source of the trouble.

O’Brien estimates the fix will take at least a week.

There’s a temptation, tugging at the back of Julian’s mind, to head to engineering and assist O’Brien, regardless of whether the chief thinks he’s capable. It’s an urge he’s had to fight for most of his life. Julian might not have O’Brien’s expertise, but with careful observation and some on-the-job training, together they’ll be able to knock out the repairs in a fraction of the time. He’s sure of it. But this isn’t a life or death situation, and even if it were, Julian knows better than to risk discovery.

So he stays put, checking in with his patients and engaging them in small talk— all to the relentless, mocking tick of his inner clock.

Serot is going to be furious.
The repairs complete, the *Defiant* docks with the station in the middle of the night, two days ahead of O’Brien’s predicted schedule. But it’s still too late. Julian’s broken his promise. A man on a mission, he jogs to his quarters and bursts through the doors.

He’s surprised to find Serot awake at such a late hour—hunched over, squinting at his console. At Julian’s entrance, Serot’s eyes go wide and he jumps to his feet. He steps back as Julian closes the distance. Not about to let Serot avoid him, Julian grabs him by the back of the neck and kisses him. “I’m sorry,” Julian whispers against his lips. He strokes Serot’s cheek, easing the tension out of him. “You have every right to be cross with me.”

When Julian lets go, Serot still looks alarmed. “Cross?”

“I’m really sorry, Serot. You must’ve been worried sick.”

Serot’s eyes flick rapidly over Julian’s face. Then, tentatively, he smiles. “All is forgiven.”

“No, it isn’t. You don’t have to lie, you know. Please, love, I’ll make it up to you. I promise.” He takes Serot’s hand, then sighs. “After I have myself a long nap. I’ve hardly slept this past week.”

“Of course, dear.”

Julian bats his lashes and leans in for another kiss. “Coming?”

This time, Serot meets him halfway. “Soon enough.”

Julian knows he’s still in trouble, but at least Serot isn’t angry. That’s a comfort.

He tries to wait for Serot to join him in bed, but before he knows it, he’s drifting off. In his dreams, legions of Jem’Hadar chase him through a maze of hallways. Each soldier wears his face, blue-white and scaled, outlined in horned ridges, but Julian can recognize himself in the blazing, mad eyes. He doesn’t need Troi’s expertise to grasp the meaning behind *that*. Julian runs up a staircase and glances down.

Nobody follows. He’s lost them. Relieved, he turns and--

--a Jem’Hadar plunges an ancient spear through his chest.

Julian wakes up gasping. This has *got* to stop. It isn’t like him. He hasn’t been plagued by nightmares for years. Not since he was a teenager. He blinks and feels around the bed. Before Julian left for the Gamma Quadrant, Serot had been at his side for every nightmare, ready to soothe him back to sleep with a whispered word, strong fingers massaging the knots out of Julian’s neck. Now the other side of the bed is empty.

He falls back against his pillow and calls into the dark, “Serot.”

He waits, but there’s no answer. Julian is about to shout again when he thinks better of it. He isn’t a child in need of a warm glass of milk. Besides, he’s much too tired.

Dread settles on the edges of his consciousness, seeping in.

“Sorry, Doctor Bashir,” Quark is saying, head bowed in a gesture of remorse, and he must be dreaming again because it’s sincere. “But it looks like my idiot brother double-booked the bar for some Klingon’s Rite of Ascension.”

“What? Quark, I’m getting married *today!*” Julian pulls at the front of his suit for emphasis, nearly
ripping the fabric. “You can’t do this to me! You tell those Klingons they can have their silly ritual in the goddamn holosuites!”

Quark begins stammering out excuses, bowing and bowing again for forgiveness, but Julian is no longer listening. He’s shouting back at Quark that this won’t stand, that he’ll have the bar shut down. In his periphery, he notices Morn fiddling with the controls of a painstick.

The alien’s eyes glint with mischief. Around them, the bar shifts. The dabo tables melt into the floor and the room goes dark, reconfiguring into a long aisle with blood red lights.

Flanking the aisle like disapproving pillars are Julian’s parents. Behind them, his colleagues: Jadzia, O’Brien, Kira, Odo, his nurses and medical techs. Further along stands Commander Sisko and Jake, followed by countless people from his childhood and the Academy. Acquaintances, lovers. He catches glimpses of former patients, and the sight of them is chilling. Theirs are the faces that will forever haunt him-- people he’d let die rather than risk revealing his illegal enhancements. His most heinous, unforgivable crimes.

The line seems to continue on forever.

