If you’re sending yourself out to the edge of civilization, people expect it to be done for fame and glory – but then, Julian Bashir has never been what’s expected of him. He’s quite happy to agree with the reasons other people provide, because he isn’t sharing the private whys and wherefores when people are more than happy to fill in the gaps themselves. There are other, better things to worry about, work to be done and friends to be made – possibly even a lover, if he’s lucky…

...all while fighting to maintain his worth, and remain exactly who he’s always been.

Notes

Written for the 2014 round of Crip Big Bang.

Art by the lovely Paradigm_Shift can be found here and here - let’s give her a big hand!

Additional notes can be found in the afterword.
Wild Creatures

Garak had been behind the counter, primarily absorbed in the task of tallying up his remaining stock and gauging potential new suppliers, when the Human walked in. It was hardly the first time a Human had come inside his shop, but the first time one did so with as little concern for Garak himself as this one seemed to hold. They didn’t come often enough to be unremarkable. While they were becoming less so, just as the station had become Deep Space Nine, it was still quite unusual. Their typical motives were either curiosity about the shop, curiosity about Garak himself, or a deliberate intent to purchase. Not this one. He clearly hadn’t wandered into the shop, but was deliberately attending, determined in his stride, yet without any concern for Garak himself.

He didn’t seem to be particularly invested in the merchandise, either. Glancing around, his gaze resting on Garak for a moment before sliding over the dresses and long-sleeved suits hanging on the display racks and the scarves arranged in a tasteful fractal on the small table, reaching out and rubbing the edge of a dress between his fingertips before letting it drop without having watched his hand.

Garak set down the padd and stylus and came forward, maintaining a respectful distance that erred on the side of caution for the standard galactic value of personal space. His pips declared him a lieutenant, junior grade, the uniform’s color blue for the sciences.

“Good evening. And how may I help you?”

“A little more time, please,” he answered, not even looking at Garak.

“If you like,” he replied, calmly drawing back behind the desk. If the Human had come in for Federation business, he would have declared so by now. “But do let me know if there’s anything I might provide.”

“All right.” His focus moved to a display of men’s trousers Garak was a few weeks away from removing from the floor, the tucked-and-flared style already fading out only months after its debut and the fabric cheap to begin with. He reached out a hand to touch one and pulled it back even before making contact, and walked across the shop to resume staring at the dresses. Then, he walked up to the desk, glancing at the small jars of extra pins and assorted novelty and spare buttons, and with his eyes not quite meeting Garak’s own, asked, “And how – so, what – how do you do commissions? You do take commissions, I hope?”

“Of course I do. As to how I do them, it’s determined by a number of factors, from the price of the material in question to the scope of the project. What might you have in mind?”

“Oh, nothing complicated, just something rather small. A tunic, I suppose I could say that. But not right now, or right away. Soon. I just wanted to get an idea of what it might cost.”

“I’d need to know –”

“Something from the fabric of the green dress, the one on the end there, with the cut-off sleeves. That sort of fabric. How much would that be?”

Garak stared a moment before composing himself, not for the rudeness of the interruption but the utter lack of taste. He would venture nearly anything would be preferable to a Starfleet uniform day in and day out, but while Human had remarkable sea-dark green eyes – which hadn’t yet meet Garak’s straight-on; it was astute of him to avoid any implication of immediate trust – which could
pick up some of the highlights of the fabric rather admirably, the rest of his coloration meant the overall effect of such a garment would be nothing short of a disaster. Still, he nodded politely and quoted a figure.

The Human nodded back. “Thank you.”

“As for time, a single piece such as that could be done within a week.”

“That’s good to know. Thank you for telling me.”

“Of course, increased rates are possible, as are discounts – additional work done after the initial craftwork, or simply for staying put while taking measurements.”

“I can assure you there’d be no squirming whatsoever during the measuring,” he said, and smiled.

“In that case, assume what I said earlier as a rough estimate, nothing more. And I think you have me at a disadvantage, Lieutenant –?”

“Doctor, actually. Doctor Julian Bashir. And you’re the Mister Garak of the shop’s name?”

“No, I’m afraid it’s only Garak. Plain, simple Garak.”

“Garak.” He nodded, and the motion took his eyes to Garak’s for a moment, the first time they’d done so. Sea-dark green, indeed. “Well. Thank you, Garak.”

“There was no trouble, but you’re welcome. Shall I expect you back soon?”

“If possible, yes. Have a pleasant afternoon.”

“I do hope to. And yourself.”

Bashir jerked his head up, not quite a nod and not quite something else, looking away and then back to Garak’s face. Meeting his eyes the once seemed to be all he would do, and Garak watched him leave, and took note of the way he hesitated just so at the dresses at the edge of the shop he’d seemed so fond of.

Well. He knew where the infirmary was, if it had to come to that.

- 

“Listen, just because you think –”

“No, I don’t think, I know, I made it abundantly clear beforehand and am in fact demonstrating so right now, the power requirements are precise and specific, and given that this is in fact the infirmary –”

“Hold it up, right now!” Kira stepped in between Timor and the medic; she’d watched more than enough of the shouting match. Looking back and forth at the two fuming men, she kept her hands up and her voice level, calm, and loud. “I don’t care which one of you is wrong and which one’s right, so someone go ahead and tell me what you’re trying to settle before I decide I don’t need to know that to figure out how I’m going to make you settle this.”

Timor grunted, and Bashir pressed his lips together and looked up at the ceiling. He was holding something in his hands, a small grenade-sized device that might well be one for all Kira recognized of Federation technology. Timor spoke first, “He says what he’s got is incompatible with what we’ve got now.”
“Which it is,” Bashir snapped.

“Shut it,” Kira said. “That thing he’s got there?” Timor nodded. “And the problem is?”

“The problem is –”

“The problem,” Bashir cut in, “is that we can’t just plug it in like you were saying, it needs both a specific and consistent power supply in addition to being able to log into the rest of the station’s computers, otherwise we haven’t got what we need but just a very fancy textbook.”

He had a tone Kira recognized, didn’t like, and knew how to deal with: people who’d run too hard too long and too far to be comfortable anywhere but running. Children grew up with battle weariness passed down from their mothers, and she didn’t want to think on what he’d been through or what his mother had dealt with while he’d been inside of her to make him sound like that.

It still wasn’t a good reason for him to be acting the way he was, no reason to take it out on Timor for the crime of not knowing something, and she’d be happy enough to see him strewn up on the promenade but an end to the argument would have to do. “So what is that, then?” She pointed at his grenade, looked between the two of them. “When it’s not supposed to be a textbook.”

“He says it’s a medical scanner.”

Bashir’s face was lit up, eyes clear, and all the anger in his voice had gone out in the moment. “Well, I like to think of it as a communication device, but yes, scanner, that’s the gist of it, of what it does.”

“Are you gonna show us what it does?”

“Gladly, by all means. Here.” He cleared a small area on a counter, set it down, pressed a number of buttons – actual buttons, not a flatscreen, and how antiquated that was – and then device chirped. Then it turned on. And the air above it might well have opened up and spilled out raw color for all that happened next, and Kira barely managed to keep her balance. Something – no, a body. That was definitely a body, it was a glowing, iridescent drawing of a person’s body floating not on a screen but in the air, perfect in all dimensions and small enough to see everything, and she couldn’t hold herself back from reaching out and touching it. It moved by her touch and she almost flinched away when it spun around at the tap of her fingers. The meat of the body, all the organs and blood, shifted away from the skeleton until Bashir pulled it back together. Then it came apart at his touch, a more determined dissection, skin and muscle and bones and guts spreading out through the air. He plucked the heart right out and everything else fell away, and he pulled it out until it was as big as it’d be in anyone’s chest. In his chest, since it was a Human’s heart.

“You call this a communication device.” Kira glanced at Timor, who had his arms crossed over his chest, trying not to give into the temptation. Bashir didn’t notice, or did notice and didn’t care, as he spun the heart around, tapped it to make it beat silently.

“In a sense it is, yes. Right now all it’s got is Human, the very anthropocentric default and in retrospect I ought to apologize for that, my apologies, and Bajoran, with only a dozen or so hours of internal battery power, less if I have to do anything beyond this sort of lecture.” He shut it off, and it powered down with a humming buzz. “When connected with the station’s power, and connected properly, so that it won’t fry anything, and the computer, where I can feed all sorts of data into it and let it run as it likes, then scanning’s the beginning. It does scan, and it’s primarily the interface that’s so useful, it’s easy to adapt it for surgery or running simulations for trials, anything that you really have to see to understand.”

“Prophets’ bones,” she muttered. If this was what the Federation had to share?
Bashir turned to Timor, the device back between his clutched hands. “Did you read the report I sent to the engineering department?”

“Read it. Read yours, and everyone else’s, everything that came through. If yours was in there it got read, and probably by me, but I’ve got more than just the infirmary to take care of, I just happened to be here when you were, don’t take it out on me.”

His head was down, gaze averted, and Kira knew it was unusual for a Human to know how to properly apologize, even if his voice stayed flat. “We’re both having a trying day. I apologize for how I acted.” Timor nodded. Bashir went on, “Do you know whom I might speak to about proper calibration, or should I call a Federation engineer?”

“Probably Federation,” Timor said with a little more than a hint of a hiss.

“All right, I’ll get someone in as soon as I can.” Kira watched him get back to something at another workstation, unconcerned with what had just passed. She couldn’t stop herself from remembering how Lelyn would dash between moods without warning, even on calm days, even after the official end of the Occupation, and spared a moment to remember to send a prayer out to Bashir’s mother.

Jadzia had spent the better part of three lives around Humans, and she knew she’d developed a pretty good eye for reading them. There was a fair amount that didn’t translate neatly between Humans and Trills, but she’d found more in common with them than she’d thought she would. Four lifetimes, and the look on Bashir’s face was something almost perfectly universal: total absorption in his work. It reminded Dax of her ages-old sons and daughters when they’d been his age and even younger, and she let herself smile at the rush of hosted memories. The rest of Jadzia let herself mix between surprise and disappointment: the trip from Earth to Deep Space Nine took a total of four and a half days, with one day left to go, and this was the first time she’d seen Bashir present and accounted for outside of the infirmary or walking to or from his quarters. She took her steaming raktajino from the replicator, and watched him eat a spoonful of what she guessed was oatmeal while he read.

“Hello.”

He glanced up from the padd – and just a glance, he didn’t even lift his head to flick his eyes to her face before going right back to his reading. “Hello.”

It wasn’t ideal, but it wasn’t a blatant dismissal, so it was something she could work from. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Jadzia.” She held out her free hand. “Lieutenant Jadzia Dax. Science officer.”


“It’s good to meet you, Julian. Is Julian all right?” Julian nodded. “You can call me Jadzia. Mind if I sit?”

“No, not at all.” He watched her sit, but not the way people had been watching her for the last couple of years since her joining – not quite the same sort of interest and curiosity. She took a sip of her raktajino now that it was finally cool enough, and held it in her mouth to take the taste for herself, then swallowed with a little groan, letting the heat flow down her throat the way she and Audrid both liked, and was about to say something when he asked, “Is there something I can help you with?”

The blatant honesty of his tone and face with the oddness of the question made her blink. “No, it’s
quite all right, I don’t need anything. I just wanted to come over and say hello. We’re going to be working together on DS9, so I thought it’d be good for us to talk beforehand, get to know each other.”

Julian nodded. “All right. Here we are, and we’ve said hello.” Jadzia nodded back. He kept looking at her, and she almost felt put off by the way he was watching her so openly, even if it wasn’t skin-hungry. “I’m sorry, but there is something you wanted, correct?”

“No! I’m sorry if I’m bothering you, but –”

“You aren’t. I’m just not quite sure what it is you want right now, and I do have a fair bit of reading to get done. But if there is something, I’d be happy to help.”

“Just to get to know you.”

“All right. And…”

Dax didn’t know what to make of that. She took another drink to give herself a moment to get her thoughts together. His eyes kept wandering over her face and along her spots, up and down her body before going back to meet her own, like he wasn’t comfortable meeting her gaze for more than a moment at a time. She quickly asked, “Why DS9?”

“What do you mean, why DS9?”

“I saw on the manifesto you graduated top of your class. Valedictorian, right?”

“Yes,” he said, taking a bite of oatmeal.

“It’s that I know – well, I’m pretty sure there are a lot more prestigious opportunities available for someone in your position. And DS9 isn’t that high up there.”

“And you’d like to know why I want to send myself out to the edge of the frontier and settle on a former Cardassian station above a former occupied war zone, when I could be in the flagship of Starfleet and charting the galaxy?”

“Something like that. I wouldn’t have guessed people would want to go there.”

“I do.”

“Yes, I know – I mean, like I said, most people –”

“If you want a reason, don’t worry, it’s not ‘because it’s there.’ I know I’ll be useful here.”

“Right.” She smirked over the rim of her mug.

“I’m sorry?”

“You know you’ll be useful. Classic medical motivation. Where you can do the most good is where you’re going to be most lauded.”

“No,” Jadzia drew back at his tone, harsh and sharp. “No, that’s not it, why would that be it?”

She ran over the words she’d said, tried to find where he might have taken such offense. “It’s that with most doctors, they try to magnify personal prestige. And there are some who are genuinely selfless. But a lot of them – the standard characteristic of self-congratulating behavior has a lot of basis in reality.”
“I know. I went through medical school. ‘The difference between God and a surgeon is that God doesn’t think he’s a surgeon’, I’ve heard most of them.”

Julian’s gaze had locked onto her own with an animal’s intensity. She took in his shoulders, now tensed, his hands with their shifting fingers, his posture and face, stolid but intensely so, like he was holding himself still.

“Then I won’t bore you with more old jokes,” she said, and he relaxed somewhat, his eyes darting to her right cheek’s spots and back.

“I appreciate that.”

“So if it isn’t adulation, then can I ask why?”

This time he looked away, and kept looking down at the table and nothing in particular for a few moments until he lifted his head up to answer, almost meeting her gaze from the corners of his eyes. “They need doctors. I’m a very good doctor, and I won’t say they need the best and that ought to be me because that reeks of the sort of jokes we agreed not to tell. But I know plenty of my classmates who said they would rather go to Romulus than, as they put it, that craphole of a station, and if they’re not willing to go and I am, then I think I’d ought to.”

“When you put it that way, it’s quite reasonable.”

“Thank you.”

What she’d said wasn’t quite something to be thanked for, but it didn’t seem worth it to investigate why.

- 

Not long after Odo had figured out the basics of bipedal locomotion, Doctor Mora had invited a number of a particular type of professional to the Center and the parties, to give him a better and broader sense of that kind of motion and movement, to help him blend in as best he could. They had been Bajorans, and Cardassians, and additional species if they could be arranged for. Dancers, gymnasts, martial artists, even a traveling acrobat company who had a contortionist in their troupe. The contortionist had laughed at Odo in a way he’d tried not to take offense to at the time, in what he now knew to be a sort of delighted, joyful awe, and still couldn’t find it in himself to take as flattering. Out of all of them, Odo had liked the dancers most of all.

Doctor Bashir didn’t walk like a single person Mora had ever seen fit to invite.

In fact, Odo thought he barely moved like the rest of the Humans on the station. His bipedal movement was quite well practiced, the controlled fall that allowed for walking and running at various speeds. It was a deliberate practice; that much Odo could tell. Not the sort of effortless effort all those professionals had worked so hard to cultivate, but closer to that than the sort of unthinking movements most humanoids developed.

Still, he was quiet. He was a professional who cared as much about his work as Odo cared about his, and respected that conviction. And he always put a good deal of thought into what he would say when he opened his mouth.

They were standing side-by-side in the turbolift, heading down from Ops and halfway to the Promenade, when Bashir said, “Constable?”

“Yes?”
“May I ask you something about your ears?”

Odo turned to look at him, clasping his hands behind his back and tightening his hair. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your ears. There’s something I’ve been wondering about them, but if you’d rather not talk about them, then that’s quite all right and I apologize for the intrusion.”

Bashir held that sort of open fascination so many humanoids wore when they decided they’d had enough of wondering and worked up the gall to ask what was on their minds. And, in an equal portion, there was also the honesty in the offer of declining the question, something rarely even considered. Odo grunted. “You may.”

“Do you use them for hearing?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to elaborate on that.”

“Oh! Certainly. It’s that in most humanoid species, the outer ear plays a relatively minor role in the hearing process, at least compared to the middle and inner ears. Damage to the ossicles or cochlea carries far more of a negative impact on auditory processing than the majority of injuries to any of the visible, external parts, even including the eardrum itself. But I’ve read the majority of Doctor Mora’s papers, and you did allow me to scan you, and the majority of your internal mass is of a uniform density and volume, which doesn’t allow for such structures as the scalae. Without them, there’s no hearing with the ears.”

“Doctor, I think you’ve provided the answer to your own question.” They stepped off onto the Promenade and Bashir matched Odo’s pace stride for stride.

“I had my – I was wondering about it, that’s true, but if I can ask something else?” Odo grunted again, which Bashir correctly took as assent. “And no, I don’t want to put you in a dark room and bombard you with vibrations of various intensities and frequencies, that’s not what I’d like to do. But since you don’t hear with your ears –”

“Most humanoids are comforted by the sight of them.”

“I admit you’d look strange without any, but what I’m more curious about is knowing how it is you do hear, since your ears are ornamental at best.”

“And how do you think I hear? You seem to have this figured out.”

“I think you hear with your entire body. Which is a working hypothesis.”

“A working hypothesis.”

“Given how you’re not wearing any clothing right now, it seems quite reasonable.”

Odo snapped his head up and felt his inner torso roil a moment before he clenched back it into place, before it could reach his surface, and didn’t let himself smile. “I’ve noticed most humanoids would rather not comment on that aspect of my being, Doctor.”

“You put on the appearance of wearing clothes, but that’s not what’s really happening.”

“That’s true. And yes, I do. Hear with my entire body, that is.”

“How fascinating.” They entered Odo’s office, Bashir standing in front of Odo’s desk while he took
his seat. “So it’s more accurate to say you feel sounds rather than hear them.”

“Yes.”

“So you felt the turbolift coming up before it arrived?”

“As did you.” Bashir blinked at him. “I noticed you tensed up and moved closer in anticipation when it was still on its way.”

“Well, yes. I – that’s another thing humanoids don’t like to comment on, how there’s a lot more sound than they usually say there is. Most of them – I should be going.”

“No, it’s quite all right. We have another four minutes before either of us needs to worry about no longer having enough time to be early, we can spare two of them.”

He nodded, and then said like he’d never stopped, “Most of them tend to tune out the ambient sounds in their environment, but still find it genuinely uncomfortable when it’s totally silent. It’s the utter absence of sound that they find disturbing. Things like turbolifts and dermal regenerators can be built to be soundless, and some have, but the majority of people that use them want to hear something even if they don’t pay attention to it, which is a very neat trick of psychology, like how certain sterilizing agents have to produce a sensation on the skin because otherwise patients won’t be convinced anything is happening. And even when there are sounds to hear, and there’s that filtering most – well.”

“We still have a minute and fifteen seconds, doctor, if you’d like.”

“No, it’s fine. I’d best get on before I can’t be early.”

Odo jerked his head towards the door, and Bashir nodded back before departing off to the infirmary.
Bashir had been the one to offer the suggestion after Garak had spotted him eating alone in the replimat and quietly joined him. He'd been surprised enough he hadn't been able hide his delight well enough to come across as anything but mildly pleased to share his company with a familiar face. They hadn’t spoken long – Garak perhaps indulging himself a little overmuch with Bashir’s claims to near-ignorance about the rumors and tales circulating about his presence and past, and Bashir explaining he didn’t often eat lunch in the replimat, not for any distaste of the food but for convenience.

“But if you would like to meet here again, would dinner tomorrow be better? I mean, more amenable? Your shop’s hours are fairly predictable compared to my own, but I could easily set some time aside. And by the time you close up there won’t be lines like this, we’d practically get this whole section to ourselves.”

“You disappoint me. No spy would ever think of meeting in anything less than a crowded, noisy, bustling environment such as this is now. We might present ourselves as easy targets, but there’s no way to eavesdrop or tail us without being obvious.”

“That’s assuming you’re a spy.” He’d been looking towards Garak for much of the conversation, eyes focusing near and around but never remaining on his face for too long; possibly he wished to broadcast the desire for developing a deeper sort of familiarity.

“Yes, it is. And I never said I was.”

“You also never said you weren’t. And there’s a regular Starfleet crowd that meets here for dinner, and I can vouch for them providing excellent cover if you want that sort of public privacy. There’s no scheduled day or time other than ‘whenever most of us get off duty in the evening,’ but they usually invite me along. I could alert you beforehand.”

“If that’s the case, then yes, the next convenient night. Tomorrow, if that’s what it happens to be.”

As it turned out, it was in fact the very next night that Bashir walked into the Replimat at the edge of a gaggle of other Starfleet personnel, hanging back towards the edge and engaged in conversation with another Human. When he saw Garak waiting alone, he first nodded acknowledgement of his presence, then smiled rather widely at the woman and offered some sort of farewell excuse before making his way over to the table Garak had claimed.

He’d been correct about Starfleet providing excellent cover; the only issue Garak had with their presence beyond his ordinary complaints was their well-tuned pack mentality. Three times over their dinner someone came over to ask how Bashir was doing, what they might be up to, to make sure Garak was well aware they would prefer Bashir to fraternize with the people he’d arrived with. After the third interruption Bashir snapped at them instead of offering a polite dismissal, then turned and apologized to Garak for the outburst before bringing the conversation back to the very same word he’d left it on before Ensign Daubert had tried to join in.

A week later, after the business with Tahna and his Klingons, Garak turned down Bashir’s invitation for another meal together, citing a commission deadline, something which barely counted as obfuscation. Having finished the dress earlier that day, he took the night to practice hiding in a crowd for public observation of a particular subject. Not to eavesdrop; not even a Vulcan could do so unassisted with that Starfleet crowd. He was simply there to watch.
His specialty was largely interpersonal work – observing conversations, cataloguing behaviors, precision elimination if it came to that. But like everyone else in the Order, he’d received training in more technical intelligence gathering. The amount of information freely available through perfectly legal channels and open sources was truly astounding; he’d known a pair of night-mothers who’d boasted about being well-connected enough that they could have pulled down a half-dozen planetary governments from their computer terminals in less than twenty keystrokes, and he knew the two of them had hardly been exaggerating. The very concept of freedom of information was utter foolishness, but he did appreciate how easy it made some things, especially when paired with plausible deniability and semi-public figures.

Julian Subatoli Bashir, born in England on Earth in their year 2341, the only child of his parents, Richard and Amsha. A year and a country was more than enough to properly search for a birth record, possible living relatives, arrest notices, anything that might have been caught by the news, whether it was about him or his family. There was an aunt Innogen still doing work in London city, renowned within her industry, some cousins of at least two generations’ removal, and comparatively little to be found on his parents, either readily or with some effort. There was scarce mention of them compared to his aunt – very little over the past five years, and absolutely nothing over the fifteen before that. What existed were mostly brief mentions within local reporting, his father’s smattering of business ventures and his mother’s efforts at community organization, remarkable only for the lack of information regarding their extended absence. Incarceration seemed the most reasonable explanation, which in turn would explain Bashir’s evident determination to salvage the family name and distance himself from the shame as much as possible.

All Bashir’s Starfleet accomplishments, from enrollment to graduation, were there for anyone who wanted to find them. Four published papers, with only one of them co-authored, most enterprising of him. His own residential record for a San Francisco apartment, nine years spent in the same location. There were Starfleet sports clubs for racquetball and swimming, with post-match victory interviews from the entire team, with accompanying photographs. And goodness, he still looked much the same.

He queued up the video of Bashir’s Starfleet Medical graduation and valedictorian speech, where Bashir seemed to be the only one that had seen fit to not wear that absurd square on his head. The video was only a little more than a year and a half old, and Garak didn’t try to place any importance on the momentary thrill of watching it, pushing those feelings aside to turn down the lights, increase the volume, and set it to play.

Bashir spoke about the necessity of education, as Garak expected. He talked about opportunities granted, making the most of time, and the unflagging support of his aunt throughout his childhood. All very typical, all to be expected, all delivered with a precise, practiced monotone with very little inflection; the man was a brilliant doctor but would never make a passable orator. It was only in one segment near the end that caught and held Garak’s attention, when something real slipped into Bashir’s voice.

“The moment you decide your worth isn’t up to you, the minute you think someone else has more of a say in whether you deserve what you’re given, then you’ve already lost it all. You can’t allow yourself worry or doubt – you have to be more than aware that it’s you, yourself, alone, who knows what you’re worth. You have to be certain. You have to remain loyal to yourself. And if you’re certain in knowing your worth, it’s something no one can take from you.”

A trifle individualistic, perhaps, but a fair commentary on the appropriate measuring of an individual’s intrinsic value. He deserved the applause which came a few minutes later. Sadly, unfortunately, his speech was the last piece of media regarding Bashir before his posting at what had not so long ago been Terok Nor. If he wanted more on Bashir as he was now, he would have to speak to someone on the subject. Garak knew most people on the station who knew him would
hardly entertain such a conversation; observing them from afar would have to satisfy.

As he’d done previously, Bashir arrived with the rest of the gaggle, already engaged in conversation. He stayed within the group’s sciences cluster, stood in line for his meal, and in a mirthful move from the universe, when he sat down he picked a seat that provided Garak with an unobstructed profile view. Garak wasn’t as fluent in Human body language as he was with many other species’, and it was hard to read Bashir consistently at the best of times. The very fact that he was choreographing himself in order to make himself easy to read, to seem like he wasn’t being obvious – leaning in when someone else did so, resting his chin in a hand and looking about the table at his companions, drawing back with his hands held open, keeping his eyes up on everyone’s faces the entire time, waiting until two others had gone before leaving – was quite a performance.

If he wasn’t trying to put together a baseline for the man, and knew how comparatively restricted his movements were when they ate together, Garak had the suspicion he might regard the display as natural Human behavior.

As it was, the effort Bashir went towards maintaining his social construct, offering forth such a performance while holding so much back from view, was something Garak couldn’t help but find enticing. But far be it for him to alert Bashir to that fact. Having found his way to such skill seemingly without any proper guidance was a deeply remarkable thing, nearly too good to do more than quietly savor over dinners for the time being. Very nearly, which was why Garak offered Bashir the data rod some three weeks later.

“The cornerstone of Cardassian literature, doctor, one of the most important works of the current age and in fact of any age. Now, granted, I can’t speak to what you read in your free time as you’ve never volunteered the information, which you may whenever you like, but I can promise you, if you come to this with open eyes there will be worlds opened up the likes of which you would do well to visit.”

“Thank you. Will you want this back, or –?”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary, I just finished rereading it the day before yesterday in anticipation of our next meal together.”

“You’ve made plans for me,” he said with a smile, pointing the rod like an accusing finger.

“Only with your best interests in mind.”

Bashir smiled, his eyes wavering away and back before he blinked and nodded in assent. “Then thank you again. And I take it you’d rather wait until I finish this before meeting again, rather than see me while I’m only halfway through.”

“Don’t be absurd.”

And that brought genuine relief, muted as it was, into Bashir’s features.

It only took him two weeks to finish reading the novel, which Garak took as a positive sign, a suspicion proved correct within moments. Whenever the Human got to talking about something that had his interest, there was little to stop him from espousing on at length, save perhaps bodily restriction. It warmed Garak that The Never-Ending Sacrifice was such a thing, and he allowed himself a sliver of delight. That sliver, and no more.

“It wasn’t that I found it dull, I never said I found the book dull, I found almost all of the characters and situations dull, but the book itself was fascinating.”
“I’m afraid I can’t sit here and listen to this. Understanding the very nature of the format is crucial to unlocking the lessons within, and without that there’s little to be done. I’m sorry but perhaps I should have started you on something a little more accessible. Maybe some cradle stories.”

“I don’t think you’re listening to me. I know that the repetitive epic is designed to be, well, repetitive! I liked that about it. The way –”

“Hold on. You liked that?”

“Yes. It’s not that I enjoyed the characters, but once I reached the third generation I realized that they weren’t the point of the novel. Every single one of them followed the same pattern as every other and only the surface details changed. Nothing happened in their story. They all had the same family structure, the same personal struggles, I could diagram out and overlay each generation together and they’d all look exactly the same. The mothers, the sons, those aunts that were lovers with whatever their particular social designation was, I’m not going to try to pronounce it and I couldn’t find an adequate translation –”

“Night-mothers would approximate –”

“Yes, the night-mothers here, the night-fathers there, the point is, they were the same. The repetition. It took me until that third generation to realize just how vertical a structure the story is, which is something most Human authors don’t do unless they’re trying to write fictional textbooks or somesuch. A sort of up-and-down story with how it all unfolded – not quite unfolded, played out. Every Cardassian could be from anywhere in the narrative, practically every incident that took place could have happened at any other time. It was supposed to draw attention away from them as individuals and have it go elsewhere.” He’d lain down his cutlery in order to properly talk with his hands, to demonstrate the overlay he’d suggested or to emphasize the vertical shape he’d somehow perceived. “And once I realized how much of the structure itself I’d been missing, I had to reread the first two generations’ sections to properly understand exactly the author’s intents for the only really sympathetic character in the narrative.”

“And who might this singularly sympathetic character be, then?”

“Cardassia itself.”

Garak blinked. He tilted his head back, and blinked again. “Please, go on.”

“Cardassia was the only dynamic character in the entire book. Yes, the Cardassians themselves grew up and died and went through their lives and struggles to find love and hope and all that, but none of them really became different from who they’d been when they started out. No major crises of conscience that didn’t resolve themselves by the time they died, or the following generation at the latest. It was all selfless devotion to the state in one form or another. They didn’t matter. It was the state that mattered. Cardassia itself. The Union grew, it strengthened its ties with allied worlds, it expanded, it changed internally. What Cardassia did, what it was capable of doing, that was what changed – the individuals’ decisions were ultimately the same, to support the state, but the state they were supporting at the beginning wasn’t the same one they were supporting at the end.”

And with proper guidance, what Bashir might yet be capable of. “While I must applaud your insight, that’s hardly an original conclusion to draw from the novel; Predoc built her career on a series of narrative poems that openly cast Cardassia as their central figure, and which have only grown more relevant with each passing year. If you’re after a more praiseworthy achievement, might I suggest attempting to unravel the meaning behind the night-parents’ absence within all but the second and sixth generations? Personally, I tend to entertain the idea of their presence as a commentary on the absent hopes of the parents for their children. But as you so described, Cardassia was the only
character which changed – so what might have brought those relationships about?”

“Well.” Bashir laced his fingers together. “Well, I might posit their presence has something to do with those generations experiencing times of great affluence, comparatively, leaving those families with the relative luxury of remaining in their original configurations, and allowing those generations’ parents the opportunity to never give up their hold on their children.”

Garak allowed himself an open smile before setting himself to the task of dismantling Bashir’s suggested hypothesis word by word, refusing to allow him to speak a complete sentence until he had finished. And when he was done, Bashir still refused to listen, attempting to elicit another round of debate. For all his Human sentimentality, he clearly understood the necessity of disagreement for proper companionability. That Garak had to hold himself back for respect of Bashir’s clear lack of practice only served to make it that much more satisfactory, if not quite satisfying. There was a glimmering behind Bashir’s eyes, a deliberate intelligence behind his movements instead of his body alone trying to find new ways to occupy space – he might yet, and soon, not need to hold himself back, depending on how quickly Bashir learned what Garak had to teach him.

Their next dinner took place at Starfleet’s bidding, field missions and diplomatic engagements delaying their meeting by two days. Bashir managed to be the first to the Replimat that night, waiting at the entrance while the rest of the night’s crowd had begun filling up the place, clearly fiercely nervous, his fists clenching and unclenching before they were pinned down by his arms crossed over his chest. He hadn’t even thought ahead far enough to secure a table in a more secluded corner – and when they finally got one, Bashir barely waited for both of them to be seated before pulling a padd out from his satchel and handing it to Garak.

“I first read it in school for a class on early modern literature. It’s not as exhausting a work as The Never-Ending Sacrifice –”

“Exhausting!”

“But,” he said with a smile, “I still think you’ll find it engaging. It’s quite a bit older, as well – it was written nearly three and a half centuries ago, between the Eugenics War and the Third World War, and while it’s supposed to be set roughly at that time, the author left it somewhat ambiguous. She wanted to write about the Earth she lived in, which has comparatively little in common with the Earth today, so you have to understand I’m not giving this to you as an example of what my species is like now or as a rebuttal to The Never-Ending Sacrifice. They’re both about people devoting their lives to the state, but that’s where what they have in common ends. I said The Never-Ending Sacrifice was a vertical story; now I want you to read one more horizontal.”

“We’re discussing novels, my dear doctor, not paintings or tapestries. There’s no need to adopt the vocabulary of another art.”

“Yes, I know they’re books and all, but – I couldn’t exactly stop myself from thinking about them like that, how the plots move, it made sense to –”

“Don’t worry, that will do for now. It’s actually reasonably charming the way you insist on bridging disciplines.” Garak had already turned the padd off and slid it into his pocket while Bashir had begun floundering, clearly having reached the end of his rehearsal, and with no more fanfare or desire to wait, tucked his napkin into the neck of his shirt. “But if you like, I’ll keep that rather crude analogy in mind. Is there anything else you see fit to warn me about before I begin?”

“No, I think that’s all.”

“Splendid.”
“If you do have any questions –”

“Doctor, I can fend for myself when it comes to navigating an alien culture, historical or otherwise. I assumed you could do the same; won’t you allow such faith in me?”

An alien culture and an extinct one, no less. There was the clinging to religious rituals, and the lack of proper modern communication and medical technology, what had been contemporary writing that was now historic detail. All of that, he found fascinating. The ancient slang was less of a barrier after he read some of it aloud to properly examine its cadence; there was something near poetry to be found in the shape of the young girl’s anger at inhospitable circumstance. What took him more time to adjust to, what nearly made him put the book aside, was the very nature of those circumstances. Some things simply didn’t happen in civilized cultures – locked in a cupboard for five days, he’d felt his stomach churn at that, had to put the novel aside and almost went to take a proper water shower to clean those words off himself. He’d had to remind himself Bashir had no way of knowing, absolutely none, and that no species knew to value the family as greatly as his own did. The circumstances of the Earth the author wrote about would never come to pass on Cardassia. Not the possession of a family without any familial bonds, not children turned into orphans by their living parents.

There was only one family intact at the end, and at such a price.

Perhaps Human savagery wasn’t the only lesson he should take from the novel. Not with everything Bashir had told him, deliberately and otherwise. The single character selflessly devoted towards bettering the state was killed by the third page, and everything that flowed served as the author’s luscious, cynical, even treacherous commentary on the war that had so recently wracked her planet. Another very alien quality to the book, that at a time when the state ought to have been drawing its power back to itself to reground, it would allow this treatise to be published openly. And she’d managed to be prescient enough to anticipate and comment on the conflict that came about only a short while later, as well; Garak had to admire her for that.

Bashir had been right about the plot being far more horizontal than vertical, all threads moving towards convergence. Garak knew it was a very non-Cardassian way of thinking, and perhaps that was most useful. To read about such closed minds, beings unable to think of being in more than one moment, to think outside of themselves. Useful to remember how to speak to them, to learn how to take their shortcomings into account.
“One drink,” Jadzia insisted. “Just one. That’s all I’m asking, I’ll settle for one. You all came out intact, we might as well celebrate.”

“I really don’t, if you’d – I’d really like to just get back to my quarters.”

“One drink,” she said again, side-stepping a bit in what she hoped was just enough to nudge him over without being too overt about her intention. It did the trick, and Julian relented.

“All right. One drink, that’s all. One.”

