A Man Apart

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A Man Apart

by Alexandria_Allen

Summary

Taking place sometime during season 5, A Man Apart introduces Dr. Gaven Ore. Ore is a mysterious humanoid alien stuck under the Federations thumb. On Deep Space 9 in order to help create new strategies to combat the Dominion, Gaven is a man torn between the memories of a homeworld and life he can never return to and the challenges of maintaining his integrity as forces beyond his control try to press their will and conflicting agendas upon him.

Notes

I'm looking for a beta reader interested in giving these chapters a once over. Comment encouraged.
Enter, An Unhappy Man

Doctor Gaven Ore was not particularly happy to be en route to Deep Space Nine.

For one he wasn't a Starfleet Officer, and it made him mildly uncomfortable that he would be expected to work with people who were. Since the appearance of the Dominion, Starfleet had been putting pressure on Gaven to join the cause. While he was generally unknown in many circles, the truth was that Gaven was a leading expert in the Field of alien genetics and anatomy. No doubt Starfleet wanted to try and utilize his expertise to help develop strategies to combat the Vorta and Jem'Hadar if not the Changeling founders themselves. While Gaven sympathized with those opposing the Dominion, he didn't agree with using biological or genetic warfare to achieve those ends. But as the threat increased, he wasn't sure how long he could avoid not upholding his principles. The more desperate the Federation got, the less choice he knew would be afforded him and deep down he also knew that Starfleet had ways of leaning on him that could ultimately force him to relent.

For the time being, however, Gaven was merely being asked to be open to Starfleet's requests while he continued his work. In exchange, Starfleet was prepared to allow him access to their resources. One thing he was happy about was that Deep Space 9 was such a melting pot of humanoid species. During his time with the Vulcans, Gaven had read about many of the common species represented among the Federation of Planets. It would be an undeniable opportunity to live among such a diverse population and that, at least, gave him some amount of personal satisfaction.

It was nearly dinner time when Gaven arrived at the station.

Since both Jadzia Dax and Doctor Julian Bashir were away on Risa vacationing with their respective partners, an uncomfortably pregnant Major Kira had agreed to rendezvous with Gaven and get him situated until the others returned and he could enjoy a more expansive introduction to the other officers on the station.

Personally, Kira was glad of the assignment. Pregnancy wasn't proving to be her favorite state of being, and although she was gracious about carrying the O'Brien's baby by this point, she would feel tremendously better once she could put the experience behind her and get back to her normal life.

Arriving in the docking bay just as Gaven was gathering up his carry on things, Kira quickly took the Doctor in since there had been an unusually small amount of personal information in his file to inform her about his character. Gaven was tall, dark-haired, and handsome. Kira decided there was a decidedly severe edge to him that made his defined sharp features look more imposing than his temperament actually was. He was dressed conservatively in a dark monochrome uniform without any identifiers. Kira noted a plain black armband on his left upper arm with a white circle upon it. Though its meaning, if any, was lost on her.

"Hello, Doctor Ore. Welcome to Deep Space 9. My name is Major Kira Nerys. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Kira said once Gaven had straightened and turned in her direction.
"Hello." He said curtly nodding to her.

A man of few words, Kira noted.

"Well, shall I show you to your quarters first? I'm sure you'd like to settle in." She offered.

"I suppose that would probably be wise. Please, lead the way and thank you." Gaven smiled at the Major in a manner that showed he was trying to be polite.

Kira and Gaven didn't speak again until they arrived at his quarters in the habitation ring near the infirmary.

"I hope you'll be comfortable here. The replicator is there for your use and if you need anything else or have any questions just let one of our people know. That's pretty much it. If you want I can give you the grand tour of the station." Kira offered.

"That would be fine." Gaven agreed though he didn't sound very enthusiastic about the idea.

"Right. OK then." Kira was trying to be polite, but the truth was she found Gaven's somber demeanor a little off-putting.

"Before we go on, maybe you'd like to sit down for a few minutes. The tour will keep. From the looks of things I imagine you're very uncomfortable right now. Please do sit." Gaven offered evenly before putting down his things. "May I replicate you anything?"

Gaven's unexpected concern for her comfort caught her by surprise, but then Kira reminded herself that he was a doctor and probably had some amount of experience dealing with pregnant women.

"You know what? Actually? I would love to sit down. Thanks." Kira said letting down her guard just a little. "And since you offered I would love some…"

Before she could finish her sentence, a sneezing fit began to overtake her much to the Bajoran's embarrassment.

"Here. Let me." Gaven quickly went to the replicator and, taking a moment to pull the name of something he'd discovered while being harbored by the Vulcan's from his perfect recall, muttered a request into the replicator's panel. To his satisfaction, the item he wanted was in the replicator's database, and once it materialized, he brought the offering to the small table the Major had dropped down near. "Chew one of these a few times and then let it sit under your tongue. It'll help reduce the sneezing fit, and it's good for the baby. I promise."
Gaven offered her what looked like a small fibrous oblong burgundy colored tomato.

Desperate to stop her sneezing, Kira followed his instructions, and a moment later her sneezing fit subsided. "Oh my god. It worked. What is this and why haven't I found it sooner?"

"Its called a Capya fruit. It calms the nasal reflex, and its got plenty of nutrients in it that your baby should like. It's not native to Bajor, but I've found it to be effective. Plus I happen to like the way they taste." Gaven took a second one out of the bowl he'd offered her and popped it into his mouth.

"I think I love you a little bit." Kira quipped.

"A small occupational hazard." This time Gaven shrugged and did offer the Major a genuine smile.

"If you don't mind me saying so, you seem pretty far along for a Bajoran pregnancy. You must be near the end of it I should think. I'm surprised that you're on duty in your present state. " Gaven observed.

"Yeah, in other words, you're saying I'm as big as a house." Kira joked, leaning back in her chair a little to give herself more room. "In actuality, I've got a lot more time to go. I'm carrying this baby for a human friend of mine and as you probably know human pregnancies take a lot longer than Bajoran ones do."

"I see. That would explain it then. Can I get you anything else?" He offered.

"No, thanks. Trust me. You've done more than enough. Remind me to return the favor sometime. I think I'm ready to go now." Kira said while trying to prepare herself for the effort that it took to get up out of her chair.

Gaven nodded and ultimately helped her up so that they could get on with their tour of the station.

~@~

Later that evening, Kira was enjoying a welcome home dinner with Jadzia Dax.

"Did you and Worf have a good time on Risa?" Kira asked knowingly.

"The trip certainly had its moments. Frankly, I think the details of the trip were what we needed to get back in touch with each other. I know for a fact Worf ultimately had a good time." Dax replied. "How's the baby?"

"Fine. Everything is right on schedule. More importantly, I finally found a natural remedy for those terrible sneezing fits. I think I might finally be able to get some work done now." Kira proclaimed.
"I heard the mysterious Dr. Ore arrived while I was away. What's he like?" If there was one thing Dax enjoyed, it was idle gossip.

"He's a little reserved, but he seems nice. What I can't figure is why there's so little in the computer system about him. From what I understand he's supposed to be a brilliant scientist and medical doctor." Kira said.

"I know. I've read some of Doctor Ore's contributions. He's been systematically updating Starfleet's alien anatomy files for the last year it seems. Some specialty assignment. His research is groundbreaking. In a few years, we may be able to develop new treatments for all kinds of genetic diseases not to mention clear up some mysteries about certain alien biology. His work may also give us a serious advantage when dealing with the Dominion." Dax speculated. "Benjamin promised we'd brief in the morning about what Dr. Ore plans to do while he's here."

"Well, he's got my support and admiration. If he's half as good as all that, then we just hit pay dirt." Kira muttered.

"So tell me. Is Doctor Ore cute?" Dax asked eagerly.

Kira's mouth dropped open and then promptly closed as she took up her teacup. "I hadn't notice."

"You liar!" Dax said grinning wide. "Come on; don't hold out on me."

"He isn't unattractive, but I promise you he isn't my type and anyway you'll see him for yourself tomorrow. Miss Looky-loo." Kira remarked.

"What? I can look. I may be with Worf, but I'm not blind." Dax grinned even wider.

~@~

Early the next morning, everyone gathered for the briefing.

"Good morning everyone. I want to introduce Doctor Gaven Ore. Doctor Ore is going to be working with us for the foreseeable future. Doctor? I know you've already met Major Kira. I want to introduce you to the rest of my team and some of the people you'll undoubtedly be working with while you're here. Starting at my left is Jadzia Dax my Science Officer and my Strategic Operation officer Commander Worf. To your right is our Chief Medical Officer Doctor Julian Bashir, Miles O'Brien Chief of Operations, and, last but not least, our Security Chief Odo." Sisko began.

"Hello," Gaven said this in the same manner of voice that he had greeted Kira in when he had first arrived.

As his eyes surveyed the room Gaven's gaze lingered a fraction longer on the none human officers stopping just short of Odo whom he looked in the direction of but not directly at as he had the others.
"Well, I suppose we should get started. It would seem Starfleet has taken some interest specifically in my genetics research and has asked me to assist Deep Space 9 in what I can only assume are matters dealing with the Dominion. From what I understand the station has had some trouble devising efficient ways of identifying Changeling operatives, and I've been asked to develop a better medical detection method if possible for doing so. I must admit that such work is not my preference, but for the time being, I've agreed to assist Starfleet with their objectives so far as my conscience and personal convictions will allow. Besides my more specific tasks, while I'm here, I am at your disposal as an additional doctor. Though, I understand that Doctor Bashir is more than capable of handling most of your medical needs." Gaven explained.

"If you don't mind me asking what is your area of expertise, doctor?" O'Brien asked.

"Alien genetics and anatomy mostly," Gaven replied.

"Doctor Ore has also done some incredible work with radiation research," Dax added.

"Do you have any existing leads on your detection solution?" Doctor Bashir inquired.

"Yes. I've identified a type of radiation that most organisms are sensitive to when exposed. My research has concluded that, specifically in Changelings, limited exposure to this radiation type renders them incapable of taking additional form outside of their natural state." Gaven explained.

"Really?" Odo interjected incredulously. "And how did you manage to come to that conclusion?"

This time Gaven did raise his gaze to look directly at Odo. "Its common knowledge on the planet Oum. Their scientific centers have documentation dating back centuries on the subject."

"Oum? I've never heard of it." Bashir remarked.

"That's not surprising. Oum isn't a Federation planet. As far as I knew they're isolationists and typically won't communicate with other species." Dax explained.

"Yes. That's correct. The planet has enjoyed a unique level of isolation due to the high levels of poxy radiation exposure the planet enjoys. Most species can't tolerate being near the systems sun or the planet surface even with protection. Of course, there are a few exceptions. The Oum themselves have evolved in such a way where they have a natural resistance to the radiation exposure allowing them to exist and thrive." Gaven added.

"I must be missing something. If the planet is so toxic and the Oum don't like to make contact with other species how did you get your hands on this wealth of information?" O'Brien asked.

"As I said, the effects of the radiation on outside species are common knowledge. I know because
Oum is my mother planet." Gaven replied somewhat tensely.

"Doctor Ore's origins are both accurate and should be considered restricted information privy only to our officers," Sisko interjected. "As far as anyone else on or off this station is concerned, Doctor Ore is human."

"Historically, my people have had limited encounters with the species. While I'm sure they'd very much like to have dealings with my people, my planet has become a no contact zone and has more or less become overlooked by the Dominion." Gaven remarked.

"How…Fortunate for you." Worf commented unhappily.

"In any case, if I can find a way to isolate the radiation exposure we could, in theory, render areas virtually impossible for changelings to infiltrate. Naturally, the problem is a matter of ensuring the radiation doesn't sicken or kill anyone else exposed to it in the process." Gaven looked increasingly unhappy as he talked. "Anyway, that's the gist of what I'm here for."

"Thank you, Doctor. If everyone is through with their questions, then I'll adjourn this meeting. You're all dismissed."

Having no further comment and reading the mood in the room Wor and O'Brien departed quickly. Bashir was kind enough to shake Gaven's hand and tell him he looked forward to working with him before leaving as well. Odo remained in the room for several minutes as if he was considering something before a call interrupted him and called him away.

Captain Sisko, Kira, and Dax remained behind.

"I'm sorry, but I hate this. No offense to everyone." Gaven muttered unhappily.

"I'm sorry if that was more uncomfortable for you than you wanted it to be," Sisko said compassionately.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Dax inquired. "In all the years I've heard mention of Oum, I've never heard of the culture allowing its people off the planet. How is it that you've come to be here."

Gaven didn't answer but looked at Sisko as if to permit him to respond on his behalf.

"Doctor Ore is a refugee of sorts. For various reasons he's been expelled from the planet and isn't permitted to return. Due to the sensitive nature of his off-world status I've agreed to protect his privacy regarding his origins." Sisko explained.
"That must be very difficult for you," Kira remarked.

"It is. I love my people and my home world. But I've reconciled with the reality that I can no longer be a part of it. For as much as I've lost, I like to think I've gained infinitely more. Being here among all of you means a great deal to me and my work. I'm honored to be a guest on this station even if some of my reasons for being here are not particularly to my liking. As I promised Starfleet, if I can do something to help all of you, I'll do it. But I do have limits to what I'm willing to allow the Federation to do with my discoveries. I know someday that may not make me very popular, but it's a risk I'm willing to take. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get started. Idle hands are the devil's playground. I think that's how the saying goes."

Shortly after, Gaven found himself left to his own devices for the rest of the day. Although wouldn't be set up with Doctor Bashir until the next morning, Gaven still felt his business for the day had not entirely concluded. His thoughts drifted back upon his meeting earlier and how under normal circumstances he would have been beyond ecstatic to meet a Klingon, a Trill, and a Changeling all in the same room. It almost sounded like the opening of some joke. Instead, he only felt miserable, guarded, and intolerably alone.