Quark appears, painstick in hand. “Walk!” he shouts and throws his arms up to encourage the others. Richard swiftly joins in, smiling wide. “Walk!”

Soon they’re all chanting, “Walk! Walk!”

Julian’s feet disobey him, moving him forward down the aisle. His parents are the first to jab him with their painsticks. He cries out but keeps going, staggering on past the gleeful, chanting faces, pausing only to receive his punishment. The excruciating pain radiates throughout his body. Kira hits him with all her strength and he screams. Sisko digs the tip of his painstick between his ribs. He doubles over, sobbing now, and the crowd closes in. They prod him, over and over, as he begs them to stop.

Then they’re back in the bar. White flowers form a graceful arch behind a raised platform, while the cerulean banners hanging from the walls add a welcome splash of color. Guests file in, patting his arm and congratulating him as they take their seats. Julian smiles. It’s just as lovely as he imagined.

“Why didn’t you invite us?” Richard snaps from behind him. “I love weddings!”

“We’re your parents,” Amsha adds.

Before Julian can call security to escort them out, Richard shoots him a petulant look and shoves a floral setting. It crashes to the floor, exploding in thousands of white shards. In an instant, the guests erupt from their seats, ripping down banners and overturning chairs. Palis, his thick brows drawn together in a frown, throws fistfuls of cake in Julian’s direction while Jake and Nog smash the shrine. His parents take an axe to the wedding arch, and it topples with a groan like a massive tree.

Julian holds his head between his hands, looking on as a Klingon targ charges down the aisle. “Stop, stop it! You’re ruining everything!” He looks around frantically and calls Serot’s name. There’s no answer. He’s nowhere to be found.

“He left you.” Kira laughs from behind a Hebitian mask as red as her uniform. She runs in circles around him, wrapping his arms and legs in gold streamers, binding them together until he’s locked in place. “He left you,” she sneers, sing-song, “he left you, you cockamamie idiot. He left you!”

No, he didn’t. No, he wouldn’t.
“He wouldn’t,” Julian slurs. A hand taps his cheek, so sharply that he gasps.

“That’s a good boy,” a voice says. “Wake up now.”

With a shuddering breath, Julian opens his eyes and, blearily, finds himself staring into the darkened ceiling of his quarters. Still the middle of the night, then. He tries to lift his head to identify the source of the voice, but his neck doesn’t respond to the command. With a grunt of effort, he tries to sit up, to move his arms, his legs, to no avail. He’s frozen in place. Complete muscle atonia, he diagnoses absently.

It’s been years since he’s suffered sleep paralysis, but considering his recent bout of nightmares, it seems his sleep hygiene is in need of a complete overhaul. That would at least explain the hallucination of an intruder in the room. Julian tries to steady his breathing and keep calm. It’s difficult with the nightmare still in the forefront of his mind. This will pass, he urges himself.

“Oh,” the voice pipes up again, “that would be the paralyzing compound. A lovely neuromuscular-blocking drug-- one of the few I’ve found that doesn’t depress the respiratory system. At least in most humanoids.”

It’s Serot’s voice, but the cadence is off, his pronunciation of Federation Standard cumbersome, as if the words are unfamiliar on his tongue. Julian rolls his eyes to the corner of the bed and spots the shadow of a figure. His heart stutters in his chest.

No. Please, no.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of using your medical override to synthesize the compound. I admit,” the figure continues, drifting to the other side of the bed like an apparition, “You metabolized it much faster than I’d calculated. I had to nearly double the dosage to keep you in your current state. Are you fully human, or some variety of hybrid?”

Wake up, wake up. Julian begs his disobedient body. His heart hammers as he tries to will his fingers into moving, twitching, anything. But he remains as immobile as a ragdoll.

“Don’t worry, Doctor Bashir, the effects are only temporary.”

The figure slinks closer until Julian can make out the shadow of his features. He’s smiling amiably, but that only manages to terrify Julian more. Then the figure shifts, drawing Julian’s eyes to the black dagger in his hand. A strangled whimper curdles in the back of Julian’s throat.

The smile widens just a little. “Feel free to speak, Doctor. There would be little point to this exercise if I left you incapable, don’t you agree?”

Julian’s tongue feels swollen in his mouth. He runs it over his lips, testing it out. After a few quick, shallow breaths, he croaks, “Garak.”

Garak’s eyes light up. “Very good, Doctor. I’m pleased to see you’re leaving behind any pretense of not knowing me. That will save us considerable time. Now, if you don’t mind the directness of my question--” He leans in, his eyes sharp with un concealed anger. “Who are you?”

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