“One drink is all I want.” Dax would have liked more, two or three at the outset, but Julian was a hard sell for anything social that didn’t involve at least six other people, and she’d make do with one drink as a start. Besides, with what Sisko had said about what they’d seen and having to leave Kai Opaka behind, she knew he could use a drink even if he wouldn’t say so out loud. “You haven’t been to Quark’s yet?”

“I haven’t had reason to.”

“You should make a reason,” she said as they worked their way to the bar through the early evening crowds that were starting to gather. “Relaxation is key for a good mind. There’s Tongo, there’s Dabo, you could rent a holosuite and go backpacking across Vulcan.”

“I know about the holosuites, and I’m sure I could find –”

“Jadzia Dax! Lovely as always, and so kind of you to grace us with your company this evening. And Doctor Bashir, a good evening, suite four is open if you’d like.”

“Hang on, suite four?” Jadzia asked as she pulled out a stool. “Are you telling me he comes here often?” Bashir sat down next to her in a gradual folding of limbs.

“He’s quite the regular in those holosuites. Hours at a time, sometimes. And he always pays his tab on time, too, I like that in a man.”

“Funny, he told me he hasn’t been here yet.”

“I haven’t had a drink here yet.”

“Semantics, Julian. It’s still dishonest.”

“Well, whatever I might have said or tried to imply, here I am, ready to have a drink.” He looked up from his crossed hands to look at Quark out of the corners of his eyes, no affect whatsoever in his voice. If the Ferengi was offended by the Human’s body language, he was a picture-perfect bartender and didn’t give anything away. “Quark, can I get –”

“No, let me guess. First drink in my bar, and at long last too, it’s important to get it right, but let me guess. You don’t seem the type for Synthehol, and if you wanted a real drink you’d have ordered one a long time ago. In that case – root beer. Federation Humans always want a root beer, I’m thinking of getting it on tap. Do you want it over ice or straight-up?”

“I’d like a lemonade, actually.”

Quark, who’d been reaching for a glass, did a double-take Dax guessed he practiced in the morning
for the absolute best theatricality. “Lemonade?”

“Cold. And not too sweet. Do you have lemonade programmed into the replicator? I can explain what it is if you don’t.”

“Do I have lemonade, I have a hundred and twelve different Human beverages programmed into my replicators, please don’t insult me. All right, who am I to judge someone’s drink order. One lemonade, not too sweet.”

“I’ll take a root beer,” Jadzia told Quark, who served them with a flourish and a smile before moving off down the bar. Bashir had a hand around his glass almost as soon as he could get it there, and had it up against his lips before she could get his attention. “Hang on a minute!” She raised her root beer towards him, and he managed a tired smile when they clinked glasses. “Now we can drink.”

He didn’t sip so much as gulp down almost a third in one go, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“How is it?”

“It’s fine.”

“You know, I’m with Quark on this one. It’s almost a graduation requirement to enjoy root beer.”

“I’ve never really been keen on root beer.” Going by his tone, if Dax didn’t know better she’d have guessed he was apologizing.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s – I’ve always found it rather bitter.”

“It’s sweet.”

He shook his head. “It’s got sweetness, but it’s still bitter.”

“And that’s not?”

“It’s tart.” He took another long drink, already halfway done.

“Ease up there, we’re not in a rush.”

“Ah. Right, we’re not. We have all evening to sit here and drink.”

“Or we could –”

“Have you got citrus fruit on Trill? Or whatever there might be like it, you know, some kind of peelable tart acidic fruit. I know that it never evolved on Cardassia, but have you got it on Trill?” He was looking away from her again, his gaze unfocused at best and the only reason she could say he was looking at his lemonade was because his eyes were pointed in its general direction.

“I’ve been to Earth, I know what citrus is. We’ve got something like it out in the lowlands. But ours grows on vines, not trees.”

“What do you do with them?”

“Pretty much what you do with yours. Drink the juice, candy the rind, eat the flesh. Spitting contests with the seeds.”
Bashir nodded, and gulped down the last of his lemonade. Jadzia tried to keep him talking, even offered to buy him another one, but as soon as the empty glass was back onto the bar he wished her a good evening and was on his way back to his quarters like there was someone young and eager waiting for him.

She asked Benjamin about it their next chess match. “I wouldn’t call myself an expert on Humans – I’ve got plenty of hands-on experience, but I haven’t made it a point to study you the way Curzon did with Klingons. It’s possible I’m just missing something that I haven’t learned yet.”

“It’s possible,” he allowed, pinning her remaining rook. “How would you say it’s going poorly between the two of you? Man-to-man.”

“Man-to-man, it’s harder than it’d be woman-to-man. It’d be easier if I could tell if he was intimidated by me, or infatuated, or just flat-out didn’t like me for whatever personal reason he’s got. But it’s more like he’s not…he’s pleasant when he makes the effort, but it’s getting him to make that effort, and then sometimes it just shatters.”

Benjamin leaned back from the board, lacing his fingers together. Dax found herself leaning back along with him. “If you’re describing what I think you are, shatters is a particularly strong word.”

“I don’t know what else to use. The moment breaks into a thousand pieces, and there’s always a mess to clean up afterwards. Is this some Human thing? I’ve known plenty of Humans of both genders who would rather go to a party than drink alone, but this isn’t that either.”

He took his time in answering. “I don’t think it’s a Human thing. Not precisely. It strikes me as more of a Doctor Bashir thing. Some Humans are more outgoing than others; you know there’s a variety of behavior patterns within any given species, and his happens to be far removed from what you’re used to.

“And consider this: it’s his first time off Earth. It’s his first time in an environment in which he’s not part of the dominant culture. We’re a social species by nature, but even as social as we are, it can take a good long while to adjust to a place like Deep Space Nine. Yes, I know he went through Starfleet, we’ve both been there. But he did it on his home planet. Here, there’s no place to go out and walk and know he’s home – you’ve left Trill so many times, I know you know the feeling. He’ll learn it himself if you let him come around.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“I told Jake more or less the same thing when we first got here.”

They burst out laughing at that, and she managed to snap up his second knight. Still, as comforting as they’d been, his words kept shaking around her head for the rest of the evening. Jadzia knew everything he’d said about Julian was right, and she knew the way she’d seen him breeze through the Starfleet dinners at the Replimat, not quite keeping everyone in his palm but always listening and engaged. Tobin hadn’t ever managed that – anything more than a small family dinner with his wife and children, or less than a huge lecture hall where he was delivering a paper, and he was done for. Julian almost had the opposite problem, and Jadzia knew there had to be something she could do to coax the breeziness he sometimes had out into the rest of his life.

Word traveled fast on a station as small as DS9, so asking around for suggestions was out; it’d get back to Julian before she could reliably do anything. Tell O’Brien and he’d tell engineering, and tell engineering and everyone would know in a matter of hours, a couple of days at most. So she had to be more restrained, and do some research first, and in such a way it wouldn’t sound so suspicious or blatant. And even if it did sound a little suspicious, and she didn’t have a choice but to come clean,
people could generally keep their mouths shut about a birthday party if they knew it was supposed to be a surprise.

The only trouble was that even with her being as circumspect as she could be, nobody knew Julian better than anyone else. Maybe she already knew he liked lemonade and nurse Parsons confessed he ate a lot of yogurt, but there wasn’t a whole lot of good that did her when it came to thinking of something for the party besides a lemon cake.

“I’m not one to snoop on my customers, especially loyal ones,” Quark said. “When it comes to what happens in a holosuite, that’s between them and whatever gods they believe in. I just provide the facilities.”

“You don’t have to tell me what he does when he goes in there,” Dax pressed. “Just something about what you think he might be doing. Anything you might be able to guess at. Just based on – on what he’s wearing when he comes in.”

His lips twitched up in a particular way that he swore they never did whenever she called him on it at the Tongo wheel. They only did that when he knew something he knew someone else wanted to know.

She slid her empty glass towards him. “And you can pour me another one while you’re at it.”

“When he comes in for a session in a holosuite…” He chuckled and bent over the bar, gestured to Jadzia, and she leaned closer. “When he comes in, he’s dressed for cold weather.”

“Okay.” Cold weather, she could –

“And sometimes he’s dressed for warm weather.”

She drew back. Quark filled up her glass.

“And sometimes he’s dressed for rain.”

“I’m being serious.”

“So am I. Every so often he’s here in a bathrobe and some silly Human swimming costume, and he never even stops at the bar for a snack on his way out. He never books his time with anyone else. You want more than that, you’ll have to go to the tailor.”

She’d been afraid of that. Quark had been happy enough to give her a secondhand report about Julian’s weekly dinners since he wouldn’t be losing any business with those in any case, and there was only a week and a half to go before the party, but it was still something she hadn’t wanted to resort to. And it didn’t look like she had a choice but to work up her courage to take a few minutes to visit his shop. She’d been inside before, a couple of times, but she’d wanted to buy things then, not learn what she could about another crewmember.

Garak was folding some shirts and arranging them on a shelf when she came in, and he turned to her with his hands full and a smile across his face.

“Lieutenant Dax, a pleasure. Do pardon me a moment, I’ll just be finishing here and then I’ll be right with you.”

“Thank you. But take your time, it’s all right.”

“Just a minute more, if you please.”
“All right.” She turned away and began inspecting the dresses, trying to find something that’d go with her height — things had never quite been so easy for Lela, always having to consider what sort of image she’d present instead of just what would hang well off her frame and not keep her too warm. There was a full-length maroon piece that looked like it might suit her, with a high-cut back and a gentle slope on its shoulders, and she wondered how many Tongo games it would take before she could think about it.

“And now that you have my attention — ah, that one I’m quite proud of, very graceful and relaxed, and it would bring out your hair so well.”

It would, she had to admit that. “I can’t help but think, well, maybe if I have reason to go to an awards banquet. But since I don’t…”

“As you haven’t come here with intent to purchase, may I ask what it is I can help you with? Or simply leave you to browse, if you’d like.”

“I was hoping — that is, I think you can help, but it’s not about clothes. I know you’ve been having regular dinners with Doctor Bashir. And I was hoping you might be able to help out with something for him.”

Garak didn’t move except to tilt his head back. “Should I be concerned?”

“No, not at all! I’m just planning something for him, and it’s a sort of party, so, well, it’s that…well, you eat dinner with him, you’d know he’s not so easy to get to know.” He nodded at her to go on. “And nobody else really has much else to say about him, so I was hoping, like I said, I was hoping you could help me think of something. To do for him.”

He blinked, twice. Then he smiled, lips tight, and said, “He’s quite fond of visual art.”

“Visual art.”

“Oh, yes. I’ve never heard him speak to a particular love of realism, or abstraction, but anything with a strong, uncompromising color scheme would suit his tastes. I’m certain you could find a painter of his homeworld he’d appreciate, or even one from your own. Sadly, my own people tend to express themselves in other forms beyond simple representation, so I’m afraid my own body of knowledge falls just short of where it needs to be for this particular task.”

“And the two of you talk about art a lot?”

He kept smiling. “No, we don’t.”

Jadzia started, then stopped, and finally managed to say, “Well, the work in your shop is wonderful, so I wouldn’t say you don’t have any artistic vision.”

“Which is quite flattering, but you’re confusing creative pursuits with craftsmanship. Ah, yes, he doesn’t seem to have much interest in holonovels, he told me he’s never seen their point, so if you do see fit to purchase a holodeck program of some sort, perhaps a non-narrative piece.”

She nodded, keeping her eyes on Garak’s face. “Thank you.”

“A pleasure to be of service for a mutual friend.”

“I’ll let you know if there’s an awards banquet.”

“Certainly. Oh, and Lieutenant?” Garak called to her, and she turned to see him standing there, so
still and almost serene. “Do pass my well-wishes for a happy birthday onto the good doctor at your party.”

“I will,” she said, and left as fast as she could while trying to maintain some politeness.

It wasn’t much to go on, but it was still more than she’d had beforehand, and she knew it probably wasn’t true but in case it was, then museums and galleries through the holosuite might work. It didn’t take her long to find some from Earth, a few from San Francisco she’d visited a few times and others from England she’d never been to in any life.

Jadzia knew she couldn’t ask Julian which ones he’d been to, which ones he didn’t really care for, which ones he still wanted to visit sometime, if what Garak said was really true. It’d throw everything right out into the open.

So she did the next best thing and called his aunt.

It took two days to get her on a subspace line. She’d been out when Jadzia called the first time, and sent a polite note back telling her when she’d next be available that arrived an hour before Jadzia was supposed to wake up. Time dilation was enough to give even Tobin a reason to swear, but Jadzia put on a good face, returned the message, and got an early start to the day. And the next day, instead of taking lunch at the replimat, she pulled out of the lab a little before she usually broke for lunch, locked the door to her quarters and right on time, she got the promised call from Earth.

Innogen was definitely related to Julian; Jadzia could see it in the shape of her face, the cut of her lips and the color of her eyes. She wore her hair long, even longer than Jadzia’s, something she could see even with it bound back – and even with it bound back it was Julian’s hair, too, if he grew it out, rich and thick with hints of its original dark luster. Innogen carried her age honestly, which meant she looked younger than she was, especially when she smiled.

“Sorry for the wait,” she said, sounding like someone who hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in the past three days. “It’s been a nightmare over here, we’ve got a client who just won’t leave us well enough alone – but this is all right, then? I’m not intruding on your schedule?”

“No, it’s fine, I set aside the time.”

“Good. So you’re calling about Julian?”

“Yes.”

“There’s nothing wrong, is there?”

“Oh, no, not at all!”

“It’s that you said you were calling on his behalf, without letting me know why. And that didn’t lead to the best of thoughts.” Dax noticed her accent matched Julian’s the way their faces did, very nearly but not quite the same. His words seemed to come out much smoother, more precise, not rolled at the end the way Innogen’s did.

“I’m sorry, I’m just trying to keep things quiet. I’m planning a birthday party for him, and –”

“A birthday party?” She leaned in towards the screen, eyes wide open and bright, suddenly looking much more awake.

“Yes. I’ve been trying to see what I can do for him, socially, and I thought what with his birthday coming up, I should see about throwing him a party for that.”
“A birthday party – oh, that’s…that’s wonderful,” she smiled. “By all means, you should absolutely throw him a birthday party. I didn’t think – no, it’s all right, if you’re throwing him one, then he should get one. He should get it. Was there anything in particular you wanted to ask me?”

“One thing.” Jadzia hadn’t expected Innogen to look so happy and relieved at the news, but maybe she had been a little obtuse about why she’d wanted to talk. She could hardly blame her for entertaining some worst-case scenarios. “I wanted to get him a good present, it’s his first birthday on the station and all, and I didn’t want to make it too obvious what I was getting. So, do you know if he likes art?”

“Art?”

“Yes. Paintings, drawings, I guess either abstract or realist, surrealist, what does he like? Does he like it at all?”

“Oh, absolutely. We’re a very artistic family, the Bashirs. Yes, yes he likes art.”

“He does?” Jadzia found herself grinning in spite of herself.

“Oh, yes. He always has, you could talk to him about it sometime.”

“I didn’t know what to get him, and I thought a holoprogram of a gallery would be something he’d like. And that I should ask you which ones he’d like to visit.”

“He’d like that quite a lot. It’s very thoughtful of you to think of that for him.” She shook her head and let out a low sigh. “The Legion of Honor in San Francisco, he enjoyed going there, and their Museum of Modern Art, that one also. The National Gallery, the British Museum. Anything large he could explore. Just so long…”

“Just what?”

“Nothing. Just so long as they’re not too crowded, like if you were going after hours. I’ve never tried modifying holoprograms, I wouldn’t really know what I’d be doing, but if you could make sure he’d get the museums more or less to himself, that’d be a perfect way to make sure he’d enjoy them.”

“I think I can manage that. Thank you.”

“No, thank you. This is – this isn’t something I’d expected to hear. And I’m very happy I have.”

Jadzia smiled, shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

“I don’t think you understand.” Something faraway and small in her voice pulled Jadzia’s smile away. “I mean it when I said I didn’t expect to hear news of anyone throwing Julian a party. And I am happy you’re doing this for him. For him, it’s not nothing.” Then her joy was back. “I’m sure we both have to be going, so good afternoon to you.”

“And good night to you.”

She knew an hour and a half was cutting it close, and almost opened everything up to getting caught, but she’d rather take the risk that play it too safe and leave everyone standing around waiting for Julian to get back to his quarters. And for everyone to get in there to begin with, she’d needed to call in a couple of favors from Chief O’Brien.

“You’re sure he’ll be okay with this?”
“Yes, I’m certain.”

“Because I’ve known a few men like him in my time, and – not that I like the guy, mind you – it’s that with men like him, you’ve gotta make sure you know them before you try anything like this.”

“Men like him?” She held her hands to her hips.

“Yeah, you know, men like him. Not really all that here, just a little – off-step, you might say. Served with a few on the Rutlage and Enterprise. Happier talking at you than with you, but good company once they get used to you. I always thought of it like getting a skittish horse used to being around people. And we’re in.” The door slid open with a little swish, and the place wasn’t entirely unlived-in, but didn’t give off any strong feelings of being more than just a residence. There wasn’t any nonstandard furniture or even much art on the walls, just a couple of art prints and a small wooden ornament. It didn’t take much to move the main living area’s furniture around enough for everyone – eighteen of them, all told, not including Julian – to have room to stand and move comfortably. Dax was tempted to take a peek into his bedroom, or bathroom, and almost managed to talk herself into it.

She’d almost asked Quark to cater the party, then went to Benjamin instead, who’d managed to come through with all the little snacks – even if some of the ingredients were replicated, everything was hand-made. It’d been more trouble deciding on what kind of cake, and she hoped it was one Julian would enjoy.

It wouldn’t take much waiting to find out, since he was only ten minutes late for his birthday party.

He stood there a moment, frozen still, eyes wide, and for a moment Jadzia wondered if he’d actually turn around and run before he burst into a huge smile. “Right! Yes! Yes, it’s my birthday, of course you’re throwing me a party, right, of course you are! That’s what this is, it’s what people do on birthdays, they throw parties and that’s exactly what you’re doing, it’s all what’s supposed to happen! Thank you, I do appreciate this, it must have taken a lot of time to arrange – ah, who arranged this?”

Jadzia stepped up front. “I did.”

Julian grabbed her shoulders and looked her right in the eyes, his whole face alight. “Yes, yes, of course it’d be you – and yes, thank you again. It’s all so elaborate, how could you manage this?”

“She had help,” Lieutenant Fenster called out.

“Ah, did she? That doesn’t sound like Jadzia, she’s a woman who could move a mountain with a word and a smile, don’t tell me you needed help for all this.”

She couldn’t stop smiling back at him. It was exactly what she’d wanted to see, that same breeziness and engagement he was always hiding away. “Some. Not a lot, just some. I needed help with the cake –”

“The cake!” Lishan shouted. Julian flinched. “We gotta cut that cake!”

“Cake?” he asked.

“Lemon cake,” Jadzia said, taking him by the arm and steering him towards the table with the food, the drinks, the cake and the half-dozen presents. She’d made sure everyone knew showing up would be enough of a present, but five other people knew a little something wouldn’t go amiss.

Julian kept smiling, joking, passing out cake to everyone else before taking a slice for himself, ate two bites and praised everything about it before putting it down to get to the presents. When he
almost dropped the first thing he picked up and barely managed to grab it, he laughed with everyone else, and after he unwrapped it, wrapped both his hands around Hala’s and shook it while he beamed at her.

Whether he intended to or not, he got to Jadzia’s gift last. She passed it over, telling him, “This one’s mine,” and he thanked her before he even opened it up. When he did, his confusion was so blatant she had to laugh again.

“And – what’s this?”

“Museums,” she said. “A bunch of them. There’s art, science, modern design and technology, mostly Human but there’s one from Trill I think you’ll like. And I’m not just saying that.”

“Really. Thank you, Jadzia. I’ll try this next time I book a holosuite. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. I wasn’t sure what you’d like most, so I kind of let myself go and grabbed a bunch – when I called your aunt, she said you –”

“You called my aunt?”

Jadzia froze. Everyone froze. Julian was staring at her, also frozen, eyes as wide as they’d been all night but the rest of his face empty and pale. There was hurt in them, hurt she didn’t expect to see, not after he’d spent so much of the night so happy.

“Yes,” she managed, “I didn’t know what –”

“Oh, well, of course you had to call her, you couldn’t well ask me what I’d want for my birthday!” Just like that, he was all smiles again, relaxed and loose. “Not without letting on about this fine shindig, and I do appreciate you keeping it a secret, that must have taken quite a bit of effort on your part. Of course you had to call her. So how is she?”

“She’s fine.”

“Good, good. I’ve been meaning to call her myself, thank you for reminding me.”

Things smoothed out as best they could, and everyone finished off the drinks and snacks, but that outburst was the beginning of the end of the party. Jadzia was the last one to leave, the last of the cake boxed up for safekeeping, and Julian promising her he’d try out her museums soon before waving her off and letting the door swish closed behind her. She knew she had to look somewhat absurd grinning so hard and carrying the cake box so carefully, but she’d seen to what she’d planned for everyone getting what they’d wanted from the night, and she wouldn’t stop herself from enjoying the moment.

The next day, around lunchtime, Julian wasn’t anywhere near the infirmary. Nurse Jabara just shrugged. “He said he’s taking some personal time today.”

“Did he say why? Anything about it?”

“No, just that he’d be in tomorrow, and we should call him for an emergency but nothing less than that.”

“All right. Thank you. Just let me know I’d like to see him when he gets in.”

“I will.”
She almost went to check up on him that night, then thought better of it. He was at the next day’s senior staff briefing, anyway, and told her he would try to work her program in when he had the chance before they got to Sisko’s reports and duty rosters.

“Jadzia?” He called out to her, and she waited for him to catch up so they could walk together. “I just wanted to say I’m very thankful –”

“It was nothing, really. I was happy to do it.”

“No, I wanted to say, I’m very thankful, and I appreciate the effort you went to in order to make sure everything went as nicely as it did, but please don’t do that sort of thing again.”

“Come on, you had a wonderful time.”

“As much as I enjoyed the cake –”

“Just the cake? I’ve never seen you so engaged with – with anyone, and you were practically charming everyone’s pants off.”

“I’m glad you –”

“Look, if you don’t want the party next year to be a surprise, then I’ll keep that in mind and let you know ahead of time.”

She realized Julian had stopped several paces behind, and turned around to see his eyes sharp and face held still. He wasn’t looking at her, and didn’t say anything.

“Julian? Is something wrong?”

“You aren’t listening to me.”

“Are you all right?”

“Jadzia, I’m very thankful that you threw me a birthday party, and I appreciate the effort you took to make sure it all went as well as it did. But please, in the future, don’t do it again.”

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to say –”

“What I’m trying to say to whomever it is I’m talking to – Jadzia, Curzon, Torias, Audrid, Emony, Tobin, Lela, Dax, whoever’s in there and listening to me, please don’t break into my quarters and invite two dozen people along with you and not even have the courtesy to tell me ahead of time, just don’t. I know what you were trying to do and – and it –” He stopped, breathing hard, and shut his eyes, and Jadzia watched him swallow and shudder and then look at her with a face closer to his usual expression. “It’s that you were too successful at surprising me. And I know the entire point of a surprise party is the surprise, it’s there in the name, but I’ve never managed to be comfortable in a party where I don’t know it’s coming.”

Jadzia wanted to say he didn’t know what he was talking about, or remind him how easily he’d made everyone laugh, the way he’d made a point to say good-night to everyone as they left without pushing for anyone to leave, but all she said was, “I’ll let you know ahead of time next year.”

“Thank you. And I did enjoy the cake. Very much.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.”
As security requests went, it was hardly worth the accompanying preamble; a desire for increased privacy in one’s own quarters was eminently understandable, and something Odo would willingly help almost anyone achieve. However, doing so by reverting said quarters’ security protocols to the Cardassian defaults that they’d been originally programmed to meant first going to Commander Sisko to be granted permission, and then to the Engineering department to finalize the programming.

“And I know if I go to Commander Sisko with my request having been given support from the station’s head of security, he’ll be that much more willing to listen,” Bashir explained.

“A sensible precaution. With all the time Chief O’Brien spends working on converting the station’s programming, shifting it back for a single quarter’s security won’t be much of a priority otherwise.” He handed the padd back.

“I’d thought about that. Starfleet security is generally sufficient, but after Dax’s party, I can’t help but think I’d like something a little more difficult to subvert. And I know, there’s not much to be done to keep Dax out of somewhere she wants to be, but even an additional level beyond what Starfleet has would be welcome.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that about Starfleet security protocols. When it comes to individual privacy, they only go so far.”

“I’ve never understood that about Starfleet. It’s always an open-door policy, there’s rarely any consideration that someone might want some privacy. And the moment you ask for any, you’re labeled a social deviant at best.”

“And at worst?”

“Privacy is usually provided through ostracism.”

Odo nodded. “Still, that has its appeal.”

“It does allow you time alone.” Bashir looked around the office, and then said, “Well, I have your code, so thank you for that. There was one other favor I wanted to ask you for, if that’s all right.”

“It might well be.”

“All right.” He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, clasped his hands tight together in front, and looked up to Odo. “There are certain individuals that I’d like to be informed about if they visit the station. I know you monitor all incoming and outgoing traffic, and can trust you to be discreet.” He reached into a small pocket inside his shoulder bag and pulled out not another padd but something far more secure, something difficult to forge and impossible to hack. Odo had only seen such things a handful of times, typically when a legate wanted to maintain some information’s privacy or flaunt their status, or both. It was a piece of paper. Bashir handed it to Odo, the paper’s texture rippling across his fingers’ surface before he unfolded it to find a pair of names written there in ink. “I know you don’t want to be bored with the details, so I’ll just say I’d prefer not to have another surprise like the one Jadzia decided to give me, and I’d appreciate it if you’d help me avoid that.”

“Certainly.”

“Thank you. They shouldn’t be coming for some – well. It doesn’t matter, I suppose. You’d be able to find out if they’re coming before they arrive.”
“Assuming they come through legal channels.”

“And if they don’t, there’s always Quark for that,” he said with a sardonic smile. Quark and Garak, but Odo refrained from voicing that particular comment.
Kira recognized Sarish and Etilen right away. They’d come in on the same transport as Vedek Winn, two refugees returning home from the diaspora. She’d first met them months ago at the Gratitude Festival, the first time any of them celebrated it openly and properly. They’d eaten lunch together, and talked about the future. Sarish had wrapped her hand over Etilen’s, and he’d looked at his lover with such open devotion Kira almost had to look away. And today, she found the two of them talking with Doctor Bashir and Nurse Jabara in Bashir’s small office. She could hear their voices, but not their words, and she’d rapped on the door to summon Bashir.

“Ah, Major. We’re just finishing up, so if you give us a few minutes –”

“Should I come back?”

“No, just another three or four minutes, we just need to schedule a follow-up appointment.”

“Nerys?” Sarish called.

“Hey, good to see you,” she called back. “I’ll just wait out here.”

“No need, no need, Bashir, the day after tomorrow, oh-ten-hundred hours?”

“That will be fine.”

“Then it’s settled, we’ll see you then. Nerys! A joy as always, we have to make a dinner sometime.”

Etilen stepped around her to shake Kira’s hand. “I brought some fresh malcai with me. We’ll take tea, how about that?”

“Malcai tea sounds good,” she smiled. “I haven’t had it fresh in ages.”

“Tomorrow night, then?”

“Of course tomorrow night,” Sarish said. “Why not tomorrow night?”

“Malcai tea?” Bashir asked.

“It’s the flower of a root – there’s just one flower a bulb, and it’s not so good dried. It wouldn’t be as pungent or sweet,” Etilen explained.

“Oh, I know what it is. It’s that I know Bajoran chemists used to use it to induce menstruation in high doses, and it might not be the best idea for you right now. Give me just a moment, let me check the database.” He disappeared back into his office, Etilen looking to Sarish, who took his hand in hers and squeezed it.

“There shouldn’t be a thing to worry over,” Jabara said.

“Why would there be?” Kira let herself smile. “Worrying over malcai tea is like, it’d be like worrying about veklava, what’s safer than malcai tea?”

“Nothing,” Sarish said, too quickly. “Nothing at all. It’s only that the two of us are, well, I’m going to be, Etilen won’t. I’m getting one of the...ah, one…”

“One of the what?”
She looked to Jabara, who dipped her head forward in assent. “I won’t break your confidentiality. It’s up to you if you want to tell them.”

Sarish smiled without any teeth. There was hope in her eyes, and none in her smile. “I’m getting a uterine implant put in.”

“You’re what now?”

“Unless you’re planning to drink three pots of it a day for the next week, malcai tea won’t have any adverse effects on the implantation.” Bashir stepped out from his office, and patted both Etilen and Sarish on the shoulders. It was all perfectly professional of him. “I’ll see the two of you tomorrow at oh-ten-hundred.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“It’s quite all right.”

“No, I mean it. Thank you. And you, Nerys, tomorrow at nineteen hundred?” Sarish asked.

“My quarters, nineteen hundred.” They all shook hands, Kira’s head buzzing.

She’d been fortunate, she knew that. As fortunate as anyone could have been. She hadn’t needed to volunteer herself for some of the more personal missions. Not everyone was so lucky, and it was made all the worse when the Cardassians had been careful about things. The ones that hadn’t left the children to their own fates – or to their would-be mother’s hands. Kira had gone with Tari to flush out what’d been growing in her belly, malcai tea and yullat root, and the nun-turned-chemist had barely had the courtesy to keep Tari from ever seeing what she’d been carrying.

There had been Cardassian-run hospitals where it was all done with hyposprays and pills almost as soon as it began, clean and neat and efficient, and they’d seen to it all with false smiles and glittering teeth and had welcomed the chance to kill a Bajoran, even before it ever saw life. Tari knew it was better to let one of their own rid her of her problem.

There was nothing the Cardassians gave as freely as death, one way or another. And still, some went to them, not out of choice but desperation – it wasn’t a termination if there’d never been anything to terminate. Kira would have thought even a Cardassian could understand, but their doctors, women all of them, gave implants and medications without asking, without questioning, without taking a moment to wonder why a woman would need something to keep herself from ever conceiving a child. But it was like the Cardassians to be cruel, and take the Bajorans’ future from them, too.

Kira knew there wasn’t anything in any prophecy about the subject, not by direct word. It was all fairly modern interpretation and counter-counter-counter arguments. And still, tradition grew and shifted over time. Until it was all ripped away. The people coming home from the diaspora almost had it easier. With so much gone, people didn’t see any reason to go to a chemist anymore. When a woman needed an abortion, or something to keep herself from ever getting pregnant, she went someplace clean and neat, a hospital or a clinic. She went to the infirmary with her lover.

She watched her friends go, then turned to Bashir, who was back at his desk.

“Are all Federation doctors trained in this?”

“In what?”

“Whatever the proper term is for pregnancy and childbirth.”
“Obstetrics and gynecology. Yes, we are. Why? Are you experiencing anything you’d like to discuss?”

“No. And if I was, I’d rather see Nurse Jabara. I just want to know how you can be so casual about it.”

“Neither of them wants to have children right now.”

“And that’s all it takes.”

“Yes.” She stared down at him, at the cultivated Federation blend of innocent certainty and moral superiority, and he sighed and went on. “It’s their decision, Major. Not mine. Children should be planned and wanted by their parents, and if neither Sarish or Etilen wants children right now, they shouldn’t have any. It’s better for them this way.”

Kira thought back to Tari’s face when she’d woken up, and how an implant would’ve helped her then, how she almost lost her chance at ever having a child she’d planned for and wanted. With the Occupation almost a full year gone, denying an opportunity when there wasn’t any worry seemed heartless, and relentlessly practical, and perfectly Human. “I just can’t see it that way,” she finally said.

“As the saying goes, it beats the alternative. Of the two I know which one I’d rather perform. Of course, I’d be more than willing to perform either, but if someone asked me to offer an opinion, I’d say I’d rather see someone go for a preventative measure than rectifying a mistake they –”

“That’s how you see an abortion? Fixing a mistake?”

“Not always, but usually.”

“What would unusually be, then?”

“Where it wasn’t any fault of the parents’ actions that they simply shouldn’t have that child. When it’d be a kindness to the child.”

“I’m sorry, but I really can’t understand how you can go ahead and say something like that.”

“Sometimes it’s not right for a child to be born.”

Forget Human; with a sense of sentiment like that, he could have passed for a Cardassian. “Do all Humans think about children that way?”

Finally, it took him time to answer. “Some of us do.”
“I’d like to stop eating dinner with you.”

Bashir had barely sat down with his small plates of grain salad and stewed nightshades and exchanged the typical weekly pleasantries before making that small request. Garak didn’t let his surprise color his voice. “My goodness, Doctor. Have I been remiss in some fashion? Here I thought we were having such a pleasant time, has the stigma of my company become such a burden?”

“In some ways, yes. But please don’t think I’m not enjoying your company; if I wasn’t, I wouldn’t want to keep eating meals with you. And I do, very much. It’s that it’s gotten to the point where I know our meals keep drawing attention to me, and I’d rather mitigate that somewhat. So perhaps we should start eating lunch together instead.”

And that was so much of what made Bashir such a fascinating Human, the distinct appreciation of the interplay between performance and observation. While it was very nearly gauche for two adults to openly discuss such matters – if the man were Cardassian he would have never mentioned the subject directly, he would have woven the situation together in silence and let his actions speak for themselves – it was such an eminently sensible request Garak was almost pleased to grant it.

“Lunch in public – well, if we must, I suppose. And, may I ask how precisely has this attention been drawn to you?”

“People keep asking me questions about us. You, really. You, and us. Some of them I simply don’t have the information to answer, but others have gotten quite…personal.”

“I see.”

“Why I’d want to be friends with you. And when I get fed up and finally answer, I keep giving them the same answers, so they keep looking for new ways to ask old questions.”

“You don’t think to give them something new each time? You disappoint me. Doctor, you’ve been given a rare opportunity for deliberate obfuscation, and you’d rather see to it that we move our meal times instead of taking every advantage this offers you. I must say, it’s a good thing you’re going to read Dead Songs, because you need the lesson.”

“Dead Songs? The novel by Ravi Orren?” He took the rod and slipped it into his bag hanging by its strap over the back of the chair.

“That would be it.” Not one of Garak’s favorites, but stimulating and clever; she had a gift for describing the overbearing helplessness and the mirroring need for agency of children and childhood. “But as we won’t be meeting here next week –”

“I’d still like to meet you here. I didn’t want to change where we’re eating, just when, and not next week, but two weeks from now. Then we can start with lunch.”

Ah, yes, time and translation issues once again. “Right, right. Then the same day of the week, only at lunchtime. Understood. Now that we’ve gotten that nasty business out of the way, there were a number of concerns I had with Marilyn Hervé’s relentlessly positive attitude towards – what was it, yes, blended families. You say she wrote for young adults?”

The rest of the meal passed quite pleasantly, barbs and arguments flitting through the air, and Garak let himself indulge in dessert in order to prolong the evening.
“Offer me a bite.”

“Pardon?” It was only replicated, not authentic, but it was still his own. Bashir could have ordered one for himself if he’d wanted.

“Offer me a bite of your fruit tart. I won’t take it. Just cut off a piece and hold the fork out to me,” he said, smiling, his gaze loosely focused on the pastry in question.

“Like so?”

“Yes, like that.” As he’d said, he didn’t take it, making something of an exaggerated display of declining the offer, even by the standards of his performances during his Starfleet dinners. Offering a friend a morsel from one’s plate was innocuous enough for a relationship like theirs from a Cardassian point of view; thanks to the novels Bashir had lent him, Garak knew there was a deep potency to the gesture from a Human one.

It could be taken as a romantic overture, and if two individual were already within such a relationship, a sexual one. Had Bashir wanted to make any sort of positive affirmation regarding the implicit offer, he would have eaten that bite of the tart. Garak’s puzzlement barely lasted two days, when he began to hear rumors of a falling-out between him and Bashir trickle into his shop.