Gaven swallowed all of this forcing his feelings into a series of boxes in his mind to be reopened later when he had the time to meditate back in his room and purge what would not emotionally serve him.

It was time to focus on his unfinished business.

Abandoning the small table he’d taken at Quirk’s to have something to drink, he departed intending to seek out the one person that Gaven felt he owed a conversation.

Odo was in his office looking over reports and trying to ignore the fact that his lower back was killing him. The idea of relaxation had always seemed silly to the shapeshifter when he could still change form, given that his natural state was as about as relaxed as any organic life form could get. Until now Odo had preferred the expression of rigidity. Now that the Founders had revoked his shapeshifting abilities in punishment, he was starting to have to rethink his standards and behaviors if he wanted to go on being…comfortable in his new skin.

Gaven was similar in mentality when it came to his self-expression. But he, perhaps, came off more reclusive and secretive than anything.

“Yes? Come in.” Odo muttered when he heard the signal on his closed office door sound.

“Mr. Odo. I do apologize for disturbing you, sir.” Gaven came into the room with all the strange assertiveness of someone used to adapting to strange and unusual environments.

Slightly surprised by the identity of his visitor Odo promptly put down the report he was reading to address Gaven. “Was…There something I could do for you, Doctor?”
“I was hoping I could talk with you for a few moments,” Gaven said evenly.

“O-Of course. Please, SIT.” Odo’s tone was a little less casual and a little sterner than he wanted to sound just then. “What was it you wanted to talk about.”

“I want you to know that…that…” Just then Gaven found himself struggling to spit out his own words. “I feel exceedingly strong about your position here on Deep Space 9. I have a great deal of respect for you and your origins, Sir. And I must admit I didn’t want to say some of the things that had to be said earlier in the briefing about your people. It is important to me that you know that. My people and your people have always held a unique fascination for each other. When your species first made contact with ours many centuries ago, we welcomed them, and when we realized our planet could hurt the changelings, we attempted to help get them off our world. When I think about what both of our people have become, I can’t help but feel…a great sense of loss and personal disappointment. I feel as if you and I are similar in the sense that in our hearts we both wish everything could be different. You’re views and experiences have served to put a rift between you and your people in the same way my views and experiences have put a rift between my people and me.”

Although Gaven was doing an excellent job at keeping his tone even and open, Odo could perceive a deep churning turmoil in his eyes and briefly entertained the notion that in truth the strange doctor was probably very nearly on the verge of tears.

“I need you to know Odo that someday the Federation may push me to use my work against the Dominion. If and when that day comes it is important to me that you understand that it would never be something I would choose to do.” Gaven insisted.

“I see. May, um, I ask you something?” Odo asked lightly.

Gaven nodded.

“I’ve been looking over your information files. It's vague as I think was your intention. In light of what you’ve been willing to confide about your actual identity as well as the circumstances behind your arrival on the station and your desire to speak to me in person like this, it leads me to the conclusion that you feel a certain connection to me. Correct me if my deduction is wrong, but it seems to me that your people have forced you off your planet as a form of punishment for some unknown reason. Is that about right?”

This time Gaven’s eyes noticeably welled but no tears escaped, and he didn’t reply.

Odo scoffed slightly and folded his hands together upon his desk. “It's never an easy thing when one's ways force a wedge between themselves and their people. That, we do seem to have in common. I suppose it is true that, although you love them, you can’t come to terms with some aspects of your people’s beliefs which likely conflict with your own. I can imagine how painful that must be for you even if I don’t know the specific details of your situation. I can tell you’re still grieving and that you’d probably rather that others not know. Though it is of little consolation I’m
sure, know that in imagining a different way of being for yourself you are remaining true to what you
know you can never be as well as honoring what you still are.”

“Yes.” Gaven agreed, finally gaining back his full composure. “Thank you.”

“Mm. Give yourself time, Doctor. And try to focus on the positives of your situation. In one way or
another, many of us on Deep Space 9 is…Without country. So to speak. You’ll find many examples
of people here who break the expected norms of the cultures they were born to.” Odo remarked
thoughtfully.

“I do look forward to that aspect of being here, Mr. Odo.” Gaven agreed.

“As for your troubles with the Federation, let us address those concerns as they become apparent,”
Odo muttered.

“Yes. I’ll keep everyone abreast of what I know. Thank you for being willing to speak to me. If
there’s anything I can do for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.” Gaven offered.

”Actually now that you mention it, I could do with some medical advice. Due to some unfortunate
business with the Founders, I had my shapeshifting abilities tampered with, you see. Dr. Bashir is
still trying to find a way to reverse the effects, but in the meantime, I’ve become more or less flesh
and blood. The experience has been an interesting ordeal so far, and I must admit I’m still having
problems adjusting to my physiological limitations. I tend to frequently pull muscles and develop
aches due to…how I tend to carry myself. I’ve been trying to work on it, but relaxation was never
my strong point.” Odo explained.

“Are you in pain now?” Gaven inquired.

“As a matter of fact? My lower back is killing me. Doctor Bashir said it has to do with having a
spinal column and carrying myself too rigidly or something. I’m trying to find other solutions, and I
was wondering if you had any recommendations given your specialty in anatomy.” Odo finished.

“I see. Well, assuming the Founder saw fit to keep your solid form in line with humans there are a
few things you can do to help. For one, you might consider getting a better chair with lumbar
support. You could also try inversion. That’s when you hang upside down. It helps to decompress
the spine. Warm baths before bed, proper rest, and an occasional massage wouldn’t hurt either.”
Gaven suggested.

“Humph. I.see. I'll think about trying some of those sometime.” Odo said

“Do let me know if they help,” Gaven replied.

The next morning Gaven was due to report to the infirmary and meet the rest of the medical staff.
Dr. Bashir was, of course, in charge of the introductions which amounted to a lot of nodding and stilted but polite conversation on Gaven’s part. Gaven was surprised that someone as young as Julian was in charge of the space station’s medical team and he was also slightly taken back at first by the man’s natural emotionally driven exuberance. It seemed to clash in an almost comical way with Gaven’s minimalism and his firm emotional control that came off much more intense and quiet by comparison. However, in observing how the rest of the staff interacted with the young doctor and the affection his patients felt for the man, Gaven couldn’t help but smile to himself internally a little. Doctor Bashir certainly seemed like the right man for his position after all.

“So.’ Bashir said once all the initial introductions had concluded. “What do you think of our fair Station, Dr. Ore?”

“It’s…Very nice, Doctor. You have an impressive set up here. I must admit I wasn’t sure what to expect.” Gaven said. “I’ve been conducting my work mostly out of a Vulcan freighter for the last eight months. It wasn’t exactly an ideal place to do my research, but the Vulcans were accommodating enough. This place is certainly an improvement.”

“Oh, yes, I’m sure it would be.” Although externally Julian radiated all goodness and light, internally he was secretly taking stock of the other doctor in a manner of detail that no one knew he was capable of analyzing.

Julian noted, for example, the subtle signs of stress that came upon the other doctor’s features every time he was forced by social decorum to react to someone and return their communication. He also noted how the man tended to plant his feet in such a way that felt fortifying and unmovable as if he was always prepared to resist being pushed over. Frequently, when others were speaking to him, Gaven would glance distractedly to the left. His subtle behavior implied that he was linking something in the present to his memory of the past. Of course, that was assuming he was similar to humans. The fact that Gaven wasn’t human and that they had orders to not raise any flags about that fact also tugged at Julian’s overactive imagination. A part of him wondered who the doctor was beyond his falsified identity and why it was that the Federation was trying so demurely to tuck the man into their back pocket as if he’d been there all along.

Gaven could feel Julian’s masked scrutiny of him which the doctor was very good at hiding under the wicker basket of all his jovial friendliness. So, Gaven thought. The young doctor was not exactly what he wanted others to assume him to be. Gaven wondered if Julian came by his abilities naturally or if he was genetically enhanced somehow. Given the Federation’s policies on genetic resequencing and enhancement, the possibility that Julian was harboring secrets about the nature of his being would have explained why he was working so hard to cover what he was actually thinking and doing when people interacted with him. Gaven could tell that Julian was downplaying himself. It was subtle, but Gaven had spent his entire life on a planet where subtlety was a primary language. Well, Gaven had no intention of bothering the doctor. He was no stranger to wanting to keep aspects of himself a secret.

“Well, should we step into my office now? I know you wanted to brief me about some things before I, let you loose, as they say.” Julian offered.

Gaven nodded, and the men proceeded to head to the CMO’s office where they could speak in private.

“Now, what can I do for you,” Julian said finally settling happily into his office chair while he waited for Gaven to sit down.

“Personally Doctor, I feel I need to alert you to my medical needs. As you know from my private file, my homeworld subjected to a unique kind of radiation exposure.” Gaven began as he settled on
the arm of one of the office chairs so that he could semi-stand without making the doctor uncomfortable.

“Yes. I believe your people call it Poxy radiation. Something to do with the unique elemental makeup of your planet’s sun.” Julian recited.

“As I’ve stated my people have developed a unique tolerance for the radiation and most of the time we’re exposed to it all of our lives. The truth is our bodies are designed to tolerate the exposure, and without it, our species systems can break down to the point of being debilitating over a long period. Now normally radiation treatments are not uncommon on most planets and stations, but in this case, I’m concerned that standard Poxy radiation treatments of this nature may not be containable. Considering how toxic Poxy radiation is to most lifeforms you can understand my deep concern.” Gaven’s tone was somber.

“Yes…I was wondering about that. How long have you gone without exposure?” Julian was trying to calculate the possible ramifications Gaven was implying as well as how a lack of exposure could negatively be affecting the man.

“A standard year. Since I left home.” Gaven said.

“Are you experiencing health concerns now?” Julian asked.

“Not yet. But I can tell you, doctor. It’ll only be a matter of time. Eventually, my nervous system will start to deteriorate, and then other systems will start to shut down. Without exposure, I estimate the result would be terminal within three years.” Gaven explained evenly.

“I see. That is quite a problem. May I?” Julian got up and came around his desk intent on doing some preliminary scans with his medical recorder.

Several minutes later he finally stepped back. “I suspect, doctor, that there’s something we can think up. You're clearly able to metabolize the radiation into something benign given that if you couldn’t just being in the same room with you would likely start negatively impacting those around you. So I suspect if we can get the radiation in your body somehow, you would then be able to absorb it naturally. The question is how do we deliver it without causing cross exposure.” Julian couldn’t resist a good old fashioned medical conundrum.

“Well, we have some time yet to figure it out. Until then it says between us.” Gaven sighed. “On a professional note, Starfleet would like me to keep updating their anatomy files. With your permission, I’d like to invite members of the station to undergo some basic physicals. I’d also like to be as useful to you as possible while I’m here so if you want any help on anything I’m at your service. I want to take on some rounds. I feel compelled to do my part here, and I’m a quick study.” Gaven offered.

It was the warmest thing the strange man had said so far.

“I think something could be set up. Your tests are certainly on par with most experienced medical officers. What was it you did on your homeworld if you don’t mind me asking?” Julian inquired.

Gaven didn’t respond right away.

“Right, sorry. Need to know. I almost forgot.” Julian backtracked as he dismissed his question. “Look, I could use some help in the early morning and some evenings. I really do look forward to working together.”

“Yes. I’ll be here, doctor. I’m sure you’ll have a great many things to teach me.” Gaven agreed.
“He’s strange,” Julian said definitively a few days later at the dinner Dax had prepared to keep herself company while Worf was running an errand off station.

“Of course you’d say he’s strange, you’re the one that keeps acting like he’s human.” Jadzia pointed out as she placed a bowl of Klingon appetizers in the center of the table.

“Jadzia does have a point there Julian. You do tend to go out of your way to pretend you don’t know he’s actually an alien and one we’re not allowed to know anything about.” Kira remarked as she wrinkled her nose slightly at the appetizers and opted for the safer looking vegetable tray on the table.

“That’s ridiculous. I treat Doctor Ore like I do everyone I’ve just met. And anyway, doesn’t it bother either of you? I mean, aren’t you just the least bit curious?” Julian asked in that leading way he did when he wanted someone to validate him.

Both Jadzia and Kira exchanged looks and then laughed.

“What?” Julian felt like he was missing out on something.

“Nothing. It’s nothing.” Kira said dismissively.


“Kira’s right, Julian. It's nothing. It's just that it's not really true. You don’t treat Dr. Ore like everyone. In fact, you treat him the same way you do every time you…you…” Jadzia was struggling to find the easiest way to put it.

“Meet someone who isn’t human.” Kira finished for her bluntly before sticking her favorite pastry into her mouth that she’d brought to curb her latest craving.

“What? What are you talking about?” Julian protested, genuinely confused and intrigued at the same time.

“Please, Julian. Let me see if I can illustrate for you. Who was the first Trill you ever met personally and became close to?” Jadzia asked.

“You. But I don’t see what…” Julian began to protest.

“Julian…” Jadzia’s eyes widened at him in a way that said; Stop being so stupid. You know what I’m referring to.

“Oh. Right. Well, that doesn’t count.” Julian protested.

“Why? Because in my case you settled on a romantic infatuation? What about Garek? Or even Odo? Face it, Julian, aliens fascinate you. The fact that Dr. Ore is not only not human but that his life is surrounded in mystery is irresistible to you, and instead of just letting it go you overcompensate every time you’re around him like you’re trying to hide something.” Jadzia explained.

“I do NOT overcompensate when I’m talking to Dr. Ore…” Julian said indignantly.

“Yes, you do.” Kira and Jadzia said in unison flatly.

“Look, all we’re saying is that if you’re so interested in him why don’t you get to know him a bit? I know he seems stuffy, but he’s actually quite…I dunno…” Kira offered as she tried to find the right
“Nice.” Jadzia finished for her. “And probably lonely.”