For all that Bashir needed Orren’s guidance to help him through his day-to-day interactions with the rest of the Starfleet crewmembers, he had a remarkably firm understanding of the movement and waves of social perception. That he thought to have a week without a meal together – loathsome as Garak found it, made worse by the awareness of the emotion itself – lent remarkable potency to the rumors, enough to make lunch together seem almost an apology and concession to maintaining a friendship of a different sort than they had previously held. It was calculated, it was deliberate, it was the sort of thing which made him the only individual on the entire station worth giving any thought to.

That there were times he seemed to be operating on an infant’s level of understanding of social graces only served to make him that much more interesting. Deeper than his aversion to eye contact and casual touch, he had no skill for thinking on his feet, and his obliviousness towards the prospects offered by his colleagues’ curiosity regarding their former dinners demonstrated that perfectly. Interrupt his line of thinking and he would pout like a champion and either return to it unbroken after an interval for sulking or outright refuse to continue and instead try to redirect the conversation. At times Garak thought Bashir was only half-trained, and wild enough to deserve to be called so.

Still, even with the lights brighter and the noise greater during the station’s artificially-designated midday than its evening, it wasn’t a hardship to eat lunch with Bashir. It had been an unmitigated source of amusement when Garak had taken a moment to talk to one of his customers on the way to the Replimat about the jacket she’d ordered, and watch Bashir stand by and try not to be too obvious about his scrambling to assess and engage with the situation as best he could.

It was barely two months after that when Garak was the one requesting they not meet the following week. Oddly enough, Bashir didn’t protest, but took it in stride. “You must have a good reason for it, if you’re asking me now.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“It’s quite all right. Now, what did you think of 1788-1901?”

“I have to say, Napaltjarri’s sense of place was impeccable. She did a remarkable job, and there were moments I could have sworn I felt the wind blowing off the screen – you know, I don’t think I’ve
read anyone who isn’t a Cardassian who’s been able describe the beauty of that sort of bushland quite so well.”

“Ah, so you liked it.”

“Not so fast, Doctor. I appreciated it, to be certain, and there were large segments I enjoyed, but did I like it? No, but I wasn’t disappointed, either. I don’t know how it could be anything other than a resonant parable regarding the necessity of expansionism. The protections of civilization do not extend beyond civilization’s borders, making it imperative to protect and expand those borders. It wasn’t a novel to be liked, it’s a textbook to be studied.”

“She was writing an elegy for her ancestors, Garak, not a treatise on how to run an empire.”

“She suffered from a sentimental editorial voice, nothing more than what I’ve come to expect from your species. Trust me, it’s quite forgivable.”

“So you’re siding with the invading conquerors, who you’d say brought civilization with them?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m siding with them, just that I understand their mission and what they wished to accomplish. Their methods were brutal and often quite unnecessary, but they were dedicated to bringing their own civilization with them across a vast ocean and into dangerous, unknown territory, and I have to admire the strength of their love for their native culture.”

“And the people already living there, who had civilizations of their own. You didn’t see anything reprehensible about that being taken away from them? In essence, they were declared non-persons even before anyone made landing on their shores, because they weren’t part of the culture that was invading their homeland.”

“You’re being reductive again, Doctor. Yes, I did admire that both cultures were given their own narrative voices, and I was quite taken with the descriptions of keeping track of one’s lineage and family line although I imagine you had a much easier time keeping track of them than I –”

“Just draw a picture in your head, Garak, that’s what I did.”

“A wonderful solution. As I was saying, calling it reprehensible is a reductive viewpoint. Unfortunate and regretful, by all means. But reprehensible? I’m afraid I simply can’t see it as such.”

“And I’m afraid I simply can’t understand why I expected anything else from you.”

“Then I’d suggest you read it again. If there was any lesson Napaltjarri intended to impart, it was that Humans desire to see themselves wherever they happen to find themselves.”

The rest of the week passed as well as any other, with nothing remarkable to distinguish its days, for which Garak was thankful; there was too much to both anticipate and dread, in equal measures. He busied himself with his work, filling orders, sketching new designs, and it wasn’t until a rare afternoon he closed up early that anything of note happened – specifically, receiving a message inviting him to dinner in Bashir’s quarters the following night, coming from the inter-station network rather than being delivered in person.

Given how detailed the message was regarding Bashir’s awareness of the looming Gratitude Festival, his remembrance of Garak having missed their then-weekly dinner the previous year during said Festival, the simple wording of the offer, the emphasized opportunity to decline the invitation, and the lack of anything regarding an emotional tone, it was for the better the invitation was delivered remotely. Garak could easily imagine Bashir standing in the middle of the shop by the men’s tunics, hands clasped tight at his sides or together in front, eyes boring into the wall just over
Garak’s head, the words coming out with the cadence of a well-rehearsed theatre audition monologue. Very much for the better.

The day did pass a little more smoothly than it had the previous year, he had to admit. He’d taken a fair amount of work from the shop to occupy his hands, there were drills and time on the treadmill for his body; it was easy to keep himself out of his head and have only one reason to leave his quarters, and then after much of the day was already past, bringing him to the only part of the day worth looking forward to. He took more time than was strictly necessary to prepare himself, settling on plain, unscented oil for his scales and hair after his shower, and left early to take a circuitous route to avoid the more heavily trafficked corridors. Even a former Bajoran terrorist would force a smile at him in passing greeting during the Festival, and he would nod and smile back as though he didn’t see their hatred.

He’d been given quarters that had formerly belonged to Glinn Meya Pakal, perhaps a little below his current level of importance but still suitable. When he tapped Bashir’s door chime, rather than being given immediate permission to enter, as would have happened with almost every other personal quarters on the station, it was gratifying to be asked to provide vocal identification. The voice may have been Federation, but the request was pleasantly Cardassian, almost delightfully so.

“It’s a pleasure to see you, Garak,” Bashir greeted him with a smile. He wasn’t dressed as terribly as Garak had braced for, but in the low, calm light – everything was off, and candles, actual candles, were lit in place of those disgustingly bright Human-grade lamps – the garish colors were fairly tolerable.

“And you, Doctor.” He’d seen the inside of Bashir’s quarters once before, for the few minutes it took between the almost nostalgic hacking of the security protocols and Bashir leaving to ask the Commander for a runabout to Bajor. It’d been as dark as anyone could get their quarters then, only the smallest amount of ambient light coming from the stars and a few minor consoles. Now, with one last candle coming to life at Bashir’s hands, there was plenty of light for him to see by, all of it gentle.

“It’s not too cold, is it? I already set the temperature to twenty-five degrees, but if you’d like it warmer I can raise a little more.”

“No, it’s quite all right.”

“Ah. Computer, raise temperature to thirty degrees, code Bashir beta-one-seven.”

“Code approved. Temperature rising.”

“Oh, my dear, there wasn’t any need for that. I was already far more comfortable than I’d expected to be.”

“Maybe you were, but it’s generally been my experience that people rarely ask for as much as they want.” He stepped into his bedroom a moment, speaking louder for Garak to hear. “And if I don’t ask, I’ll never know how you’re feeling. Besides, even if you were lying, I might as well go ahead and ask anyway – you shouldn’t think you’re special because of lying to me, I go through the same song-and-dance to get to the truth with practically all of my patients. No one ever accidentally sits on anything.” Stripped of the blue-and-purple long-sleeved tunic, he was instead wearing a short-sleeved black undershirt, cut off halfway down his forearms, a vast improvement for a multitude of reasons. The candlelight was flickering radiant on his skin. “Besides, I’m not a Cardassian. I can make a guess based on what I know about you and your species, and it might be well-informed, but it’d still just be a guess, and I have enough trouble when it comes to guessing for Humans. How is it now?”
“Quite pleasant, actually.” It would soon reach the temperature of a pleasant springtime day, and judging by the temperature of the unfamiliar-but-well-scented food Bashir had laid out on his dining table and the steam rising from the spout of a small teapot, Garak might almost be tempted to remove an outer layer of clothing himself before he left. Quite possibly more, if he’d read the situation correctly. “And what have we here?”

“Nothing particularly fancy – it’s all replicated. I’ve never been much of a cook, and even if I was, it’s difficult to get access to some of the fresh ingredients these dishes would need. But I hope you’ll still enjoy them.” He poured two cups of the tea and handed one to Garak. “This, though, I was able to get the mint fresh.”

“Ah, that’s the smell.” Bashir smiled, head tipped down to meet Garak’s gaze through his eyelashes, and they sipped. As ever, it was fascinating how he sought ways to look indirectly, to knowingly fool himself into comfort. The tea was bitter, but it was a cleansing bitterness, and it reminded him of home.

“There was something – I have something I want to say.” He set his cup down on the table and clasped his hands tight together in front. So he had read everything correctly. Garak held back a smile and nodded for him to go on, one hand under his cup, one hand around it, holding it close to his chest, the tea’s warmth moving up his arms and down his throat, meeting deep in his chest to bloom and spread through the rest of his body. “I invited you here tonight in the hope of offering a reprieve from the Gratitude Festival, but that wasn’t my only reason for doing so. This dinner is something of a pretext. I’ve wanted to ask you for some time now, that –”

“Julian.” Garak set his own cup down. “I’ve read enough of your species’ literature and social customs to make a guess as to what an invitation to a private candlelit dinner implies.”

“So – so I don’t have to explain what all this is?”

“No, you don’t.”

He visibly and theatrically relaxed, a grin shining on his face. “Oh, thank God. I was afraid I’d have to explain all of this to you, but – we both read Beverly Road, of course you know, and here I was all set to recite this silly little speech about romantic procedures and social implications and now I don’t need to, thank God, such a relief, you have no idea how nice it is to just not need to say any of that.”

“I had my suspicions with the dinner invitation itself, but the candles, and the disrobing, little as it was I’m still quite appreciative –” He blushed so nicely in the low candlelight, so very mammalian, “– went a good way towards, oh, what did Beverly say to Vivian, ‘tipping your hand’, that was the idiom. So consider it tipped. And the invitation accepted, on all levels stated and implied.”

“So – that’s a yes, then? To the bedroom and all that?” Garak nodded. “God, that’s just brilliant, and it’s, it’s splendid, this is wonderful.”

“All that, and more. But shall we take dinner first?”

“Yes! Right, the dinner. Let me get your chair.”

Nothing on the table was familiar, except in part and concept – a grain salad, roasted fish, a variety of sauces from thin to thick, universal ideas given unique expression with Earth’s particular resources. Julian introduced them one after another, listing every ingredient of each dish down to the water and salt, explaining geographic and cultural origins and the history of the curious term love-apples. Garak tried a little bit of everything and enjoyed most of it, and rather appreciated Julian’s perspective on Nelita Ma’tar’s memoirs, being a doctor of Bajoran ‘frontier medicine’ himself, if practicing nearly
fifty years later.

When asked, and pressed, he admitted he had prepared and rehearsed a second speech in case Garak
turned down his romantic invitation, something that would have emphasized how much he valued
their friendship and that he regretted any possible boundary crossings. “I might have gone straight to
dessert, if I thought things had gone particularly pear-shaped.”

“Pair-shaped?”

“Taken a turn for the worse, gone to shit. It’s a British idiom. Pears are a fruit.”

“Ah, pear-shaped. How colorful. Let me say if things had indeed reached such a state, and I’m glad
they didn’t, your plan to rectify the situation would have worked.” Small flat spirals of twisted flakey
dough held together by honey, topped with nuts tossed in more of the same, they were impossible to
eat as neatly as Garak would have liked, but the flavor was outstanding. It was just on the edge of
too sweet without quite getting there, each bite a sharply held pleasure.

“I’m glad, too.” Julian smiled at Garak, those beautiful sea-dark green eyes gently focusing on his
face, and he found himself as warmed by what he saw in them as he’d been by the tea. He took
Julian’s cup and poured the very last of the pot into it, handing it back to him using both hands, a
gesture he knew Julian knew from Sons and Daughters of the Mogrund. It wasn’t long after that they
found themselves in Julian’s bedroom. There’d been kissing on the way, Julian so warm and eager,
and each of them stripping themselves of their own clothing to avoid any fussing with hidden
fastenings, Julian bunching his up to toss into a basket in a corner and Garak folding his to lay over
the back of a chair. He took a moment to steady his breathing, then turned to see Julian looking at
him. For a moment they stood there nude, silent, and it was just as much the thrill of the alien – the
Human, the mammal, his first partner outside his own species – as it was the thrill of who that alien
was that kept him staring instead of moving, that kept them both staring.

The first time he’d met Humans, everyone had been fully clothed – that was how first contacts
generally went, outside of a few notable exceptions and deeply tawdry holosuite programs – but he’d
learned about them in his xenobiology studies and briefings, and knew what they looked like inside
their skins and under their clothes. At the time, and until he’d gotten to know Julian, he’d never
entertained the thought he’d fuck one, much less the fantasy. But even armed with knowledge of
what Julian’s species looked like naked and what he had between his legs, it wasn’t the same as
learning the specifics of Julian himself that were standing before him. Knowing Julian was going
through much the same thought process did nothing to quell the fascination and bewilderment, the
questions of what is it that you’ve got there and what am I supposed to do with it. Such were the
pleasures, rich and strange, of fucking outside one’s own species.

Then he saw how Julian was looking at him, at his face, wearing an expression somewhere beyond
bewilderment. He was looking at him in wonder, enraptured, and clearly, deeply afraid. Garak nearly
opened his mouth to speak, then held back and kept it closed, smiled instead, relaxing his shoulders
and doing his best to help put Julian at ease. His fear didn’t leave him as he moved closer and
reached out, everything about him shouting to Garak that he was ready to pull away and bolt at the
slightest hint of danger, as ready to run as any frightened wild creature. Garak remained standing
still, to let him know everything was safe. Julian’s hand moved towards him, hesitant, curious, and
Garak closed his eyes to let him know how safe he was.

And so, before anything came to pass, standing naked together in Julian’s quarters, he’d been
touched by soft, gentle hands with proper strength behind them. A curious, compelling combination.
When Julian’s hand finally reached his cheek, he’d breathed in Julian’s scent and focused his
awareness on that touch, how that hand lay on his face and lightly traced over his ridges, up his ear
and down his scales, sliding up into his hair where it came to rest. He was utterly silent. Garak opened his eyes to see all of Julian’s fear gone, nothing but happiness in its place, and it took Garak a moment to comprehend that he was the reason why.

Julian ran his fingers through Garak’s hair, stroking it gently, before coming back to rest underneath his ear. He pulled Garak in for a kiss, and that was all they needed.

It wasn’t the sort of first time of so many tawdry romance novels; it was the sort of first time that came with the promise of being far better once he and Julian became accustomed to each other. Something without fanfare and fireworks, just a chance to meet each other’s bodies, so strange and alien to each other. Even with both of them armed with their knowledge of their partner’s anatomy, figuring out how they could fuck was more fraught than the initial greeting and physical explorations – if they possessed the capability to do so, and in what capacity, whether or not it was possible for them to fuck as Julian wanted or as Garak preferred. Many of the relevant parts were analogous, some strangely familiar and others only seemingly so. Thankfully, their bodies and desires had more than enough in common with each other for them to reach a happy state of affairs and a properly celebratory end to the evening.

What Garak found he enjoyed more than the fucking was what came afterwards. Inexperienced as they’d been with each other, the sex itself had still been quite enjoyable. When he finally disengaged from Julian, he allowed himself to continue an evening of luxury with a proper water shower that he stood in longer than he needed, but as there wasn’t any concern over the inevitable charges when Starfleet was footing the bill and Julian looked like he’d needed some time alone as well, he didn’t see any harm in it. By the time he got out, Julian had recomposed himself and offered a large, heavy robe, almost a gown, that wasn’t as insulating as Garak’s own sleep shift but gripped and slid over his scales just as pleasantly.

When Julian was done with his own water shower and they were lying together, underneath blissfully heavy blankets tucked in rather tightly, Garak wrapped himself around Julian, who shivered slightly before grabbing his hand and pulling his arm close over his chest. And Garak smiled. It wasn’t a holosuite illusion. With the ambient temperature nearly what it ought to be, Julian held close in nothing but Starfleet-issued briefs and his skin so lovely, heavy blankets deliciously conserving their warmth in a little cocoon that for the first time in almost two years, he was blissfully, beautifully, honestly warm.

The mattress was Terok Nor standard, just like his own, and held temperature and scent well enough that when Garak woke up the next morning without anyone in his arms, Julian might not have gotten out of bed at all. Garak pressed his head against the pillow and pulled his feet in close, and a few minutes later Julian walked into the room, now clad in a violently mauve sleeveless shirt and black trousers, followed by the faint aromas of redleaf and Tarkalean teas.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Quite well, thank you for asking.” He stretched out, flexed his toes and fingers, and sat up to lean against the headboard. “And yourself?”

“Likewise.”

“Good, very good. You know, I have to compliment you on this. I honestly wouldn’t have thought to expect such a thorough seduction campaign from you.”

“What do you mean?” Julian crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway, and even with his posture and tone, Garak knew him well enough he could tell he wasn’t irritated at all.
The level of preparation you took to get me here, of course. Staging a public falling-out followed by what appears to be reconciliation on much less intimate grounds, I already admired you for that, but now that I know you were using it as a pretext to get me into your bed, I'm positively flattered you took the time to seduce me so.”

“I didn’t say anything to you about wanting to sleep with you until last night.”

“I know, and you did a remarkable job of masking any overt desire for me. But as I was saying, you were so careful with your construction and presentation of our public relationship that you’ve already diffused most suspicions and rumors about there being a private relationship between us to begin with. I don’t doubt there will be those happy to see if they can find more within what’s there than what exists, but you’ve made it easier to pursue what began last night with very little worry.”

“But not no worry at all.”

“Of course not. I may be flattered but I’m no fool.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” He was smiling at Garak, and it was clear from his tone he was smiling at himself as well.

“As well you should be. Come here, please.” Julian climbed back into Garak’s arms, leaned back against him and squirmed to get as close as he could, and Garak pulled him in, more than willing to oblige the nonverbal request. “You demonstrated a great deal of foresight and deception. That’s something to be rewarded.” Julian tipped his head back onto Garak’s shoulder with a strange, thin sound from the back of his throat as Garak’s hands found their way into his underwear and to his penis. He held it gently in his right hand, with his left hand scratching through Julian’s pubic hair and playing with the curls.

“Just because – oh, ah, ahhh. Just because I’m not as fluent in social behavior as people think I should be –”

“There’s no need to sell yourself short.” Garak began working Julian’s penis gently, enjoying the way blood flowed into it, bringing about so many lush changes in texture and weight. He squeezed gently, and Julian shivered, gasping for air silently. Garak smiled as he bit down on a little patch of skin and moved to cradle the head of Julian’s penis with his left hand, enjoying the growing heft of it, how it was so much like his own, unadorned and sleek, bearing only a tiny circumferential scar. He circled the plump head with his middle finger, sliding up and down the little hole from where liquid was beginning to flow.

“Just because I’m not as fluent in social behavior as I know I should be doesn’t mean I don’t know how things between people work!” His words came out in a great hurry, as though he was in a rush to finish getting the thought out of his head, and while Garak didn’t have much of a baseline he could reasonably extrapolate from the previous night that Julian wouldn’t be able to provide anything in the way of verbal expression much longer. So perhaps he was. Garak bit down a little harder, ran his tongue over the skin he had between his teeth, and dipped his left hand to cradle and fondle Julian’s testes to begin masturbating him in earnest. When he came all over Garak’s hands without even a whimper, he slumped down low against his chest and blinked up at him, looking almost curious and somewhat confused, a replica of how he’d been the previous night except for how he didn’t look as though he was in danger of running away.

“Yes?” Garak wiped off his hand on the sheets.

Julian blinked again, and smiled. “Nothing. Just considering what’s good manners for this particular situation.”
“Returning the favor is a universal virtue.”

“Of course it is.” It was easier for Garak to take off the robe rather than bunching it up around his waist or having Julian root around underneath it. His focus on bringing Garak off was single-minded and outstanding, and it didn’t take long before Garak clenched his hand in Julian’s hair and hissed out his climax. Julian swallowed everything, and let Garak push him away once he’d had enough time in his mouth.

“You’ll spoil my appetite.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage to find another.”

He put the robe back on for breakfast, feeling somewhat slovenly when Julian made it a point to put on proper if distasteful clothes, but not motivated enough to concern himself with that just yet, not when the temperature was still at thirty degrees. That, and the fact that Julian had seen fit to serve fruit tarts for their breakfast. Using pastry as romantic and sexual overture was one of his species’ better cultural inventions. At the time, Garak hadn’t known the full implication of his offering a bite, but now he knew Julian had been almost outrageous in asking for one. Even if he had turned it down, Garak had still made the offer.

He found it deeply fitting that it was Julian turning it down which had finally taken them to bed.

They’d barely sat down when Julian said, “We’ll be meeting for lunch next week at our usual time, of course.”

“Yes, naturally. The Festival will be long over, and we have to maintain the continued presentation of our accepted public image.”

“Vitally important.”

“And you like your schedules.” That drew a chuckle, and Garak rolled a slice of strawberry around his mouth before biting it between his back teeth to get that shock of juice over his tongue, to press the fleshy mass against the roof of his mouth before swallowing it down. He knew how much Julian liked his schedules; after two years of enjoying nothing more than pleasurable company with him, he was still well aware of how he worked.

“So,” Julian wiped his chin, “Cara Li’s Three Kings Lie Buried in Prague for our next book? I think you’ll like that one.”

Garak did, although certain parts of it were so steeped in Human culture – three distinct cultures at that, the three kings of the title echoed in them as they came together within the ancient city – he had to practically read the novel side-by-side with dictionaries and reference guides to fully grasp the nuances, and wondered if Julian selected it as revenge for his frustrations over Mikva Prokat’s enigma tale The Legate’s Commendation. Regardless, the humor of the situation of having something to be thankful for because of the Festival wasn’t lost on him, and even in his quarters he couldn’t quite let himself laugh, but did allow himself a wicked sense of amusement.

Nearly eight months later, as Garak watched the inner workings of his brain and nervous system hover in the air like some sort of hallucination above what Bashir called a communication device, a picture come to life that he spun about to inspect from all angles and perspectives, he found himself hatefully thankful once again. The whole situation was far from ideal, from the beginning when the wire began to fail to the end he found himself in, badly sedated and barely warm enough, with Bashir waiting on another batch of artificial leukocytes to finish incubating and spinning Garak’s hallucinatory brain around and around as though that would help them grow faster. Less than a week
ago they’d been sitting down to lunch together, their lives following their typical pattern, and now everything had gone pear-shaped, as Bashir would say.

He’d thrown and spat everything he could at Bashir, shouting how selfish he was to give such an interest to his go-to fuck, offering Garak that galling Federation openness which wouldn’t even be an option to him otherwise. Bashir had let it all wash over him, had gone to the home of Enabran Tain himself to risk his life so bravely, so foolishly. He’d had the gall to claim he’d have done it all even if they’d only been friends. And Garak still possessed the desperation to believe his forgiveness. To need to believe it. And to be thankful once it was bestowed upon him.

Garak watched his brain spin in the air, the wire, now dead, resting inside it. He watched Bashir spin it around again before he turned it off, and when it silently disappeared, Garak wondered if Bashir was aware of how well he could lie to himself. It left him almost proud, sometimes.
Lion's Jaws

Even as badly as Kira wanted to get back to her quarters, rip off the dress, take a water shower, and sleep for a week, she knew there were things that had to be done first. At least ripping off the dress and taking a water shower were still on the agenda, even if she had to do it in the infirmary’s decontamination chamber after the regulation-mandated physical scan and examination – it was astounding Starfleet had regulations for what to do when this happened, like it happened often enough to deserve regulations. But as badly as she needed to sleep, maybe it really was a good idea to wait a while. It might help keep everything a little farther away, help her remember where she really was. Everything had looked the same, looked like it’d used to, and it was so much brighter here. It’d been so hot over there the way Terok Nor used to be, the way Deep Space Nine wasn’t.

She lathered the shampoo into her hair and braced herself against the wall for the cold water to wash everything out. Warm water would just make her feel comfortable, and she didn’t need that right now.

Nurse Jabara was there when she got out of the shower, with an exceptionally large and soft towel she didn’t hesitate to wrap around herself. “Thanks, Taila.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “D’you need anything else?”

Kira started to dry herself off. “I’ll let you know.”

“Just ask, I’ll be here. And Commander Sisko’s coming in to see you soon.” She handed Kira a folded set of patient clothes; it wasn’t her uniform but beat the gown all to pieces. “So just wait in the main area, I guess.”

It felt later than it really was, only seventeen-hundred hours, and there were a couple of Starfleet medics milling around the main area. They glanced at her before looking away, and everything was exactly as it’d been when she’d left just a couple of weeks ago. She wished Sisko had told Taila when he’d be in to see her and Bashir, to know how long she’d have to wait, a courtesy unique to the Federation that it usually provided. But today wasn’t a usual day.

The door to Bashir’s office was open and the lights were off, and it took Kira a moment to notice him standing in the middle of the floor, eating something out of a small container.

“Oh! Sorry, I’ll go, I just thought –”

“No, no, you can stay here if you like. Care to sit down?” He gestured with his spoon at a chair that she sank into. “Let me guess, you wanted someplace quiet and out of the way?”

“How’d you know?”

“It’s why I’m in here. Do you want the door closed?”

“I do, actually.” Bashir turned on a small light by the computer terminal before he closed the door, and sat down in the chair next to hers. He was in the same patient clothes as she was. “What happened to your uniform?”

“Officially deemed unsalvageable, but personally, I’m glad to get rid of it. This is going to make one hell of a report.”

“I don’t even know where I’d start with it.”
“I’d think the trouble with the plasma injector leak.”

“No, I mean – never mind.”

“All right.”

Kira tried to sit up straighter, then gave up and let herself slump. Prophets’ tongues, she was too tired for this. In the dark, it really didn’t matter. She glanced over at Bashir, then at what he was eating, and then the container he was eating from. It wasn’t too dark to see it had ‘danger – warning – biohazard’ written on the side in four different languages. “What are you eating?”

“Yogurt. Cow’s milk cultured and mixed with bacteria. I’d offer you some but it’s Human-strain bacteria, not Bajoran, and if you had any it’d range from a nasty case of diarrhea at best to – oh my God, I forgot, I’m so sorry I forgot. I should have offered you something since I was already eating. Do you want anything to eat?”

“Not really. But thanks.”

“The replicator’s right there, you can get yourself something if you want.”

“If I do, I will.”

“It can’t do yogurt because it can’t make the live bacteria, but it should do almost anything else you might want.”

“If it can’t do yogurt, where’d you get yours?”

“I cultivate the bacteria in one of the lab stations and add it to the milk afterwards, then leave it to culture. I keep it in a fridge over there.” He pointed with the spoon at a little square box-shaped fridge in the corner she’d missed.

“Right.”

“I’m sure I could start some Bajoran-strain bacteria cultures if –”

“I can just get it from Bajor.”

“Ah, yes.” He finished eating and put the spoon and container in the replicator to be recycled, and managed to stay quiet long enough for Kira to start relaxing, but not too much for it to be a surprise or a jostle when he asked, “Do Bajorans have myths about changelings?”

She opened her eyes and sat up. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Changelings. Not like – I don’t mean anything like Odo, not something that can change its shape. I mean like stolen children, that kind of changeling. I’ve only read two books on Bajoran myth and religion, maybe they weren’t included in those.” He was staring straight ahead, not even looking at her out of the corners of his eyes.

“From what you’re saying I don’t think we do, but we might. You’ll have to describe them more.”

“In Earth myth, they’re – actually, they’re more a part of O’Brien’s culture than mine, most of the myths are Irish, not Jewish or English, but at their root they’re a reasonably common idea. What they are, the common story is babies are stolen by supernatural forces, elves or fairies, strange magical beings that live in another realm and want to abduct Human children, and the changeling is the creature left in the baby’s place.”
“That’s horrifying.”

“We’re a species that likes to horrify itself. You’d be surprised. The worst part of the stories isn’t that the baby was stolen, if you can believe that. The worst part is the changeling that replaces the child is a perfect physical copy, so the parents who’ve lost their child and had it replaced with a fairy creature are fooled at first into thinking nothing’s happened at all. The changeling looks exactly like the child that was taken, but it behaves nothing like the child it replaced.”

“We have stories about possession. About visiting other realms and what you should and shouldn’t do when you’re there. What to do if someone’s been taken over by a spirit, or a Prophet, or what I think Humans call ghosts. But nothing like those changelings.”

“Nothing about malevolent forces that abduct Bajoran babies while their parents sleep and replace them with strange versions of themselves.”

“No.”

“You’re right they’re horrifying, Major. There used to be all sorts of superstitions about them, how to ward them off, how to keep babies from being stolen, how to recognize the signs and symptoms in case it happened to your baby, and then how to kill it by throwing it onto a bonfire –”

“How to what?”

“They were almost all I could think about when we were over there,” he went on without hearing her. “The other side, over there, it was full of changelings, it was those Human myths come to life. When we first got to Terok Nor, I thought – I can’t even imagine what it was like for you, I’d thought, even with everything this is lucky for me. I can’t imagine how horrible it must have been for you to see the other Kira like that. Some stranger with your face, it would have been a nightmare I can’t even imagine.”

Commander Sisko had said the same thing. So had Ensigns Swain and zh’Vrathi, and Taila. But none of them had sounded like they’d spent time thinking about how much of a nightmare it’d been for Kira herself. Nothing was happening on Bashir’s face, but he wasn’t even trying to look at her, and was clenching his hands into tight fists.

She didn’t reach out to touch him, not when she knew he’d flinch away, but leaned in closer to let him know she was present. “It was. And you were pretty lucky you didn’t have to see your other self. The Intendant? She had my name and my face, but she wasn’t me.”

“I was lucky, all right.”

“Doctor Bashir,” and she kept her voice quiet, like she was talking to a child who was about to cry instead of a grown adult who sounded like he might, and Bashir didn’t look at her but jerked his head in her direction, “it wasn’t your fault you had to kill someone.” He jerked his head again, then he slowly turned to look at her, face tight with something that was probably confusion, it was hard to tell with Humans sometimes. They all looked so naked without any ridges. “You had to, for us to get here. We wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t shot them.”

“If I hadn’t shot that Odo.”

“If you hadn’t shot that Odo, yes. We wouldn’t have gotten away. But you don’t…” She tried to remember what Lupaza had said, the first night she’d come back from a raid, the way she’d pushed her voice towards her. “…you don’t need to eat yourself over it.”

“And of course it’s fine because it’s not our Odo I killed.”
“You had to.”

He nodded slowly. It took a moment for him to really look at her, not like he was trying to see something on the other side of her. When he did talk, he was much quieter than she usually heard him. “There’s plenty of training on what you should do if you lose a patient, but not as much if you kill anyone.”

“That’s something you learned in Starfleet medical school, how to deal with killing someone?”

“No, just Starfleet.” He blinked at her. “Right along with basic weapons training.”

“Good for Starfleet.”

They sat for a while, quiet in the dark, until he said, “I didn’t know you read Lewis Carroll.” He was back to his usual tone, the same voice he used when he talked about Bajoran composers or Human meditation.

“Jadzia recommended him to me. She said that I should catch up on all the children’s stories I’d missed.”

“Did you know he was a mathematician?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“He was. He worked at Oxford University in the nineteenth century, and Lewis Carroll wasn’t his real name, either, it was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. He actually wrote the two Alice books for – do you want me to be quiet again?”

She almost did. Almost wasn’t enough. “I can’t say I’ll listen, but you can keep talking.”

“If you like. He wrote the two Alice books for a real Alice, Alice Pleasance Liddell –”

Kira didn’t pay any attention to his words and just listened to the sounds. He kept talking until Sisko arrived to debrief them. They each had a full week to write their reports, and she was more than happy to push hers until the day after tomorrow at the very earliest. Back in her quarters at last, she kept the lights off so she could walk through them in the dark, and know she knew exactly where everything was without anything surprising her.

When she next saw Bashir, it was two days after they returned, just before sitting down to the staff meeting. He caught her eye and looked away. After the meeting was over and done, just as dull and routine as she’d expected it to be, he asked her for a word, and when he clutched his hands to his sides she braced herself.

“As you know, Starfleet has regulations for what we went through. And among them, there’s one that’s not a regulation so much as a suggestion, which is –”

“I have a lot of things to do today, Bashir, would you mind getting to the point?”

“Which is, Major, that you find someone to speak with about what you went through beyond writing a classified report. Someone with the proper clearance.” He smiled, just a little. “Someone other than myself. I’ve found someone to speak with. As I said, it’s not a regulation, only a suggestion. You don’t have to take Starfleet up on it. And I wouldn’t care to speak to whether or not Starfleet has any feelings if you do, one way or the other. I don’t much care, myself. So now that I’ve said that, I’ll let you get back to the rest of your day.”
The implicit reminder that Starfleet expected everyone to get along immediately without any time to adjust or get to know each other was tempered by the way it sounded so close to what Lupaza had said to her. “Okay, then. Good for Starfleet to have that there. Now, I really have to be going.” She left before he could say anything more. The moment the turbolift started to move, she let her shoulders drop and slouched down, and as soon as it stopped, she squared them back, straightened her posture, and walked out like nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.
Nearly Midnight, Honolulu

Their first meeting after the nasty business with the implant was all over and done with, Garak told Bashir he wanted him to masturbate while he watched. He spun together something that was very nearly honest about feeling inadequate to the task of giving and receiving pleasure at the moment and uncertain as to when in the future he might want to once again participate directly, but remained hopeful to see Bashir in a blissful state that night. They’d been in Bashir’s quarters, Garak in his usual clothes and still feeling the chill, always feeling it now even in his own quarters, Bashir in a garish civilian outfit that Garak couldn’t even bring himself to be annoyed by, and the state of having to look forward to being of sound enough mind to be so much as annoyed by such clothes was itself distasteful enough to kill any lingering feelings of arousal.

So he asked Bashir if he might simply watch.

Bashir didn’t say he didn’t believe what Garak said, he didn’t protest at the request, he didn’t even ask if Garak might join him in manually stimulating his genitals. Instead, he accepted what he was told, stripped naked, lay on his bed, and brought himself off.

Garak had watched Bashir masturbate other times, but he’d always been a part of the proceedings in some way – kissing or holding him, whispering encouragement, licking him clean afterwards. Some form of participation beyond observing the act while fully clothed from the other side of the room. As much as he knew he’d enjoy the physical act of fucking as he ever did, Garak couldn’t parse out if he’d be willing to fuck Bashir again, not with what had transpired between them. But from the look Bashir had worn before he’d even removed his shirt, he’d understood that making himself as vulnerable as possible was one of the better ways he could demonstrate a willingness for their sexual relationship to resume.

So he watched Bashir lie down, close his eyes, and then masturbate while barely exhibiting any change in expression. Even after he’d climaxed and lay there with his spent penis clasped loosely in hand, the most he’d done was clench his jaw about halfway through and arch his neck and shoulders just before he came. He hadn’t even bit his lip or grunted. That he hadn’t made any noise hadn’t surprised Garak, not precisely. It was nice to have some confirmation that silence was apparently normal for Bashir no matter what the sexual act or the given presence of a partner helping to bring him off. No matter what they’d done together, past a certain point he wouldn’t make a sound – though after seeing him masturbate silently and barely register what looked like a fairly powerful orgasm given the quantity of ejaculate, it might well be that he did not, rather than that he would not.

Bashir’s reward for the skillful performance was a hand stroking over his forehead and through his hair. Garak didn’t lie down beside him but sat next to him, his legs hanging off the side of the bed, while he ran his fingers through Bashir’s strange, curling hair. In a minor concession to what he’d just done, Bashir was breathing deeply, and without opening his eyes or even the tiniest thinning of his lips, pushed his head into Garak’s hand.