“Fine, fine. The doctor sure seems to have won the both of you over, though I can’t see how since the man seldom says more than two words at a time.” Julian muttered.

“You know I have lots of nice interactions with him. They’re just not always in words. Dr. Ore is a very thoughtful man from what I can tell. Like when he helped me with my sneezing. He saw a problem, and he just fixed it.” Kira remarked.

“Last week he sent Worf and I a gift basket of lotions and salve. He’d heard it was our anniversary. The card was quite sweet. He’s just really good at being impersonally personal, it feels like. He looked almost alarmed when Worf and I came by to thank him for it. Anyway, we’re not trying to gang up on you Julian we just aren’t interested in saying anything negative about the man.” Jadzia explained.

“It wasn’t my intention to be negative I was trying to be conversational…Nevermind. Let’s change the subject and go about having a nice time. Cheers.” Julian muttered, toasting the others as they got on with their meal.

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The first week or so of Gaven’s arrival proved to be a solitary one. Dr. Bashir and been kind enough to find Gaven a small office space within the station's infirmary to do his work which consisted mostly of doing basic physicals on the available and willing station inhabitants and writing up his finding in triplicate then, with permission, updating star fleets medical data. Gaven himself wasn’t allowed to input new information into Starfleet's database, but he was able to see the results of his work rather swiftly which was good enough. His interaction with his patients was thorough and very brief, and patients seemed to walk away with a favorable impression of him. Almost every morning Gaven found his most uncomfortable dialog to be with Dr. Bashir, not because he disliked the young doctor but because Julian seemed to exaggerate his friendliness every time he saw him.

“Well, good morning Dr. Ore. And how are we getting along today?” Julian said as he had on most mornings when Gaven showed up for his rounds.

Gaven noticed the doctor always seemed to speak slightly more loudly than was needed as if he was trying to project his voice on a stage and his movement were somewhat exaggerated. More substantial steps, more arm waving, broader smiles, and an annoying level of exuberant expression.

This particular morning was no different. “I’m…Fine. Doctor. Thank you.”

Gaven stalked the rest of the way into the infirmary and went directly to his small office almost as if he was trying to get away.

“Well, that’s…Good. Listen, I have an idea. What do you say to us having lunch today together? I thought we might pick each other’s brains. Maybe talk about some cases I’ve had that proved troublesome.” Julian offered while he leaned casually in the doorway of Gaven’s office.

“Thank you, but no,” Gaven replied bluntly.

Julian eyes looked like they might pop out of his head at having his offer rejected so utterly and without any additional comment. Julian was so confused by the man’s tone; he almost didn’t know what else to say just then.
Gaven mentally kicked himself at the prospect that he might have just hurt the other man’s feelings.

“I’m sorry, Doctor. I have a great deal of work to do today. I wasn’t planning to take lunch.” Gaven lied.

Julian waited for the man to finish with a follow-up offer but waited in vain. “Oh… Well, another time then I’m sure. Right. Well if you need anything, I’ll just be over here. Doctoring.”

Gaven watched Julian linger for a few seconds longer before he backed himself out of the office and disappeared.

Gaven watched the entry into his office a full minute before he finally sighed profoundly and turned into his desk covering his face with his hands as he tried to rub away deep regrets. “Damn it all.”

“Bad morning, Doctor?” The blunt gravely tone of Odo’s voice suddenly cut into Gaven’s reality like a comforting rush of warm water.

“Odo, hello. Yes, you could say that. Come in.” Gaven said, clear relief in his tone that hinted at how much he liked the shapeshifter and was glad just then to see him. “What do I owe to your visit. Anything wrong?”

“I told you before that I would take your medical advice into consideration and report the result,” Odo remarked.

“And? How did my recommendations go over?” Gaven asked, genuinely interested.

“The new chair is helping, and I must admit the inversion therapy you recommended has been quite effective and even…Enjoyable.” Odo reported.

“Good, and the baths?” Gaven inquired.

“I’m…Still working up to them. I’m not quite sure how much I like the prospect of being wet. Warm or not.” Odo admitted.

“More ironic words have never been spoken given your species natural state and the collective way you engage in the Great Link. Baby steps, Mr. Odo.”

“Ye-es. Speaking of baby steps, if you don’t mind me saying so, you might just consider allowing our good doctor the satisfaction of getting to know you a bit.” Odo advised gently.

“I don’t think that’s wise,” Gaven replied though the look on his face said he didn’t like the taste of his own words.

“Why? You seem more than capable of making friends here at the station if you wanted to. I think you’d find Doctor Bashir very likable. Most people do.” Odo encouraged him gently.

At this Gaven got up and closed his office door before he sat back down and rubbed at his face some more. “I’m not good at this, you know. This business of starting my life all over from scratch and having to go around pretending as if my old life never happened. Back when I was stuck on that Vulcan freighter, it was easier. I was as about as isolated as I felt. I…” A well of emotion seized up in the man causing him to pause. “I don’t want people to get too attached to me here. I don’t trust the Federations motives in anything involving the work I’m doing and yet I have to find something to anchor my life. Dr. Bashir, in particular, is a good man, but he takes his relationships with people to heart. I don’t want him getting tangled up in my secrets, Odo.”
“Fascinating that you’re so worried about Dr. Bashir’s well being in particular,” Odo remarked.

“Doctor Bashir is the one that sees me the most of anyone on this station. He’s the one person I can’t consistently avoid given our work arrangement.” Gaven muttered.

“I must say, I don’t really like this shroud of mystery the federations is keeping over you. Frankly, I fail to see the reasoning behind it.” Odo said, settling himself on the edge of Gaven’s desk.

“I should think you of all people would know what it’s like to be the first of your kind to be commonly identified. Before all this business with the Dominion, you were just a unique alien oddity and just another individual trying to make a place for themselves in the universe. Now you’re much more than that to both your kind and others. If the Federation had it within their power to turn me or my work into a weapon to use against the Dominion, do you honestly think they’d just let me go about my business? Right now I’m potentially the best-kept secret they have, and the Federation is nervous that if word got out about my identity and my potential others would come out of the woodworks to get their hands on me. I have no doubt, Mr. Odo, that if I were to show any real resistance to the Federation’s overtures; I’d be sitting in some isolation unit somewhere being poked and prodded at against my will. All because I had the misfortune to be able to metabolize a radioactive element that is toxic to almost everyone else and that has a specifically interesting effect on changelings in particular.” It was the first time Gaven had vented about the suspected reality of his situation.

“Mmm. I see.” Odo did see very clearly. More clearly than some might have that the alien man sitting in front of him was, in actuality, a prisoner of circumstance.

Given Odo’s history of being prodded at an experimented on, he understood. He also realized quite acutely how much distress the other man was probably experiencing.

“Since you were so kind as to give me such succinct advice before, Doctor. Please allow me to suggest something of my own?” Odo planned to say something with or without Gaven’s approval.

Gaven didn’t protest.

“You’re a man of many secrets, and I think some of them are causing you a great deal of pain. It may help you to make friends. Maybe even find someone, in particular, you can confide in that is…Better with feelings. You appear to be a forthright man. I would suspect you’re also one of deep conviction and I’m sure for better or worse your attitudes are part of the reason you’ve ended up here. While I respect your need for caution and anonymity, I feel too much isolation and personal reflection could do you more harm than good.” Odo said decisively.

Gaven smiled slowly after a few seconds. “I do like you Mr. Odo. I’m glad we have such a good understanding of each other. I’ll take your recommendations under advisement.”
“I’m sorry. I… I can’t understand you. I NEED to run some tests if you WANT me to help her.” Dr. Bashir was at his wit’s end as he tried desperately to communicate with the tall red skinned female alien that had come in on the last transport with a sick child in tow that morning.

Presently the child in question was being held by an almost panicked looking Julian as the mother muttered something guttural and made hand gestures that the universal translator didn’t register as a language.

Gaven didn’t say anything at first when he’d arrived upon the unusual scene and stood in place watching the chaotic-looking situation without comment for at least a full two minutes.

Finally, Julian caught sight of him and uttered the most pathetic sounding “help” imaginable.

Gaven didn’t hesitate further and walked the rest of the way into the central part of the infirmary rolling up his sleeves to his forearms as he came around the exam table where Julian had been trying to put the clinging child down. “Well?”

“She just came in here off the morning transport and started babbling incessantly at me. Next thing I know she thrusts this child into my arms and starts making a god awful fuss. As far as I can tell the child has a very high fever but I have no idea if that’s an abnormality in this species and to what existent. Every time I try to put her down to examine her the child starts crying bloody murder and the mother tries to hoist her back into my arms. Would YOU try to reason with her, please? I’m about ready to sedate both of them and be done with it.” Julian threatened.

“Right. Give me a moment.” At that Gaven swiftly went around the table to address the woman who was nearly a foot taller than him.

Julian looked on as Gaven gently guided her aside and began talking to her with one or two carefully placed words. Julian noticed he didn’t let go of the woman’s upper arm and that she had allowed it to hang dead while she made a few slower hand gestures with her other hand and one or two guttural grunts. Several seconds later he let go of the woman and turned back towards Julian.

“Hand her over, please.” Gaven requested with a leading but even edged to his voice.

“Gladly.” Julian gently pried the child off him and directly into Gaven’s arms before the girl had time to realize what was happening and started fussing again.

Gaven balanced the girl child on one hip as he pressed his thumb and pointer fingers into either side of her forehead and gently dragged them down toward her throat. “Your right. We have to get her body temperature down NOW. She’s also exceedingly dehydrated, but that should be easy to fix.”

“Yes and just how do you propose we do that? The mother won’t let me near her with anything let alone put her down.” Julian muttered in frustration.

“I can get it down. I’ll need an isolation room, a sub-zero anti-thermal blanket, and a large bottle of water along with your temporary help.” Gaven requested.

Julian nodded and jumped into action to fill the order quickly gathering what they needed as he escorted Gaven into a private room, figuring the man would explain as they went.

“Now what?” Julian asked.
“I need you to secure that door eventually. I can’t afford prying eyes. In the meantime, I need you to cut off my shirt so the child can properly latch onto my skin.” Gaven explained.

“What are you going to do, strip down and wrap yourself and her in that anti-thermal blanket? You’ll induce hypothermia.” Julian protested.

“Not in her. And only a little in me. You’re a doctor. I’m sure you can treat me for it after. I need to get her temperature down now, and this is the quickest way. Once her temperature is down, she’ll take the bottle, and the mother can handle it from there. But if we’re going to keep perpetuating the idea I’m human I have to do it in here. This is a need to know kind of situation, doctor; and you’re in a need to know position.” Gaven insisted. “Let us get to it.”

Julian didn’t protest further and after locking down the room, worked on fulfilling Gaven’s requests. He didn’t see what all the fuss was about until he got about half way down Gaven’s shirt where he ripped it the rest away to expose the man’s toned muscular upper body. Once he was completely visible from the waist up Julian suddenly saw the glaring difference in their anatomy. Along the front of Gaven’s abdomen was a pocket of what looked like muscle and cartilage. There was one slot on either side of his stomach starting about two inches down from his rib cage and ending just above his defined pelvic muscle. It reminded Julian of a gill opening on a shark.

“Facinat…” Julian muttered as he nearly reached out and touched one.

“Later, doctor. I need you to position the anti-thermal blanket for me.” Gaven muttered.

“Right. How do we know when enough time has passed do you think?” Julian inquired.

“I’m hoping that she’ll unlatch and want out of it and off of me once her body temperature has normalized.” Gaven mused.

“In that a professional opinion?” Julian quipped.

“No. More like an educated guess. Why don’t we find out if I’m right.” He urged.

Julian and Gaven didn’t waste any more time. The anti-thermal blanket was a thick insulated cooling blanket designed to rapidly reduce a person's body temperature in a short period. Prolonged time in one at least for humans could result in hypothermia and shock. True to his estimation the girl child seemed to latch onto Gaven by her fingers and toes which had little suckers on them then she went into a kind of stasis. Gaven joined her in this stasis, and after being secured on a med bed, he became verbally nonresponsive as the child and man were caught up together in a mutual kind of repose. For Julian’s part, he monitored them carefully, trying to come up with a quick game plan if something went awry. The experience was nerve-wracking for Julian since for once he felt like he didn’t know what was going on.

About forty-five minutes in and just about around the time Julian was ready to pull the plug on the whole damn experiment. Julian suddenly saw the child begin to stir and eventually indicate it was moving about independently and wanted out of the blanket as quickly as possible. Julian obliged her swiftly, and sure enough, the child suddenly seemed alert and very eager to return to her mother as she started making loud chirping noises and stood expectantly at the door.

“Quiet you. I’ll let you out in a moment. Gaven? Gaven, come on. Wake up.” Julian unwrapped the other doctor as swiftly as possible and began taking his vitals.

Not surprisingly he was in the beginning phase of hypothermia, and it took several minutes for the Doctor to stabilize him and get Gaven to start coming out of it.
“Damn it; you scared the hell out of me!” Julian crossly said once Gaven began to open his eyes and show signs of independent awareness.

“Well? Did it work?” Gaven muttered his lips still shivering as Julian worked to stabilize his body temperature.

“Yes, it bloody well worked which seems like a damn miracle since I’m only vaguely certain you had any idea what the hell you were doing,” Julian grumbled trying to keep his tone in check.

“Like I said…It was an educated guess. I’ll explain more about it later if you really want to know. Throw me something to wear if you would and get that girl back to her mother before they both have an anxiety attack. Everything should be fine now.” He insisted.

Gaven spent the rest of the morning in the isolation room, recovering himself until he was right enough to retreat to his quarters for the day. Meanwhile, the rest of Julian’s day settled back into a sense of normalcy with perhaps the exception of the usually upbeat doctor seeming a little offbeat the rest of his day. It wasn’t surprising to Gaven when sometime later that day, the computer indicated someone was waiting at his door.

“Come in,” Gaven said from his spot on the sofa he’d planted himself on with a blanket, pillow, and datapad.

A purposeful looking Julian stepped into the apartment and waited for the door to close behind him before he cut right to the chase of what had brought him there.

“Explain,” Julian demanded.

“Which part?” Gaven could tell the doctor was not very pleased and had been brooding about it most of the day.

“How about we aim for just about all of it. How’s that?” Julian almost spat.

“Won’t you sit down?” Gaven offered.

Julian obliged him but never took his eyes off the man.

“Shall we do this interrogation style or do you want to go with a softer interview like approach?” Gaven inquired while adjusting his pillow before folding his hands in his lap.

“What did that woman tell you and how did you go about getting it out of her?” Julian wasn’t pulling any punches and launched right in.

“Interrogation style, it is.” Gaven sighed. “As far as I can tell her species communicates using a combination of throat sounds, sign language, chemical signaling, and emotional telepathy. Her clothing and posture indicated she was likely an important figure from a matriarchal society. Perhaps an emissary or even a cultural leader. While you might not have understood her, she clearly understood you enough to realize where she needed to take her child for treatment and that you were the right person to see. You’ll have noticed her body temperature was significantly high — probably a kind of biological normality. As a mature adult, I’d wager that it was typical to see. The child was a juvenile though, too young and underdeveloped to regulate its body temperature in the same way she could. And so, as children are apt to do, the little one likely came down with a run of the mill fever in transit that just got a little out of hand. As for what she said to me when I linked with her for lack of a better word…”

“Linked…So wait a moment. Did you link with her? As in telepathically?” Julian pressed.
“I linked with her, yes, biologically. It's more empathic than it is telepathic although in theory if I was dealing with certain species with telepathic abilities, I suppose I could probably communicate with them in that way. As I said, this was more emotional and biological. As a result, I was able to piece together a few theoretical possibilities. She knew you couldn’t understand her and was mainly trying to show you what to do. She was highly frustrated by what she deemed not to be so hard to understand. That was the gist of it.

“She called me stupid?” Julian protested.

“…In not so many words. I think a closer translation would have been ‘inept.’” Gaven replied smiling slightly.

“Oh, that’s just so much better. What do you mean, in not so many words? Stupid and inept or both SINGLE words.” He fumed.

“Can we get past this, please? You’re letting you indignity sideline you from your other burning questions.” Gaven muttered.

“Right. So how did you know the little one wanted to latch onto you?” Julian continued.

“I figured if the mother could have controlled the child’s temperature herself, she would have. I also hypothesized that assuming she was from a matriarchal society that there was a possibility that in her culture males would be expected to fulfill nurturing aspects of parenting. When it comes to survival, juveniles tend to do what’s instinctual. A hungry juvenile mammal, for example, will on instinct seek out its mother’s teat and try to latch. This child was trying to do the same thing to us by latching on so that it could try to disperse its body heat. We were the only males in the room after all. I made an educated guess that just happened to be right. In spite of my empathic advantages, I still use modern deductive reasoning, doctor.” Gaven explained.

Julian tilted his head down and then up again as if he saw some opportunity.

“Are the Oum a matriarchal society, by chance?” Julian asked carefully.

He was no doubt trying to back his way into inquiring about the gill-like openings upon the man’s abdomen.

Gaven knew what Julian was fishing for and tried to hold back an amused close-lipped smile. “No as a matter of fact.”

Julian didn’t say anything and waited.

“My people, doctor, do a tremendous amount of compensating for the radiation exposure we’re afflicted by. While my people have developed a natural tolerance, we can’t generally escape the logical consequences of such exposure. Congenital disabilities are common, as well as severe deformities and other deficiencies during the development process. That’s why my people developed telepathic and empathic abilities. To ensure communication and connection between those who would otherwise not be able to achieve it through natural biological means. Procreation is orchestrated very carefully by my people, and for the most part, a large amount of congenital abnormality is acceptable, even embraced and preferred in Oum society.” Gaven explained.

"Your people embrace genetic mutation and deformity? Well, that is a new one. You look remarkably developed considering what you're inferring.” Julian noted gently trying to hold back a deep sense of alarm at the idea.

“Sometimes anomalies happen. About 1 out of every 100 of the Oum’s population are born without
noticeable defect. Those of us that are part of that 1% are singled out and restricted to subservient societal positions.” Gaven said neatly.

“You’re punished for being born unencumbered? That’s ludicrous.” Julian protested.

“Every culture has its unique appreciation for aesthetics,” Gaven said distantly. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter now, I’m human. Remember?”

“Remarkable.” Julian got to his feet as his mind began to spin forming fast connections around what the other doctor had revealed. “Well, in any case, I think we did a far good amount of work today. I’m glad you were there, and I look forward to seeing what other professional adventures we can get up to. I suppose I’ve taken up just about enough of your time for the evening. I think I’m going to go and seek out a good...game of darts. Care to come along?”

“No. Thank you, Doctor. I’d rather stay in and get an early start tomorrow. I’ll see you then.” Gaven replied.

“Yes. Tomorrow. Goodnight then.” Julian saluted and headed for the exit. His mind reeling like mad despite his even looking demeanor.

“Oh. Before you go, Doctor Bashir. The answer to the question you didn’t ask me is ‘yes.’ I’ll see you in the morning.” Gaven’s eyes had fallen back upon his computer pad though he didn’t need to look up to know that Julian had stiffened before he’d recovered himself and let himself out.

In his absence, Gaven smiles to himself but the satisfied feeling lasted only a minute before other memories had him scowling again.

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For the next few days, Gaven kept to himself while working and spent a great deal of his time out of the office. Starfleet didn’t have any records or documentation on the species he and Dr. Bashir had treated, and Gaven wanted to remedy the fact.

His absence gave Julian ample time to consider the things Gaven had said and not said about his people. More than anything he was finding it frustrating not to be able to vent about his thoughts openly. Julian’s tolerance for his unfulfilled curiosity finally got the better of him by the end of the second day Gaven had been away conversing and spending time with the alien woman.

“I don’t like it,” Julian grumbled as he and Jadzia examined some data regarding the Poxy radiation they were supposed to be analyzing.

“Don’t like what?” Dax distractedly asked as she compared the Data Gaven had given her to other know radiation types in the computer database.

“All this cloak and dagger business we’re dealing with. Here we are trying to beat back the Dominion. Everything is in shambles, and then out of nowhere a man appears who possibly could be the answers to all our problems, but we’re not allowed to know a damn thing about anything to do with him. Who are the Oum? Why after all this time have they changed their behavior?”

“You know Julian sometimes you need to stick around a little longer during briefings. I think Dr. Ore has been very candid about why he’s here. More so than he is required to be. It also seems he’s quite willing to answer questions when they’re directly put to him and asked by people that are allowed to know. If you want insight into his culture and homeworld so badly why don’t you just ask him about it?” Jadzia muttered.
“I have a little. Frankly, it seems downright bewildering to know even a little of what I’ve learned.” Julian confessed.

“Maybe that’s the whole point, Julian. All politics aside maybe Dr. Ore left his home world because he was disturbed by the same things you are. Different cultures have different rules and expectations. Usually, people get expelled because they’re either unwilling or unable to conform to those rules and expectations. I feel sad for him, frankly. It’s just that he’s so brilliant and has so much to offer and now he’s lost everything. Did you know that he has an eidetic memory? All of the files he gave us from his home world he transcribed from memory. He wasn’t able to take anything off world with him. Can you imagine what that must be like?” Jadzia asked rhetorically.

Julian did know what it was like to be eidetic given he had the same ability. Though somehow he doubted that Dax had gotten it completely right. It appeared that Gaven had many unique skills that no one would have suspected.

“What I am happy about is at least I think he might have found a friend. There’s this beautiful red woman I’ve seen him with the last few days. He looks peaceful around her. Who knows, maybe there’s something there.” Dax shrugged.

“Somehow I doubt it. Gaven's probably looking to write a dissertation on her for Starfleet.” Julian muttered.

“Wow, so that’s it. Huh. You disappoint me, Julian, I thought you were above that kind of pettiness.” Jadzia said flatly. “I can’t believe you’re jealous of Dr. Ore.”


“Is it? Did you see his equivalency scores? They're not lies. Dr. Ore has enough medical and scientific knowledge in his fields to put both of us to shame, and I’ve been through how many lifetimes? He’s an amazing asset to have on our side. Face it, Julian. You’re used to being the best around here. You're a medical prodigy, and everyone likes you. You’ve already achieved so much so quickly, and now you're faced with a man that might just be better than you and you don’t even have the satisfaction of knowing how much better he is or how he got to be that way. You like him too, and it bugs you that you have to really try with him.” Jadzia pointed out in her matter of fact way.

“Well he may be brilliant, but he’s also deeply depressed, isolated, and…and I’m really at a loss for how to help him. I just wish I knew more about his circumstances.” Julian admitted as he thought about the medical trouble Gaven was heading towards and how little Julian had yet to learn that could help him.

“Well considering he gave up his planet, his people, his culture, and his identity…I’d say that is to be expected. As for the rest, maybe the best way to help him is to be his friend. If he’ll let you and if you can manage it. I can’t imagine what it must be like to keep such huge secrets about your life from people.” Jadzia mused.

Julian, on the other hand, could imagine it and felt creeping wedge of empathy wiggle its way into his chest. “I’ll have you know I’ve tried to befriend him. I ask him out to lunch, to darts…He never takes me up on any of it or extends an invitation in return.”

“Maybe he doesn’t like public places. Think about it, Julian. He knows we’re all curious about him and generally speaking he knows he has to be careful what he says and where. It seems like when you ask him things directly, and in private he’s more than willing to answer questions and converse about his experiences. Maybe instead of inviting him out to things you should try spending time with
him in private.” Jadzia pointed out. “It can’t hurt to try.”

Later that evening Gaven was in his quarters for the day writing reports and trying to ignore the lurking darkness of his thoughts. The night had been painful for him with dreams of his final days on Oum as well as haunting memories of particular events he wished he could wipe from his mind. When he had eventually awoken, he had found himself in intense emotional pain and had spent nearly three hours in bed grieving before he’d forced himself to try and get some work done.

Writing the reports through the day in his quarters instead of in his office had helped but not relieved his suffering completely and had served only to numb him until he felt utterly hollow and wrung out inside. Putting down his pad after several hours of work done lounging upon his favorite couch, Gaven finally put his pad aside and crossed his arms to stare into space. How long was he to go on like this, he wondered. Displeased with himself Gaven finally stood, he’d grown stiff from lounging in one position for so long, and moved towards a display table that sat near the outer wall of his quarters. Gaven hadn’t meditated for some time. He preferred to live with the heaviness of his feelings instead of trying to purge them. Maybe in a way, he felt that holding onto his suffering was likened to holding on to the memory of his world now lost.

On the table was what looked like a simple collection of crystals and a dark stone obelisk or two. At the center was a small engraved metal box that glowed and pulsed gently. Gaven hovered near the metal box his eyes focused on it. Eventually, he took it up in his hand. Sighing to himself, Gaven turned around and allowed himself to slide down into a sitting position on the floor with his back rested against the display. He then held the box in front of him and hesitated a moment before he triggered it to open and display the three-dimensional image of himself standing and laughing with a figure hanging upon his back. “Come Lopel Ner, look look look. See? We’ve missed it again. I don’t know how I’ll ever forgive you.”

The audio of the box made Gaven suddenly smile as tears welled at the same time and he choked a little, mourning both of the easy men he saw before him. Gaven raised his free hand to touch the projection which flickered and replayed itself a few more times.

“Yes, we’ve missed it again, Lopel Ner. We’ve missed it again.” He repeated to himself.

Gaven might have given himself over to a few heart-wrenching sobs had the bell on his door not suddenly rung jarring him into hurried composure. Getting quickly to his feet, Gaven closed the box and put it back in place before he briskly scrubbed at his face and upon the second ring brought himself to answer the door.

“Doctor…What, what can I do for you?” Gaven was surprised Julian was on the other side of the door holding in his arms a bottle of some blue liquid and a package of food.

“Good evening, Doctor. A patient of mine gifted me with a bottle of blue Acrelian mead, and since I happened to be on this side of the habitation ring, I thought you might be interested in testing it with me. I’m told Its supposed to have quite an interesting effect. I also brought dinner along, figured if the mead wasn’t to our liking we could console ourselves with something more palatable. Since you helped on the patient case last week, I felt it only fair that you get half of the resulting spo…” Julian had been making such a show of his gesture that he hadn’t bothered to look at Gaven directly until just near the end of his speech.

When he did, he was alarmed to see the state the man was in. The good doctor looked sick and pale, his eyes seemed more hooded than usual and appeared bruised as if he’d been rubbing at his face all day and though his clothes were in order he radiated a disheveled wild kind of energy that made his
hawkish glare almost alarming.

“Gaven are you ill? You look like hell.” Julian muttered.

“I’m fine. Please, come in.” Not wanting to discuss his state of being out in the open Gaven saw no choice but to retreat into his quarters and allow Julian to come with him. “I’m just a little out of sorts today.”

“Why do I feel as if that is an understatement?” Julian inquired lightly.

“Because it probably is.” Gaven smiled slowly, unable to resist subtle honesty just then.

“Well, perhaps it’s a good thing I dropped by. Nothing beats a somber mood than a good meal, some alien spirits, and some company.” Julian said in that over the top stage fashion he liked to use when trying to lighten the mood.

“Really. I’m appreciative, but you don’t have to do this. I’m quite alright.” Gaven protested.

“Oh contrar’, I want to do this and anyway I outrank you as the CMO of this station and your physician. Sit and eat something. You’ll feel better, and it’ll make me feel better to see you do it.” Julian wasn’t above pulling rank and professional status when it was warranted. “I don’t know what’s going on with you but its been building for weeks and I’m not the only one worried about you. I am however in a position to help you. If you’ll let me.”