Garak held his hand still until Bashir relaxed, and then resumed his stroking. His skin was warm, and Garak very much wanted to kiss it, but instead said, “I’ll see you at lunch tomorrow,” and let himself out.

Nearly two weeks later, he took Bashir standing up against the wall. It didn’t do him any favors beyond a fair climax, even though the single sound of pain Bashir made when Garak slammed him against the wall – single, sudden, and sharp – was the most satisfying sound he’d heard in ages.

After they both came and he was still inside Bashir, he leaned against his warm, smooth back,
pressing him to the wall and keeping him immobilized until Garak was ready to move and no sooner. Bashir didn’t squirm, struggle, or fidget; he remained in place until Garak let go of his wrists and moved away, when he turned around to lean against where he’d been pressed. His eyes were dark, open but opaque, and Garak very much wanted to take him in his arms again and kiss him. He reached out to pick up a bead of sweat running down Bashir’s neck and sucked that off his finger instead – and it was that, of all things, which made him blink and stare at Garak in silent confusion. Garak licked his fingers and smiled.

Pulling a sound out of Bashir became something of a game after that. He knew he wasn’t likely to win, and it still turned out to be a satisfying pursuit. Knowing what he wanted to accomplish was so unlikely, Garak could let himself focus on the effort rather than the goal, something he’d so rarely been allowed to do during his life that the whole idea of it was still delightfully novel. With Bashir more willing than ever to cater to Garak’s desires, he almost thought about asking him what went through his mind when he tried fighting back, when that only made Garak redouble his efforts to pin him down and fuck him even harder. He’d do it gladly if asked. Bashir’s own pleasure didn’t seem to factor into what they did anymore.

Knocking Bashir against a wall or throwing him to the floor could frequently elicit a sound of pain, the only sound Garak could manage to bring forth from his mouth. But it was still clearly only a base instinct from deep inside his Human brain responding to the shock and pain, obeying the letter of the law and not the spirit, and hardly qualified.

They continued their lunches together, still full of spirited, genuinely enjoyable debates over Valeria Rocha’s historic novel Gun and the folklorist Nesla Torlak’s anthology Stories for Young People. Publically, their faces never changed, no matter the circumstance, and Garak still found it pleasant – even delightful, sometimes – to look across the table and see Bashir smiling at him. But they no longer met for dinner, even if they knew full well they were going to fuck that night. Perhaps some tea, some light snacks either savory or sweet, possibly even a bit more conversation. Then to the bedroom or just the floor, and even then, only long enough for Garak to recover from the exertion and make his way back to his own quarters. And for a good long while, that was simply how their arrangement remained.

It wasn’t until after Bashir returned from one of the senior staff’s field missions to the Gamma Quadrant, the one that brought back news of Odo’s homeworld and species back at long last, that anything changed with their arrangement. Garak didn’t know what brought it on, what made it happen, what made that particular moment different from all other moments. He’d been deep inside Bashir, fucking him gently, bracing himself up on his hands to look down at the back of Bashir’s head and the way his hair caught the dim light. As usual, Bashir was silent; there hadn’t been so much as a murmur the entire night. His eyes had been closed tight, his arms wrapped around his pillow – then something moved across his face that Garak didn’t recognize. And he rubbed his cheek against the pillow, and he made a sound.

It was almost too quiet for Garak to hear, and so surprising he almost came out of shock.

He stopped, reared back to stare down at the Human, then grabbed his hips and began fucking him like he finally meant it.

There wasn’t another sound the rest of the night, even when Garak wrapped a hand around Bashir’s penis and brought him off with two quick jerks – there was speech, once they were both finished and Bashir asked if Garak wanted the first shower, but no more sounds. He couldn’t even tell if it had been a sound of pleasure. It had been so small; even the sounds of pain weren’t anything like that. Harsh nonverbal exclamations regarding forceful exterior stimuli were far removed from that one break in the silence.
Somehow, it was hearing that sound which made Garak stay the night. Just that sound, quiet and small. And at long last, he woke up with his arms around Bashir. He hadn’t meant to wake up first, but was glad to have done so, leaving the bed as unobtrusively as possible. After a brief consideration to leave a note and return to his quarters, or shower and reassess the situation afterwards, he didn’t even bother getting dressed and, after some maneuvering, voided his bladder into Bashir’s alien toilet before logging into Bashir’s computer terminal.

He’d anticipated some encryption – anyone who voluntarily adopted Cardassian security protocols over Starfleet’s had mastered the basic concept of privacy – and was decently rewarded. It took some work to get past the initial lockout, as he had expected. What he hadn’t expected was a message to pop up onto the screen the moment he was in.

_Garak_: I know you’ll be hacking into my computer the moment you get the chance. I also know you’ll be disappointed if I don’t bother to protect anything, even though we both know you’ll find your way past whatever barriers I put up without too much trouble, the same as any simple tailor might. So just to make it easier for both of us, that first level of encryption is all I bothered with. I hope you appreciate it. – Julian

It was precisely that willingness to embrace reality which, on his better days, helped separate Bashir from the rest of his species. But Garak knew it was unlikely that there was only that token resistance between him and unrestricted access – otherwise, there wouldn’t be a message declaring that to be the case. There was no way to know what else might be protected, or where, or to what degree, without investigating firsthand. Garak smiled, sighed, stretched his fingers, and went to see what else there was to find.

The surface information anyone might come across if they had access to Bashir’s terminal while he was logged in and away from the desk were a fine enough place to begin. His files were well-organized by subject and date, numerous in-progress drafts of his own papers of his own and notes on others’, but as Garak doubted anything would come of his delving into them at this moment in time, he left them as they were. His pornography turned out to be fairly prosaic, static images of one or both genders of his own species and nothing more.

There was another password in between him and Bashir’s incoming and outgoing messages, easy enough to bypass with system administrator privileges – unfortunately, a fair number of the personal ones were video recordings. Assuming Bashir was still asleep, playing them could well wake him, but the ones that were text-based, those Garak began reading. The majority of them were to or from his aunt, with Bashir carefully managing his words whenever he wrote of classified missions or restricted information, generally saying little more than having gone to the Gamma Quadrant for a few days and coming back safely, or mentioning some difficulties with visiting ambassadors or the station’s computer systems without enumerating on what those difficulties were. He was fairly careful when it came to mentions of his physical and mental health, and a bit less so in his talk of how much he enjoyed the company of the rest of the command and medical staff, but even there he used names sparingly; only a few repeated themselves, and then, only when prompted. Innogen’s responses to even the slightest mention of voluntary socialization were invariably enthusiastic and gently demanding of whatever additional information Bashir might deign to share.

Garak read through those conversations carefully as the shower turned on, taking note of when Bashir voluntarily provided specific details and what he shared on request. He would allude to how many new friends he was making without giving out any figures, or extensively discuss the conversations during the dinners he ate with the Starfleet and medical personnel, but only provide a vague description of the more private dinners Commander Sisko often hosted. As his primary racquetball partner, Chief O’Brien merited repeated mentions by name, unlike a single offhand reference to discussing literature, which didn’t even mention the other participants involved.
Bashir’s earliest letters often spoke of a distinct longing for weather in general and fog in particular, and how even though it was easier to deal with homesickness with all the good friends he was making, he still missed it deeply. Her response included some video and photographs of fog around London that nearly took his breath away; the architecture was too precise for his taste, but the amount of lush greenery even along city streets and in the parks was astounding. Such an alien world, all that grass. And the fog winding its way through the city like a living thing would be unheard of on Cardassia, even in the southern archipelago during wintertime.

The messages and letters to Commander Sisko and other Starfleet and Bajoran personnel were encrypted more thoroughly, as were his drafts of Starfleet-mandated reports. Tempting as it was to focus his efforts there, Garak let them go for the moment – he could always find his way back to them another time. Bashir had set up a number of newsfeeds, and Garak began reading the most active ones first. Apparently it was the season for some of the sports from Earth, with two stories popping up while he browsed and the shower turned off. There was one newsfeed for his aunt, with another for the advertising and design agency where she worked, and Garak spent a little time browsing through both. Given the work credited to her, he considered setting up a newsfeed for her himself – she had a remarkable sense of playfulness, but clearly knew when to restrain herself. He hadn’t given it much thought, but it appeared that graphic design and tailoring were two very closely related disciplines.

Garak browsed through news regarding various branches of medical research, Bajoran gerrymandering, Earth and Federation politics, Starfleet alumni reports, news regarding –

The sight of the word made Garak flinch and draw back from the terminal, then lean in close to make sure he’d read it correctly.

Bashir had a newsfeed for *filicide*?

It was hardly as busy as some of Bashir’s other newsfeeds but there was a disturbing regularity to it, full of stories from all throughout Federation space and adjacent territories, sometimes fathers and sometimes mothers and occasionally both of them working together in tandem. Garak didn’t bother reading the articles themselves, just the headlines, and even a handful of those were more than enough for him to have his fill – and unlike the other newsfeeds, with some items left unread and others marked for later, Bashir had read every single item on the filicide feed with the exception of the one which came in the previous night.

“Well, fuck me,” Garak whispered.

Their absence suddenly made sense – he couldn’t think of a better reason for why Bashir’s Federation government had disappeared his parents for nearly two decades. That it had let them return to personhood after having served their sentence spoke of a deep commitment to clemency that, at best, bordered on the ridiculous. They hadn’t succeeded, but to even have attempted spoke of desires Garak hated to even consider.

“Here you are,” Bashir said, freshly showered, clean-shaven, in his casual underclothes.

“Oh, thank you, Doctor,” Garak said as he took the mug of redleaf tea.

“You’re welcome.” He wrapped a hand around his own mug of the same and leaned in over Garak’s shoulder, brought up the only unread item on the filicide feed, and smiled. “I see the Tejerina case reached a verdict.”

“Guilty, yes. What I find rather surprising is that the outcome was ever in doubt. Given the evidence, is there any possible way she could have been innocent, or even acquitted? Far better to declare the
verdict beforehand, and I’m sure you’ll agree with me when it’s in a case like this.”

“As much as I’d like to,” he straightened up and stretched out his shoulders, “I know if I agree with you on this case I’ll end up agreeing more and more, so on principle, I’m afraid I can’t.”

“You and your infuriating Starfleet principles. As gifted and flexible a mind as you have, there are some days I worry you’re beyond all hope.”

“But not every day, and coming from you that’s quite the compliment. Can I get you some breakfast?”

“Not quite yet, I’m fine for the moment. You seem to be taking this quite well.”

“You hacking your way into my computer and personal files? I’ve been expecting it since the first night we slept together. I’m only surprised it’s taken you this long.” He replicated a plate of Earth scones and Bajoran jam, and sat down at the small dining table for breakfast.

“The life of a tailor is a busy one; I simply hadn’t yet gotten around to it. But it was very kind of you to make it as easy as it was for me.”

“You’re worse than Jadzia when it comes to keeping you out of places. I didn’t see any point to fighting it.”

“Yes, you said as much in your little message, which you can delete now. Though I do wonder, were you trying to earn my trust with it? The ease of access, at any rate. We both know I would have found my way in eventually, but I don’t doubt you could have managed to keep me busy long enough to interrupt the process and set me back to the beginning, if only by physically restraining me.” After he finished skimming Innogen’s feed and replicated a bowl of hot tojal, Garak joined him.

“Garak, if I really wanted to do something to demonstrate how much I trust you, and I’d like to remind you that I don’t, then I’d give you copies of the papers about me in Starfleet Medical’s databases.”

“You would what?”

“All right, they’re not devoted to me, I’m just one of several research subjects.” Bashir smiled, and broke a scone in half to spread jam on the exposed crumb. “All of the authors used pseudonyms for their patients to maintain confidentiality, so unless you knew exactly which ones to look for, and when and where and could make a guess to which pseudonym applies to me, you’d never find anything. Papers written by me, certainly, most of those are open-access, but none of the ones written about me. The only way you could get into the relevant databases would be with a Starfleet access code, and I’m not giving you mine so don’t bother asking.”

“You’re joking.” He had to be lying. Bashir was an atypical Human but he wasn’t that far removed from the norm of his species, not to the degree that he would have been the devoted subject of scientific study in a similar manner to Constable Odo. He was speaking with the same tone and holding the same posture as he always did, as any practiced liar would do to profess their innocence by selling their tale with every ounce of belief behind it, but this particular story was so outlandish he might as well claim he was a secret double agent of the Romulan Star Empire.

“Of course I am,” he smiled, and took a bite of his breakfast.

“Are you?”

“Do you want me to be?”
“You must be now.”

“Yes.” He smiled. “No. Possibly. What was your question again?”

“Your aunt’s agency is doing quite well. I might have to give her a call sometime; I did love her work on the hotel’s re-branding campaign.”

“She’ll be flattered to know her work has such illustrious admirers.”

“I’d hardly call a simple tailor an illustrious admirer, but who am I to judge?”
Guided By Wire

Before she’d been joined, Jadzia had lived through weeks full of nonsensical but terrifying nightmares of worst-case scenarios – her symbiont crawling out of her pouch, or losing herself to all its past hosts, or even finding they were incompatible and she’d die within three days. She was half-convinced they’d ended because she’d stopped sleeping at the complex, and that they were starting up again because she knew she was going back. The Defiant only had another few hours to go before they got to Trill, and she knew she needed sleep just as much as she knew she couldn’t sleep without someone to comfort her, a holdover from her own childhood. None of Dax’s other hosts had needed it in their adult lives. She knew she couldn’t go to Benjamin about this, and the only other person she knew well enough to talk to about how low she was she’d almost permanently broken any chances of friendship.

Jadzia had half-expected Julian to hold a grudge against her after the party. She’d almost expected it from the way he’d nearly blown up at her and looked so close to tears - the whole thing had made her worry about what she’d done to damage what she’d hoped would be a good friendship. But all the worries ended a few minutes before the next senior staff meeting, when he greeted her and asked how her tachyon research project was going.

She’d been taken aback a moment, but answered, “It’s fine – it’s actually coming along pretty well, now that you mention it. I mean, we’re not getting the data we want, exactly, and the systems aren’t playing nice with each other, but we’re still getting data we can use, so that’s fine.”

“Good. Not about not getting the data you want, that is, but that the project’s still moving forward.”

“Teshak swears she’s going to chain herself to the lab if that’s what it takes.”

“Sometimes that’s really the only thing you can do. We’ve all been there.”

If there was any anger in him, she couldn’t see it. “Believe me, I know. It’s kind of funny – Curzon never had an easy time with that sort of scientific discipline, and always wished he’d been joined a little earlier. He kept thinking he’d be able to get out of those classes if he’d already gone through them.”

“But in order to get joined, he had to go through those classes first.”

“So you see the dilemma,” she said, and he smiled at the joke before Benjamin called the meeting to begin.

If it was anyone else, she would’ve guessed Julian just had a knack for letting go of whatever feelings came and went throughout his head, instead of trying to hold onto them for one reason or another. It explained how he could be practically shouting and spitting in anger at something one minute, then calm and composed and back to himself barely an hour later. The way something that made him spend a day hiding in his quarters just rolled off his back and let him greet the person responsible for it with a smile and genuine curiosity about how her work was coming.

But that didn’t seem like the best way to describe him, not with the way he greeted practically everyone with a smile and genuine curiosity about how their work was coming. Maybe Chief O’Brien and Benjamin had been right, that all Julian had needed was time to adjust to being on the station and around so many new people, and now that he was there, he could let anything and everything that happened to him move on past without any need to try to keep it.
All that went through Jadzia’s head when he held her hand after Verad charged onto the station and forced him to rip Dax out of herself. He’d spoken so gently – she’d barely been aware of herself then, herself alone, but she’d looked at him and saw that Julian hadn’t been anywhere else but there with her. There, in that moment; he’d just been there. She’d wanted to cry. It’d been awful to know death was coming even if dying would save everyone; it’d been worse knowing she’d be alone inside herself when she died, no matter who was holding her hand when she went.

Then Benjamin rescued her, and Julian put her back inside herself. She knew he’d never held a Trill before but he’d known how to hold her. There hadn’t been any anger in his hands, not anger at Jadzia for the party or at Verad for stealing Dax. He’d held her hand when she’d been alone, and he held all of her in the cold air before he put her back. And back inside Jadzia, Dax realized that was all he’d held. Only what was in front of him, what he’d needed to deal with in that one moment.

When Kira had taught her how to mediate, Jadzia had been told that if she thought of something she needed to think nothing of it, but her thoughts wouldn’t work quite like that, and kept wrapping around trying to make sense of Julian. Jadzia and Dax had both known plenty of doctors with that same talent, and she was willing to put down odds they taught that at Starfleet Medical. Living in the moment wasn’t something that came easily to Trills, joined Trills especially.

And here she was almost a year later, in danger of losing Dax and Jadzia all over again. This time it wasn’t someone forcing his way onto the station and trying to steal her; nobody knew what was wrong, except that it might be her. She didn’t want to contemplate what that might mean, and had already given up on trying to sleep to pace up and down the Defiant’s corridors without any idea where she was going or who she might see. When she looked around and realized where she was, it was Julian’s bunk, and when she knocked, he let her in.

“I’ve been in danger of losing Dax before. I don’t want to have to go through that again. Just – just let me know, don’t let me worry like this.” He hadn’t said much of anything, just let her talk. “And this time it’s almost worse, because I know I’m going to be told by someone from the Commission, by a doctor. I’ve never told you this before, Julian, but I’ve always been afraid of doctors.”

“Most people are. When I was younger, I was terrified of them.”

“Really?”

“Yes. They were always trying to ask me questions I could never figure out the answers to, or putting me through all sorts of horrible tests. It took me ages to understand what they might have wanted from me. Then I grew up and decided that the only way I’d know for certain what they’d wanted would be to become a doctor myself. I thought that was the best way I could be the one asking the questions and figuring out the answers.”

“And then?”

“Then I learned what I really wanted was to help people. That’s what doctors are there for, to help – that’s what I’m here for, if you need me.”

She didn’t dream that night. But a few days later, returning home with Joran awake inside of her, finally whole again, she dreamed about swimming. But not swimming like she’d learned in any of her lives – not with her hands and feet, not by kicking at the water and holding her nose as she went under. She’d dreamed about swimming like she had just after she’d been joined four years earlier, of water all around her, enfolding and engulfing her, her entire body moving effortlessly, and when Jadzia Dax woke up the next morning, she finally felt like herself again.
The infirmary’s security alarm was blazing, slashing through him, as Odo tackled the Lethan would-be thief to the floor. He struggled, kicking and clawing and shouting over the medical staff running past the two of them, but not for long. Odo let the Lethan’s fingers sink into his chest and then clamped tight around them, held them inside himself for a moment before shifting about to get his hands around the Lethan’s wrists and flip him over onto his stomach. He held him down as deputy Mara slapped the handcuffs onto him and began reciting the thief’s rights as the rest of the medical staff shouted and clamored, and when Odo stood to survey the infirmary he finally saw why.

Doctor Bashir was shuddering and twisting on the floor, limbs splayed out, and Odo noticed a small wet patch on his groin – loss of bladder control, evidently – and his eyes wide open and blankly staring, half-formed sounds coming out of his mouth that spoke of a struggle to get air into his lungs.

“Four CCs of trithorazine!” Jabara yelled, rolling Bashir onto his side.

“– and anything you say or do – ” Mara continued.

“You sure four’s safe with his regimen?” Chalan shouted just as the alarm finally quieted.

“No, but Prophets’ tongues we don’t have time to argue! Four!”

Odo helped haul the Lethan to his feet and looked back at the two nurses holding Bashir in place long enough to see the hypospray deliver its contents. It took a moment to see a change in him, one last full-body jerk before the shuddering slowed and finally stopped.

“Take him to a holding cell, I’ll be right along,” Odo said to Mara.

“Right away, sir.”


He shook his head, which could mean he was present enough to know how much he wasn’t, or it meant he wanted to get out of Jabara’s hands. Odo heard him make a frantic sound deep in his throat and struggle against Jabara, who released Bashir to let him push away from her, get on his hands and knees, and then vomit rather loudly. Going by the reactions of everyone else present, Odo knew this was yet another incident for him to be thankful he lacked a sense of smell. Bashir was sweating enough his epidermis was actively reflective and his uniform was sticking to it, heaving great, deep breaths, and when he looked around, his eyes were wide but finally focused.

Odo took a step forward. He’d never seen anything quite like this. “Is Doctor Bashir –”

“Could someone fill me in on what just happened?”

“Lethan telepathic attack,” Jabara said. “We had to stabilize you, four CCs of trithorazine.”

There were still pieces of regurgitated food stuck to his chin, and Linzman handed him a towel that he used to wipe them away. “Trithorazine was a good choice.”

“We know you’re on –”

“Queliprazine, hundred-fifty milligrams delivered by hypospray every six weeks, a week to my next
dose, I should be all right.” He shook his head. “Could someone get me some new trousers, please?”

“Here,” Tagana handed him a set of patient garments.

“Thanks. I’ll just –” Tagana and Linzman each took an elbow in hand, helped Bashir get to his feet and stay there, and he began the walk towards the decontamination unit.

Odo waited until Jabara was on her feet before he asked, “What was that?”

“Grand mal seizure.”

“Is that a typical response?”

“No, and he doesn’t have a history of seizures either.”

“I’ll need to question him.”

She whipped around. “Right now?”

“The moment he’s ready, I’ll be back. But not before. Call me the moment that is, and not after, is that clear?” She nodded. He glanced back at Bashir, who was already stripping off his uniform. Odo let his legs ripple slightly, then smoothed them back into place from hips to his soles and walked back to his office. There were enough people to interview that didn’t need time to recover just yet. Deputy Rula had a number of witnesses already called in, and Garak was among the first, displaying his characteristic eagerness for the opportunity to present himself as seemingly trustworthy and present a well-curated collection of falsities. Odo wouldn’t allow any of his deputies to take Garak’s confession, but today he seemed willing to keep his lies to the same topic.

“And then Bashir told Altovar the gel wasn’t for sale.”

“Not for sale at any price, I believe those were his exact words. He was deeply angered by the request, and even looked the Lethan in the eye when he said those words to him, which for Doctor Bashir is quite angry indeed.”

“You would know, I take it.”

“Constable, we’ve been regular dining companions for nearly three years now. I should like to think I know him at this point in our relationship.”

“May I ask why it is that you volunteered yourself to provide witness testimony?”

“It’s nothing more than a desire to see a dangerous criminal apprehended, and the wish to help in whatever way possible. Is there anything else about the case at hand?”

“Quark described Altovar as his ‘friend.’”

“I assumed that to be a euphemism for ‘solicitous business partner.’”

It was frustrating enough dealing with Garak on a good day, more so when he was genuinely forthcoming and helpful. Odo carefully logged his testimony, made a note to observe him more closely, interviewed two other witnesses, and was about to begin with a third when he received the promised call from Jabara.

“I think it’d be best you come here. You can interview him in the infirmary, right?”

“Of course. On my way.”
When Odo arrived at the infirmary, Bashir was at a workstation, barefoot and still in the patient uniform, and Odo took note of the standard raktajino mug, contents steaming, and the empty biohazard container and dirty spoon still holding traces of what he took to be yogurt. Bashir was examining some data both on the screen in front of him and the hovering images above the little communication device beside him.

“Doctor?”

“Oh, yes, Odo, come in.” An odd request, as Odo was already inside the infirmary, and Bashir didn’t turn around right away, but Odo had come to expect that. “I’ll be just a moment.”

“May I ask what it is you’re doing?”

“Reconstructing the Lethan’s attack. They’re typically fatal, and I’d like very much to know why that wasn’t the case.”

“I’d like to discuss the attack with you first, while it’s still fresh in your mind.”

“Oh, by all means. Would you care to sit?”

He didn’t care one way or the other, but decided to accept the offer. “Yes, thank you. And you understand that as the primary witness and victim of the attack itself, any details you can provide will be helpful to the investigation.”

“I doubt providing details will be a problem, constable,” Bashir said with a weak smile, staring off towards the Promenade without meeting Odo’s eyes.

He was right: it wasn’t. Bashir didn’t need prompting to provide a gratifyingly detailed testimony, with Odo needing to ask just a handful of initial questions to begin his recollections. Everything he said aligned with the other testimonials Odo had collected, including Garak’s – and Bashir’s matched his word-for-word in several places. There was no way the two of them could have colluded, and Odo was forced to come to terms with the fact that Garak had been as honest as was possible for him. He couldn’t let himself hope that would set a precedent.

“Then I said to him, oh, ‘what do you think you’re doing.’ Then he put his hands by the sides of my head, about this far,” and Bashir demonstrated, “and then there was a – shock, of some sort, except that it was cold. I tried fighting back and grabbing his wrists but it went on, and then I was on the floor with Jabara giving me the hypospray,” his left hand dropping down to the side of his neck just above the injection location, “and Linzman asking me where I was. I don’t remember anything in between.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Nothing. I’ve tried to piece it together, but there’s nothing there to work with.”

“You’re certain of that.”

“Yes. I’d like to, but it’s that….” He wiped a hand over his face. “This isn’t a case where I’m having trouble attaching words to something, it’s that there’s nothing for me to attach words to. I honestly can’t remember anything during the seizure.”

“That’s quite all right, you’ve provided more than enough.”

“That’s good, then. Glad to help.”
“Just one more thing, if I may – it was the Lethan’s telepathic attack that set off your seizure?”

“Yes. It’s part of why I think I survived. It’s only a working theory at present, but seems viable. I’ll need more data, of course, since one incident isn’t enough to set a precedent but it is enough to begin forming – would you like to see the model I set up? I was working on it when you arrived.”

“It’s not strictly necessary.”

“Here, let me show you.”

“Doctor, I –”

“No, I’ve got it right here. Look.” Odo sighed and followed Bashir to the workstation, knowing the sooner he indulged the doctor the sooner he could get back to his office. Bashir had already called up the images that he’d been previously examining, and Odo nodded at them.

“I see.”

“Not quite yet.” Bashir touched a finger to the brain hovering in the air, and pulled it to the side, shifting it over and turning to the computer screen long enough to call up a second right beside it. He pointed to the second one and said, “It’s hard to discuss without a control model, which is this one here. It’s a typical adult male Human brain, and you can see how it’s quite different from mine –”

Odo glanced between the two of them. “You’ll need to explain how.”

“Oh, gladly! There are a significant number of structural differences, you can see some of them right now, here in the folds, the white matter, it’s far denser in mine.” He held his finger pointing, and glancing between the two brains, Odo could distinguish what Bashir was referring to. “It’s a fairly common trait in autistics. Additionally, here, the amygdalae,” Bashir took both brains in hand and flipped them about, then to Odo’s astonishment began pulling them apart, reaching inside and twisting his fingers to turn them shimmering and transparent except for two pieces on opposite sides of the bottom front, and he’d said he’d come up with this technology on his own, “you can see mine are larger as well, nearly twice the size. There’s a fair bit more you can see, such as my corpus callosum, and I have an underdeveloped cerebellum but that’s not so easy to display without some sort of input – the differences in resting systems are more subtle, but getting back to the subject at hand, the Lethan’s attack, right, that’s the input I can show you.”

“All right, show me,” Odo said, trying to steer the conversation to an end.

Bashir smiled as he pulled the brains back together. “By all means, Constable.” He cued up some more data from the computer. “Here we go, one telepathic attack made to order.”

Both brains were suddenly and rather violently awakened. Light shot through both, running across the folds and through the meat of them – the attack moving along just a few paths and structures in the control brain, but more or less the entirety of Bashir’s. It was fascinating, and appeared rather painful, enough that Odo took a moment to focus on the feeling of having nothing more than himself inside his head.

“You wouldn’t have been able to see that if they were just resting side-by-side.”

“No, I doubt I could.”

“If I had a more typical brain the attack would have killed me within a few hours. You can already see the structural degradation beginning, there. But it’s moving throughout and dissipating in mine.” Odo nodded. “I suppose that as advantages against telepathic attacks go, this is a very poor way to
go about achieving one, but it’s preferable to the alternative. Not always the most desirable brain at
the best of times, but it’s what I have to work with.”

“Were you aware of this capacity?”

“No. I’ve been studying my brain for most of my life and frankly, I didn’t know my brain could do
that. I know Vantika took control of Major Kira instead of me, but I thought it was because he was
being opportunistic, not because of an inherent trait on my part.” Bashir turned off the floating
displays and leaned against the terminal. “It’s utterly fascinating, but in retrospect I’m not terrifically
surprised. I’ve never had much success with telepaths, even when they aren’t attacking me.” He
glanced at Odo, almost embarrassed, nearly shy. “I think that’s why Ambassador Troi doesn’t like
me very much.”

“I – I wouldn’t say Ambassador Troi doesn’t like you. I wouldn’t say she dislikes you – certainly,
you two don’t have a great deal in common…”

“If she does like me, she hasn’t said so.”

“What has she said?”

“She said I had a lovely and uncomplicated way of experiencing emotions and the world around me,
much like a happy child.”

“I see.”

“Odo,” Bashir sighed, “I’ve had a number of telepaths compare me to children, to infants, and to
animals, and all things being equal, if I had to choose between those, I’d much rather be compared to
an animal.”
“I know you gave me something already,” Bashir said, “but this is something I’ve wanted to get myself for quite some time now.”

“And this is why you wanted the tunic commissioned?”

“Yes.”

“I hardly see why it would be necessary.”

“For the structural integrity. There’s so little left…”

“My dear, it’s quite sound as it is.”

“Not if I do nothing, or just leave him on a shelf. But if I want to do anything more than that for any period of time, I know I’ll need something to help keep everything intact.”

Birthday presents weren’t Cardassian tradition, much less giving two of them, and Bashir explained he would be happy to pay for the work done, the materials used – but Garak insisted on having none of it, not when he had already been paid with intimacy and secrets and trust. And quite honestly, there wasn’t a great deal of work needed, he had sufficient enough scraps of the desired material that he wasn’t losing any inventory, and as promised so long ago, there wasn’t even any squirming while he took the measurements.

Small childhood comfort objects weren’t particularly Cardassian, either, especially not once one reached the age of emergence, much less adulthood.

“My dear, you needn’t hover.”

“I know, I just…” Bashir managed to sit down, although his hands stayed moving. “It’s a silly thing to be worried over. You being such a good tailor and all. I just – I’m used to worrying about him.”

“Thank you. But trust me, your bear – what was his name again?”

“Kukalaka.”

“Kukalaka, yes, he has nothing to fear from me, nothing at all. A model customer.” Garak had even brought out an old-fashioned metal needle for the task. Perhaps the sentimentality was rubbing off on him, but then again, sometimes it was nice to involve one’s hands directly in one’s work. “And with such refined taste in clothing as well. I daresay he could model most anything in my shop and look stunning.”

“Good. I’m glad – I mean, I’m relieved to hear that, and I’m glad that you’re enjoying yourself, too.” Bashir rubbed his neck again, tilting his head to the side to give his hand more to reach, as he had been for much of the evening and as Garak had never seen him do before, an oddity in his typical catalogue of repetitive behaviors. He wasn’t even rubbing the other side of his neck to mirror the action. “And he does pull off the Cardassian look well, doesn’t he?”

“Once one knows how to flatter one’s colors, it’s hard to go wrong. Or once one simply knows to put their trust in their tailor.”

“Come on, Garak. Even Kukalaka knows not to trust you.”
“How astute of him. And if I may, what’s wrong with your neck?”

“It’s not my neck that’s the problem, it’s my brain, but thank you for asking.”

“Goodness. You’re not suffering aftershocks, are you?”

“Thankfully, no. But I have to stay on top of my medication regimen, so I needed to have another sample taken this morning. Monitoring proper levels of all the necessary chemicals that won’t pass the blood-brain barrier means taking them right from the source.”

“With a needle?”

“The old-fashioned kind.”

“That strikes me as somewhat barbaric. Ah well – I do understand the lengths to which one must go in order to maintain one’s health. Though I have to admit, I’m still somewhat disappointed you didn’t tell me about your medication until just this week.”

“Clearly an oversight on my part. I should have told you much earlier. Why, Garak, I too manipulate my brain’s chemical production in order to maintain level functionality and increase my ability to enjoy and engage with life, and now that you know we have that in common, you’ll trust me implicitly and tell me everything about that malfunctioning device sitting in your head.”

“No need to be snippy about it.”

“I suppose not.” He smiled. “But there’s no reason for you to be upset about someone else keeping secrets of their own, either.”

“If you say so, my dear. And there.” One last snip, and the Cardassian-styled integrity-maintaining tunic was finished. It was more of a suit, really: sewn right onto the bear, wrapped around his arms and legs and torso, not too loose and not too tight. Garak passed Kukalaka back to Bashir, who took it gently and cradled it in his hands like it was an unhatched egg or a newborn infant. He knew Bashir held the bear as a precious item, more precious than anything else from his childhood, or else he would have excised it from his life long ago. It was still a sight, the depth of feeling he rarely wore, and wore it so openly now, and Garak found himself warmed to know he helped bring that sight about. “I trust it meets your satisfaction?”

“What? Yes. Absolutely. Thank you.” He wasn’t even attempting eye contact, and stroked his thumb over the tunic, very slowly. “This is…” He hesitated, and didn’t even try to finish the thought.

“How long have you had him?” Bashir wasn’t looking at him, and Garak still made sure to lean in closer, just in case some part of him was paying attention to Garak’s posture.

“As long as I can remember, so it’s been at least twenty-nine years.”

“You can remember that far back?”

“Not well, but somewhat. Fragments, more or less. But I don’t remember him, though. He’s just always been there.”

“An ever-watchful guardian over –”

“You don’t need to make fun.” Ah, perfect: actively engaged, but still in a deep enough reverie to remain honest.
“And where does his name come from? Does it hold some significance in a Human language I haven’t been informed of?”

“The opposite. It’s a collection of sounds I was fond of that managed to get attached to him.”

“A collection of sounds.”

“Yes. Before I really learned to talk, I used to make all these sounds just for the pleasure of making them – at first I didn’t even try to use them to communicate, but after I realized that was something I could do, I ended up deciding those were the best ones for him. So instead of remaining a nameless thing, he became Kukalaka.”

Conscious realization of the capacity for communication – how old could he have been, to remember something so many took for granted by the time they had managed speech. “You remember naming him, but not receiving him.”

“That’s right.”

Intrinsically linked to childhood, but removed from any parental association he might or might not contain; a fair reason to retain ownership even with the presence of the newsfeed reminder. What a joyful thing it was to know a person like Bashir. “Your constant companion, always there when needed. For all he’s done for you, it’s kind of you to take such good care of him.”

“He’s earned it,” he said with a laugh and without any trace of irony.

“Why is it I haven’t seen him before?”

“Well, the first time you came to my quarters I don’t think you were really paying a good deal of attention to anything but me. And whenever I invited you here after that, I made sure to hide him beforehand.”

“Where did you hide him?”

“Someplace safe.”

“Yes, and where might that be?”

He looked up at Garak, still happy. Nothing on his face but happiness over the single object from his childhood he’d not seen fit to excise from his life. “Wouldn’t you rather I hide him and you try to find him, now that you know he’s here to be found?”

“My dear doctor,” and Bashir didn’t stop smiling even as they kissed, Kukalaka pressed safe between them, “now that would be sufficient payment for services rendered.”
Jadzia hadn’t expected the news, much less from Kira, and even if she’d been told ahead of time and asked to guess how she’d be informed, she wouldn’t have ever considered Kira storming down the corridor of the *Defiant* with Odo keeping pace as they were heading home after rescuing him, in a hurry to find someone to help her make sense of what she’d learned. She’d followed Kira, and O’Brien had followed her, and they were all crammed into Kira’s quarters and trying to make sense of what was going on.