“I see.” Gaven said, “In that case, I suppose it would be rude to avoid your charity and professional concern.”

Gaven settled into a chair near the small round dining table and gestured for Julian to proceed.

“Good,” Julian said approvingly as he jumped right into unpacking in that directive way that indicated he was in no mood to be swayed.

For the next forty-five minutes, Julian watched with a doctors concern as Gaven ate whatever was put before him and started to gain back some proper coloring. Julian was almost sure the man hadn’t eaten since the day before, and once he had, it seemed like his mood lightened considerably.

“Well, doctor? Shall we get started?” Gaven suddenly said when he caught Julian starting to stare off into space for the lack of conversation between them. “I’m sure you didn’t come here just to feed me. We should find something safe to talk about.”

“Indeed. I know. What was it like on that Vulcan Freighter? You were there for some time, I understand?” Julian dropped out of his stupor and launched right in.

“Eight months. Granted I was mostly unconscious for the first three, but it was still a long time. As candidates go, I can see why they’re a desirable first contact species. I’d been expelled from Oum and was floating around in space barely clinging to life when they found me. I think if they hadn’t had some telepathic abilities, they might have accidentally blasted my tomb-like transport out of space. But I suppose one of them felt something and they choose to investigate and ultimately extract me.” Gaven said candidly.

“That’s terrible. Why not just kill you on the world if your people were planning to go about it like that and leave you for dead anyway.” Julian muttered.

“Peace Doctor,” Gaven said evenly looking down into his lap. “The Oum is not as cruel as they sound. My people don’t believe in execution. But they do believe in honorable suicide though I like
to think exile from one’s home planet when you are not a species that allows contact with other ones can be like murdering a person. In spirit anyway. I promise you I had no intention of dying in space.”

“You called the Vulcan’s to you?” Julian felt impressed. He hadn’t thought Gaven’s telepathic abilities were as strong as all that.

“I reached out to anyone or thing that could have been listening on the off chance someone heard me and someone did. As for being on the freighter the Vulcan’s treated me like they would most first contact situations, though my telepathic abilities convinced them rather logically that I was probably from an advanced, intellectually aware, and space capable species. Not being a science vessel they had no choice but to drop me at the closest starbase as a refugee. In the meantime, though they found me quite fascinating and useful. I think both for my emotional depth and strong mental control which feels like an intriguing contradiction of logic to them. In exchange for my assistance with some problems they had, they agreed to allow me to learn about their culture and opened their common database to me. I essentially spent the rest of my trip absorbing information in a containment bay.” Gaven explained.

“Fascinating. Do you know how to do that neck pinch thing Vulcans are so famous for?” Julian asked with childlike interest. “I’ve always wanted to be able to do it but can’t seem to get the technique right.”

“Yes, and it’s probably because your energy exchange isn’t fine-tuned enough. Humans can achieve it, but it requires some telepathic predisposition and projection. Most humans aren’t self-aware enough to achieve it.” Gaven explained.

“But you can do it?” Julian noted.

“Yes. But then again I’m not a human, and as you’ve seen, I have some telepathic and empathetic abilities natural to my species.” Gaven replied humbly.

At that Julian finally cracked open the mead and poured for them. “Speaking of that. I’ve been meaning to ask you something on the personal side having to do with something from a while back. I swear you answered my question but naturally that led to more questions and being a doctor and in the name of scientific discovery I was just wondering…I mean if it’s too personal please feel free to not tell me about it…”

Gaven chuckled slightly. The first time Julian had ever seen him exhibit bonafide evidence of a sense of humor.

“You want to know about the…” Gaven wiggled a pointer finger between his chest and abdomen indicating he knew exactly what Julian was referring to from before. “As I said before, doctor, the answer is yes.”

Julian grinned wide and blushed slightly proving he was both satisfied and embarrassed by the suggestion that he’d possibly been thinking about Gaven’s anatomical features for so long. “Have you ever carried children?”

With a smile still on his face, Gaven picked up his mead glass and sipped from it before answering in that humble though amused way he had of displaying when he felt warmed by someone else’s interest in him. “No.”

“Is…Uh. Do all males of your species come equipped?” Julian asked taking a big swig from his glass.
Gaven smiled more fully and drank again. “You don’t have to be so delicate about it, doctor. And the answer is no. I requested to be genetically modified later and then given carrier rights. Procreation you understand is a very delicate matter on Oum since most of our people are either sterile or biologically incapable of carrying offspring safely. Breeding is carefully controlled and often done via surrogate, those like myself are particularly favorable because we have ideal bodies for the task that put less stress on a fetus that is already likely to struggle to form completely in the first place.”

“Interesting. For a people who reduce the able like yourself to a subservient position in your society they still largely prefer you for…carriers.” Julian’s indignity began to rise slightly.

“Life is full of contradictions.” Gaven sympathized.

“If you requested the modification you must have been planning to…” Julian surmised realizing too late that it was perhaps insensitive for him to ask more probing questions about Gaven’s intentions.

Gaven didn’t say anything, but the look on his face said more than Julian was comfortable with Gaven knowing.

“I’m sorry. Forget I said anything. You’ve been more than candid on the subject to appease my curiosity.” Julian backtracked.

“Do you want children, Julian?” Gaven asked casually. His smile had dropped away and was obstructed by his glass as he finished it off.

“Well, I don’t know really. It would be such a big decision, and I haven’t met anyone that fit the bill if you will. Many humans like to be paired when it comes to these things. But, uh, yes. I suppose I would like to be a parent if I ever got the chance. I like to think I’d make for a good father despite not having the best of models to work from.” It didn’t escape Julian’s attention that this was the first time that night Gaven had addressed him by his first name instead of by his title.

“The Oum like to be paired too whenever possible but for more for practical reasons and not just emotional ones,” Gaven remarked.

At this Julian was tempted to ask what Gaven’s particular circumstances had been regarding the subject while on Oum but he thought it impolite just then and refrained from posing the question.

“Right. I believe its time for a second round.” Julian said in an attempt to change the subject.

“Yes. This may also be a good chance for you to explain this game of yours to me. What was it called again?” Gaven asked.

“Darts. It’s called darts.” Now it seemed it was Julian’s turn to smile.
Questions and Theories

It was nearly three in the morning when Jadzia’s communicator went off while she was in the middle of finishing a complex project she’d stayed late on her shift to end.

“Dax here,” Jadzia muttered after tapping the receiver to find out who was summoning her.

“Good morning, this is Doctor Ore. I don’t mean to disturb you. But could you assist me with something in my quarters?” There was a mild crash in the background and a regular kind of giggle from someone other than Dr. Ore.

“What in hell? Yeah, I’ll be right there. I suspect this isn’t something you felt needed security?” Jadzia asked.

“No, but I think it might warrant the assistance of a good friend. Dr. Ore out.” At that, the communicator went silent, and Jadzia decided she better head as quickly as possible to the habitation ring.

“My god. Julian! What have you two been doing in here?” By the time Dax arrived at Gaven’s quarter’s a very drunk Julian could be found half out of uniform and about 3/4th of the way through one of Worf’s Klingon operas.

“I'm sorry, Dax. I guess he was right about that Acrelian mead having an interesting effect on its drinkers. I suppose I could have sedated him, but I wasn’t sure where Dr. Bashir’s quarters were, and I’d rather not have him sleep here.” A very sober seeming Dr. Ore said apologetically.

“Real Acrelian Mead? Julian! You know that stuff is contraband. What were you thinking and how much of it did you have?” Jadzia scolded Incredulously.

“He had three or four glasses. We both did. I didn’t realize we were breaking any rules.” Gaven said.

“Starfleet officers aren't technically allowed to consume non-synthesized alcohol,” Jadzia explained. “Particularly not ones laced with hallucinogens, JULIAN. Did he know that before you guys started abiding?”

Gaven shrugged indicating he wasn’t sure.

“If you had just as much as he did why aren’t you acting like an insane person?” Jadzia quipped while she tried to pick her friend up off the floor.

“I guess I metabolized it more efficiently. I’ll examine a sample later if you want a more scientific explanation.” Gaven replied as he swooped into to get on Julian’s other side so that they could both hoist him into a standing position.

“If Odo catches him like this there’s going to be hell to pay. Look, I know its a huge imposition but conscious or unconscious I don’t know how we’re going to get him back to his quarters, would you remotely consider letting him stay here and sleep it off once he finally crashes? My quarters are just as far away as Julian's are, and Worf wouldn’t approve of me bringing him home.” Jadzia pleaded not enjoying the prospect of dragging an intoxicated loud or limp Julian through the corridors for any reason.

Gaven looked displeased by the prospect but found he had little room to refuse. “Fine.”
“Thank you so much, Gaven. I’m sorry to invade your priva…” Just as they were getting Julian to his feet, a sudden hallucination kicked in causing the doctor to struggle out of their arms.

“You're a coward, Dr. Renaldo! Agent X and I have no intention of letting you steal the Maltese Cummerbund.” Julian announced swinging around to face them.

“Do you know what he’s talking about?” Gaven muttered sidelong.

“Not a clue. But this could get ugly. Julian has a personal interest in human spy stories. I think he’s having a delusion. We should probably sedate him. You wouldn’t happen to have a hypo needle on you?” Jadzia asked only half serious.

“No. My med bag is back in my office in the infirmary.” Gaven said as he kept his eyes trained on Julian who just happened to be hovering in a stupid manner somewhat close to Gaven’s display area.

“Come on Julian, calm down. No one is stealing your Maltese whatcha-ma-call-it. Why don’t you slowly come this way and lie down.” Jadzia tried to coax.

“A likely diversion. You’ve probably already taken it. Where is it hiding? What do you take me for?” Julian protested loudly.


Gaven suddenly got an idea. “I think Dr. Renaldo is up to her old tricks again, Julian. Luckily I, Agent X, have planned for such treachery. Look there. I’ve planted a tracking beacon behind you there. If its blue that means the Maltese…Cum…The cummerbund is somewhere here in the room. I’ve got Dr. Renaldo covered turn around and tell me if the tracking device there on display has turned blue.”

“My pleasure and good work Agent X. Hold her now…” Just as Julian stumbled to turn around and reach for the metal box sitting on the display counter, Dr. Ore rushed him from behind catching him where his neck and shoulders met with a finger grip that caused Julian to lose consciousness immediately.

Dr. Ore managed to catch Julian as he collapsed, dragging him by the chest with some effort to the nearby sofa.


“Yes. Well, I am not without certain skills. Though I perhaps did it a little harder than is customary. Our Doctor Bashir is going to have one hell of a hangover when he wakes up.” Gaven observed.

“Deservedly so. Are you sure it isn’t too much of an imposition to keep Julian here tonight?” Jadzia asked.

“I admit its not my preference but given what you’ve told me I don’t see that there’s much choice. I’ll take care of Dr. Bashir. I promise.” Gaven reassured her.

“I have no doubt. Well if you think you can handle Julian from here, I guess I’ll be going.” Jadzia said with a sigh. “We’ll be having words later.”

“Don’t be too hard on him, Dax. I think he was trying to help me.” Gaven said lightly.

“I see. I guess Julian finally took my advice. Too bad he made such an ass of himself.” She muttered glaring down at her friend.
“I respect his efforts,” Gaven admitted.

At this Dax finally turned her attention away from Julian and centered it wholly on Gaven. “How are you doing, really?”

Gaven shrugged slightly. “The best that can be expected. I like it here on Deep Space 9. I know I come off…Shy. And I’ll be the first to admit things aren’t easy for me, but for the first time since being expelled from Oum, I feel like I could belong somewhere again and become…important to some people if enough time passes. I hope Jadzia greatly that someday I may find myself whole again and I suspect this is as good a place as any to resurrect myself from the dead.”

As was her way to act on instinct, Jadzia stepped closer to him and pulled Gaven into a strong embrace. “I can’t imagine your pain Dr. Gaven Ore-Oum. But many of us are very fond of you here and would like to see a happier side of you. Try not to disappoint us.”

“I’ll do my best.” Though he was surprised Gaven did not resist her compassionate gesture and even embraced her back. “Now get going before Worf decides to come searching for you. The last thing I want is to be the cause of offending a sleep-deprived Klingon trying to locate his mate.”

Jadzia laughed and pulled away. “Thanks again for that gift basket. I can promise you it went to good use.”

“As was evidenced when you and Worf came in a few days later individually for medical treatment. Goodnight, and wish him well for me.” Gaven walked Dax to the door and saw her out.

Once gone Gaven sighed profoundly and glanced around to the scene that was waiting for him. The table was a mess, the room somewhat disheveled, and now he had the added problem of a half-naked Doctor laying unconscious on his sofa. Picking up his datapad, Gaven briefly took the opportunity to look up what exactly they’d been eating and drinking to determine if there were any specific medical things to be concerned over. The last thing he wanted was for Julian to end up in a coma if the nerve pinch he’d used to subdue him poorly reacted to the hallucinogens coursing through the doctor’s system. Seeing no worrisome interactions of note, Gaven put down the data pad and sat back down in his chair as he pondered what to do next.

It was true that it wasn’t his preference to have the Doctor in his quarters for the night. Mostly because Gaven’s repose was always the worst time for him emotionally, it wouldn’t do to have the other doctor come to in the middle of the morning only to find Gaven thrashing and sobbing in his sleep. Though he supposed if he was found out he could always blame it on the Acrelian mead they’d drank. Gaven reflected on the things Julian had asked him. His circumstances of life had been complicated by the end while on Oum. Gaven had lost more than he would ever admit when his beloved counterpart had been killed. The least of which was the dream of the child they had planned to produce together. Now the memory of what they had been planning to do held extra significance to him. There were times, often in the early morning when he could not abide in dealing with his grief, Gaven would instead allow his imagination to play out a particular fantasy to cull his suffering. In it, he imagined that before his counterpart had died, they’d completed the in-vitro fertilization process and that when Gaven was expelled from Oum, he secretly would have been carrying their child. A profoundly forbidden memento of a life that was no longer his to own as well as a piece of his counterpart whom it had never been his place to love. It was a comforting though bitter fantasy and one that made the muscles in his abdomen twist painfully in longing over the genetically grafted womb he’d worked so hard to gain and fill.