“I just can’t believe it.” Kira crossed her arms over her chest. “I thought I knew him, but that – you can’t know someone who’ll keep a secret like that.”

“I fail to see the importance of two individuals seeking to maintain some semblance of privacy,” Odo said.

“What two individuals?” O’Brien asked.

“Garak and Bashir,” Jadzia told him.

“Garak?” He pulled a face. “You’re telling me they’re in some sort of relationship together?”

“When Bashir came to see Garak and myself in the infirmary, they went to hold hands in a way that is consistent with that, yes.”

“You got they’re together just from how they held hands?” Dax asked.

“Not just together, *lovers*,” Kira spat. “I can’t believe –” She grimaced and said a Bajoran word that made Odo frown and Jadzia wince; it was one of the worst pieces of Bajoran obscenity she’d ever heard Kira say.

“There’s no need for that sort of vulgarity, Major.”

“What’d you just call him?”

“It’s a word that refers to an individual who voluntarily abandons all sense of propriety and willingly associates themselves with unclean things.”

“Pig-fucker,” Jadzia explained. “Colloquially.”

“That’s more’n a bit harsh. And I’m no fan of Cardies myself, believe me I’m no fan, but I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry and I shouldn’t have gone there. I just – I can’t see how, I can’t see why –”

“Just what did you see?” Jadzia turned to Odo. “All you said was you saw them holding hands, but you didn’t say anything else.”

“The Cardassian custom of pressing hands together to indicate various relationship statuses between individuals – it’s as inefficient as any humanoid courtship ritual, but at least they’d waited until I was nearly out of the infirmary before going to –”

Kira sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “There’s a whole vocabulary for it, like in Bajoran shadow-dances. Trust me, I know what it looks like, I’ve seen enough of it. You can press your
hands like this,” she held hers palm to palm, “and it’s saying hello or goodbye, you do it longer or shorter depending on how well you know them. Clasp your hands together, like this,” she held them together like she was praying, “and it’s like giving someone a kiss. The way they were doing it, like this,” she wove her fingers together and held them tight, “is something you only do with a lover. Odo might as well have caught them with their pants off and Bashir’s tongue halfway down Garak’s throat.”

“Humans hold hands all the time,” Dax pointed out, head swimming.

“Not like that, they don’t.”

“We really don’t. Lovers hold hands like that. Keiko and I hold hands like that. If they were? Yeah, Kira’s right. Did they see you do it?”

“I was on my way out, and I saw no reason to bother them.”

“Prophet’s eyes, just how long – we should go ask them how long they’ve been going on like this.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? You’re not worried you’re being too hasty about it?”

“Not in the least, Jadzia.”


“I admit I had some suspicions –” Odo shrugged.

“You knew?” Kira gawped.

“Hardly. I’m very nearly as surprised as you are. But there were some behaviors that were far from circumspect – Doctor Bashir has always been willing to bend or ignore the rules for Garak. It’s never been enough to draw any conclusion from, not until now.”

“I honestly didn’t think he had it in him,” Dax said.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means – I don’t know, I think it means I didn’t think he could have a relationship, let alone one with someone like Garak. I mean, I couldn’t have a relationship with someone like Garak. And Julian’s a good friend, but the way he works with people is –”

“Y’don’t need to say any more.”

“I’m not talking about Humans, I’m talking about Julian.”

“I know, and he’s my friend, too. And you don’t need to say he can’t find himself a lover. This lover, I don’t know if I can say I like it, or even good on him for finding it, but –”

“It’s the fact that Garak is a Cardassian which is bothering all of you?”

“Well, yes!”

“More that he didn’t tell us,” Jadzia said. “All right, didn’t tell me.”

“Why d’you think he’d have told you?”

“They must have reason to be together, if they’re as close as you’re saying.”
“Let the Prophets bless me if I can figure out what those reasons are. And Garak not saying anything, fine. Let him keep as many damn secrets as he wants, let him do whatever the hell he wants with himself, it’s nothing for me to worry about. But Bashir? Why didn’t he say anything? How did he not say anything? People like him can’t keep secrets.”

“He had good reason to keep this from you, I’m sure.”

“He really wouldn’t.”

“You’d be surprised,” O’Brien said. “An’ I’m not sayin’ like you were surprised today. But – I could ask him. How long’s this been happening? Odo, you got any idea?”

“None, Chief.”

“I think all we can do now is ask him.”

“Right, go up and ask Bashir how long he’s been fucking Garak.”

“Or Garak fucking – sorry.”

“Jesus, I did not need that. Either of that.”

“I’m not one to pry on others’ personal affairs, and quite honestly I don’t think any of us should care one way or another, but if you’re that set on finding out, then a direct confrontation would be the best possible method. Which I won’t be participating in, I’ll have you know.”

“Computer, locate Doctor Bashir,” Jadzia requested.

“Doctor Bashir is in the infirmary.”

“Computer…” She hesitated, not ready for the answer. “Computer, locate Garak.”

“Garak is in the infirmary.”

She glanced at O’Brien, who grimaced, and Kira, who pulled a face, and Odo, who huffed, and then tapped her combadge. “Dax to Bashir.”

“Yes, Jadzia?” Bashir chirped.

“If you can spare a minute, could you meet me in the mess hall?”

“On my way.”

“You’re gonna do it now? Oh, I am not, I just won’t –” O’Brien ducked out, and now it was just her and Kira, which meant it was just up to her to keep the fallout to an absolute minimum.

It was thankfully deserted when they arrived, and Jadzia picked a table in a far corner, the better to keep her back to the wall. She and Kira were nursing raktajinos when Julian came in, smiled, and ordered a redleaf tea, and she realized if she’d been paying any attention, she’d have noticed when he switched over from Tarkalean – he’d made the switch at some point but she couldn’t quite remember when, and maybe that’s when he’d gotten involved with Garak. She’d noticed when Audrid and Tobin’s children were lovestruck or heartbroken with less; it should have been enough for her to see it in Julian.

“Good evening, Major. Jadzia.”
“Doctor.” She nodded curtly.

“So what’s on your mind? Jadzia, you were saying…”

“Nothing much. It’s really nothing much. Just something that’s come up, and we’ll be home in a few hours but it’d be good to get it out of the way beforehand.”

“All right. What is it?”

“It’s just something we’d like cleared up.”

“Is something wrong?”

Jadzia glanced at Kira, then at Julian – looking so open and friendly, and it was trickier with him than anyone she’d ever known. It was like he was just tame enough to let her forget he was wild until he did something to remind her.

“Julian, Odo saw you.” He blinked and angled his head, and she suddenly realized he had done that deliberately, not out of a natural instinct but studied practice. “He saw you and Garak.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“A little while ago. He saw you and Garak in the infirmary tonight, with your hands –”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“He wasn’t,” Kira snapped. “He saw you two lacing fingers when he was on his way out.”

He glanced around the table. “Is that what this is about? What Odo might have seen?”

“Julian, it’s late, we don’t have time for this. Could you just tell us?”

“I don’t know what you want me to tell you.”

Evasive, denying, guarded, seemingly open without giving anything true away – Jadzia saw Kira’s realization fall over her face, Julian’s sudden shift in behavior one more thing that couldn’t just be chalked up to nearly four years of living on DS9 with all that entailed.

“Maybe if you would tell me what it is you want to hear, then –”

“Oh, quit with the Cardassian games already, we know,” Kira said.

“You know…”

“You and Garak. Yeah, Julian, we know. I didn’t want to believe it, but you aren’t saying no.”

“Garak and I aren’t together. We’re friends, that’s all.” He sounded so honest and earnest Jadzia wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until he gave up pretending.

“You really ought to take more lessons from him. You’re a terrible liar.”

“It’s late, we don’t have time for this. Jadzia, Major, I’m sorry, but if you aren’t going to tell me why you’ve all decided to start some baseless interrogation session –”

“How long have you been sleeping with Garak?” Dax asked. As much as she hated it, sometimes brute force bluntness was the only viable option.
“How – I’m sorry, but that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Drop the denial already,” Kira said. “We know you’re involved with Garak. We just don’t know when you two started. We just don’t know – is he blackmailing you?”

“Is he what?”

“You two had your hands together like a pair of Cardassian lovers, and you trust me, Bashir, I know what that looks like and I know what it means. What I don’t know is when or why it started, and I can’t think of a reason for the why except he’s coercing you into it.”

He flinched and tensed, eyes narrowing, and he clenched his jaw and almost hissed out, “I don’t see how that’s any of your business, Major.”

“I can have him off the station tomorrow if that’s –”

“No!” There it was, the same hurt in his eyes when Jadzia said she’d called his aunt. Frantic and upset, it suddenly gave way to anger. “You’ll do no such thing, and if you know already, then what does it matter, why we’re involved?”

“Because you’ve been keeping this from us, and we thought we were your friends,” Jadzia said.

“And why does that matter?”

“Because – Julian, you should have told us. Why didn’t you think to tell us?”

He looked around the table, frustrated, confused, bewildered. “Why would I have told you?”

It took Jadzia a moment to grasp he meant it. Julian hadn’t thought telling anyone about his relationship with Garak was at all important. They stared at him, and he stared back, something flickering over his face and settling around his eyes, focused and sharp.

“Julian, why in the hell didn’t you think –”

“How is it that I’m the one here who’s supposed to have an empathy disorder?”

Kira did a double-take, Jadzia opened and closed her mouth, and Julian stood up and began to walk out without so much as a good-night or even a sleep-well.

“Hey!” Jadzia called. “Where are you going?”

He didn’t turn around. “First to see Garak, because the two of us were talking before you interrupted, and then to see Commander Sisko, because Garak and I have been discussing moving in together for quite some time now and there doesn’t seem to be any reason to put it off for any longer. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Jadzia watched him go. She didn’t see him during the personnel debriefings once they got back to the station, and made sure she was in the right places to avoid him when she made her way to Quark’s. It was late enough she ought to be heading to bed, but she didn’t need sleep as badly as she needed a drink. The Dabo tables were all empty, and all that was left were some stragglers, Morn, an engineering team on the upper level eating what was either dinner or breakfast depending on their shift, and Quark himself.

“Jadzia, good to see you! You look – hang on, you look awful.”

“If I’m being honest, I really don’t feel my best right now.”
“Let me get you something for that.”

“Make it something expensive,” she groaned. Jadzia rubbed her eyes, and when she opened them Quark was staring right into them.

“How expensive do you want me to make it? Federation expensive, Risa expensive, Feringinar expensive?” He grinned, and just seeing him smile made her feel better. “If-you-have-to-ask-you-can’t-afford-it expensive?”

“Regret-it-in-the-morning expensive.”

He drew back with a slow nod. “Tall order.”

“Can you get it for me or not?”

“Oh, I’ll get it for you, and I’ll make it a double if you want.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Fair warning, this is going to take a minute.” He started assembling bottles along the bar. “I’m just wondering what could have happened to make you of all people order something expensive.”

“I think I was an ass.” Quark hummed some sort of acknowledgement as he began pouring the ingredients into a shaker. “I have a friend who – okay, it’s not just some friend, it’s Julian, and the conversation we just had could’ve been handled better, but…I try talking to him, and I think of him as my friend, but I don’t know if he thinks of me as his friend, too, or just someone who’s there to be friendly to. And at this point I don’t know if he can have friends. Or maybe he does and I’m just not one of them. Maybe he just doesn’t think about people that way. Maybe he can’t, but that doesn’t seem… I don’t know if it matters if I tell you, I don’t think he’s going to mind anymore. He and Garak –”

“Yeah, what about them?” He dropped something into the shaker that made it start to fizz, and he slapped the top on and began vigorously shaking it up and down. Jadzia almost had to push her mouth closed.

“You know about them?”

“Know what, that they’re a couple? Yeah, why? They both came back all right, didn’t they? His shop’s still blown to smithereens, if he doesn’t want it anymore I’d like to have a word with Commander Sisko about the property.”

“But…how…”

“Prime location, and there isn’t a massage parlor on the station yet. Too bad about the jackets, though. I was all set to commission another one.”

“Hang on, you knew Garak and – you know he’s with Julian? I just found out a couple of hours ago.”

Quark shrugged. “I’m a people person, what can I say. You work a job like this, you get an eye and an ear for these things, and the two of them haven’t been that hard to spot.” He made a show of pouring out the drink into a tall vase glass, and it changed colors as it fell through air, dark blue to light blue to a shade just past aquamarine when it finally landed in the glass. He finished it off with six small red berries on the stick of a paper umbrella and handed it to Jadzia. “One double regret-it-in-the-morning expensive, as ordered.”
She took a sip and had to force herself to swallow. “That’ll do it. And hang on. You’re saying you already knew about them. How? I don’t remember either of them slipping up in public.” The trick seemed to be to eat a berry first, and then have another drink – it made it go from curl-her-hair sour to dizzy-up-her-tongue tart.

“They didn’t. But like I said, it’s been pretty obvious if you know what to look for. The way Garak holds himself around Bashir, trust me, during the Occupation I got a lot of business from Cardassians holding themselves around each other the way Garak does when he’s around Bashir.”

“Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“Because for one thing, I thought everyone who cared knew about it already, and for another, even if they hadn’t, it’s really not my concern. And it shouldn’t be yours. Private engagements don’t have a place in public business.”

He left her alone with her drink, which miraculously didn’t come with a built-in hangover. She almost wanted another one before she went to see Julian that night, but despite what Curzon had to say from personal experience, some things needed to be done sober. Jadzia smoothed her hair, checked her clip, and rang the chime.

“Vocal identification required,” the computer chirped.

“Lieutenant Jadzia Dax.”

A moment passed, then it chirped again. “Permission to enter granted.”

She’d almost expected the lights to be off, for Julian to be sulking somewhere, but – he’d heard her request to enter, there wasn’t any way she could’ve caught him off guard. He was dressed in black civilian clothing and looked at her without trying to meet her eyes. “Hello, Jadzia.”

“Hi.”

“Can I get you something?”

“No, that’s all right.”

“I have fresh mint for tea if you want some.” He gestured to the couch and chairs. “You can sit down if you like.”

“Thanks.” She remained standing, and he didn’t bother to sit either.

“Did you talk to Benjamin about moving in with Garak?”

He crossed his arms back over his chest. “Yes. He said – oh, he’ll take it under consideration and advisement, but given the current political climate, it would be unwise to commit to such a venture at present.”

“That sounds like Benjamin, all right.” Julian smiled, which helped put her at ease. He had sounded like him, though – the accent aside, he’d conjured Benjamin’s cadence almost eerily well. “But you’re still going to pursue it?”

“Of course.”

“And Garak…”

“What about him? I haven’t had much time to talk to him since getting back to the station.”
“Is he…” She groped for something to ask. “Is he doing all right?”

“He was, the last time we spoke. He seems to be doing fairly well in spite of everything that’s happened in the past few —”

“Why him?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Why Garak? I just can’t…I can’t see the why, and maybe if I could, then I’d understand why you didn’t say anything. But it’s just been this big blow-up of a secret, and I’m sorry for how things went the other night but I can’t see why you picked Garak out of everyone on the station.”

She watched him jerk his head up, saw his face go cloudy, and he nearly snarled at her before he shook, and words came out of his mouth instead of whatever primal sounds he’d nearly made. “Why I picked? Is that what – Just what is it you want to hear from me? What do you want me to say? I enjoy having lunch and discussing literature with him? We have wonderful conversations together? I think he’s beautiful? I like it when he fucks me? He never looks at me like I’m something that needs fixing? Jadzia, is there anything I could possibly say to get this to fit inside your head? No? Then just accept the fact that we want to be with each other and live with that. Why didn’t I tell you before? I could give you a nice, long list of reasons why, and virtually all of them were in full force the last time we spoke. It was my and Garak’s business, it was private, and now it isn’t, and now we have to pay for that when neither of us ever expected to!” Julian was shaking now, looking away from her, and she’d never heard him speak with a voice this tight or angry, not even when he’d nearly cried on the Promenade.

“Did you know I spent the day working damage control with my staff? They deserved to hear it from me, not from some gossip in the Replimat, and oh, Jadzia, you should have seen the looks on their faces when I told them. We’ve been working side-by-side for almost four years now and all the time we’ve spent together with us earning each other’s trust might be all for nothing now that they know I’m involved with a Cardassian.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, thank you.”

Jadzia took a breath to steady herself. “I still think you should have told us.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s what people do.”

“It’s what – oh. Oh my God, Jadzia, it’s what people do.” He smiled tightly, laughed softly, amused but not happy. “Of course it’s what they do. Of course, of course…”

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s that you think I ought to know what people do. How well do you know me by now?”

“I think I know you well enough to know you have some idea of how you’re supposed to act. I think you’d understand why I’m hurt. I think you’d be able to fit it inside your head why nobody’s happy to find out any of this.” Dax glared at him, hands on her hips, leaning in to better emphasize her words.

“I have some idea, thank you very much.”
“Oh, some. Great! Just enough to understand why you fucked up, not enough to care about it.”

“I do care.”

“Because it’s inconvenient. Because you lost face with your staff. Not because of what your friends think, because you don’t care about that, do you.”

“Don’t, Jadzia.”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t. Please.”

“Tell me why not.”

“Because! Because I do care, and I don’t always know how I’m supposed to show that or work with the fact that I do, and…” Julian hung his head, and turned to look out the porthole window at something out in the far edge of beyond. “Maybe I should have told you right away. Maybe I could have trusted you to be discreet. But it didn’t occur to me at the time, and now that’s coming back to bite me in the ass. Don’t think I don’t care what people think of me. I do care. I care more than you know. I don’t always know how…” He went quiet, and finally looked her in the eye. “When you were Curzon, and the Federation ambassador to the Klingon Empire, you learned how to act like a Klingon.”

“Well, yes.”

“You didn’t just learn the vocabulary and grammar rules and the correct accent. You learned proper nonverbal body language, you learned the common cultural references you’d never heard before. You learned the slang and the customs, and how to fit in. When to laugh at what jokes, and how much laughter was appropriate. How to handle yourself depending on who else was in the room with you. How to handle unfamiliar situations and difficult arguments. How to make friends. And you were a magnificent ambassador. You knew Klingons so well, they even accepted you as one of their own.”

“Thank you, but –”

“But, they weren’t Trills. They weren’t what you grew up with. It wasn’t what you knew from total immersion from birth. It wasn’t what you were always comfortable with, and sometimes you’d wished you could transport back home and be around people that you knew would know you right back. Because as good as you were with Klingons, even after they accepted you, you weren’t one of them, and there were Klingons that would look at you and never let you forget that. You’d never be a Klingon. There was always the threat of that reminder no matter what you did. There were times you didn’t get it right, because as well as you learned it –”

“Could you get to the point?” Dax snapped, suddenly uncomfortable with his words – there wasn’t any way Julian could have learned this, not even Benjamin had heard any of it.

“The point is that you learned all that for a different species.” He smiled. “And I had to learn it for my own species. It’s not something – the nature of being social doesn’t come naturally for me.”

Jadzia watched him look away from her, his eyes focusing on the wooden ornament hanging on the wall, the little Earth decoration that looked like a strange Human hand. He wasn’t looking her in the eye and she could see, from how he was standing, just how much he hated being here. Julian had always been so curious and friendly, kindness pouring out of him like a fountain, and always so controlled, so shy. All this time, he’d been fighting instinct so he could be himself. She nodded
slowly, “I appreciate you telling me.”

“You’re welcome. And trust me, I’m sorry that this hurt you. Garak and I did have reasons to keep our relationship to ourselves, good ones even. But I honestly didn’t think it would hurt you so much. And in retrospect, I don’t think I could have. I don’t expect you to trust me now. I barely expect you to understand. I just want you to know that yes, I see why you’re hurt, and for you to see why I didn’t see that coming.”

“I do.” She didn’t smile, just sat down in the chair offered when she first came in. “I’ll take that tea now,” she said, and he didn’t smile either, but he made them each a cup and took the other chair.

“Quark knew.”

(Of course he did.”)
It had been a trifle optimistic on Bashir’s part to assume that a single request to Sisko would grant them the shared quarters they’d talked about. But to have even discussed the notion was itself a manifestation of Bashir’s stubborn Human optimism. Furtive discussions, all of them – yet there was something endearing about them, even hopeful.

Bashir had first mentioned the subject not long after returning from a Starfleet symposium on Earth, the specifics of which were above Garak’s public security clearance. They’d talked about what they could over dinner in Bashir’s quarters – “And how is your aunt?” “She came to see me in San Francisco,” – with the rest of the night spent in Bashir’s bed. After they’d fucked, rather more gently than Bashir typically asked for after such highly classified missions, he lay wrapped in Garak’s arms, half-underneath him, with Garak using Bashir as a heat source and Bashir using Garak as a blanket, neither of them displeased with the arrangement. He was warm beside and beneath him, his arms wrapped around his chest and their legs tangled together, and Garak was beginning to drift when Bashir murmured, “It’d be nice to have this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, to have it. Own it. To keep it. It’d be nice not be so clandestine about this.” He took a deep breath, and Garak felt his chest expand and contract in his arms. “To do this in our quarters, not yours or mine.”

“Ah. To have this.”

“Yes.” His feet rubbed against Garak’s, soft and almost ticklish.

“That it would be. If we could. As we can’t, my dear, all we can do is savor the moment.”

Rather than pursue an argument, Bashir did as he was told. And though Garak had to dismiss the notion for the fantasy it was, he had to agree that as fantasies went it was quite a pleasant one. Not that he had ever had an arrangement of that sort, not with a fellow Cardassian, not with anyone.

“Have you ever lived with someone?” he asked Bashir some weeks later, during a private breakfast in Bashir’s quarters after a particularly stimulating night.

“Very nearly, once. It was more a relationship of convenience than anything else – I was available and so was he, and we’d meet regularly in my apartment. We never talked about moving in together, we both knew it’d be over within a few months, and when it was time for him to graduate and leave for his residency, that was all there was to it. But he slept over often enough to justify extra toothbrushes and towels, and I suppose that’s about as close as it’s come for me.”

“There were a few individuals I’ve met I’ve considered living with. It wasn’t ever easy, with my work on Cardassia; it was always such a risk, and with me never knowing when I’d be reassigned, or where, or for how long, I’m sure you understand that the relationships I had were far more convenient than yours ever was. Still, there were times it was tempting. Order agents taking spouses isn’t unheard of, merely strongly discouraged.”

“Oh, I’ve had some decidedly convenient relationships. I might even tell you about them sometime. But first I’d like you to tell me if I’m one of those individuals you’ve considered sharing your life with.”

“Consider that question a moment.”
“Garak, I want to tell you about my sexual history as much as you want to share yours with me.”

“Well played, my dear.”

“And now, with us? I suppose there is discouragement. But if there wasn’t, and we could…”

“We might as well sprout wings and fly, for all that we could.”

To be sure, there was a sensation of flight when he found out their relationship was no longer private. Flying, or falling, or flying as he fell – Garak had always found it difficult to determine the precise distinctions between them. But once you were in the air, there was nothing to be done but try to land safely on your feet. And he certainly had enough experience with that particular skill, he didn’t worry about himself. Rather, he found himself worrying for Bashir. It was a delicate feeling, almost fallow, and it shocked him to realize both how much of it he’d forgotten and how fast it all came back. He found it frightened him as well; too many sharp reminders of his mistakes.

“We’ll still eat lunch together, I hope,” Bashir said in the backroom of his shop, over cups of Terran mint tea and rokassa juice, after he’d informed the infirmary staff about his relationship with Garak before anyone could beat him to it. While he had accomplished his goal without losing as much face as he’d feared, it had taken quite a bit out of him. Garak had closed up early for the day, and watched Bashir stare at his tea as it grew cold.

“I see no reason not to. They no longer provide a dedicated cover, but in truth, I’ve grown quite fond of them.”

“I have as well.”

“And because I know what you’ll ask next, yes, I’d like to continue the rest of our activities. Now that we’re known, for us to break this off now strikes me as a needless waste of time and effort. There’s no going back to the safety of being unobserved, but as I’m given to understand, we would be projecting weakness if it appears our relationship can only operate under secrecy, and in a moment such as this, weakness is the last thing either of us should want to display. We might as well see this through to the end, and please tell me, did you think we might have kept this secret until one or both of us left the station with no one else ever finding out?”

Bashir looked down into his tea. “I’d hoped.”

“My dear doctor, there’s hope and then there’s folly.” And there was no reason to let him know how much such a hope impressed him; they might even have managed to accomplish it, had they been a little more aware, had Kira not been there, had any of a hundred thousand million things happened just a little differently. Oh, eshala.

“I seem to be skilled at folly. Why not pursue one’s natural talents?”

“One can be trained to avoid folly, with sufficient practice. And there are far better talents to pursue.”

That Bashir’s talents included precision marksmanship was sufficiently impressive. Garak had known he was quite skilled in tennis and racquetball, and that he made it a point to practice with his phaser at least twice a month, but after his stand with Dukat, when everything was done and over with, Odo told him how Bashir had soon left the infirmary for what could be called the front lines – and managed to collect a rather impressive body count, as well, nearly equal to Garak’s own.

Shortly after the Detapa Council was escorted off the station to return home, which Garak didn’t stay to watch, he was summoned to Captain Sisko’s office without explanation. He arrived promptly, not urgently, and strode through the doors and sat down as though he hadn’t a care in the world.
“And how may I be of service?”

Sisko merely looked at him. Garak smiled back, as serenely as he could. He considered blinking, but decided against it; kevaka flowers didn’t need rain to thrive. Sisko watched him, and he stared back, both of them knowing Garak wouldn’t be the first to speak, and when Sisko broke the silence there was a sharp threat running through his voice. “I don’t trust you, Mister Garak.”

“As comforting it is to have a reminder, I doubt you called me here for that alone.”

“No one on this station trusts you. I’ve asked Doctor Bashir, and not even he trusts you. And you may have been fighting on our side, but that doesn’t make you trustworthy. All it proved was that you’ll work with whoever is convenient for you at any given moment. You’ve made it abundantly clear that’s the case.”

“I should hate for you to think me dishonest.”

He laughed low and hard, more a gruff than anything mirthful. “There’s an old Human saying, you can always trust a dishonest man to be dishonest, it’s the honest ones you have to watch out for. And you, Mister Garak, are honest in your dishonesty. I can’t trust you, and I can’t rely on you. But I can depend on you. I need to know where you stand.”

“Captain, I stand with Cardassia.”

“Even in exile?”

“Even in exile.”

“Were you aware that every day at seven hundred hours and twenty-nine minutes, I receive a message from Bashir regarding an approval for shared living quarters? It’s always the same, and it serves no purpose other than to remind me that this relationship of yours went on for almost two years without my knowledge, which itself reminds me I can’t trust Bashir as much as I’d thought. This is hardly an ideal situation from where I’m standing, and since the two of you seem dedicated to maintaining your relationship – I take it that you are?”

“That would be correct.”

“Bashir is one of the most honest men I’ve ever served with. Even now, I don’t have any doubts about where he stands. And you, one of the most dishonest people I’ve ever met – I’m not sure if it’s fitting or ironic the two of you found each other.”

“Personally, we’re merely thankful.”

“In that case, tell me, do you make him happy?”

The carefully thrust spearpoint of a question very nearly shook him off-guard, and Garak allowed himself that blink. Just one, careful and measured. “Yes.”

Sisko looked at him expectantly, with Garak looking back, and then he finally smiled. “Then that’s all I need to hear.”

Not two days later, Bashir’s request to Sisko for a larger set of living quarters was approved, with the news delivered in person by a particularly ebullient Bashir himself. He even bounced on his feet as Garak had seen him do twice before, when the phrase ‘unable to contain himself’ found literal meaning. Garak simply pulled him into the back room and kissed him gently, as close to public affection as he was comfortable with. It also helped to calm him down somewhat.
"I understand if you don’t want to make the move right away. We’ll need to pick something together, of course, and you’ll have to make all your arrangements – I’m sure you made all sorts of sneaky spy arrangements to your quarters when the station was still Terok Nor, and there’s living temperature and plumbing fixtures, Miles owes me a favor so we can keep your toilet and we compromised on twenty-seven degrees already, didn’t we, which isn’t the best for either of us but –"

"But, my dear, it’s something we can both live with.‘ He kissed him again and ran his fingers down his shoulder, over his arm, to take his hand in his own a moment. ‘Let me know which quarters there are to choose from, and I’ll decide which is the most suitable."

"I already talked with Miles about it, not about this, I came to tell you first – he’s getting better about us, he’s fine with it so long as I don’t talk about us, but I asked him how he managed being, well, involved with someone who’s not Starfleet and he was willing to talk about that. I don’t know how much of what he said might help, but we were joking like there wasn’t anything I didn’t need to say, and I was so happy to have that back."

"From what I know of the Chief, personally and by reputation, for him to be so much as fine about our relationship, even by omission, demonstrates a remarkable amicability on his part. Not to say that I fully condone his current attitude towards us; merely that if this were still Terok Nor, and the two of us still managed to somehow find ourselves in each other’s arms, I doubt my fellow Cardassians would be quite as amicable as he is. And what advice did he impart?"

"He said I needed to have someone in Starfleet to talk to, and that he – oh, that he might be willing as long as I provide the drinks, because he’s damn well not talking about anything personal involving a Cardassian while he’s sober,” he smiled, mimicking the Chief’s accent without any hesitation. “And he didn’t say, but I know I’ll have to be more careful about providing you terminal access, because you can snoop around and read all the news on tennis you like, but I need to make sure there’s something more in place between you and any Starfleet transmissions.”

"I take it my word isn’t enough for that? My dear doctor, you have no idea how proud of you I am to hear you still don’t trust me."

Out of the short list of seven quarters Bashir ended up suggesting, two Garak dismissed immediately, three were shortlisted as tolerable if they were willing to sacrifice, and two remained viable possibilities. He investigated them all under as much privacy as he could manage, attempting to put his old security measures into place now that the station was some strange fusion of Cardassian and Federation technology and under an entirely different type of scrutiny than what he had previously worked under – maintaining ongoing processes had been one thing, but readapting them from a new beginning was quite another. It took the better part of a week to satisfy himself that the quarters previously occupied by Dalin Asima Tevrek would suit his and Bashir’s needs as greatly as possible.

They moved the majority of Bashir’s possessions first, as it was technically his quarters. He explained the two-thumbed blue hand he called a hamsa was a superstitious gift from his aunt to ward off bad luck and remind him of daily purpose, and laughed at the faces Garak made while they packed away his clothes.

“‘I hardly think this is amusing.’"

“If you don’t like my clothes, just say so and I’ll throw these out and buy new ones. From you, even! Don’t think you’d need to charge me less because we’re going to be living together.”

“I find it difficult to understand how you could have thought these a good idea to begin with. You’re hardly one for sentimental value, your bear notwithstanding, and nearly everything here – I can’t understand how it got here to begin with.” He held up a pair of pants. “What possessed you to
purchase this?”

“The fabric.”

“A colorblind Ferengi would find this far too much to wear.”

“I didn’t say the pattern, Garak, I said the fabric. There’s a difference.” He pinched up a corner and rubbed it between his fingertips. “The texture is why I bought it. I was tired of looking for something I could wear and this was the first piece in the shop made out of fabric I knew I wouldn’t mind having on my skin. Touch it, you’ll see.”

“So you don’t care about the colors.”

“Not at all.”

“You honestly don’t care about them at all. Forgive me, but I’m having a difficult time parsing that.”

“I’m sorry that’s the case, but that’s simply how it is.”

“You’re telling me that fabric could be, oh, puce and vermilion and tangerine, and if the texture were the same, you’d be willing to wear it?” He nodded. “It might just be my profession talking, but please, do have some consideration for what you decide to put on your body.”

“And please listen to me when I tell you I do, it’s just that the color doesn’t matter nearly as much as the texture.” Bashir hadn’t even been attempting to meet his eyes, something Garak had become accustomed to, but turning away demonstrated an irritation bordering on anger that a lack of eye contact would communicate for most anyone else.

“So you were, my dear – and now I see why you take such pleasure in touching everything in my shop, even when I’ve asked you otherwise.” There it was, a smile at the edge of his face Garak spotted out of the corner of his eye. “Now, please understand what I mean when I say I can’t recommend you restock your wardrobe exclusively from my shop. Much as I would enjoy seeing you do so, for personal and professional reasons, you said I shouldn’t feel the need to charge you less than any other customer. It would take quite some time for you to raise sufficient funds to see it done properly.”

“Then I’ll take three shirts and two sets of trousers, and we’ll start with that.”

“Splendid. I’ll begin on them tomorrow.”

He started sketching out the designs right after opening; mornings were typically slow, and he let himself indulge in savoring the prospect of the commission and the promise of what it entailed – perhaps even something better suited to Bashir’s form than what passed for his dress uniform, the opportunity to treat himself to some harmless jest and take Bashir’s measurements by hand – that it was almost a surprise when someone came in. And all she did was stand there, waiting for his attention. She’d purchased from him twice before, but it was clear that at the moment, clothing was far from her mind. Garak put down the stylus and stood to greet her.

“Doctor O’Brien, how good to see you. It’s been some time – I take it Bajor is treating you well?”

She smiled, her entire body projecting gentleness and honesty. “Yes, thank you.”

“Have you come for another dress? Or perhaps a pair of work trousers. I have a number of new pieces in Betazed llama wool I believe would suit you quite nicely.”
“Thank you. I’m sure they would, but I’m not in here for anything new.”

“Then may I ask what brings you my shop? A gift for someone else, perhaps?”

“Miles.”

“The Chief? Did he send you to relay a message?”

“No. I’m here on my own. But Miles talks. And he hasn’t been particularly happy lately, when he talks to me – or from what I hear, when he talks to Julian.” She didn’t smile. “I’m not here to threaten you, Garak. I don’t think there’s anything I can say that might threaten you. I’m here because I care about my husband. He wouldn’t like to hear me say you’re worth Julian’s time and that he should learn to live with your relationship. What he would like to hear is me supporting him, and saying you shouldn’t be around Julian, that Julian shouldn’t be involved with you at all, that he might as well break his friendship off or that I’m going to go talk to Julian and do what I can to distance the two of you from each other. Because I know Julian well enough, and he’d put your plans to move in together on hold if he knew just how much Miles hates it.”

How he’d missed her presence after she’d left the Promenade Merchants’ Association. Another two of her, and they could run the station without any trouble; another eight, and they might conquer the Klingon Empire without firing a single shot. “Go on, please.”

“I don’t plan on telling Julian just how upset Miles is. I think it’s petty of him to take his prejudices out on his friend. But my plans might change.”

“I hope they don’t.”

“They don’t have reason to yet.”

“I should shudder to think of what those reasons might be.”

“I don’t spend as much time with my family as I’d like. When I do, I want to make sure everything’s as safe and happy for them as possible.”

Garak smiled, and tilted his head in a minor gesture of respect. “It’s been a pleasure speaking with you. Should you desire a new dress, or any garment you might wish, do let me know.”

“I’ll stop by.”

“Take care, Doctor O’Brien.” He waited until she was nearly out when he said, “You said you’d been having some trouble with your flowers? Orchids, I believe?”

“Excuse me?”

“Julian talks to Miles, and he talks to you; you talk to Miles, who talks to Julian, who talks to me. You earned your doctorate in orchard agronomy, correct? I worked as a gardener for some time, and my specialty was in orchids. Perhaps I might be able to offer some help, or a consultation.”

She hesitated for just long enough to tell Garak what he needed. “Thank you for the offer. And if I need to ask you about it, I’ll let you know.”

“Of course.” She strode out, and he watched her leave before going back to Julian’s designs.
Preparations to begin talks over Bajor’s potential bid to join the Federation were going along well enough that one might go so far as to describe the present round of trade agreements as amicable. Odo was restricting himself to being thankful that the governments’ relationship had progressed to this point of trust, if for no other reason that when he requested that Starfleet security personnel newly assigned to the station familiarize themselves with his own regulations rather than simply comply with their initial orders, they willingly complied. The Federation liaisons enjoyed talking of establishing precedents; if that included bringing a few Starfleet officers up to a reasonable standard, so be it.