Fingering the edge of one the cartilage-like lining of one of his abdominal openings through the fabric, Gaven shut his eyes a moment but then reminded himself of where he was and what was happening around him. He pulled his hand away and stood suddenly annoyed with himself. Out of
the edge of his gaze, Gaven caught Julian stir slightly in his sleep due to the uncomfortable position Gaven and Jadzia had dropped him in. Gaven sighed again realizing that if it came down to him or Bashir, he would much rather have been the one miserable. Walking over to the sofa, Gaven assessed the situation and came to a decision.

“Come on, Doctor. Might as well put you in my bed where I can at least pretend you won't throw up on me in the morning.” Gaven who was much boarder built than Julian grabbed the more petite man by the arm and hoisted him up over his shoulder carefully adjusting as not to topple them both as he carried Julian into the other room and laid him down on the bed. “You owe me for this one. I hope you realize that.”

Upon tucking Julian in, Gaven went back out into the main room so that he could go about setting everything to the right and getting rid of the evidence of their immorality. It didn’t take long to put the space back in order. Having nothing further to do, Gaven briefly considered bunking down on the sofa which admittedly was not an uncommon place to sleep before the gurgling sounds coming from his bedroom suggested to him that might better if he saw Julian through the night and, if necessary, prevented the man from drowning in his vomit. The job of a doctor was never done.

Entering tentatively into the bedroom once more, Gaven stared at the sleeping Julian wishing to high heaven the man was less attractive in his repose than he was when he was awake. Yes, Julian owed him big time for this. Pulling up a chair next to the bed Gaven borrowed the extra blanket from the bed’s foot and settled into his nursemid’s repose. If Julian thought that Gaven was going to stare at him all night in worry, the young doctor had another thing coming. Gaven planned full well to sleep tonight even if it was upright. “Good night Dr. Bashir. I’m very…happy to have enjoyed your company.”

Several hours later the com in the room began to blink indicating a quarter to quarter call. Julian had conditioned himself to instantly wake up to such subtle beeping noises lest it was someone in medical need. He immediately jolted upright in a bed that didn’t feel like his own and instantly regretted the swiftness of his actions as one of the most painful hangovers he’d ever experienced made itself known in his neck, shoulders and behind his eyes. The com beeped again as Julian muttered an almost intelligible “Hello. Who’s calling?”.

“Well look who decided to wake up. I’ll have you know Julian that when I told you to reach out to Doctor Ore, I didn’t mean having him babysit you through a drunken stupor. If you were going to drink Acrelian mead, you could have at least had the decency to invite me along with you. Now get up and keep in mind that it’s very possible that Doctor Ore had no choice but to stay up all night to make sure you didn’t jump out an airlock or choke on your bile sometime after you passed out. You and I will be talking more about this later. Dax out.”

The com clicked offending the call just in time for Julian to start piecing together the events leading up to the point where he’d passed out. His memory was mostly clear up until about his third glass of Acrelian mead. At which point he just had a few flashes of what had transpired. Despite being painfully hung over he also managed to ascertain that he was likely still in Gaven’s quarters and that it was probably very late in the morning and well past the time both men were due to show up for their shifts. Gingerly getting up out of bed Julian edged his way towards the living room and took a peek into the living space. Everything was as immaculate as when he had first arrived, and the only evidence that Julian had been there at all was the neatly cleaned and bundled stack of dishes he’d brought with him that had contained their dinner. At first, Gaven was nowhere to be found, and Bashir almost wondered if the man hadn’t left earlier, but when Julian plodded back into the bedroom to gather his neatly folded and pressed clothes, Julian noted that Gaven was indeed still there. True to Jadzia’s assessment he had indeed been keeping vigil over him propped up in a chair beside the bed. At the moment Gaven looked to be in a deep sleep and once again the man looked
unwell. Julian sometimes wondered if his apparent fatigue was more than just emotional disparity and if he was beginning to show signs of radiation sickness from lack of exposure.

Julian got dressed as quickly as he dared and contemplated whether it was better just to leave or try to rouse Gaven from his slumber and encourage him to go back to bed. While Julian had to make an appearance one way or another in the infirmary, Doctor Ore was not technically required to be there every day and was welcome to take liberties with his schedule whenever he liked.

After several moments of contemplation, Julian finally decided it was better to try and rouse the other man. He didn’t like the idea of just leaving Gaven sleeping upright in the chair and apart of Julian also wanted to make sure the other man was alright before he left him alone.

Coming around the side of the bed, Julian gently pinched either side of one of the doctor’s knees and shook it. “Gaven? Gaven, wake up.”

Not unsurprisingly Julian’s efforts did little to stir the man.

Sighing, Julian took a moment to take some old fashioned vitals to make sure Gaven genuinely was just in a deep sleep. His breathing was normal though his pulse was a little fast, Julian noted. Without his instruments, Julian had to rely on his doctoring common sense. Pushing a dark curl from the other man’s temple, Julian pressed the palm of his hand to Gaven’s forehead checking for signs of an abnormal change in body temperature. His temperature turned out to be normal but when Julian went to pull his hand away from Gaven’s face his fingertips accidentally brushed against a wet part of Gaven’s skin just above his cheekbone. Upon closer inspection, in the dim light, Julian noted his face and throat were moist with tears, and Julian could see the doctor’s upper eye skin quiver indicating his eyes were rapidly moving under their lids which meant that Gaven was likely in an intense state of REM.

Worried for him, Julian gripped Gaven’s shoulder and shook it a little more aggressively. “Gaven, wake up. You're in a bad dream. It’s all right. It's me, Doctor Bashir. Come along now.”

Gaven stirred just enough to expel a whimper and stretch as one hand reached out fingers extended to touch something that wasn’t there. His body trembled a little bit as his consciousness ebbed a little closer to conscious reality but didn’t entirely turn over into wakefulness.

Bashir’s heart twisted painfully for witnessing what he realized was a more honest representation what the good doctor must have been privately feeling all this time. While Jadzia had often indicated she thought the doctor was indeed in a great deal of private pain, the weight and depth of it had never really stuck Julian as clearly as it did now. Growing more concerned by the second and not wanting to startle the vulnerable man out of his troubled repose, Julian sunk onto the bed and sidled up close to the other doctor until their knees pressed. Julian carefully caught Gaven’s open hand and squeezed it pushing his free hand into the side of Gaven’s face leaning in close so that when he spoke again, he could take on a more intimate and authoritative tone. “Gaven, I said wake up. You’re all right. It's a bad dream. Whatever is going on it not real anymore. Let it go and open your eyes for me. Gentle now. I won’t leave you, but I want you to open your eyes and look at me.”

Finally, Julian’s coaxing was enough and Gaven did eventually open his reddened and swollen eyes to look at him briefly. Unfortunately, Gaven couldn’t sustain eye contact very long before a fresh wave of waking grief rumbled up through him forcing the usually so controlled man to crumple forward and into Julian’s arms. Without reserve, he then quietly sobbed and whimpered with his eyes and the bridge of his nose pressed into the hollow part of Julian's left shoulder where his arm converged with his chest.

For a moment Julian was worried the man might fall out of his chair and it took a bit of reordering to
readjust somewhat so that Julian could brace his back against the contemporary backboard of the bed and essentially pull the other man halfway into his lap as he might have done with a distressed child. Gaven, who usually would have been appalled by the whole business for once gave in allowing the doctor to do his job and perform a more evolved sort of bedside manner.

“I’m sorry, Gaven. I didn’t know it was this bad. I had no possible idea. I promise I won’t tell anyone, but you have to let me help you find a way to address this properly. You can’t face this kind of turmoil alone anymore. It’s too much. You’ve been through unspeakable trauma, and I should have known better, I should have seen how deeply it ran. I promise it’s going to be alright. Just hold onto me and try to go back to sleep.”

Gaven didn’t say anything or look at Julian again but eventually, his convulsive movements eased, and his grip loosened proving he was spent and too tired to bother feeling embarrassed.

As it turned out Julian didn’t end up leaving Gaven’s quarters until the afternoon and only departed when he was sure that the man would sleep without further disturbance for some time. Instead of going directly to the infirmary or even to Dax, Julian made a direct line for one of Quark’s halo-suites bribing the first customer he saw to give up their spot so that Julian could utilize one of the programs immediately.

As had become common, Julian pulled up the lounge singer Vic’s program because he desperately needed to unburden his mind but didn’t want to technically violate his patient-doctor confidence by confessing himself to one of his friends. He wasn’t ready to go to Captain Sisko about the matter either, although that would have been his second best choice.

“Why so glum, chum? How about a song to lighten your spirits.” The rat pack inspired lounge singer said upon appearing in front of Julian at the holo-bar.

“Not now, Vic. I need to talk, and you’re my only safe option.” Julian distraughtly muttered.

“Sure kid. Tell old Vici boy what happened.” The lounge singer pulled up a stool and ordered them both a drink.

“He just fell apart, Vic. In all my years as a trained medical professional, I’ve never experienced anything as raw as that. Even when I’ve dealt with grieving families...Its never been like that.” Julian muttered. “And the worst part is that this has likely been going on all along. He’s been here on Deep Space 9 for weeks now, suffering unspeakably and no one knew. He didn’t let anyone in.”

“Well although I don’t know who you’re talking about, kid, it sounds like he’s let you in. You gotta admit, that’s got to count for something.” Vic reasoned. “Nobodies an Island. What exactly happened? Did he owe someone money, get jilted by a dame?”

“I don’t know. The man has been kicked off his planet for some reason. Abandoned and left for dead. Clearly its more than that though. He must have lost people he cared about. Maybe even someone he loved. God, who knows what else. Starfleet knows so little about his people, and I know so little about his actual circumstances before he came to the station that it's hard to understand it all. To top that all off he’s medically sick and emotionally destroyed. And so far I can’t do anything for him.” Julian angrily growled.

“Sounds like the guy is completely down and out. I gotta admit I’ve been there myself and you want to know what pulled me out of it? Good friends, the love of a good woman, and the sweet, sweet music.” Vic mused.

“Thanks, Vic. That’s just so helpful,” Julian complained.
“I’m telling you, kid. The best thing you can do for the guy is to try to be there for him. Keep him distracted, and give him a reason to keep on living. The good thing about losing everything is that you have everything new to gain.”

“Maybe your right. I just don’t understand why this particular example is bothering me so much. I wouldn’t call the Doctor and me, Friends, per se. He’s a colleague and an extraordinary and talented man. But…” Julian muttered.

“So you got an irrational soft spot for the lug. It happens.” Mack muttered. “You don’t need to be friends with someone to care about them.”

~@~

Several hours later Julian was looking green around the gills but tolerably capable as he made up for lost time in the infirmary. When Jadzia Dax suddenly strolled into his office looking for him. “Well good evening, Julian. Got a minute?”

“No. Go away Dax I’m in no mood for one of your lectures nor do I feel like running through a postmortem of last nights events.” Julian was still very much out of sorts and had been trying hard not to take it out on anyone while he was on duty.

“Geeze, fine. What crawled up your backside? What’s the matter? Still hung over?” Dax pressed trying to tease him into a better mood.

“I told you I don’t want to talk about it.” Julian insisted more firmly.

“Well then. Is Dr. Ore around? I’m planning a dinner party set a few days from now and wanted to invite him. You're invited too if you can manage to behave yourself.” Jadzia muttered.

“I encouraged him to take the day off. He wasn’t feeling very well.” Julian said as he focused on his datapad.

Dax narrowed her eyes at Julian’s tone but didn’t press him further.

After a few minutes of watching him ignore her, Julian finally sighed and put own his pad so that he could rub at his face.

“Seriously, Julian how did things really go last night?” Considering that it had been her idea for Julian to engage the other doctor, she felt she had a small right to know how everything had gone.

“We had dinner and talked. You were right that Gaven’s very willing to be candid when someone allowed to know things asks him about himself. He didn’t tell me everything, but I do feel as If I understand him a little better now. He’s a sensitive man, and I think it can be safely said that none of us really know the extent of what he’s been through.” Julian knew this much he could afford to share with Dax.

“Are you worried about him?” She gently asked.

“Yes, though I’d prefer not to go crazy over it and run to the captain just yet. It's clear to me now that he’s in profound mourning.” Julian had logically suspected as much but having seen it first hand had shaken him especially given that he wasn’t sure which aspects of Gaven’s history haunted him the most.

“What can we do for him, in your opinion?” Jadzia inquired.
“It’s hard to say. The grieving process is unique to everyone, and Gaven's got quite a lot to be upset about. He may never fully heal from his experiences. All anyone can do is try to be supportive and available to him if and when he decides to reach out. In the meantime, you and I can help him by figuring out this damn radiation business. We need to find a way to create poxy radiation treatments or the lack of exposure over time will kill him.” Whenever Julian didn’t have the answer to one question, he switched to another that would hopefully prove to be more easily solved.

“Dr. Oum must be able to contain it; otherwise he would be a walking radioactive hotspot and people would become sick. If his tissues can contain it, then our only problem is to get the poxy radiation into him. In theory, once it was absorbed his biology would render the radiation benign, I would think.” Jadzia observed.

“It seems the Oum wanted him to die in space. But you’d think that if the Poxy Radiation is derived from their sun then putting him in orbit around the planet would have only killed him assuming the tomb lacked an environmental life support system and rations. To kill him through lack of exposure they would have had to dump him well out of range of the sun.” Julian reasoned.

“Does the data we have on hand say where the freighter picked him up? I find it hard to imagine the Vulcans would have traveled too near the Oum’s planet.” Jadzia asked.

“I don’t know for sure. I suppose we’d have to run it by the captain or Dr. Oum himself since we can only look at the fabricated files Starfleet has on record.” Julian mused.

“What are you thinking?” Jadzia asked.

“Well, there seem to be a few plausible possibilities. It's possible that the Oum is space capable and jettisoned the craft out of the system. Another possibility is that they kept him close to the planet and the freighter just happened to be traveling in the region, picked up on his distress and rescued him. Vulcans are more resilient to standard radiation so it's possible they could be just as resistant to poxy radiation and that this would make it possible for them to travel through the system without any major adverse effects. In any case, Dr. Oum insists the Vulcans rescued him and I do believe him. I must admit though that I wouldn’t mind getting my hands on remnants of whatever it was they found him in.” Julian said.

“Why?” Jadzia asked.

“I want to see if they perhaps put him in something that shielded him from the poxy radiation. When he mentioned the craft, he was floating in Gaven called it his Tomb. I’ve been wondering if he meant that more literally than not. Something about the Oum believing in honorable suicide over murder.” Julian said.

“Speaking of customs, Dr. Oum has given the captain permission to release the data Gaven transcribes about the Oum to us for personal study. He told me he coded it to read like a series of speculative novels. I suppose to ensure no one linked the data back to the actual planet or him. We’re supposed to get them during our briefing tomorrow. The information might help us.” Jadzia informed him.

“I’m sure we’ll find it all riveting.” Julian muttered.
The next day it was time for a progress briefing involving the senior staff and Gaven.

Julian had considered walking to the good doctor’s quarters early and asking if Gaven wanted to walk to the briefing together but thought better of it when he found that it might make the other Doctor feel as if Julian was checking up on him. Even if that was Julian’s actual intent he surely didn’t want Gaven to know it, so ultimately he stayed away and prepared himself for their inevitable encounter in the Captain’s briefing room.

Julian wasn’t the first to arrive or the last, but in any case, it felt as if Doctor Ore had been there before anyone, likely privately conferencing with Sisko before everyone else was due to arrive.

“Good morning everyone. Let us take our sets and get started.” Sisko folded his hands atop the table. “Where are we on the poly radiation studies?”

“All radiation contains energy that is carried by particle waves or streams.” Dax began. “The reason it can be damaging is due to its ability to harm organic matter by penetrating through the cell wall where it then damages the natural programming of DNA.”

“For example when we used to treat human cancers with radiation therapy the idea was to damage the cancerous cells and destroy their ability to divide and grow,” Julian added. “Thus killing the cancer cells.”

“But Poly Radiation is unique in the sense that while it has stereotypical effects on organic tissues, it can also directly disrupt as well as enhance cellular growth. Increasing the rapid development of deformities and genetic defects secondary to selective cellular stimulation.” Jadzia continued in spite of the confused look of Miles, and the stoic looks of both Worf and Odo.

“To put it simply, it can both shut down cellular development and enhance it, sometimes simultaneously. The Oum have adapted to this effect making it more consistent from individual to individual limiting it to one or the other. Either impairing natural development or enhancing it case by case. In many species not used to high exposure, the effects are accelerated causing spontaneous mutation over a short period or simply shutting down the body entirely. Its not fatal to everyone and ships can be equipped to shield their riders allowing movement in the sun’s area.” Gaven clarified.

“We could calibrate a force Field to isolate Poly Radiation internally on a ship say if we wanted to flush out an area. But we’d have to be able to get people we wouldn’t want to be effected out of the containment zone.” O’Brien offered.

“What if we think smaller?” Kira offered. “Couldn’t we contain small samples and come up with some kind of incapacitating hypo injection?”

“It’s plausible, but if we’re wrong and we introduce the wrong dosage in a subject, it could kill them,” Julian added.

“You said the radiation wouldn’t kill in all cases. Can you Elaborate, Doctor?” Sisko asked.

“Species that have greater control over their biological impulses such as Vulcans could internally regulate the effects of the radiation in the short term even with high-level exposure. There are also species like the Changelings who are generally immune to the effects of the radiation but that have other sensitivities that impair them in damaging ways. Changelings, for example, can tolerate the radiation itself but lose the ability to form organized shapes with prolonged exposure after just a few
day. The Oum don’t know if this effect is permanent, but it doesn’t appear to be life-threatening just limiting.” Gaven explained.

“What if we attack the issue a different way. You said, Doctor, that your people have developed ways to make the radiation’s effects more consistent and the Doctor tells me that the Oum can render the radiation benign. Could we develop an injection to protect those exposed if Poly radiation were to be released in a confined space?” Sisko asked.

“That’s more realistic, but I would think that it would have to be calibrated uniquely for every individual species and mixed species individual you wanted to inoculate,” Julian said.

“You’d also need compatible samples of saturated tissue from someone with the kind of regulation you want,” Gaven added.

“But it could be done?” Worf pressed.

“Yes. It could be done.” Gaven had that look on his face he got when confirming the validity of something he wasn’t personally comfortable with.

“Well, then I guess we’ve discovered everyone’s homework for the foreseeable future. Dax, I want you to double team with Chief O’Brien to get a force Field calibrated for testing. Worf and Odo can work on the way to outfit and equip our security teams. Meanwhile, Kira is with me. I know it’s a long shot, but I want to try and reach out to the Oum and see if they would be willing to speak to us. As for you Dr, Bashir, I think you know what we need from you.” Sisko said.

“Yes,” Julian replied a little less enthused sounding than he’d wanted as he watched Gaven grimace to himself at the mentioning of potentially contacting his people, from the corner of his eye.

“Dr. Oum. Did you have something to add?” Sisko asked.

“Right. To hopefully help all of you with your future progress I’ve compiled a comprehensive collection of data about the Oum, their culture, world, philosophies, history, scientific advancements, etc. For my protection and because this information hasn’t been made public outside of high members within the federation, it has been formatted into fictional volumes that are of course not really fiction. I’ve taken the liberty to tailor your copies to reflect information that would be most relevant to you individually; however, you are welcome to explore as much of the collection as you like. I ask only that you keep your copies to yourselves and each other and that you do not release them to anyone. That’s all I have to say.” Gaven finished and sat back down while Sisko began passing out the data tablets.

“There’s got to be thousands of pages here…” O’Brien muttered both impressed and surprised. “Is it true that you transcribed all of this from memory?”

“Yes. Though I admit, it’s not complete I could only document what I’d seen, read, heard and personally experienced first or second hand on Oum in my lifetime. There’s still much that could be said, as is with any planet and people.” Gaven remarked somberly. “You don’t have to read it all, and there’s an abbreviated version for those of you who would rather skim.”

“Well, if no one else has anything to add then we’ll adjourn. I would just like to remind everyone that the information Dr. Oum is providing for us is absolutely restricted. Please be mindful of when and where you discuss the information and recall that Dr. Oum’s life could be at risk because of this information he has been willing to share. Dismissed.”

Before anyone else had time to stand and leave, Gaven quietly and curtly dismissed himself and
departed swiftly saying nothing further and making no eye contact with anyone besides the door.

Both Kira and Dax watched him leave, while Bashir stared at a speck on the table, and the others except for Sisko who was watching the entire room; we're looking through their databooks.

“You know…Call me crazy, but was I the only one here that picked up on the fact Doctor Ore doesn’t seem happy about any of this?” Kira asked critically to the remaining group.

“Yes, thank you,” Jadzia muttered her eyes going wide with emphasis. “Don’t mistake me, I’m dying to know more about the Oum, and I understand why this information is important, but I can’t help but feel we’re violating something here.”

“I suppose one could argue that by reading any or all of these we might develop biased impressions about the Oum that could extend to Doctor Ore as well.” Odo offered gravely. “And the Oum are isolationists, so we have no real way of knowing what’s actually true and what isn’t. I like the doctor, but we should still tread cautiously. In terms of the Federation, he’s been very cooperative, but that doesn’t mean everything being shared is correct.”

“I don’t think he’s playing anyone. The Federation has the man over a barrel, and he essentially has no choice but to help us and have some choice in the process or risk not cooperating and being forced against his will to contribute. You all do realize that if the Oum won’t talk to us, which I doubt they will, to develop an injection that’s even half effective we’d have to use tissue samples from Doctor Oum himself.” Julian pointed out unhappily.

“It’s true that Dr. Ore is in a delicate position with the Federation. I hear your concerns and want to assure you this is well-covered ground. So far as this information is concerned, Dr. Oum wants someone to know who he is and where he came from. I can appreciate a person wanting their life to mean something, and he knows that for better or worse the work he’s doing with and for us will give his life the meaning he wants.” Sisko said reassuringly.

“So, he wants us to read these…” O’Brien asserted. “Well, if it helps me understand even half of a way to push back against the Dominion, then I’m happy to oblige him.”

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Later that day Jadzia, Miles, Kira, and Julian settled in at Quark’s for drinks. All of them had had grueling shifts wrought with problems, and it was rare that they were all off duty at the same time.

“Can you believe it? One little faulty duct in the horticulture lab and six dozen people come down with food poisoning over some bad lettuce.” Miles had spent nearly ten hours personally trying to fix the problem while Julian was slammed by the sick and Kira was whisked away by a worried Keiko and practically held hostage until the source of the sickness had been found.

“At least you got to work today. All I did was sit around your quarters being hovered over. Not that I didn’t appreciate the concern.” Kira remarked with equal parts annoyance and gratitude.

“Nobody gets to complain about their day in front of me. If I never see another Lurian with multiple stomach flu again. It’ll still be too soon.” Julian muttered.

Of any of them, the doctor looked the most frazzled by his day.

“You win.” The other three muttered in unison before the ones capable of drinking pulled their glasses back.

“So have you guys…Ya know…” Always a gossip hound, Jadzia wiggled her brows as her eyes
went wide. She was referring of course to the databooks they’d all received that morning.

“I have. I mean, what else was I going to do all day since no one would let me do any other work.” Kira replied.

“And?” Jadzia wanted to discuss it.

“And I don’t think we should be talking about this here,” Julian interjected as he put on his best scolding professional face.

“How is the good doctor, today anyway? He ran out of the meeting so quickly this morning. I didn’t know what to make of him.” Miles asked in an attempt to change the subject.

“Busy. Gaven got all of the regular load in the infirmary that I didn’t have time to handle. He left about the same time I did.” Julian said.

“I think he’s on a date this evening,” Jadzia speculated.

“A date? With whom?” Miles asked. He was finding it difficult to imagine a man like Gaven doing any such thing.

“An alien woman who’s been visiting the station. I haven’t had the pleasure of an introduction, but it would seem our Dr. Ore is getting to know her pretty well. It's the fourth time I’ve seen him with her in the Promenade. Don’t look but he’s sitting with her right now on the second floor.” Jadzia gently indicated with a knowing smile on her face to a spot several feet behind and above Miles.

Miles was polite enough not to turn his head, and Jadzia and Kira didn’t have to because they were facing the right direction and needed only to look up. Julian, however, did turn his head to look up at them and wasn’t surprised to see Gaven sitting very close to the woman with one hand holding her upper arm as he seemed to make slow, small talk making signs with his other hand and looking relaxed and pleasant.

“I doubt that’s what you think it is, Dax.” Julian muttered as he pulled his eyes away feeling suddenly annoyed by what he saw.

“Well, whatever it is he looks a hell of a lot happier just now then I've seen him,” Kira noted. “Maybe he’s made a friend.”

“Are you all daft? This Ore fellow is a person, you know. I’m sure he doesn’t appreciate everyone gossiping about him every five minutes. I thought we were here to relax? Come on, Julian. Let's get in a few games of darts. I’ve still got my wife to get home to yet.” Miles muttered, feeling as if they were all children again making googly eyes at the new boy in class.

“I second that notion,” Julian muttered. “Ado, ladies. You can join us if you like.”

“Are you kidding?” Kira replied as she leaned back in her chair and reminded everyone that the last thing she wanted to do in her condition was to stand around throwing things.

Everyone laughed as the foursome split up into pairs.

Once the men had left Kira narrowed her eyes knowingly at Jadzia. “Since the men are otherwise disposed of, what to come back to my place and do a little light reading?”

“You read my mind. Let me call Worf and tell him not to wait up.” Jadzia replied.
Half an hour later Jadzia and Kira were enjoying a well-deserved girls night in Kira’s quarters.

“So which parts did Dr. Ore organize for you?” Kira asked as she lounged on one of her sofa’s while Dax leaned against it while sitting on the floor.

“Dr. Ore sent me the sections he transcribed that cover the Oum’s limited contact with other species and their early historical attempts at space travel. It includes a lot about the planet’s ecology, and planetary make up. There’s also an extensive amount on the planets flora, fauna, and animal life and a large section regarding the city Dr. Our lived in and other notable landmarks. You?” Jadzia asked.

“Sections on the socio-political atmosphere and some of the cultural elements,” Kira sighed. “Frankly I’m finding it all hard to wrap my head around. The literature implies the Oum has been around for hundreds of thousands of years. All that culture and progress and all this time practically no one knew they were there.” She said.

“You want to know what I’ve realized more than anything else?” Kira asked.

“What?” Jadzia said.

“According to what I’ve read so far and been able to surmise. By Oum standards, Dr. Ore is a criminal. I mean a big one. Never mind whether we’re skirting the Federation’s Prime Directive, here. Dr. Ore has blatantly gone out of his way to commit the biggest cultural betrayal possible. His very existence here has defied every effort his people have made in the last ten thousand years to remain isolated and apart from the rest of the universe. He’s a traitor, and yet we’re treating him like…”

“Our lives depend on him?” Jadzia offered.