Midway through the third day of the conference, Odo was walking through the Promenade, taking in the sights and sounds – which contained rather more aggressive discourse than usual for this time of day. When he went to investigate, he found it was coming from Doctor Bashir and another Starfleet medical personnel, also a Human male, the both of them engaged in an argument Bashir was visibly putting more emotion into than his conversational partner as they walked along the lower level. He began making his way down to join them.

“No, I’m sorry, what you’re proposing is flat-out nonsense of the highest order, if you’d read anything I’ve had to say to Starfleet Medical over the past four years you’d be well aware of that!”

“Look, all I’m trying to say is there are rules, and standards, and if you want to be in a partnership both sides need to do some work.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you there. I’m not disagreeing with the baseline goal you’re trying to accomplish. But the methodology you’re suggesting, it’s simply not going to succeed and you need to understand that. I don’t see why you aren’t making an effort to at least try.”

“It’ll happen. I don’t see why you aren’t getting that.”

“Gentlemen,” Odo said, the two Humans stopping at his salutation.

“Ahh, Odo, good to see you. No major problems with the added security?”

“None that I’ve found.” He looked at the other Human, his skin and hair both far paler than Bashir’s, his features softer. Either the same age or slightly older, wearing the standard uniform of Starfleet personnel stationed on Bajor. “May I ask who this is?”

“By all means. Odo, this is Doctor William Sterrett, here with the long-term Federation medical liaison. William, this is Constable Odo, security chief of Deep Space Nine.”

“Good to meet you,” Sterrett said with a practiced smile and an offered hand. Odo grunted in return and didn’t make a move to take it; Sterrett kept smiling and withdrew it without broadcasting any discomfort.

“I take it the two of you know each other?”

“Reasonably well,” Bashir answered.

“I wouldn’t say that – we were close in med school, weren’t we?” Sterrett grinned.

“Not really,” Bashir said without looking towards Sterrett – who, to his credit, didn’t appear to let it bother him. A very well-trained doctor, then.
“He’s just joking.”

“I’m not. You were available, that was all. But in any case, he’s been assigned to the new clinic in Tempasa for the duration. Setting it up, getting it going. We’ve been discussing some of his plans for what he’ll be doing while he’s there.”

Trust the Federation to try to be in charge from the very outset. Odo nodded politely. “I take it this isn’t quite going as well as you’d hoped, Doctor Sterrett?”

“It’s coming fine. I’d just asked Julian here to take a look at what I’m proposing for long-term work in the region, and –”

“And I’m trying to explain to him that in all the time I’ve been here I’ve never seen one Bajoran ask for a monthly birth control shot over one of the variable alternatives. Not one.”

“And I’m trying to explain to him all I want is to see Bajor following Federation standards. If they’re going to be joining the Federation, they should be going by the same set of standards as everyone else in it, and they really ought to start ahead of time. Every Bajoran I’ve talked to likes the idea of their planet joining up, and all I’m trying to do right now is get Julian to try to understand how –”

“You’re making this about the Federation, not Bajor.”

“Trying to understand how it makes sense that it’s different when they’re on a planet with the clinic there instead of having to shuttle themselves up here once a month.”

“Almost none of the Bajorans living here opt for the standard shots as birth control. The vast majority request IUDs or RISUG treatments. Request them, once they know they’re available. They’re not going to switch over to shots just like that. Constable, you’ve lived with Bajorans longer than either of us have worked with them, you must have an opinion on the matter.”

“In regards to…?”

“In regards to – well, I suppose reproduction is a rather academic question for you, but I meant in regards to what birth control options you think Bajorans would be most likely to follow.”

“You have been asking the Bajorans themselves about this?”

“I have,” Bashir said, “Doctor Sterrett, not as much.”

“I make sure to ask everyone who comes into my clinic. I think I get more foot traffic down there than you do up here.”

“Gentlemen. I’m not a Bajoran, and the word ‘birth’ doesn’t apply to how I came to be. That said, I’ve found preventative measures often surpass punitive ones when it comes to preventing crimes, and pregnancies, and the related overlap in between.”

“Odo,” Sterrett said, “everything we’re talking about is preventative.”

“I’m well aware of reliable birth control as a cause of a decrease in general crime and many specific types of lawbreaking. As to the specific methods, so long as what’s provided is given without restriction to all seeking it, I see no purpose in debating which type is adopted by the general population.”

“That’s precisely it,” Bashir said, hands grasping at the air, “it’s about what’s being requested and what’s being mandated.”
“Julian, IUDs and reversible inhibitors are what they’re requesting now, but when Bajor joins –”

“Do you see what I’m arguing against?” Bashir looked to Odo, turning his back to Sterrett, who shut his mouth out of what looked to be a blend of surprise and discomfort. “I’m sure you can appreciate. Not that I don’t support the vast majority of Federation medical standards and practices, but the very basic tenet of treating the patient you have, not the patient you wish you had or the patient from the textbook, seems to have been lost to Doctor Sterrett here.”

“Julian, you know you can call me Will.”

“He’s not even disagreeing with me. When the emphasis is put on the doctor’s convenience rather than the patient’s request, whatever the circumstances, no good can possibly come of it.”

Sterrett rolled his eyes, sighed, and held up his hands in a gesture of resignation. “You’re in a mood. Okay. I get that, you get your moods. I’ll drop you a line later when you’re feeling more up to talking. It was good to see you anyway.”

Bashir mumbled out a farewell as he kept his eyes to the floor. “I don’t get moods,” he said to no one in particular once Sterrett was well and fully gone.

Odo glanced away. “I do hope things are going reasonably well, personal disagreements aside?” When Bashir voiced his assent, Odo took the opportunity to continue on his rounds.
It was always a pleasure to see Minister Chalan – the morning’s trade agreements regarding oceanic sailing routes had gone smoothly enough that there was time for her and Kira to take an early lunch and enjoy the company. She hadn’t seen Mikaro and Danole in almost eight months, not since Antos’ funeral, and she wasn’t surprised they ended up talking about people who’d left them. That was just what happened when you saw old friends.

“We need to keep our eyes ahead of us,” she told Kira, just as she’d told her then. “You can’t move forward if you aren’t looking in front of you.”

“I know, but that’s not what I’m trying to say. I guess what I want is to be able to – to stop, sometimes. Not fall backwards, not move forwards. Just let myself be where I am for a while.”

She waited a moment before Mikaro responded. “I know what you mean. But that’s a luxury for us, in these times.” She smiled, and really put her hands into it, “As long as you’re running, you know exactly how fast you’re going.”

Kira smiled back. “The day I believe that is the day –”

“Major?” All three of them turned to look at Bashir, keeping a respectful distance, body held stiff and still, padd already out. “I’m sorry for the intrusion, but I just needed to pass this onto you and then I’ll be going.”

“Thank you.” He hesitated, glancing at the women sitting next to and opposite her, and she rolled her eyes; there wasn’t any reason not to, and Mikaro and Danole had to be back at the afternoon’s talks in a little while anyway.

“Doctor Julian Bashir, this is Minister Chalan Mikaro of the Ministry of Commerce, and her interpreter, Akorem Danole.” Mikaro dipped her head, and Danole offered a hand to shake.

“A pleasure, both of you. Now, if you’ll excuse me –”

“No, please stay.” Mikaro gestured at the empty seat beside her. “It’s good to meet friends of Nerys’.”

“I wouldn’t call us friends, exactly,” he said, smiling at Mikaro, “But if she doesn’t object, I can spare a few minutes.”

Kira pressed her lips together. “It’s all right.” She watched him at the replicator, ordering a cup of something and almost sipping from it, before putting it back and getting something else that turned out to be raktajino. Not redleaf tea. Like that made a damn bit of difference; pretending wasn’t going to do her or anyone any amount of good. If he was willing to admit to what he did in private he might as well live with it in public. He sat down, took a drink, and asked Mikaro what she was doing on the station.

“Less than I want. Trying to get everyone to agree with everyone else. We need to work with the fishermen who were there before the Occupation, and they’re as bad as the crabs, but we have the rest of the conference to get everything organized, so it should be all right.” While she signed, Bashir kept his eyes on her face, sipping his raktajino while her hands shot words into the air. He steadfastly ignored Danole’s presence aside from her voice, never looking her way.

“Where did you meet each other?”
“I knew about Nerys through a friend from the underground. We met about two years ago, when she was on Bajor as a liaison for the military at a conference.” She didn’t smile with her eyes, and her hands were a little stiff when she told him, “I was already working with Danole then, if you’re wondering.”

His face was as empty as it ever was. “I wasn’t, but thank you.”

That seemed to put Mikaro at ease, because she smiled like she meant it when she asked, “Do you come to Bajor much?”

“Not too often.”

Bashir looked at Kira when he asked her about how the morning had gone, but he only looked at Danole twice, once when she laughed and said he’d have to slow down to let her spell out some of the words, and once when it was time for Mikaro to leave for the next round of talks and they both said good-bye.

“That was pleasant,” he said to no one in particular as they left.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” Kira said.

“Minister Chalan is a very charming woman. I hope her talks go –”

“Is that all?”

“I believe so, why?”

“Because aren’t you supposed to tell her what a pity it is she can’t hear and that you have a magnificent Federation device you’ll pop into her ear and this time tomorrow she’ll be enjoying a symphony?”

“No. For one, they’re implanted inside the skull, and for another, why would I say a horrible thing like that? Just because she can’t hear? That’s no reason for me to impose anything onto her.”

“Huh.” Kira leaned back in her chair and looked at him not looking at her. “I’d think most Federation doctors would.”

“I think you’d be correct there. And trust me, if she wanted such a device, I’d do whatever I could to make sure she had access to one. But she never made any mention of it herself, so then why would I mention anything?” He drained the last of his raktajino and made a face; Kira knew the way it went sour if you left it to get cold. “I hardly blame you, though. I know people who would’ve mentioned that the moment they met her, saying things like there’s no need to worry about the prime directive since we made first contact, and to be quite honest I find that horribly distasteful.”

“How very noble of you.”

“It’s not noble to have common decency for people’s basic autonomy.” There was a flash across his face she didn’t see much, some part of himself feeling upset or angry enough to make itself known to the rest of him, and then it was gone again. “Did you know no one on Earth speaks – talks – well, communicates, with sign language?”

“No, I can’t say I did.”

“No one reads Braille anymore, either. There’s a colony out in the Graf system that uses their own sign language, but no one on Earth – it’s a shame Humans decided to get rid of it, it’s such a lovely
way to communicate."

Kira knew Bashir was just being Bashir when he called it lovely, wasn’t willing to cut him any slack for just being himself when he still ought to know better, and had to ignore that for the moment so she could ask, “Got rid of it?”

“More or less entirely. You read about the Eugenics Wars?”

“A little bit, yeah.” She was still fuzzy on why Kirk was so important, but she’d been doing more Federation background research when she had the time, enough to at least recognize the name.

“Well, before they happened, there was a rush to perfect Humans as much as we could. The governments enacted massive social programs like the eradication of smallpox, except instead of a virus the focus was on anything that could be mapped in the genome – GM2 gangliosidosis, Huntington’s, mucoviscidosis, most types of cancer. Gene therapies were given to people that didn’t want to pass on their illnesses. Congenital deafness was one of them.”

“Mikaro wasn’t born deaf.”

“And you were just telling me about all the wonderful Federation implants she could receive to fix the condition which happened later in her life. Nowadays if someone doesn’t want such an implant, they move to the Graf system. Back then, there wasn’t a Graf system to move to, so you can imagine the pressure – oh, there were a few holdouts, but for the most part, anything that could be removed to improve the species’ overall health was taken out of the genome. As you can imagine, nobody’s bothered to put any of it back in.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Of course there are always some things you can’t predict. Accidents, random genetic happenstance.” He smiled and chuckled, and Kira had no idea what was funny, but Bashir always laughed at things nobody else thought was funny. Then he stopped smiling but kept his face pressed up into a tight smile, so tight she couldn’t even see his lips. “Well, anyway, what I mean to say is that’s why Humans rarely use sign languages to communicate, and for whatever reason Minister Chalan is deaf is none of my bloody business, and I’d be a terrible person to impose onto her when she’s clearly fine with how her life is at present. Thank you for the tea and conversation, Major, and I’ll see you at the next staff briefing tomorrow.”

“Certainly.” That was more than what she’d expected of him. It wasn’t enough, by any means, but it was something.

There was a half-mug’s worth of deka tea left, and she let the replicator reclaim it instead of trying to force it down.
Breathing didn’t hurt so much anymore. There was that. And even if it did still hurt, there were only a few hours’ left to suffer through it, and Jadzia knew she could handle that. She’d waited longer for worse. Suffocating slowly inside a freezing turbolift shaft wasn’t a bad way to go, really. At least she had some company, which put her ahead of Torias.

“Aren’t you uncomfortable?” She asked Julian, who was sitting as far away from her as he could get to put a few extra centimeters of space between them. He was hunched over and curled up, with his arms wrapped tightly around his legs.

“Me? No, I’m quite all right. Trust me, I’m perfectly comfortable in little spaces like this. I’ve had a number of very pleasant encounters inside little –”

“Julian, we don’t need to get into that.”

“Ah. Right. My apologies. Well, I promise you the next time I’m in this sort of situation, I’ll know exactly how to behave and that I shouldn’t mention my relevant sexual history.”

“Thank you.” She closed her eyes, which helped a bit. “I’d think whatever you do with Garak would be more relevant.”

“He’d never want to have sex in a place like this. It’s far too cold for him to be comfortable.”

“I see.” Jadzia forced herself to keep breathing evenly to better manage her oxygen. “So who did you have sex with in a place like this?”

“Tiffany Chambliss,” Julian said without hesitation or embarrassment.

“And who’s that?”

“Someone from my graduating class at Starfleet Medical. We had the same introduction to internal medicine class together. At least, that’s what she told me. I didn’t recognize her at all when she introduced herself. I didn’t say we hadn’t met before, of course, since I’ve made the mistake of doing that when it hasn’t been the case and I just couldn’t place someone I didn’t know all that well because we were in a different context than usual. But, I pretended to know her, and that seemed to please her, and soon enough we were, well, I’m sure you can extrapolate.”

“Believe me, I can. I just don’t know why you were in a place like this for that.”

“We needed to get away from the party, and the upstairs coat closet was the most private room in the house.”

“What party was this?”

“New Year’s Eve party, 2366-2367.”

“I wouldn’t have pegged you as someone to have sex in – no, sorry. You really are the kind of person who’d sneak off from a party to have sex in a closet.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Sure, why not?”
“Thank you, then.”

“Did you have a good time with Tiffany?”

“Yes. We stayed up the whole night and watched the sunrise from the rooftop along with everyone else at the party.”

“Where was this party?”

“It was somewhere in the Inner Sunset near Irving Street. I’m sure I could find it again if I walked around the area, I just can’t remember the precise address.”

“That’s all right.”

“Have you had sex in places like this?”

“Julian, do you take every social encounter on a case-by-case basis?”

“For the most part. When I don’t have enough experience to really build an idea of how to go with it, then yes.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised to hear that. And yes, sometimes, back when I was Curzon. Emony, too, when I was celebrating a good match or cheering myself up after a poor one. Not too much since Curzon. And certainly not now.”

“Goodness, no, we’d use up oxygen at a rate that’d have us suffocating within an hour.”

“ Wouldn’t want that to happen.”

They lapsed into silence for a time, something that didn’t break until Jadzia began shivering. Julian gathered her in his arms, which helped somewhat.

“Won’t Garak mind us doing this?”

“If anything, he’d approve. Mitigating circumstances being what they are, he’d understand.” Julian sighed and said something Dax almost but couldn’t quite place.

“Pardon me?”

“Yes?”

“That word, what was it?”

“Eshala?”

“Yes, what’s that?”

“It’s a Cardassian word. It’s…it’s not quite something easy to translate, but it roughly means, and this is very roughly, ‘so as it is now, so has it always been and will forever be.’ Or ‘indeed,’ I suppose.”

“How does it work?”

“What do you mean, how does it work?”

“Use it in a sentence,” she said, smiling against his shoulder. “How do Cardassians use it?”

“Well, it’s an interjection that places a particular emphasis on whatever you’ve just said. Right now, I
used it to say that Garak would always understand the need for warmth. Someone could also use it to describe – well, becoming a parent is a fairly common use of it. Someone has a child, they’re a parent, eshala. Now they’re a parent, and so will they always be a parent. No matter what happens to them or their child, they’re always going to be a parent,” he laughed quietly, “or that you’re now a part of the Dax line.”

“Jadzia is now Dax, eshala?”

“Precisely. The queen is dead, long live the queen, eshala.”

“It’s a good word.”

“It rather is, isn’t it.” He held her a little closer. She leaned into his arms.

“You really do care for him.”

“I do.”

“Aren’t you scared of him?”

“No. Why would I be?”

“He’s Garak.”

“Yes, and why would I be scared of him? I know what he’s capable of doing and how dangerous he can be, but I wouldn’t say that scares me. If I got into a cage with a tiger and forgot it was a tiger and let it eat me I’d be doing a fairly thoughtless thing. I don’t forget what Garak is. I’m not exactly afraid of him – I don’t trust him, certainly, and I wouldn’t expect him to harm me, but I’m not going to forget who he is.”

“You don’t trust him?”

“Not particularly.”

“But you love him.”

“Yes.”

“How can you love him without trusting him?”

“The same way anyone trusts someone without loving them.”

“They’re not exactly transitional properties.”

“They are to Cardassians. If I’m involved with one, I ought to try to understand that.”

“Which is one way of looking at things.”

“I’d think you might do me at least the token courtesy of trying to understand that,” he said, then laughed again. “I could lend you a novel on the subject.”

“While you’re at it, you might as well invite me to dinner with you two.” She smiled. “Discuss comparative literature.”

“Don’t you even joke about that. We take our literature discussions very seriously.”
“But that’s not a no.”

“I’d be happy to suggest it to him, if you’re serious about it.”

“If there’s anything I’ve learned in all my lives, it’s to take fun seriously.”

“When we’re out of here I’ll mention it.”

“Please do.”
Their first week of proper cohabitation, Garak took a water shower that lasted for at least a half-hour each night. He decided to stop before the luxury became routine – Julian didn’t take advantage of the water each night, and exile wasn’t supposed to be luxurious. Bearable had only recently been made possible; sufferable might be the next logical step. Especially so now that he resided in quarters with lights and temperature close to what was reasonable, and a Human lover somehow capable of proper Cardassian affection.

Keeping their weekly lunches even after moving in together was a sensible, practical and simply good idea on Julian’s part. There was no telling when he’d be called away for a mission or some emergency, sometimes for long enough that Garak was allowed to remember all the finer sordid details of solitary life. Even his shop had the occasional late night or pressing commission that followed him to their quarters. Maintaining a weekly meal on both their schedules not only allowed for the sort of continuity under which Garak knew Julian felt most comfortable, but served as a bulwark against the inexorable tide of the universe to keep them apart. That it sometimes yielded days where all three meals were spent in each other’s company – four such days in total since they’d begun residing together – was something remarkably rich in the simplicity and rarity of the pleasure.

Furthermore, their arguments could finally reach the depth and breadth and intensity that Garak always hoped they would. Every subject, from the structure of Nal Parkan’s comedy of manners The Air of Night to the intertwined nature of art and commerce to the notion of the separation of culture, heritage, and ancestry could be carried out to their full capacity. One such debate regarding the concept of informed medical consent, and if such a thing was possible without a doctor’s education or with simply a proper understanding of one’s circumstances, lasted almost two weeks before finally reaching its end with neither having lost, but with the feeling of both of them having won. As well it should have.

Something neither of them anticipated was their newfound ability to be congenial in public, at least to a limited degree. Even Julian was hardly so bold as to fondle, embrace, or even kiss anywhere more public than his office or Garak’s shop’s workroom. Still, a firm, gentle touch on a shoulder or arm or the small of the back when others could observe the gesture, and not needing to be concerned with their observations, was an almost illicit thrill.

Garak even brought himself to accept Julian’s invitation to one of his holosuite exercise programs, and afterwards he admitted the swimming pool would be pleasant enough once the temperature was recalibrated for a Cardassian physiology, but he was quite content with his treadmill for the time being. Thankfully, Julian remained happy enough to play dress-up and pretend with Chief O’Brien and saw no reason to invite Garak to those little get-togethers, which pleased him immensely. Not only to avoid wearing those costumes, but also to pocket a tidy commission from them, and having another topic to readily commiserate about with Doctor O’Brien once she came by his shop to discuss the Terran orchids and Bajoran orchards under her care, just as he knew she would.

There were other programs Julian insisted on sharing with Garak for some reason, always promising they would be far more to his tastes. It rankled very slightly when he managed to be correct, even if the museum was nothing like any he had ever encountered. Garak knew Humans took pure visual art quite seriously, and it still seemed wasteful in a way he found difficult to articulate. If ornamentation was the singular goal, that could be achieved easily, but it so rarely was – and if one wanted something beyond that, then the building the works themselves were housed in was quite a bit more impressive.
A woman at the ticket booth waved them through with a smile before going back to her book, and a handful of watchmen and custodians were out and about on their rounds, but other than that, there was no one else in the museum.

“Why not simply get rid of them as well? You’d have the entire museum to yourself.”

“It’s not about being entirely alone. Even the illusion of that is a disturbing concept. It’s more knowing there’s nobody else here to bother me – or us, as the case is now.”

“I suppose I can see the appeal to that. Still, it does seem to be lacking in even a token nod towards honesty within the scenario’s basic set-up.” Garak briefly paused to take in a painting of a man bearing an uncanny resemblance to Captain Sisko.

“We can pretend we’re here on special dispensation of the curator.”

“You could remove the woman in the booth and sneak around past the guards.”

“Miles and I already have a program for something much like that,” Julian said, glancing at the portrait of a woman who could have been Lieutenant Dax’s identical twin.

“That I might well be persuaded to come along and see.”

“I’ll be sure to mention it to him. I can’t make any promises whether or not he’ll agree, but I’ll mention it – and yes, that reminds me, I’ve been meaning to tell you that there’s a new translation out of what’s actually the first Human novel ever written, something close to fourteen hundred years old that I think you’d enjoy quite a bit, since it’s all about social status and courtly manners. I was thinking we might read it next.”

“That we might. Provided it’s not yet another farce, we’ve read quite enough of those.” Garak kept his eyes on the paintings to better contain any amusement that threatened to leak out through his face. Julian didn’t often allow himself to go off on tangents like that, even in private, though it was clear they frequently came to him – he was still coming to understand how everything was so densely connected within his brain, so differently from the other Humans around him. It was fascinating to be allowed a look into its inner workings when he allowed himself to speak at length and failed to restrict himself.

“To the best of my knowledge, she meant it to be taken seriously.”

“Well, then. In that case, what with that rousing endorsement of yours, once we’re done with The Wind in Her Fists let’s move onto your translation.”

Afterwards, Garak insisted their evening had been pleasant enough, even with his overall disappointment regarding his expectations of museums and the version of reality presented in the holosuite. As he described what he knew constituted a proper museum, there was a slight flash in Julian’s eyes that Garak knew signified his characteristic near-foolish determination. And perhaps two weeks later, it paid off in the form of their second visitation to a holosuite version of a Terran museum, this one named after two dead monarchs, housing a collection that wouldn’t be out of place on one of Cardassia’s own museums, in theme if not precise content. Functional, splendidly and artistically crafted objects occupied far more attention than the purely ornamental pieces – though once again, it took Garak some time to get used to the scenario. Being able to interact with the exhibitions was an indulgence of the highest order, the type he generally avoided, but it was difficult to resist giving into Julian’s sway. Not when it clearly pleased him so much.

“Are you telling me you’d rather not be able to do this?”
“Not quite. Merely that it seems somewhat lush to be able to engage with everything in this manner. If we want to create the illusion of visiting the real thing, there should at least be some minor concessions to reality.” He picked up a small dagger and unsheathed it, held it up to catch the light along its edge. “That said, I’m not complaining about the capacity to do this, only commenting that it’s somewhat out of character for this type of program.”

“It’s become quite common to have holographic displays in museums around the Federation to allow for precisely this sort of thing. And we’d hardly be able to do anything like this if we were in a proper museum. Everything real would be underneath protective glass or forcefields, so it’s not as though we’d be able to follow through on whatever temptations we might have.”

“A fair point. Cardassia could do well to adopt a similar system – most of our artifacts are in the hands of private collectors, and sharing a replica hardly diminishes the power of the original. Should the Council decide to call, I’ll be sure to mention it to them.”

“So you are in contact with them.”

“I implied no such thing! Only that they might one day decide to contact me, which itself is fantasy enough without thinking they’ve already done so.”

“I should start my day reading your correspondences for a change.”

“And if you decide to do so, please let me know beforehand. I’ve heard it’s good to begin one’s day with laughter.”

Not quite a week later, they were in the same museum, and Julian’s pleasure over having finally found a holosuite program both he and Garak enjoyed was rather short-lived. The moment Garak pulled out one of his measuring tools and a padd and began noting the precise dimensions of one of the ancient evening gowns.

“Don’t you want to see more?”

“Eventually. As it is, I’ve been having some trouble tracking down the precise patterns for a number of the garments within this program, and extracting the information from the program’s data hasn’t proved worthwhile. Don’t worry, as soon as I’m done I’ll be happy to see more of what this place has to offer.”

“Please tell me, what might that number be?”

“ Barely three dozen, it won’t take much time at all. Less, if you let me get on with it.”

Julian did so, though not without some slight growls, and eventually departed to find his own entertainment. Garak hummed quietly as he moved from room to room, eventually sitting down on a broad expanse of floor with several garments spanning five centuries and twenty ancient kingdoms laid out beside him. The hand-stitching was impeccable, and difficult to believe this had been done with a global level of technology no greater than a spinning wheel. Garak called the lights to increase slightly, and took out his datalens to get a better look – though he had barely begun the third dress when Julian saw fit to interrupt him in perhaps his most outlandish manner to date, running into the room decked from head to toe in garments from his ancestral lands thrown over his civilian clothes, brandishing a full-length curved sword, having announced himself well before entering with a rousing yell that heralded his arrival by almost a full minute. He watched Julian brandish the sword, strike imaginary foes down, spin about and almost trip, and finally end his admittedly highly entertaining pantomime with a shouted, “Yalla!”
Garak made a show of taking off his datalens, setting his hands in his lap, and sighing. “My dear, if you’d have preferred to spend the evening with the Chief, I’d hardly have minded.”

Julian made another put-upon face, but plopped himself down next to Garak and his pile of garments just the same. “Now that you mention it, I did hear about a Maccabee program he might like. What are you doing now?”

“Planning out some new designs. Trying to, at least. I can’t recreate these methods, obviously, but the cut of these pieces is something I believe I can use — take these two,” he handed over a woman’s dress and a man’s gown, “in terms of craftsmanship they’re very close to a number of garments I’ve made, and while it’s hardly fair to call something five hundred years old ‘innovative’ I admit I hadn’t considered this sort of draping with this type of fabric. None of this is synthetic, either, which I find most impressive of all. I have a fair bit of Bajoran poplin I’d bought for a commission which sadly fell through, and since then I’ve been trying to figure out how best to use it. I think something drawn from these might be what I’ve been looking for.”

“Do you think you’ll be doing any actual drawing tonight?”

“No,” Garak replied. “I will soon, but for the moment I’m simply trying to plan out basic ideas.”

“Mind if I keep you company?”

“Not in the least.”

It was hardly the first time Julian kept him company on a quiet, working night. The first time Julian had done so, they had been eating dinner together for little more than six months, and when Garak explained he was planning out everything in his head before committing to a single cut, he’d looked at him with an awe and fascination Garak hadn’t thought the situation deserved.

“You’re thinking in terms of images.”

“You needn’t sound surprised. I’d hardly be a passable tailor if I couldn’t imagine anything before I made it.”

“No, I do.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I don’t meet many people of my or any other species who also thinks that way.”

“Thinking with visual images is something you rarely come across?”

“Yes. Most people don’t. Not even for a little while, like now, when you’re trying to think of what something is going to look like before you make it. And yes, people can remember things they’ve seen, or make up new ideas, but when it comes to really thinking that way, they don’t understand how I do it.” He’d smiled. “Or even that I do it at all. They think, or I think — it’s difficult to explain.”

“Feel free to take your time.”

“I was just thinking… it’s funny in retrospect, it would have been so obvious to anyone else, but for a long time I thought everyone did. When I found out most people don’t think the way I do, I was surprised, because at the time I honestly had no idea. I was in an art museum, with my aunt and one of her friends. I was, right, I was twelve, and we were standing right in front of a large landscape painting. Big, sweeping, there were all these people and things in it. I don’t remember what brought it on, I think we’d been talking about the different kinds of paint the artist used, but my aunt’s friend
said it was a shame you couldn’t see the whole painting inside your head, when you thought of it you could only think of one face or another, or the tree in the corner, you couldn’t think of the whole thing. And that didn’t make any sense to me, because I’d been thinking of the whole thing.”

“Please go on.”

“Well, I said it was right in front of us, she could see it all in front of us. She told me, right, she said you could only hold a little bit inside your head because you could only see a little at once with your eyes. I told her again, no, of course you could see the whole painting all at once, and she said no, you couldn’t. This I didn’t understand at all, because what I’d been doing was looking at it and then putting it all together, so maybe I had been looking at just one part at a time, but after I’d looked at each part of it I could put the entire painting together. I told her how I’d done that and how I could see the entire painting together that way. Then she told me she didn’t do that.” He laughed, very faintly. “And I told her how that was fairly stupid of her to not do that.”

“Goodness! I’d assumed Humans had slightly more respect for their elders than that. It seems all this time I’ve been operating under false information.”

“We do ordinarily, yes. But I was so frustrated with her I couldn’t think to stop and be polite. So I called her stupid, and I got such a lecture from my aunt right there in the gallery, I hadn’t seen her so angry in years, she made me apologize to her friend right away. I remember getting upset about having to apologize because nobody explained why what I’d said was hurtful, so I didn’t know what I had to be sorry for. Not until a month or so afterwards, when I realized my aunt’s friend wasn’t stupid because she didn’t know how to put paintings together inside her head. It wasn’t that she was stupid for not doing that. It was that she couldn’t put the painting together, but I could, and then, I remember thinking this, I was the one doing something that she couldn’t do. And she wasn’t stupid. She just couldn’t think about the painting that way. Nothing wrong or stupid about it, for either of us. Just different ways of thinking. And I’d had no idea no one else thought the way I did. It was quite the shock when I realize that, let me tell you.”

“Ah.” Garak leaned in closer to Julian and dropped his voice even though there hadn’t been anyone else to hear. “I remember something similar when I first left Cardassia and began regularly interacting with aliens. Value systems alone are so difficult to translate at the best of times, and please don’t think I don’t appreciate your unusually receptive manner. But to make sure one is understood by aliens when you’re holding the galaxy together inside your head so very differently –”

“To realize not everyone around you looks at it in the same way.”

“Precisely! Beyond the simple physical capacities of sensory input, how they comprehend what they see. Whether or not they understand you think of it differently as well.”

“It sounds like important work for a spy to understand that.”

“Good customer service, my dear doctor, often requires something very close to proper telepathy. Understanding a disparate set of thoughts when there’s so little in common between you and them, when they seem determined to obfuscate their goals and desires as much as possible, the upward struggle of trying to reach out to them – yes, I know that well.”

“I’m glad. It’s that – maybe it’s because you’re a tailor. I tell people I don’t necessarily think with words, and they don’t understand. I don’t always use words in my head. I do when I need to think of how to say something, but if it’s just me thinking, it’s in pictures. And people ask why I call my medical scanner a communication device.”

“Isn’t that what it says on the patent form?”
“Well, yes.”

“Well, yes.”

“Then why the confusion?”

“Because even if I tell people I’m using it to show them what I see they don’t necessarily – if I’m thinking of a heart I’m not thinking of a picture of a heart unless I’m thinking of a specific image or diagram, if I’m thinking of a heart then it’s a heart occupying physical space that I can look at from all angles. So I needed something to show people what I’m thinking of. The device itself is based off existing holodeck technology, just made less encompassing and more portable and specialized, hard light and photons without any of the matter replication. The problem is even after I tell people why I felt the need to create it, they don’t quite grasp what I’m trying to tell them.” He shook his head.

“There’s not much room in the literature about it. I managed to find the autobiography of one woman from nearly five centuries ago who thought like I do, and I felt so comforted when I read it, just to read about someone else who thought in pictures.”

“And what did she do?” Garak asked.

“Oh, she designed slaughterhouses,” Julian said breezily.

It had taken Garak a near minute to pull together a response. “I see.”

“A remarkably important profession before replicator technology took off – there aren’t so many left, but for a time, nearly half of all slaughterhouses on Earth followed her designs,” Julian had spoken without any concern over Garak’s silence. “She said she thought in images, like the animals she worked with, and she tried to design everything so that the animals never felt any fear or pain even at the very moment of death.”

Sitting in the holosuite, Garak picked up another garment, adjusted his datalens, and looked at Julian, who was still half-dressed in his ridiculous costume and was stroking the sleeve of a deliciously soft dress he’d draped across his lap, one of the finer examples of blended fabrics of the period. Garak shook his head and went back to finish his measuring. Filicide and slaughterhouses – what a singular Human Julian was. But perhaps it made sense for a doctor to find comfort in constant reminders of death.
Jadzia knew Julian’s sense of humor was off-kilter at the best of times, but she’d honestly thought he’d been playing along with her joking in the turbolift up until he told her Garak would be happy to have her over for dinner and some literature discussion sometime.

“What? No, sorry, I’d love to come, I’m actually kind of flattered. I just didn’t think you were going to make that offer.”

“He was hesitant about it at first, but when I told him you knew Iloja of Prim back when you were Tobin he became much more interested.”

“Oh, he’s a fan of his work?”

“Not particularly. He said – oh, Iloja’s work is fairly melodramatic and sentimental, which to be fair is in keeping with the style of the period and the surrounding circumstances of his exile, but given the extent of his work it seems a little excessive nonetheless.” Julian shrugged. “He wants to know if it’s because of when and how he lived or an inherent aspect of his character, and would appreciate a firsthand account of the man.”

“Then by all means.”

“He also said you ought to pick the book.”

“Why?”

“Well, you told me none of Dax’s hosts since Tobin have been as interested in Cardassian literature as he was, and I’ve become fairly familiar with it in the last four years. As for Human works, we both have a greater understanding of its emotional conventions than Garak does. And with you as the guest, we decided it’d be more fitting that you select the topic of conversation.”

“I appreciate the thought. Is there anything in particular you’d like me to bring?”

“Just something Trill.”

A request like that was almost too broad and too narrow at the same time, and it took her a couple of days’ sorting and selecting and re-sorting to find something she knew would fit the bill. The day after she finally did, when Julian was up in Ops to discuss the *Defiant’s* sickbay with Benjamin, she caught him on his way out and handed him a pair of data rods.

“And what have we here?”

“Kith’s autobiography. I know, you two usually talk novels but you didn’t say if I had to pick something fictional or not. You asked for something Trill, and this is about as Trill as I could get my hands on. And Garak did say he wanted a firsthand account, so trust me, this is going to deliver on that.”

“Splendid.” He slipped the rods into a pocket on the inside of his shoulder bag. “As for dinner, does two weeks from now sound all right?”

“That should be fine.”

It turned out that with one thing after another, emergency missions and protracted assignments which
never gave any advance warning even with the Prophets right next door, it was closer to three
months. The way Julian had stopped asking her when she might be free made her wonder if he’d
given up on her ever giving a positive answer. When the night finally came, she ended up putting on
one of her better civilian outfits and bringing a bottle of fresh kanar as a way to apologize on behalf
of the universe. It was the sort of gesture that got Nilani to say yes to Torias’ proposal.

Dax smoothed her hair again and tapped the comm, gave her voice ID and stepped inside to a place
about as warm as her Klingon exercise program. She had to blink a couple of times to get her eyes
used to how dark it was compared to the corridor; standing lamps lit the place instead of overhead
panels, providing a more diffused, lower light.

The fact that she was twenty minutes late and they still didn’t have everything set up for dinner made
her feel worlds better.

“Ah, Jadzia! Good to see you,” Julian said without looking up from glancing between a padd and the
replicator. “I’m sorry, but this may take a few more minutes – I honestly don’t see what the issue
should be, it’s not as though it can’t do eggs or bread, you’d think challah would follow naturally –”

“Do forgive the good doctor,” Garak smiled. “For some reason he’s placing a rather undue amount
of pressure on himself to make this as special an evening as he can manage, and quite honestly, if
we’re not welcoming a bridal personification of the day of rest into our home I hardly see why he
should bother.”

“Because it’s generally celebratory and not exclusive to the Sabbath, that’s why, I’ve looked forward
to this for three months – oh, this isn’t worth the trouble right now, computer, two loaves of San
Francisco sourdough.” The bread shimmered into existence, and was placed on the table along with
the rest of dinner. It all looked Human enough, but the shakshuka was made with regova eggs
instead of chicken, and the pitcher of mesal juice was absolutely Trill, even if it so happened that the
sweetened juices from the fruits of that particular lowland vine made a drink remarkably close to
Terran lemonade. “There we are.”

“We would have had it ready quite some time ago if you weren’t so determined to needlessly
complicate things for our lovely guest. I’m afraid I must apologize on his behalf, and may I take
that?”

“It’s really fine, I’m just glad to be here. And yes. I thought we’d drink this with dinner.”

“As though you haven’t fussed for hours every time before Ziyal’s come over. My God, are you
even listening to yourself?”

“Being a good night-father is nothing like – oh, mercy,” his eyes widened as he read the bottle’s
label. “If Quark’s had this in his storeroom and he’s been holding out on me –”

“Oh, I didn’t buy it from Quark. I bought it through Quark, he said he’d get my hands on a bottle of
this for me as long as I didn’t ask where he got it. Besides, he owed me one.” Then, as Garak opened
the bottle to take a sniff with a look of bliss, “What’s a night-father?”

“It’s a Cardassian thing,” Julian answered, literally waving her question away with a swipe of his
hand through the air.

“And to be a good night-father requires a very different set of personal and behavioral standards that
go beyond fussing over which type of bread to serve at a small dinner gathering, I’d think by now
you ought to have some understanding of the concept,” Garak shot back, then turned back to Jadzia,
his voice much friendlier, “and that really is quite a lovely dress of yours, might I trouble you for the
name of the designer?”

“You might. I don’t remember it offhand, I got it from a boutique on Betazed. I’ll check for you later.”

“Only if it’s no trouble to you. And now that the good doctor has finally gotten all of the fussing out of his system, let’s sit down and begin.”

The food was almost all Human, but it wasn’t like one of Benjamin’s dinners. Instead of a single main dish with a couple of smaller ones beside, Julian and Garak had laid out seven different small plates plus the bread and drinks. Passing them around and chatting gently about their respective working days, Jadzia noticed that Garak put something of everything onto his plate but Julian was starting with nothing but a single helping of the shakshuka. She began with a couple of the stuffed grape leaves, a spoonful of the aubergine stew, some greens that were bitterer than she’d expected and a story about two of her lab techs and their most recent accident with the particle accelerator, noble gasses, and a bunch of bananas that had both Garak and Julian smiling.

“And I’m sure everything will grow back by the time they get around to publishing the paper,” she finished.

“At least they’re getting a paper out of it. Would you like some tea?” Julian asked.

“Oh, do take it, please, he won’t stop prattling on about it.”

“Yes, please.”

“After the trouble I went to find you something non-caffeinated which wasn’t decaf that also managed to have ‘something of a backbone’ as you requested – and it’s redder than redleaf manages to be –”

“Without any smoke to speak of, how can you call it an adequate substitute for redleaf tea? How could anyone?” Jadzia took a sip to hide her smile over Garak accepting the cup Julian handed him.

“I think I’ve had this before. Red bush, right?”

“Yes, the legume. And it’s a perfectly fine drink if someone complains about sleep difficulties and needs to cut some caffeine out of his diet.”

“I’ve never complained about sleeping poorly, but if I were to do so, I doubt it would be to you.”

“You don’t need to say anything.” Julian wiped up the last remaining molecules of shakshuka with a piece of sourdough. “But really, this isn’t here or there. Please pass the lentils.”

“No, it isn’t. And here you are. Lieutenant, I found the book you selected highly illuminating on Trill culture and life, and I thank you for bringing it to my attention when I doubt I would have read it otherwise.”

“You’re welcome. So you enjoyed it?”

“Not in the least.” His words made Jadzia swallow wrong on some chickpeas, and she had to force them down with some tea, waving Garak on to continue while she drank. “I’m sorry, I know you had high hopes for it and I did find it unlike anything I’ve read before, but not in a pleasant way. It was a struggle to get through – and I suppose in a roundabout fashion I have to thank you for delaying this dinner, as I doubt I’d have finished it otherwise.”
“I managed to read it in less than a week,” Julian said, with more than a little smugness.

“Well…was it the content? The subject matter?”

“The format,” Garak said, and ate a fish head in one bite.

“What do you mean?”

“Words and pictures together. The whole concept was rather confusing, and with the style always changing from one book to another, it was difficult to find myself engaged in the stories of any of the characters, let alone become invested in them as individuals.”

“And this is coming from the man who thinks the repetitive epic is the highest form of literature the galaxy has ever produced. What could be more repetitive than eight hosts of a single Trill symbiont? And Jadzia, don’t you think that the way the third host began experimenting with moment-to-moment transitions was –”

“One thing at a time, you two, I’ll explain everything, just let me see – all right, it’s primarily credited as Kith’s autobiography because Kith’s hosts didn’t begin writing it until its third, a woman who was already a novelist, and it was the only nonfiction she ever produced. Then nothing, then its fifth host, who wasn’t an author or artist in any form until after he was joined, wrote the other two books. That was what happened with its ninth, and also the tenth and eleventh, then the sixteenth, the eighteenth, and the twenty-first and last host. You read the epilogue?” Both Julian and Garak nodded. “Then you know Kith the symbiont was given a proper funeral and sent to rest. What separates its autobiography from the rest of the genre is the way the symbiont is thought to be an influence on each artist who contributed to the piece. It’s not unheard of but still very unusual for any symbiont line to carry on in the way Kith did with this book.”

“It’s almost like reassociation,” Julian mused.

“Almost. Not quite. It’s not Kith’s host claiming someone else’s children as their own because they used to be their mother, or, yes, trying to return to a romantic relationship from an old host’s life. You’re close to the spirit of it, though: it’s the fact that many of its hosts participated. But not all its hosts, which complicates the matter.”

“Yes, there was the ongoing theme of questioning self and memory,” Garak said. “The observation of social roles and archetypes, but observation was all there was. I found the general lack of direct engagement with the subject fairly disheartening; I would have liked much more of that.”

“It’s the ongoing questioning that’s the important part,” Dax said. “There’s never going to be a proper answer to a question like that, just a mystery that gets handed down. See, that’s the whole point – it’s questioning the nature of joined Trill identity. What’s your own, how does being joined impact that, how once you’re joined you’re part of the Kith line or Dax line no matter who you were before, but you still stay yourself.”

“I managed to understand at least that much, and I have to think highly of any culture that holds its collective memories in as high regards as yours does. But as I was saying, it wasn’t the content which took some getting used to, but the format.”

“It helps to see it as a collaborative effort between the forms. The words and the pictures taken together – Julian, what did you say Humans call them?”

“Comics for children, graphic novels for grown-ups. Even if some people still insist on everything being called comics, for some reason.”
“On Trill, we just call them books. And an autobiography is hardly a novel.”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing comparable on Cardassia. Single images with captions, perhaps, or simplified illustrations for operating instructions, but nothing anyone would ever call a narrative.”

“Then that’s just your loss. It’s the major art form on Trill. Klingons have their opera, you have your literature, Humans have acting and theatre, and we Trills have our…” Jadzia took a deep breath and reached for the juice. “We’ve got our comics. That’s not what their name really is. It’s haela’jhoh, which means – it’s not quite that easy to translate, but, I suppose the spirit of the term,” she smiled at Julian, “can be translated as ‘word-picture-dance’. Which is a really good way to think about them. The words and pictures get to dance together. Humans have theirs too, and I really liked that one about the wombat with the hyenas and the dead god –”

“Oh, I loved Shadowchild!” Julian exclaimed.

“I loved seeing another marsupial as the protagonist. But as I was saying, even with works like that, they never became the major literary form the way they did for us.” She spooned some honey into her teacup, stirring slowly. “Actually, Garak, now that I think about it, you might have had an easier time getting into it if I’d gotten it to you two in its original form.”

Garak angled his chin up and blinked politely. “Do go on.”

“It didn’t debut on datarod. Almost no Trill literature does, not even now. Most of everything gets published in a physical format if possible.”

“Really.”

“Yes. It’s not just as a prestige thing for the author or a limited run for collectors; anyone who wants one can get one. It’s the way the dancing works – people always talk about how there’s more they can do with it when they have a better understanding of its physical construction.”

“A sentiment I understand from my own work. Now that you mention that, it’s quite possible I’d enjoy it more on paper than a screen.”

“I’ve always thought much the same thing. Not necessarily with comics themselves, but with most every art form. Arbitrary constraints placed on a piece before anything ever begins often –”

“We’ve had this conversation, Julian,” Garak said.

“We have?”

“Yes, we have.” His voice was softer than she’d ever heard before, and he was looking at Julian out of the corner of his eyes, while Julian himself looked nowhere in particular, more than a little confounded by what he’d just heard.

“Arbitrary constraints, stringent rules, greater flexibility within them?”

“Correct.”

“Right, then,” and he turned to her, all bafflement gone, “Jadzia, I’m sure you can imagine what I’m talking about, just think of a highly rigid poetry format like a sonnet and how much people can do with those and that’s what I’m trying to get at. In any case, if you know where we could read a copy, even a holosuite replica, we’d quite like that.”

“I can lend you a program.”
“Thank you.”

“If it’s all right, can I use your bathroom?”

“By all means. It’s just through there.”

She tried not to leave the table too fast. The light turned on the moment the door closed behind her, pitched just a little brighter than the main quarters’, coming from a single panel over the sink’s mirror. As station bathrooms went, it was larger than hers but looked just as small, thanks to a pair of toilets flanking the sink: one that looked like a normal toilet, and one that looked like a slightly modified urinal. Even though she didn’t really need to, she went ahead and used the normal one, just to have more of a reason to leave for a moment besides realizing what she’d been missing all these years.

Garak had spoken to Julian so gently. Not angrily, not indulgently, and not even annoyed – not the way a parent might speak to their child when they’d begun reciting a cartoon’s theme song for the twelfth time in ten minutes. Julian himself hadn’t been upset or irritated or even bothered after Garak told him that he didn’t need to finish his thoughts. There had been no shortage of times Jadzia wished she could have done what Garak just did and find a polite way to explain they’d already had the same conversations before, sometimes upwards of five times. And now she’d seen how to do it. If Julian could allow himself something like trust towards Garak, Jadzia knew he’d allow it for his friends.

Neither Julian or Garak had touched each other all evening. They hadn’t looked each other in the eye, and they’d sat and laughed with each other, pouring each other kanar and tea, Julian so comfortable with Garak he willingly acquiesced social guidance to him, and Garak having done so with a concern and love Dax had only rarely been able to manage in any life with a husband, wife, or child.

It wasn’t anything like what Jadzia thought she knew a relationship had to be like, not with the amount and intensity of their arguing, not with the lack of common markers of intimacy. But what they had was intimate, she’d just seen that – she knew it was a deep and genuine love, exactly the sort of thing artists and authors danced themselves to death to tell. She’d just been looking for something that fit her confirmation bias, and hadn’t been able to see what was right in front of her until just a few moments ago. It was the problem all scientists had to grasp, something Dax hadn’t managed to learn yet. The mistake had been trying to find what she’d thought she was supposed to discover, not what was actually there.

She washed her hands, readjusted her hair, and took another glance at the second toilet. Then Dax realized why it looked so familiar, and the near-shock and delight hit hard enough Jadzia had to laugh.

When she got out, Julian was taking dinner off the table, and Garak was putting out bowls of what turned out to be some sort of warm Cardassian fruit soup that was almost thick enough to be a pudding, pale purple, and had a sweet astringency the spices offset enough for it to be playful instead of painful.

“Nice and tart,” Julian said, which made Jadzia smile along with Garak for what she knew were very different reasons.

“If you don’t mind my asking, how come you –” She shook her head and started over. “How did you manage to get so much remodeling done on your bathroom?”

“Oh, Miles owed me a favor.”
“And Doctor O’Brien owed me a favor. We thought it best to consolidate between the four of us and pay off all the favors as one lump sum, if you will.”

“We’d kept Garak’s toilet on hand in case we could arrange for exactly that.”

Garak huffed and began another round of the endless argument cycle, and Jadzia simply took another spoonful of the pudding to hide a grin and passed a blessing to Kira’s Prophets that Julian didn’t always know when not to share.
Bracing for Sunday

The damage would take weeks to fix, easily months, the station crippled and lives lost, and this was what she always hated the most, the powerlessness, not being able to run and fight back. Kira closed her eyes and clutched her arm and hissed a measure of pain before clenching her teeth and forcing her voice out steady.

“Okay, listen! We’re going to have to think of everyone as dead until proven alive, no matter where they were when the Jem’Hadar hit us. I want to know who we’ve still got, and I want to know what they took and how they did it, and I don’t want anyone wasting time thinking about what they might have done differently if they’d seen it coming. We’ve already lost good people and we need to make sure we don’t lose more. Teams on each level, someone checking everywhere they hit, everyone’s going to get their hands dirty today. Mourn for them later. Let’s get going.”

By the time the Defiant arrived and left almost right away, they’d gotten enough of an idea of how bad the damage was to grasp how blessedly fucked they were. Her arm was throbbing, and she took a moment to close her eyes and steady herself. Bashir and the rest of the crew the Defiant could spare had barely arrived and were already in deep.

“How bad is it?” He asked her a moment after Sisko beamed away, running the tricorder over her arm.

“How bad does it look?”

“Major, we really haven’t got the time for this. I can see you’re not so badly hurt you need immediate attention and I can make a guess how much pain you’re in but I can’t truly know unless you decide to tell me, so you’d better go ahead and figure out what it is you’re going to say because otherwise I won’t ever know.” His voice stayed soft and firm like it always did when he was dispensing medical information, like they were in Sickbay and he was diagnosing a mild rhinovirus, and he snapped the tricorder shut. “And the dead don’t plan on lying to me anytime soon, and if you’re going to, I’d much rather speak with them right now. So how bad is it?”

“It’s not so bad I need to visit Sickbay yet.”

“All right. You haven’t lost much blood and you’re not in any current danger, so I’m going to leave you alone for the time being but I want to see you as soon as the worst of this is over. Girani!” He called over the din. “I’ve got –” Another conduit exploded less than two meters away, and his head snapped up to look in its direction for just a moment before he looked back at Semna and called back out like nothing had happened. “I’ve got two more nearly-gones here, find me someone to move them to Sickbay, and when Chalan gets back tell him I need my scanner, I need its back-up battery, and I need its toolkit.” She was on her way the moment he was done, and he shouted to her almost as an afterthought, “And two CCs of alprazoline for the Major!”

“I told you, it’s not so bad.”

“Not now, but you’ll need them before it gets worse.” He jerked his head towards her and threw off a little smile and went right back to work, moving through the bodies and debris like there was absolutely nothing to be concerned about. She turned away and Lieutenant zh’Vrathi was there with an updated report on the bodies presumed lost in the debris field. Death by Jem’Hadar would be a kinder way to die. Anything other than freezing and suffocating in a vacuum was kinder.

“May the Prophets guide them home,” she whispered, and looked up at zh’Vrathi. Her antennae
were lying close and tight down against her head, only their tips quivering – Kira quite liked her, quiet and serious and several years older than Kira herself, and right now she looked altogether lost in all the death. Kira didn’t try to force a smile; she just let her voice do the lying. “Thank you. We need to keep our attention up here, and when did you say we can head out with recovery teams?”

“Tomorrow at the earliest. I’m sorry but –”

“Stop right there. Don’t be sorry when it’s not your doing.” zh’Vrathi drew back, and then nodded, her antennae starting to rise back up. “Good. Now get back to reactor control, they need you more than us.”

“On my way.”

Kira took a moment to lean against the wall. Everything in here was hot – all the heat, all the shouting. Chalan wouldn’t get here fast enough, and deep breathing wasn’t going to be enough for much longer. Home was always so fragile, and when there was less than a meter between her and the void, it wasn’t a good time to get reminded. People were coming to her for one thing and another, and when Chalan finally arrived with the hypospray and administered the dose, it was like stepping into a cool bath.

“Will this work?” She heard him ask Bashir.

“Of course it will.”

“But – did you do any tests? Any calculations?”

“I already did them in my head, trust me, I promise you this will work.” Kira watched him set the device down on its little spindly feet and attach the external battery attached. He poked it with the tools, muttered something that almost sounded like a benediction, and then it sprang to life with the same little chirp it always did – except this time, instead of a little hovering image, it was the entirety of the corridor in minor scale, the whole thing shimmering as Bashir pressed the images, pushed a couple more buttons on his device, and began pulling at the shapes in the air, and Kira realized what he was doing just a moment before the debris and damage turned transparent and the bodies lit up like fireworks. It showed exactly where the bodies were, exactly where to find them. Who was still alive, who was gone, nothing they couldn’t find with a tricorder but seeing just where they needed to go, that alone was practically a Prophet’s blessing.

Bashir handed the scanner off to Swain, who began directing people to where the living were, where the dead were, and Bashir – who’d flinched away the first time a Vedek tried to read his pagh and raised his hand to ask a question when Jadzia asked them to participate in her zhian’tara – went right back into the field. Kira didn’t have a moment anywhere near him until they were in Sickbay and he was finally dressing her arm. She wondered what she’d done to merit his personal attention, and he told her there wasn’t anyone nearly dying anymore, so he was free to work on the people who were only very badly injured, and everyone else was already practically dead on their feet. He was the least tired of them all, and his staff needed the rest of the night to sleep but he could go another hour without much worry, or for however long it took to patch Kira up.

“You seemed all right out there.”

“I was.” He dropped another tiny pebble-sized piece of rubble into a nearby dish and dabbed at her arm. She appreciated his willingness to use hands-on techniques when she’d asked for them instead of automatically defaulting to Starfleet tech. “All my teachers in med school told me I had a good head for triage.” Kira sighed and he stopped. “Sorry.”
“That didn’t hurt.”

“Oh. Well, that was the last piece, so I’ll get the dermal regenerator and fix you up then, all right?”

“Please, yes. I don’t want it to be tomorrow but just let me get today over with.”

“By all means, Major.”

As he ran the device over her wound, she felt it knit together with the usual inside-out itch that came with it. “That scanner of yours.”

“What about it?”

“Is it standard Federation technology?”

“Hardly. It’s standard Bashir technology, I suppose, it’s my design and invention and patent, but it’s still only about five years old, and very little technology becomes standard after that short a time. The Defiant doesn’t even have one yet. I keep meaning to talk to Captain Sisko about it, thank you for reminding me.”

“You’re welcome?”

“I honestly appreciate it. And there we go.” He stepped back, and she ran her hand over her arm. Not even a scar, just a low ache that she knew would hang around until the pylon was fixed, at the very earliest. “You don’t need another dose of painkillers, do you?”

“No, I’ll be fine. I just need a shower and some sleep.” She thought a moment about how many hours there were until she had to wake up and who on the station still didn’t have the chance to go to bed, and then went ahead and said, “You did a really good job in all that out there.”

“Thank you.”

“Look, if this is rude for Humans to talk about, let me know and I’ll shut up about it, but if it isn’t, I’ll just go ahead.” He nodded, his permission granted. “You said you were all right with everything.”

“Yes, I did. Because I was.”

“I know you’re not exactly a typical Human, and I don’t mean that to be insulting, I’m just saying it. What I’m wondering is, I don’t care how many classes you’ve had, the only way you’re fine with days like today is because you’ve seen years of it or you’re like you. However you are.”

“However I am.”

“I don’t know what sort of word to use for whatever it is. What do you call your condition, anyway?”

“My condition? That’s far too broad a term to be of any use. Illness, disease? Those make it sound contagious, and it’s certainly not that. Disorder? That’s a closer approximation, even though it makes it sound as though there’s one single unifying aspect to everything, when that’s hardly the case. Syndrome? Technically speaking, from a medical standpoint, that’s the most accurate term possible but it’s still not how I think of it. Disability? Now that I’ll gladly accept.”

“So that’s what you call it, then?”

“I don’t usually call it much of anything. What do you call your skin?”
Maybe she was too tired to wrap her mind around what they were saying. “It’s just my skin. It’s part of me, it’s what I live inside –”

“Exactly. Now, how are you feeling? And no, it’s not because of what I don’t call much of anything that I keep asking – although it means I don’t have much in terms of a meaningful capacity to hazard a guess regarding someone’s emotional state unless I know them exceptionally well. I’m asking because I’m a doctor. I’m fairly certain you don’t think much of me as a Human or a person, and quite honestly I don’t particularly care. But think of me as a doctor, and tell me how you are.”

She really couldn’t blame him from flinching away from Winn Adami. “I’m as good as I can be right now.”

“Do you think you’ll need something to help you sleep?”

“I think a shower will be enough.”

“All right, then. Don’t take it the wrong way when I say I hope I don’t see you back in here for a good long while.”

“If you don’t take it the wrong way, then I’m agreeing with you.”

“Then have a good night, Major.”

“Good night, Doctor.”
When Garak was informed that Julian’s mission in the Gamma Quadrant would be extended by seven to ten days, he had received the news through an impersonal message delivered to his shop’s private computer terminal; when Lieutenant Dax let him know Julian would be staying on the plague-ravaged planet for what would likely be an additional two months, she came to his shop herself to do so. He’d been measuring cloth for another set of Dabo commissions, and set them down the moment he saw her – under-slept, weary, clearly bearing bad news.

“I’m sorry,” she began.

“No, I understand,” he said. “Two months, you think?”

“Thereabouts. She said she only had that far to go. I mean, placental pregnancies are generally fairly routine. And if anything goes wrong, he’s there.”

“For as long as it will take, he’ll be there. That’s the good Doctor Bashir. Well, I do appreciate this news, and thank you for, if you’ll pardon it, delivering it so promptly.”

She half-smiled and looked away. “If you need anything –”

“While it’s generous of you to offer your company, and it is appreciated, trust me, I don’t anticipate myself needing to accept it. No offense meant.”

“None taken. I just thought – well. You know Julian.”

“Intimately so.” He was hardly surprised at the news; the possibility of easing and preventing suffering and death aside, and what an aside that was, the Quickening Blight was a problem for Julian to solve, and he would dedicate himself to it as deeply as he could, entrenching his life into the process, something Garak had witnessed and been roped into no small number of times before. Sometimes he could be dissuaded, and more often one had to wait it out. Two months was hardly the longest he’d seen Julian devote himself to one project or another. And he knew Julian made every trip to the Gamma Quadrant with extra doses of his medication.

Garak had been speaking quite truthfully to Dax when he said he would be perfectly fine living on his own for the duration. Julian would return, that he was certain of, just as he was certain Cardassia would someday be ready to receive him again, and any attempt to determine when that would be would only add to the pain of the waiting. He dismissed any thought of Julian making a precise arrival on an exact date and closed the shop early, staying on to work late in the back room as he’d done on many other nights when there’d been no one waiting for his company. The dresses were finished two days ahead of schedule, and he hung them out front to draw a little more pleasure from them. He took his usual breakfasts with Odo and dinners with Ziyal, and quickly remembered how to sleep alone. The mint needed watering, depleted stock needed reordering, and Lieutenant Dax needed three cups of tea and a rather lengthy explanation of the meaning of the phrase the air of night is smell\textsuperscript{1} to understand the wordplay behind the title of the comedy of manners and romance concerning two sets of would-be night-parents.

“It means that during the night, when so much of what one can see is stripped away, all they’re left with is what’s real. Only what’s real. Not what’s true, as lies can be quite real. Certainly not what you can see – smell in this case referring to scent, the substance of reality. So for night-parents to be discussing the air of night…”

\textsuperscript{1}"The air of night is smell" is a phrase from the comedy of manners and romance play of the same name, written by William Congreve. It means that during the night, when so much of what one can see is stripped away, all that is left is what is real. Only what is real. Not what is true, as lies can be quite real. Certainly not what you can see—smell, in this case, referring to scent, the substance of reality. So for night-parents to be discussing the air of night…"
She nodded, her arms crossed and leaning on the countertop next to the small box of decorative pins. “It means…” He waited, hopeful. “It means they’re trying to be honest with each other.”

“But quite. They’re trying to find common ground between each other, yes, but honesty isn’t the method they’re trying to employ to achieve that goal.”

The short fiction collection she lent him, printed on real paper with real ink from one of Trill’s most renowned pair of dancing partners, proved more accessible than Kith’s autobiography, though he once again had to read it as a piece of alien cultural research rather than a welcoming piece of art. Odo’s suggested reading material was both far less substantial and more accessible in nearly every way which mattered – he would positively hang Julian for not telling him there were Human mysteries that came as close to proper enigma tales as he’d ever found from a non-Cardassian author. He added it to the list of subjects for conversation, and then did his best to promptly forget there was such a list to keep track of. Ziyal learned how to mend her own clothes, some commissions came in and other pieces were sold off the rack as they were, and Odo suggested a novel that turned out to be unlike anything he’d yet read from Julian’s species.

“I’ve read a number of books from that era of Earth history, and even a few for that intended age group, but never such a – mature mystery before. How did you come across it?”

“Actually, it was suggested to me by Jake Sisko.” He took a sip of himself to maintain the illusion. “About halfway through, I thought you might appreciate it yourself. The amount of cultural notes and references that required translation was quite extensive, but the characters’ motives, whether for money or prestige or simply to unlock the hidden secrets around them, those were universal.”

“If that was what brought me to mind, I’m quite flattered. Personally, I was rather taken with the extended chess metaphor. Granted, the game itself is a simplification of that which it’s trying to portray, but nevertheless, an ongoing battle between family members to defeat each other and claim victory – now that was a lovely touch on Miss Raskin’s part.”

After some research, Garak found another Human-authored book in much the same vein, for roughly the same audience; again, the heroine was a young Human girl devoted to finding out the secrets of the world, though Odo vehemently disagreed on the nature of her motivations. He refused to believe her spywork and research was her gathering knowledge for its own sake or to be made use of one day, and rather that she sought control over the world around her through the information she’d collected.

“That was what the Order attempted to achieve, was it not?”

“Safety and stability, not control.”

Nevertheless, they both agreed her tradecraft was highly admirable for someone so young, even if she was fictional, and her identical lunches of love-apple sandwiches reminded him of Julian’s often-monotonous eating habits. He resolved to ask him if he’d read the book when he returned, whenever that might be.

As it turned out, it took little more than a week for Julian to walk into their quarters late one evening, his personal code bypassing the voice request and entering just as Garak was letting the replicator reclaim his teacup and contemplating an early night. There had been no calls to pick him up at the infirmary, no calls from the infirmary, nothing from Captain Sisko or Lieutenant Dax or even the good Constable that Julian had sent back the signal to send a runabout. No, only Julian dropping his bags onto the floor with a gusty sigh and smiling at Garak apologetically before walking up to him, and anything that could be said would have only further delayed the welcoming kiss. Julian looked stranded on his feet, weary and unrested, but still satisfied and proud of himself at the same time – a
beatific weariness, the sort which came after what he would have said was ‘victory by the skin of his teeth’, or what Garak would say was ‘lit by the blind moon’. He shook beneath Garak’s hands, so gently, the happy shaking that could come on when he was too overwhelmed by the emotions churning inside him, and Garak ran his hands through his hair and kept kissing him until he pulled back and sighed, looking him in the eye from a scant few centimeters away. Lovely, lovely sea-dark green.

Thankfully, he’d at least found time to brush his teeth, and while he smelled of worse than a shower in a runabout could clean away, at least it was faint enough to be ignored in favor of another kiss and a brush of fingers over those now-fuzzy cheeks.

“I’m sorry I haven’t had the chance to depilate properly.”

“My dear, it’s quite all right.” Julian’s hair was only a fair bit longer, mostly softer and curlier – no facilities to wash or trim it, and Garak reasoned he could delay a visit to the barber’s another day or two at the very least, clutching it during sex would be quite the treat and stroking it was a simple, pleasant delight. “In fact, I might say the – scruff, yes, that’s the term, the scruff has its own charms that I’d appreciate learning about, if only once.”

“It is rather late,” he murmured into another kiss, “I could well put it off until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Perhaps.”

While he’d managed to keep his facial hair in a reasonable semblance of order, his body hair had been left to grow in, and once he’d disrobed Garak gulped in the sight – a fine dusting over formerly Cardassian-smooth limbs, little patches under his arms that almost matched the clutch in his groin which itself had sprung up a little tail tracing up to his navel, the slight, faint curls across his chest, Julian blushing and looking away when he noticed Garak noticing.

“I didn’t see much point in shaving anything. I should get back to that. I know it’s not standard Federation fashion –”

“Oh, please, my dear doctor! There’s fashion, and then there’s personal style, and trust me when I tell you that you’re one who needs quite a bit of help with both. You’d do well to leave all this in. It’s quite fetching.”

“Fetching?”

“Oh, yes.” He ran his fingers across his chest, twirled a little curl around a finger. “At least, I find it so. And would you deny me this unprecedented opportunity now that it’s presented itself?”

“I might. It itched something terrible when it came back in.”

“Then simply leave it as is, and never worry about trimming again.” His hand slipped down to the pubic tail, to rest underneath Julian’s adorable umbilical scar for just a moment before going on farther.

The following morning, Julian was as clean-shaven as ever, but pointedly spent quite a few minutes without a shirt on to display his willingness to leave his body hair well enough alone for the time being. Garak voiced his appreciation by preparing tojal for them both, though for some reason Julian insisted on leaving off yamok sauce to eat it plain. It was something Garak tried his best to not to judge him on.
A snatch of music dashed through the air when Julian logged onto his terminal, a sound Garak had almost come to miss. It was standard Starfleet protocol to encode certain messages sent to their officers and personnel. Very often, as part of his preparations for extended missions, Julian would add an additional level of security to the messages by arranging for them to be sent directly to his office in the infirmary. Both he and Garak knew not even that would be enough if Garak truly wished to read those messages, and they also knew it’d served its purpose of keeping Garak away from them through sheer discomfort at the thought of voluntarily going to the infirmary and the trouble that would be involved in rerouting them once again. And while Garak often left most of Julian’s Starfleet communications alone when there were no such physical barriers in place in order to respect his privacy, after so many weeks of Julian’s absence Garak’s openly admittance to curiosity prompted a snort of derision.

“But I would appreciate it if you would tell any good news you might have to share. I haven’t been following some of your, ah, particular interests –”

“Well, managing a vaccine for the Blight, that’s the best news I can personally deliver, and I’ll get you a copy of the paper and the briefing report once I manage to write those. And let me see, my goodness there’s a lot here…ah, my aunt’s agency is in the running to win the contract for an upcoming campaign, she won’t tell me what but she’s hopeful, there’s the usual alumni newsletter that never has anything interesting, there’s – oh.”

“Oh?” Garak looked up from his tojal. Julian had gone completely silent, staring at the screen. Not even a report of a girl locked inside a house that her parents burned down around her had gotten him to be quiet; he’d shared that piece of news almost cheerfully, even relating the findings from the autopsy report once it was released to the news-reading public. He didn’t respond when Garak leaned in over his shoulder, and while the item was from Starfleet Security, which delineated it as a rather pressing piece of information, the message was nearly two weeks old and no longer quite so urgent. But just above it in the queue was a note from Odo sent only a few hours later, containing the same information and an apology he wasn’t able to deliver it in person.

“I did ask him to let me know,” Julian said softly.

Garak leaned in to better make out the names, then drew back. “Oh, my goodness. Julian, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right, Garak. I knew it was going to happen. It’s been long enough.” He stayed still, eyes unfocused and locked onto the screen. “Their petition for a new hearing has been granted, and once that goes through and the last terms of their parole are lifted they’ll be able to travel outside of the solar system.” He took a deep breath, and shuddered as he let it out in several small gasps. “And then they’ll be coming here.”

“How can you be certain of that?”

“Because that’s what they’ll want to do. They know where I am – and please don’t say anything, most anyone could find out where I am with a few minute’s research. Possibly less. They’ll find out where I am, and they’ll want to come see me. Because that’s what they’ll want to do. It’ll take some time to raise the capital to book passage and come here, but they will.” Garak laid a hand on his shoulder and felt him shudder. “Shit.”

“Forgive me if you think this is me making light of it, but that does seem to be the appropriate response.”

“Thank you.” Julian closed down the terminal, stood up and walked to the window to stare out at the stars. “It helps to hear that.”
In all the years he’d known him, the closest Garak had ever heard Julian come to speaking of his parents was whenever he evaded any question concerning his interest in filicide. It was a frightening thing to have a consistent reminder, but sometimes that was what one needed. “My dear, if there’s anything, anything at all –”

“Thank you, but I don’t think there is.”

“I know how it is for someone to want me dead, but I can hardly imagine – by the Union, the charges for even attempted filicide in the Federation must be lenient indeed if –”

“You think my parents tried to kill me?” He didn’t turn and look at him, but he stood up a little straighter, a slight shake of laughter in his voice. “You’re likely the first person I’ve met who’s ever agreed with me on that.”

“Then why were they arrested, if not for that?”

“Treason.”

“Treason?” Garak gaped. “Julian, that’s even worse.”

“I know.” He laughed again. Nothing about this was the least bit funny, Garak could never grasp why in the name of the heavens he always laughed at things which weren’t funny. “And it was only attempted. The official charge is ‘conspiracy to commit treason,’ they couldn’t manage to accomplish even that much. I’ve looked into it, and based on what other cases there have been over this sort of thing their sentences would have been far more lenient if they’d been successful. They might have had something to bargain about or barter with, we’d all be in massive trouble to say the least but they’d be in a better position now than they really are.”

“But what about yourself? Would even the Federation have a place for the child of traitors?”

“There would be a place. Believe me, there’d be a place. I’ve looked into all of it. I’d be out of their lives, is the important thing. For them. I wouldn’t be here any longer. I don’t know why I’m here, I honestly don’t. Maybe their contact fell through. Maybe someone else up the chain talked their way into a deal and implicated them as part of their terms. All I know is my parents were arrested on charges of conspiracy to commit treason, and what they wanted to accomplish was to kill me.”

“How – precisely what would they have done that might have them arrested for treason if their desire was to kill you? Send you to the chopping block of a Klingon eager to taste a bit of Human flesh?”

“Nothing that outlandish, Garak. They just wanted what was promised to them.”

“What was –? I’m afraid I still don’t understand.”

“They wanted what was promised to them. They would have broken some of the oldest, most sacrosanct laws of the Federation to get it, and if they’d seen their quest through to the end no one would have said they were in the wrong for any of it. Oh, yes, breaking the law and getting caught, absolutely. That’s what they’re guilty of now, and everyone agrees those things are wrong. But the reasons they had to break the law, everyone agrees they were right to try to break it. Why they wanted to do away with me. It would have been kinder if they’d simply killed me outright – you’ve seen the charges, you know they’d be out free right now. And I wouldn’t be here, and they’d be able to try again for the proper child they were promised, the one that was stolen away from them with me left in its place.”

“Julian, please, calm down. You’re talking nonsense and I can’t make out even half of what you’re saying. Regaining the child promised to them that was stolen away? How would killing you have
accomplished that? What could they possibly have had in mind that would accomplish such a thing?"

“They wanted…” Julian shook his head, jerked it sharply. “They would…” Garak waited, watched as his hands trembled, clenching and unclenching. “What they wanted…” He pinned them down underneath crossed arms, forced himself still, and finally spoke. “There was a – a procedure they wanted done to me, it could only have been done to me when I was very young. It would have – in essence, what it would have done would be to get rid of me, the person I am, and replace me, burn me away and empty out my head of who I am and be rid of me and let them have the child they wanted in my place. If they’d tried, if they’d simply tried killing me the same thing would have happened, I’d be gone. If they’d had me go through the procedure, then I’d be gone too, but – it would have – I might have stayed aware of myself, I might have woken up and recognized myself in the mirror, but I wouldn’t be myself anymore. They’d have found a way to get rid of me, and I don’t know – sometimes I think about it, I’ve read about what the procedure would entail, all of it highly illegal, all of it unquestionably dangerous, but none of it from people who’ve had it done to them. I don’t know if it would have hurt. That was what I first thought, when I found out about what they’d wanted done to me, would it hurt. And I realized, they didn’t – there wasn’t any way they –” He wiped his eyes to no avail and kept crying, his voice staying flat as he forced himself to speak. “I’m sorry. It’s that I know no one ever – no matter what I tell them, they don’t believe me.”

“What don’t they believe?”

“They don’t believe me when I say my parents never had any love for me.”

“With everything you’ve told me now, which I presume is true, I don’t believe that.”

“They don’t believe me because it’s a terrible thing to say. Because Humans value family nearly as strongly as Cardassians do, and for me to say my parents don’t love me is nearly as unbelievable as them trying to kill me. It’s not supposed to be true, so no one believes it, but it is true. They – they might have. I know they loved the child they were promised, they loved the child they imagined I’d be, I know they loved the son that would have given them joy and happiness and brought the galaxy to its feet in wonder, they loved the child they thought they would receive. And they didn’t love me. And no one’s willing to believe that. Everyone’s willing to believe my parents were right for wanting what they did, and I can’t let anyone think that, I let someone think that for a moment and everything’s lost. I tell people this and the onus is on me, I’m always lying whenever I talk about this no matter what I say, and I can’t –”

Garak stepped closer to Julian, to stand right beside him, the better to watch his face, and he very much wanted to reach out to bodily remind Julian of his presence. Julian beat him to it, leaning into Garak, and he wrapped his arms around him. He let his body speak for him. Very early on in their relationship, during their first months together, Julian had once asked Garak to hold him – specifically, that he hold him like he was a Cardassian, not like a Human, with all the strength and force he’d give to a member of his own species. That was how Garak held him now, strong and tight, and it seemed to satisfy Julian, who soon enough stopped crying, even though he seemed ready to burrow into the scales on Garak’s neck.

Thankfully, he was close enough to his ear Garak could hear him clearly when he finally said, “That first book I lent you, do you remember it?”

“I remember it.”

“I asked you who your favorite character was, and I told you mine was the original councilman.”

“Barry Fair-something, Fairbrother? Fairbother, that was it. He was a decent enough character, I suppose, for a posthumous one.”
Julian pulled back a little. “I lied about that.”

“You lied to me about that? All the way back then?” Garak smiled as he stroked Julian’s hair. “With nothing at stake, you lied about your favorite character in a novel when we barely knew each other and you had no reason to? I’m delighted to find out you were adept enough at the trade to do so, but I would appreciate it if you’d tell me why.”

“I didn’t want to explain who my favorite character was, then.”

“You might as well tell me now.”

“Patricia.”

“Patricia? She was…”

“The night-mother who’d left the town. She was in it for about ten pages near the end.”

“Ah, her.”

“At first my favorite character was Sukhvinder. I’d never read about anyone else – I never cut myself, I’d bite at my hands and arms and slam my head against the wall or the floor, but reading about someone else who self-injured –”

“You did what.”

“I haven’t been tempted to do any of that in years, Garak, it’s fine, you don’t have to worry. I wanted to say until Patricia showed up, but when she finally did, I realized – she was someone else I’d never read about. Reading about her…” Garak could feel him smile, his face pressed against his cheek. “Before I read it, I had no idea I didn’t need to love my parents. For the longest time I knew I was deficient, and defective, and that there was something wrong with me because I didn’t love my parents. For years, I knew that. And it’s not the best novel I’ve ever read, it’s not even Rowling’s best novel, but it was the first time I’d ever read about someone else who didn’t love their parents. Reading about her was what gave me the permission I needed to not love mine. I know I’m not incapable of it – I love my aunt, I love you. I just don’t love my parents. And now I know there’s nothing shameful in that.”

Garak kept his arms around Julian until he moved away. He went to get dressed, presumably to continue on with his day as though he hadn’t received news of the most calamitous sort. Given how restrained and practiced Julian was with his emotions in public, let alone private, such a personal demonstration of them made Garak peer around the doorway as quietly as he could, only to find him sitting in the near dark with his bear clutched tight to his chest, something he gave no sign of doing some thirty minutes later when he finally emerged in his usual civilian outfit. Garak nearly expect him to sleep with his bear that night; it was almost a surprise when it was still on the shelf when they took to bed.

As promised, he gave Garak a copy of as much of his report on the Blight that survived Starfleet redactions that very afternoon. They went back to their weekly lunches together, with Julian agreeing with Odo regarding Harriet’s motivations, causing Garak no end of irritation. And when pressed and asked, very gently, an interrogation session lasting days and weeks – not the longest sustained investigation he’d ever undertaken, but by far the most personal – Julian gave up bits and pieces of his secrets Garak held onto like the most precious gems, or his one tiny vial of soil from home.

“They weren’t allowed to contact me through standard means,” he told Garak one night. “Their comm access was heavily restricted their first nine years of incarceration. So they had to send me
letters. Real paper letters, written in their handwriting and with ink. There are only two prisons on Earth, they had to go to Mars, greater security for the worst offenders. They were arrested when I was six and I didn’t see them again until I was fifteen, when they were transferred from Mars to New Zealand.”

“So they sent you letters.”

“As long as they were given a censure first. I held onto them for a long time.”

“Do you still have them?”

“No.”

“Might I ask what you did with them?”

“I burned them.”
Slowing down to rest wasn’t unfamiliar to Odo; blacking out to unconsciousness, less so. The few previous incidents of the latter had all been after violent attacks on his person, whether instigated by a well-intentioned lab technician or another impersonal outside force. Sometimes he’d been shocked into holding the form he’d held throughout the duration, and others, he’d had to push himself inwards and upwards and re-solidify himself. As to the latter, no matter how long it took for him to feel ready to slip out of his bucket or strong enough to walk after sliding about the floor and walls of his quarters, he’d spent the time perfectly aware, fully conscious of where he was, the extent of himself.

He had no idea why he’d expected sleep to be anything like that.

Doctor Bashir had been with him in the Defiant’s infirmary the whole of the journey back to the station, and when Odo woke up, he’d asked him how his sleep and dreaming had been and provided cool water to drink that Odo let sit in his mouth a moment before tilting his head back and letting the artificial gravity help it down his throat. He’d swallowed liquids before, both when he’d took part in a simulacrum of the act of drinking and during that joyful night of sharing himself with Curzon. But he had never done it out of necessity. The necessity of consumption was universal to all of the galaxy’s life except his own people.

On the station, he was given a cup of yogurt served within a small biohazard container, gently pressed into his hands with the provision to eat it before it got warm and the reminder that he was technically alone in his body. Humans made use of bacteria within their digestive systems to help the process; without symbiotic gut flora, extracting nutrients from ingested food would be an exceedingly difficult task. The first food he would eat as a solid would be eaten in preparation for what was to come. And Curzon had never eaten yogurt that Odo could recall. Water he’d had some memories of, twice-removed, but yogurt he’d be eating without any memory to guide him. It tasted the way sliding up a flat surface used to feel.

Some time later, his first bowel movement proved a memorable experience.

Odo knew accommodations had to be made to live as a solid, and understood he was required to make them more or less immediately, no matter what his idea of a proper adjustment period was. What he hadn’t anticipated was the irony of the humor of the situation, that even trapped within a singular form, there were far more fluctuations and changes to his state than there had ever been when he had been a proper Changeling. To reside in a body that was no longer under his complete control meant what control he still possessed needed to be as complete as he could manage.

He learned how to remove hair from his face, to monitor and slice off extraneous parts of the keratinous growths on all twenty of his digits. The proper methodology of ablution, whether using a water shower or a sonic one, proved far more pleasant. Odo knew that humanoids shed trace numbers of skin cells each day; the notion that he was losing tiny pieces of himself and wasn’t even aware of doing so led him to wonder if all born humanoids were as insane as they were precisely because of that ongoing loss of self.

A wholly encompassing weariness overlaid itself perfectly from liquid to solid state, except he was no longer able to fully relax and settle himself quietly and remain aware of it. Bodily rhythms beyond that were given due attention and consideration. Ingestion, digestion, urination and defecation made up an endlessly repeating process. When he cut himself in a moment of carelessness, he watched blood slip out of its vessel and slide down the side of his finger, pushed along by his heart, and he felt a shiver across his skin, a ghost, a phantom of how it felt to turn himself inside-out. Doctor
Bashir healed up his hand without asking how or why, which Odo appreciated. All he received was a warning to be careful, and that he might do well to let his body heal at least once, to understand the process on his own.

Just as there were regular internal cycles that required adjustments, there were external ones as well. In all its history, the station had never seen a prisoner in a holding cell for more than eighty hours, and then only because the transport to take the prisoner back to Lissepia was unavoidably delayed after a touch of piracy. Six months was quite a different beast. There were other places Garak might be kept for the duration of his sentence, but as Captain Sisko made so clear – and as Doctor Bashir argued so eloquently – Deep Space Nine remained the best place to house him. His utter usefulness in translating and decoding intercepted Cardassian messages couldn’t be understated, and quite simply, there wasn’t a better place to put him.

The unprecedented act of housing Garak for six months meant various accommodations needed to be granted. The privacy of his own cell, for one; he was given the rearmost, and would never see a cellmate share it with him. A weekly change of clothes. Regular food rations, a daily sonic shower, treadmill access. Lights dimmed and extinguished to allow for proper sleep, and a pillow and blanket beside, always to be returned in the morning. Visitors for consultations were allowed on appointment. And, out of the grace of the Federation’s heart, visiting hours three times a week. Though there were so few individuals that came to visit during those six hours, Odo sometimes wondered whether or not it would be proper to call them appointments as well.

As per usual, Bashir arrived a half-hour early, bearing what Odo knew to be gifts and small tokens of affection, and greeted him with a smile. “Good afternoon, Constable.”

“And yourself.”

“I’m here for the scheduled visiting hours.” Another part of the regular routine.

“They’re not for another twenty-nine minutes, but feel free to wait.”

He smiled at Odo, and pulled one of the chairs to the side of the room, sitting down and pulling a padd out of his satchel. “Perhaps one day you’ll let me in a little ahead of schedule.”

“Don’t count on it, Doctor.”

Miss Tora was always punctual when she came to call on Garak, rarely more than five minutes early. She was a patient, polite young woman, and Odo could see why she and Nerys were so fond of each other. He had only seen Miss Tora and Bashir visit Garak at the same time three times as of yet, and two of those were during the first week of Garak’s incarceration. They seemed to have managed an agreement of sorts between the three of them for how to divide their limited time and make the most of it.

As per his and Bashir’s regular routine, with three minutes to go, Odo made him empty out the entirety of his rather full satchel, for every item to be scanned, examined, and approved before being allowed into Garak’s cell. Sometimes there were small treats, or a change of clothes a few days early, or a padd full of news about the rest of the galaxy outside the security offices. Miss Tora often brought specialized Cardassian cosmetic and hygiene products, some of which they both used during their time together, often with Garak grooming Miss Tora’s hair in a particular fashion or another while they conversed, less frequently with Miss Tora cutting Garak’s hair herself.

Today, Bashir had brought with him some small containers of Cardassian foods that Odo had often seen but never yet smelled, a padd containing some forms regarding the long-term storage of Garak’s shop’s remaining inventory, and a rather handsome set of books that Odo felt compelled to handle.
His fingertips didn’t rustle or ripple as he slid them over the books, but it felt good to hold something new and unfamiliar just the same.

“It all seems safe enough,” he said, handing it back. Bashir slipped it back into the case with the other five.

“I was hoping this might stay on with Garak, actually.”

“Oh?”

“Well, it’s nothing but paper,” he smiled. “There’s nothing Garak could really do with these to contact anyone or even attempt an escape. And on the days when there’s no one to see him, I thought he’d appreciate something to distract him for a while.”

“Perhaps. I’ll take it under consideration.”

“Thank you.” Bashir re-shouldered his bag, and Odo and Mara escorted him to Garak’s cell. He was standing in the center and waiting with a smile on his face.

“Constable. Officer.”

Mara rolled his eyes and Odo straightened his shoulders. Garak kept his hands behind his back until the forcefield came down long enough for Bashir to enter, when he held up a hand that Bashir pressed as soon as he stepped over the threshold.

“A pleasure as always, dear Doctor.”

“And you, Garak.”

Odo turned to Mara, “I’ll take it this time.”

“Yes, sir.” There was always to be a chaperone during visiting hours, and every so often, Odo took it upon himself to be that person. The two of them had laid out a small blanket upon the floor of Garak’s cell and sat upon it, all the better to lay out the small containers and allow Garak to eat peacefully while Bashir related news – the Starfleet business with the Founders, his own research projects, what he’d heard of Cardassia, sometimes taking a small bite of something or other to give a cursory nod to participating in the eating process while Garak consumed the majority of what he’d brought.

“And where did you get these?”

“My aunt,” he said with more than a hint of pleasure and smugness. “Her agency won the contract.”

“Yes, you were telling me – it’s Austen’s five hundredth birthday?”

“Six hundredth. It was a major campaign this year, designing everything for the festival, and after her agency’s design won –”

“You mean after her design won.”

“After the design submitted by her agency won, all the staff were given paper copies of her books. She said she didn’t want hers, and sent them to me. I’ve read them already, and I thought, well. Paper and prisons and all that.”

“All that, yes. I do understand how these things go. Constable?” Garak called.
“Yes?” Odo didn’t step into the cell with the two of them, maintaining a respectful distance, standing just at its edge, hands clasped behind his back.

“Did Doctor Bashir ask you whether it would be permissible for me to keep these books in my possession during my incarceration?”

“He did. And I’ve agreed to take it under consideration.”

“Eminently reasonable of you.” He smiled, giving Odo a respectful nod before turning back to Bashir. “Paper-based communications to the incarcerated is something of a tradition for Humans, I believe. Is that correct?”

Bashir didn’t smile back, closing his eyes and letting out a deep breath. “Something of one, yes.”

“In any case, I do appreciate the thoughtfulness on your part.” He pulled out one of the books, flipped through it and held it open to take a deep smell of the pages with a look of pleasure across his face, clear even with his eyes closed, and finally returned it to the case.

“I’m afraid on a starbase, they’ll never quite smell as proper old books should.”

“Climate-controlled atmospheres do present limited opportunities for aging. I suppose I could get them wet to see if that would speed up the process – but then, they’re a gift twice over. It would be such a shame to cause them deliberate harm.”

“I’m glad you like them.”

They pressed palms again when it was time for Bashir to leave, very nearly the most physical contact they ever engaged in during their visits. Odo had looked into the possibility of conjugal privacy, to see if there was a precedent either of them might call upon and what he might use as a counter-argument, but three months in, neither had made anything close to an attempt at hinting at wanting to make such a request. Not verbally, at any rate. There were five instances Odo had seen them kiss, quite chastely, all but one after Bashir had returned from one mission or another; in such circumstances, Odo felt he could nearly condone it.

Today, they bid each other their farewells, their until-next-times, releasing their fingers. Bashir stepped outside the cell, and Odo reactivated the forcefield. Though he didn’t turn around to check, Odo knew Garak was watching them go. He’d reviewed the security tapes of previous partings, and all had been the same.

The first time Bashir and Garak parted, the first session of visiting hours of Garak’s incarceration, Bashir had left the cell very nearly in tears. Odo hadn’t been privy to that particular part of the conversation, when they embraced each other. That had been the one time they had kissed without a mission to prompt Bashir towards the action. And while Odo knew it was outside his purview, that it was privacy of the most personal type, he knew monitoring Garak was a vital duty. In his office, Bashir had wiped his eyes dry, and Odo asked, as circumspectly as he could, just what it was Garak had said.

“Nothing. It’s really nothing.” And he’d wiped his eyes again. “It’s just that – I told him I understood, that even though I hold him so highly I know he doesn’t do the same for me. I said I knew he would always place Cardassia above all, even above me and that I could accept that. And he said…I’m sorry, Constable. I should…”

Odo had seen this kind of thing before, the desperation to speak, though never in an innocent party. “It’s quite all right,” he said, as gently as he could, the better to encourage a confession.
“It’s that he said. Well.” He smiled, looking somewhere far away. “He said it was so utterly *human* of me to say that.”

In all his time among solids, Odo had always thought of Bashir as the *least* humanoid person he’d ever met, and even now, couldn’t grasp why – especially with his preference to be compared to animals over all else – he had become so emotional to simply be declared a member of his species. It hardly seemed like a compliment. But he knew that asking for clarification wouldn’t do either of them any good. Odo did his best to think of it as Bashir being Bashir, a non-humanoid Human if there ever was one. He did his best to think of it much like how Bashir had asked him how he’d dreamed, explaining that he could easily determine Odo’s quality of sleep without ever asking, but that dreaming was a different beast. Bashir had gone on to say he knew Odo hadn’t engaged in REM-based sleep before being turned solid, and that he’d known someone else who’d begun dreaming late in his life and that if he liked he could put Odo in touch.

Today, after the impromptu picnic on the floor of the holding cell, complete with a thermos of redleaf tea – an aroma Odo could now identify without hesitation – Bashir had no tears to wipe away, only the usual conversation routine they’d had many times before.

“I’ll be back in a few days.”

“Then I’ll see you then.”

“Take care, Odo. And – dream well.”

“Thank you.”

There were reports to write up, notices to read, logs to record, and all the minor concerns of being solid on top of all that. And there was the contact information, remaining as yet untouched. Odo had done his research – one of Worf’s former *Enterprise* shipmates, someone in possession of a reasonably distinguished career and the subject of no small number of journal articles and legal precedents. After asking for it, he’d read the one Bashir authored nearly four years previous, and while he’d found much of it inaccessible, he’d appreciated Bashir including the papers about himself and those like him without being prompted as well as including notes decoding the pseudonyms. Those papers Odo found more relatable, particularly the ones regarding delayed linguistic acquisition and outward demonstrations of intelligence and awareness, subjects he’d struggled with himself for a fair amount of time.

With everything to be done, there wasn’t any chance to finish it all – and with that thought, Odo finally added ‘*contact Lt. Cmdr. Data*’ to his daily list of tasks, assigned it a medium-level priority, and began planning how to inquire about how he had adapted to dreaming.
When his sentence would end had never been a variable under his control, but if he’d been consulted on the matter, Garak might well have chosen zero-five-thirty as his discharge hour himself. The station slowed and rested but never slept, and there would always be those out and about no matter what the hour, and leaving security either very early or very late would keep him away from the majority of gawkers and observers. To leave late meant beginning the next day afresh; to leave early meant a full day getting back on his feet. There were distinct advantages to both, and even a case to be made of leaving during the busiest times in order to disappear into the crowd. But he had no choice but to leave at the earliest possible hour. The clothes he’d worn when he’d been arrested were handed back, cleaned and pressed, and he finally shed the prisoner’s uniform to find his clothes hung a little more loosely than he’d remembered.

Julian and Ziyal waiting for him wasn’t something he’d allowed himself to imagine, but there they were, bleary-eyed but clear-faced, eager and happy to see him. As though he was merely arriving on a transport delayed a few hours and now returning home.

“Good morning, my dear,” he said to Ziyal when she hugged him and kissed his cheek.

“And to you, night-papa.”

“I take it you slept well?”

“Very well.” She drew back and smiled. “But you look like you could do with some rest yourself.”

“Your concern is touching, but I’m quite all right.”

“I’m inclined to agree with her.” Julian kept his distance, posture telegraphing eagerness and anticipation. “You’ve never made a proper complaint about how difficult it is to sleep here, but it’s fairly obvious if someone knows you well.”

“Perhaps an early evening tonight, then, if you wouldn’t mind.” Ziyal left his arms, and Julian came forward, hand raised in a proper greeting. Garak pressed their palms together – for politeness’ sake, as Deputy Seelee was still waiting, they didn’t go farther. He turned to her, “I hope you don’t mind if I say I hope to never see this place again.”

“It’s really fine by me.”

“Splendid.”

None of them had yet had a chance for breakfast, so they took the chance to eat their first meal together, the three of them, in his and Julian’s quarters – and Garak was flattered at how thoughtful it was of Julian to take a personal day away from the infirmary, that the three of them could spend the day in his shop, completely uninterrupted, to prepare it for reopening. This wasn’t the first time he’d had to start over, and thankfully this time it didn’t require any rebuilding. He’d asked Julian and Ziyal to pass on as many rumors as possible, and the majority of the theories of why he’d been in that holding cell for so long outright contradicted each other, with few of them holding anything resembling charity towards his character. Garak was the only tailor on the station, but business would be still slow for quite some time. There was no use pretending otherwise, and there was nothing to be done but keep looking forward. He’d been making notes on current trends and what stocks to order as best as the trickle of news through Julian and Ziyal allowed, and soon enough he’d be working properly again. And today would be nothing but preparation for that work. Airing out what had been
held in storage, setting up woefully out-of-season displays with the best of what he could pull together, bustling about more than he had to simply for the pleasure of having that much more space to move.

“I have tomorrow off as well,” Julian said from the floor, eating a hasperat wrap for his lunch. Ziyal was sitting next to him and having the same, and Garak was standing, leaning against a bare wall with a bowl of sem’hal stew topped with proper non-replicated yamok sauce. “I’d thought – it’s not proper sunlight, it’s not even very sunny, but there is a holodeck program I’d very much like to share with you.”

“You don’t say.”

“Oh, he does,” Ziyal smiled at her other night-father, who looked away with a rather endearingly embarrassed smile. “He’s been talking about it enough that I’m hoping you’ll say yes.”

“Well, I suppose another day won’t make much of a difference for the grand reopening.”

As such, the following morning he followed Julian’s instructions to dress very warmly in preparation of their holosuite appointment. It hardly felt practical, more so when he saw Julian wearing no extra layers besides a light outer jacket, and when he voiced a protest, Julian only laughed.

“It’s a program set on Earth, so it’s going to be cold for you, but only cool for me. Be glad your sentence was over when it was, otherwise we’d have to wait several more months for this.”

“Forgive me, but that hardly follows.”

“Well, it’s autumn on Earth right now, at least the part of it where the program’s set. I couldn’t well play the spring or summer modules when it’s wintertime, could I?”

“I see.” Prayers done while facing a specific direction and orienting towards one’s homeworld was one thing, assuming one prayed to begin with; Julian’s synchronization between an artificial landscape and the genuine one might serve a similar purpose. An outdated, somewhat absurdist purpose, but similar enough to be understood. Julian tended to indulge in that sort of thing. “In that case, it must be good timing on my part. Shall we?”

Julian smiled and readjusted his satchel, the clink of containers speaking to the promise of a rather long outing. “Computer, run program.”

Garak had the usual moment of disorientation as the room slid and shimmered and snapped, and then they were standing out on the embankment of a river flowing through a city. It appeared to be roughly the same time of day as it was on the station, taking a disparity from twenty-four hour cycles to twenty-six into account. The sky was shale-by-the-sea without anything resembling clear light coming through the cloud barrier – it was deep winter weather, southern archipelago weather, clouds remaining in anticipation instead of moving in, raining, and moving on. He pulled his jacket closer around him.

“Welcome to London,” Julian said with a smile.

“So this is your city.”

“It is.” He climbed up onto the bottom railing of the fencing running by the river, leaning as far over the water as he could, kicking up his heels so he rested without any feet on the ground. “I haven’t lived here since I was eighteen, but I still think of it as home. Former capital of the British Empire, current home of the Williams-Bashir Design Agency, still a major center and player within Earth culture and politics, with a current population of approximately twenty-two million. This is the River
Thames, England’s longest extant river, home to a variety of birds, fish, mammals, and other wildlife – we’re coming to high tide right now, you can see the currants shifting.”

“Fascinating.” Nothing he didn’t already know from his background research on Julian; still, it was often a pleasure to hear him ramble enthusiastically. “So you grew up here?”

“In the city, yes. Not right around here – I grew up in Westminster, which is over that way,” he pointed up the river, still leaning over but balancing on just one hand and his own sense of proprioception, and though he didn’t wobble or even shake, Garak took a half-step forward the moment he let go of the railing, “we could go see it, if you’d like. I didn’t plan anything in particular for today, only that I’d take you someplace with a horizon line less than three hours away from the station.”

“The thought’s appreciated.”

“I admit I’m cheating a little bit – it’s rarely this warm at this time of year, but I think that as long as I’m not forcing it to play out of season or at a temperature it’s never actually been, I’ll be all right.”

“What temperature is it, then?”

“Twelve degrees.” He hopped down from the railing.

“Doctor, promise me you’ll never take me here while you’re running the winter module.”

“I promise,” he laughed. “I won’t take you through the winter San Francisco one, either.”

“Thank you.”

“If you’d like a panoramic view of the city, we could visit the London Eye, or we could –”

“Just some time walking underneath a sky would be quite enough. Though if there’s some open space, I’d like to eat lunch there, when it’s time for that.”

“By all means. There are plenty of parks to choose from.”

“You have the advantage there. I wouldn’t know enough to choose, so I leave it up to you.”

Julian nodded, then frowned, pursed his lips and looked away, the sort of expression he made when he wanted to give the impression of trying to make a decision about something that he’d already picked quite some time ago. “Hyde Park, then. It’s just far enough we can walk there without needing to get the program to jump us over.”

“That sounds like a most pleasant outing. Shall we be off?”

“This way, then,” Julian said, and they began walking in the direction that he’d pointed. “It’s reasonably close to my aunt’s house as well. We can’t go inside since the program isn’t detailed enough for that, but we could walk past it and see it, if you’d like.”

“Perhaps. I’ll see how I feel when we get there.” Moving helped make the temperature that much easier to deal with – he didn’t doubt Julian had warm tea in his satchel, but didn’t need any quite yet. He said as much, and Julian smiled. It was a very beautiful city, he could see that much just from walking beside the river. When a bird flew past, Julian would whip his head around to track it, and often identified it through a delighted exclamation; when Garak asked for more information, he was always happy to provide. Sometimes the birds called out to each other, nearly an antonym to the soft lapping of the river’s waves and gentle sounds of the more persistent breezes. And other than the
river, wind, birds, Julian, and himself, there was silence.

It wasn’t the silence of a city sleeping or at rest: it was an empty silence. No aerial vehicles in the skies overhead, no boats along the river, no groundcars he could hear, no bicycles or pedestrians along the path with the two of them, no trash along the path, no noises or sounds or smells from the city around them, nothing to indicate there was anyone else within this London with them. Garak realized he was walking within a hands-breadth of Julian, matching every pace, and forced himself to relax his stride and move slightly away. If Julian noticed, he didn’t give any indication of doing so.

“No, out of all the anseriformes that live on the Thames, the mute swans are still considered property of the British royal family, even though there hasn’t actually been anyone holding any major position since 2041. There’s still the yearly ceremony, and there’s a similar one with ravens at the Tower to see to the return of the Lost Queen, which isn’t something I’ve ever believed in but I think it’s nice to have just the same. As it is, we’re coming up to Westminster now, and – Garak? What is it?”

He almost didn’t believe the sight. It shouldn’t have been as shocking as it was, but that was the paradox of empty places: the fewer people about, the more each one counted, and the one Human standing on the far bank of the river might as well have been a parade. They were a woman, by the look of things, and she was standing up on the railing much as Julian had been.

When he saw her, Julian broke into a grin. “Hello!” he shouted, waving an arm over his head before cupping his hands around his mouth, “Hello!”

After a moment, a similar shout carried to them, the woman waving back. She hopped down from the railing, and walked away from the river and into the city.

It one of the more surreal encounters Garak had ever had, holographic or otherwise. “I thought we were alone in this program.”

“It seems you thought wrong.” This time, Julian was simply leaning on his forearms against the fence. Garak joined him, bracing on his hands.

“Then might I ask where everyone else is?”

“I can’t say. The AIs aren’t programmed for precise locations, so they might be anywhere.”

“Just how many people are in this London right now?”

“Let me see. Autism has an incidence of about one out of every twenty-five hundred births, so with a population of twenty-two million, that’s about…eighty-eight hundred other people here with us, thereabouts.”

“Of course. And those that aren’t with us?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never given that part of this program much thought.” He looked to the sky and smiled. “I suppose they must have all gone to Luna or Mars for the weekend.”

“I take it those are popular destinations for Humans on Earth.”

“Reasonably popular.”

“You wouldn’t have any modules for those, would you?” Garak teased.

“No,” Julian answered, cheerfully oblivious as usual, “aside from the exercise programs and the
museums and the ones I share with Miles, just London and San Francisco. They vary for the seasons, of course, but other than the weather, they’re just like they are now. You might like the San Francisco one – not the winter module, but I think you’d find the summer one rather pleasant. The fog there is wonderful.”

Fog was a rare and precious thing on Cardassia. “I might indeed.”

He looked back up at the sky, and when he spoke it was with a forced lightness. “You do know that my parents think you ought to be completely alone in the city right now?”

“I’ve had some suspicion.”

“The whole of the Federation tends to agree with them.” He climbed back up onto the fencing, not to lean over, but it appeared simply to climb for the sake of doing so. “More or less everyone thinks they’re correct in thinking that. And I can’t stand that. I know that if I don’t do whatever I can to convince everyone that they shouldn’t agree with them, that my parents were wrong, then I know they’ll turn out to have been correct, and my life might as well be forfeit.”

Garak knew there was nothing to say to that, and so instead he moved closer to Julian, broadcasting his presence as best he could. Watching Julian’s face as he kept staring up at the sky, he placed one hand over his, and saw Julian smile when they touched. It was such an open, happy smile – it was one of the qualities Garak most loved about him, his ability to be within the moment as purely as anyone could hope, that when he was happy, he was undeniably so. Perhaps it was selfish of him to want some of that for himself, even if it was only by proxy and proximity.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Julian said.

“The city?”

“I meant the clouds.”

“Oh? Yes, I think so. There aren’t many days like this on Cardassia, it’s not quite what I’m used to.”

“They remind me of you.”

“How so?”

“They look like you. The color isn’t quite the same grey as your scales, but it’s nearly there – it’s less the color and more the texture, anyway. See over there, on the far horizon? Those almost have your color, but even that’s not really it. See how it all changes throughout the sky, that it’s not all flat? There’s those ripples there, those other patterns there. The way everything changes across the sky, the way the colors all look the same until you really look – the way there’s no shadow cast at all. It all reminds me of you.”

“Thank you.”

“You know,” he laughed, “when I first saw you naked, I thought – no.”

“Please, go on.”

“It’s that when I first saw you naked, I thought you looked like fog. I really thought, I’m making love to fog. And I grew up in London and I lived in San Francisco for nine years, trust me when I say I know fog – it’s probably my favorite weather phenomenon, and there you were, in my quarters. Someone made of fog, this…this fog person, and I thought you were the most beautiful thing I could ever think of.”
“Oh.” He squeezed Julian’s hand. It was precisely that sort of nearly-there insight which caught Garak by surprise and made him fall in love with him all over again. “Oh, my dear Julian. Thank you.”

The southern archipelago was far removed from the main continents, and positioned beside a rather steep drop on the continental shelf; combining those key factors with axial tilt and planetary rotation, ocean currents and seasonal shifts, was what gave the archipelago its unique fog. During the coldest parts of winter, when the conditions were precise, for a few weeks each year there was fog on Cardassia. The residents of the archipelago were intensely proud of it, and all the training to see through fog that living with it required.

To be called a *fog person* was a rare and high compliment. And here he was, in a city of fog people, with a fog person of his own, who had called him one without knowing the implications but understanding them as perfectly as any Cardassian.

That was the joy of living with fog. How there was such difficulty in seeing through it that one would always see well even when it was absent – and Julian looked to the sky and laughed for the pleasure of being present – and how, when it parted, when the sky opened up and the fog cleared, there was the strongest, sharpest clarity one could ever hope for. The clarity that left someone with a clean understanding of the universe, of their place and purpose within it; the clarity that led someone to laugh for simply being alive.

Garak didn’t laugh. But when he looked to the facsimile of the sky, he found that he was smiling.
A couple of weeks after I decided to write this fic, before I’d done any writing, I got my hands on a copy of *Far From The Tree*, a phenomenal book about the intertwined natures of disability, difference, and identity, with a very useful and heartbreaking chapter on autism. Shortly after I decided to make Innogen Bashir a graphic designer, I received a copy of *Dialog*, a book showcasing the work of the Carbine-Smolean design agency which gave me a good idea of what her work would actually entail. When I needed a name for a filicide news piece in the story, I just picked one I’d seen on the *Bioshock* wiki that had a nice sound to it – that I found actually belonged to someone guilty of infanticide when I decided to check the name on Google, making it a name that would absolutely be included on Bashir’s newsfeed.

At first I’d wanted to write this fic because I couldn’t believe nobody had explored this possibility, and then I realized I was probably onto something. Once is random, twice is coincidence, three times is a pattern. It fell together in such a way I just rolled up my sleeves and got to work without questioning anything. Not even the fact that my monthly yogurt consumption has roughly quadrupled since last October.

Besides wanting to fill a perceived void in the fandom, I had a more personal reason for wanting to write this story. While the genetic engineering reveal opened up a number of possibilities and led to some good episodes, I still can’t help but feel that something was taken away from the show, and the producers almost committed to a sort of denial about who Julian Bashir was as a character. And I wanted to steal him back from them. So I did.

- From a Doylist perspective, very little of the greater world of the show would be different – Bashir’s genetic and neurological status wouldn’t have any impact whatsoever on the Founders’ plans to conquer the Alpha Quadrant, Nog’s decision to join Starfleet, or Worf’s assignment to the station and subsequent relationship with Jadzia. From a Watsonian perspective, there would be some things about the world that would be quite different, very few of which come about because of who Bashir is.

Damar and his family are from the southern archipelago. It’s O’Brien who gets tapped for Section 31; his work with the Orion Syndicate was his qualifying audition. When news of the intelligence agency reaches the rest of the senior staff, Bashir’s the only one who isn’t shocked – surprised, but not shocked, given what he knows about the Federation. When O’Brien asks him if Garak taught him to be that cynical, he tells him no: “I learned it from my parents.”

Dukat is just as angry over Ziyal having any sort of interaction with Garak, and it’s made worse because Garak taking the role of her night-father maintains a properly delineated relationship between the two of them in addition to allowing her a tiny piece of proper Cardassian society while living on the station. As it would be rude to exclude him, much to Lady Sirella’s horror, Garak was invited to and attended Jadzia’s bridal party – and while he didn’t play for the Niners, he was present for the game, because he was serving as the commentator.

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My artist Paradigm_Shift, once again.

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