“Yeah.” Kira agreed. “I don’t really know what to make of it. I mean it should matter, shouldn’t it? And yet, its almost like it doesn’t matter at all.”

“Want to know what I don’t understand? Everything you just said is true. He is a traitor to his people. But he only became one after they exiled him off the planet. None of it would have ever occurred if they’d kept him on their world. He had to have done something else that upset his people, first. The rest feels almost like retaliation on his part.” Jadzia speculated.

“There’s a lot in here. I mean I’ve been reading these all day, and I’ve barely scratched the surface. The Oum is a staunchly organized culture. Highly advanced. And yet there are elements in their culture that feel appalling. They have a complex social order, with people like Dr. Ore at the bottom. He’s worded it very carefully and respectfully but what he’s implying is that people like him are like…Like slaves. They’re not allowed to hold any societal rank, and they’re owned like property. Bought and sold to whoever can afford them. Treated aesthetically less than their counterparts who fit more traditional expectations of appearance and ability.” Kira said empathetically, no doubt drawing emotional comparisons between the none-mutated Oum’s role to how the Cardassians had treated the Bajoran's during the Occupation of Bajor.

“Maybe he’s justified then.” Jadzia offered.

“The heartbreaking part is that it seems very clear that given his way Dr. Ore would have never left his planet. He misses his people and mourns not being apart of them anymore. I feel bad for him.” Kira admitted.

“I think we all do, Kira. To some degree or another. How could anyone not relate in some way? No matter what he’s done, I feel as if at the end of it he’s a good man. We may never know the exact
reason he was expelled from Oum; but I want to believe the reason, no matter how outrageous in his own people's minds, is something most of us wouldn't consider being criminal behavior. Since the Oum has expelled him, I would think he's no longer subject to their laws, though I would imagine it must be difficult for him to let go of his people's customs.” Jadzia said thoughtfully.

“In any case, I can understand his fascination for others outside of himself. Reminds me a little bit of Odo, actually.” Kira smiled at the thought.

“That it does.” Jadzia agreed. “Look how well Odo’s time from his people has turned out.”

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The next few days on Deep Space 9 passed without any notable activity. Everyone seemed inclined to stick to their work and the free time of the senior officers was consumed with a great deal of private reading about subjects they weren’t allowed to discuss openly. In this time Julian and Gaven stayed away from each other, or at least it seemed as if they rarely had any reason to cross paths during their workday. Though no one else would have guessed, Julian couldn’t help but feel as if the other Doctor was actively ignoring him and trying to keep himself away. As for Julian’s part, he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do about it. On the upside, Gaven did seem noticeably lighter in recent days. He was quick to smile, and although he still talked very little, people saw him out and about more, walking through the promenade or always sitting in a more private part of Quark’s either alone or occasionally with the Red alien woman some of the people suspected he had taken a more personal interest in. All in all, Julian was pleased by all this. But apart of him still felt like he was being shut out.

Finally, after fourteen days of little to no contact and after absorbing about half of what Gaven had organized for the Doctor to read Julian decided it was high time to break the silence between them. Under the guise of following up with Gaven as a patient, Julian went to see him once more in his quarters since Gaven had been in and out of the infirmary too much for Julian to find enough time to speak to him while he was working.

Julian’s unexpected visit caught the other Doctor in the middle of what appeared to be him packing.

“Hello, Doctor. Was there something I could help you with?” Gaven asked nonchalantly upon letting Julian into his quarters.

“Well, I just, um, excuse me; may I ask? Are you going somewhere?” Julian hadn’t been sure what he was going to say to Gaven when he arrived, but now he found himself entirely distracted by the apparent fact that the other man looked to be packing for a trip.

“Yes. I’ve asked permission from the Capitan to take a few weeks to travel to Gulba 4. It's not a Federation planet, but its people are in open talks with the federation about being allowed to apply. That’s what the Gulba emissary was here for, she was planning to meet with a Starfleet delegation nearby to discuss the matter. She’s ready to return to her, but she grew concerned that her child would become ill again on the journey. I’ve offered to act as her Gulm Jabib; her attendant in case the child becomes ill again in transit. I outlined all of this in writing for you two days ago. Didn’t you notice it?” Gaven asked genuinely surprised.

It took Julian longer than it should have to realize Gaven was referring to the tall red alien that had brought its offspring into the infirmary awhile back. “No, I must have missed it. You do realize, Captain’s approval or not; I have to agree that you’re medically fit to go on such an extended trip especially if you plan to let that child hang attached to you the entire time.” Julian muttered in that suspicious tone he got when he felt like someone was trying to pull something on him.
“Yes. Why do you think I outlined the mission for you and left it on your desk for approval?” Gaven pointed out. “I would have almost thought you came by to give me a physical if it weren’t for the fact that you could have done it just as easily in the infirmary.”

Julian detected that Gaven was intentionally trying to sound coy and he wasn’t amused by it. “Well as long as I stopped by let’s have at it, shall we?”

“As you like, doctor.” Gaven put his folded shirt down and opened his arms palms out facing towards Julian.

Digging his medical tricorder out and a few other gadgets from the med bag he always carried with him, Julian got to work recording the man’s vitals.

“Right. Any numbness in the limbs, muscle weakness or unusual fatigue?” He began.

“No,” Gaven responded.

“Diet the same? Activity level?” He pressed.

“No changes, average activity.” Gaven continued.

“Have you felt depressed, hopeless, or had any thoughts of hurting yourself or others in the last thirty days?” Julian challenged.

“I’ve been sad, unhappy, but not suicidal. Lately, I’ve felt better compared to when I first arrived. Useful. Optimistic, even.” Gaven admitted.

Julian paused for a moment in anticipation for what he was about to ask next.

“What about the nightmares?” Julian asked, steeling himself for how Gaven might choose to answer.

For Gaven’s part, he knew he couldn’t lie. Had Julian not caught him in the middle of one of his nightly episodes he might have tried but he knew he couldn’t avoid the issue now and he knew Julian had waited for some time wanting to talk about it.

“There’s always going to be nightmares in the night for me, Doctor. My losses are great, and I can’t deny I feel the memory of them keenly all the time. But I need you to trust me when I say I have it under control.” Gaven spoke with authority now looking straight into Julian’s eyes to prove he wasn’t ashamed even if a vulnerable part of him had been exposed.

“I don’t like the idea of you leaving the station,” Julian said bluntly. “But if you promise me you’ll allow me to arraign a treatment plan to confront your night terrors and other traumatic experiences I’ll sign off with my approval.”

“No.” Gaven sad just as bluntly.

“No?” Julian’s brow raised the way it might as if he was dealing with a surprisingly defiant child.

“No?” Julian’s brow raised the way it might as if he was dealing with a surprisingly defiant child.

“I’m not going to allow you to use something private about me as a bargaining chip, Julian,” Gaven said evenly. “If you want to use my mental state as a justification for why I shouldn’t be allowed to go on this trip then write it into a report, submit it, and then argue it with the captain after; but don’t you ever try to blackmail me. I’m not a Starfleet officer or your subordinate. I will deal with my grief and anything else disturbing to me in accordance with my cultural traditions and my conviction. Do you understand?”
“Just what are those cultural traditions and disturbing things?” Julian demanded growing cross at the notion of being accused by Gaven of overstepping his authority. “I didn’t need to be there that morning to know you’re in unspeakable pain and that it affects every facet of your life. Do you think I’m the only one that can see it? We can all feel how acutely you’re suffering. Everyone leaves you alone with it because no one wants to pry into your private life. Don’t you see I can’t do that? That as a doctor and a compassionate human being I have to take notice and try to do something about it? If you genuinely have a better method than I do at helping you cope with your experiences, then fine. But either you’re not utilizing those methods, or they’re not working, and in any case, it worries me that your so damn intent upon holding onto it all so tightly.”

“What do you know about any of it, Doctor?” Gaven asked sternly. “You hardly know what my experiences have been or how the Oum’s emotional processing works. So you have a bit more insight into my private life. It certainly wasn’t something I wanted you to see, and if I’d had any good sense at all, you wouldn’t have. Oh, and since we’re on the subject of things you don’t seem to understand, allow me to enlighten you. All I’ve done since encountering other cultures is being shoved around, interrogated, prodded at, and held against my will. So far I’ve expended a great deal of patience to everyone regarding the business but mark me when I say that my patience has its limits. I would almost prefer that the Federation and everyone else treat me like a proper prisoner than this backhanded hospitality I’m spoon fed. Don’t think for one second that it hasn’t occurred to me that my rights such as they are here and now are an illusion. As a refugee, I don’t have any rights. I have become a pawn, caught up in a war of worlds that I have nothing personally to do with. Don’t you see, this trip is an opportunity for me to do something for myself?”

Julian didn’t say anything for a while. For the first time, it occurred to him that Gaven was caught up in a strange kind of game that felt wrong to him somehow. Julian could well imagine that the Federation was using him and that everything Gaven had just related was likely correct. While Julian felt as if something was terribly wrong with the entire situation he found he didn’t have enough hard information to fully understand the scope of Gaven’s position or what could and couldn’t be done about it.

“You know,” Julian said at length. “It’s often really hard for me to remember that you’re not actually human.”

“I know. Would it help if I had a tail?” Gaven quipped suddenly, effectively starting to break up the tension between them.

“It just might,” Julian muttered only half joking. “Mind if I sit for a second?”

Gaven nodded and indicated to a nearby chair while they both took a few minutes to calm down.

“Can I ask you something? Why are you really doing any of this? At some point, you must have had a choice.”

“I suppose you’re wondering why I didn’t just keep to myself when I got rescued?” Gaven said as he resumed his packing. “Looking back, I wish I had. Anonymity seems to be a significant form of protection among most people, I’ve discovered. Maybe, I may have been more protective of myself if the Vulcan’s hadn’t found me first. Their unique telepathic abilities saved my life and also left me exposed.” Gaven explained.

“Did you mind meld with one of them?” Julian was back in his information gathering Doctoring mode.

“Yes.” Gaven nodded. “The experience was... Unique. Though in some ways similar to my own people’s sharing abilities. The Vulcan’s were cautious with me after that and did everything in their
power to bring me back into myself. For a while, they thought it better that I remain in stasis until I sufficiently healed here."

Gaven tapped at his temple with one finger.

"Unfortunately, I was forced out of stasis when the freighter I was on ran into a bit of trouble," Gaven said grimly.

"Yes. You mentioned something about that.” Julian muttered.

“The freighter was on the edge of the Delta quadrant when they received my summonings. They didn’t have to investigate, but they obviously felt that it was of some importance that they did. Oum is located near the quadrant border. Once I was retrieved they made a new route to the closest science vessel intending to pass me on where decided if it would be prudent to bring me directly to Vulcan. But the freighter was interrupted in route by a Breen ship that decided to engage them.” Gaven explained.

Julian visibly shuddered at the mentioning of the Breen.

"I do not doubt that the Breen intended to destroy the freighter outright until their scans picked up my signature. After that the Breen immediately disengaged.” Gaven said.

"Why?” Julian wrinkled his nose.

“The Dominion has a no-contact agreement with my species. Once the Breen identified what I was, they had no choice but to disengage.” Finished with his packing for the moment, Gaven finally sat as well.

“Unbelievable,” Julian said shaking his head.

“When I got to Vulcan there was a Federation representative already there to meet me. At least that was the belief. I was familiar by then with your species. So far as the Vulcan database would allow. It’s interesting how they write about humans by the way.” Gaven remarked. “At any rate, I was given a choice to stay with the Vulcans or go with Starfleet. I agreed to go with the representative, a mistake in hindsight.” Gaven’s voice trailed off slightly, and he briefly broke eye contact with Julian indicating he didn’t like thinking about whatever it was his story was reminding him of.

“What happened?” Julian had a horrible feeling all of a sudden.

Whoever the man was, he wasn’t a Starfleet representative. Though I was made to believe as were the Vulcans that he was. At some point, I was subdued against my will and taken off planet. I was then promptly held against my will and interrogated.” Gaven said his tone and expression implying that the “interrogation” he’d undergone had been violent.

“But I thought Starfleet transitioned you directly from the Vulcan Freighter to Deep Space Nine?” Julian asked confused.

“An inconvenient but necessary lie,” Gaven admitted. “What’s true is I was on a Vulcan Freighter and in Stasis for three months. Then the Breen attacked. We spent another three months trying to get back to Vulcan. When we did, I was only there a few days before I was kidnapped. My assailant kept me nearly three months before he deemed me sufficiently useful to the plight of Earth and the Alpha Quadrant. Only then was I released into Starfleet’s custody. My treatment up to that point was…overlooked. Once in Starfleet's custody, I knew I had to protect my interests and so I saw no other choice but to disclose further. I can’t prove who abducted me, Julian. But its become clear to me that someone very powerful and human is keeping tabs on me and my only hope of real freedom
someday is to make sure they are not the only ones keeping those tabs."

“Unbelievable,” Julian’s mind reeled at the prospect that Dr. Gaven Ore was quite possibly at the center of a true blue spy game.”Does the captain have any idea about any of this?”

“Yes. And the captain has agreed to monitor the situation. Deep Space 9 may prove to be the closest thing to a true refuge I have. However, I am a scientist. I can’t ignore my natural leanings towards personal discovery. If I’m going to be at the beckoning and call of Starfleet, then I am at least going to press my advantages where I find them. I’m personally very interested in the people of Gulba 4. If it proves suitable, I might make the world my home someday if I live that long. Do you understand now, Julian?”

“About your trip? Yes. About everything else…” Julian widened his eyes and held his breath.

“Please don’t share what I’ve told you about my real situation. Its imperative no one else knows.” Gaven said.

“Right, right. My lips are sealed. And anyway, it's so convoluted who would believe me if I said anything?” Julian said sardonically.

Gaven’s mouth turned up, but it wasn’t a genuine smile. “Oh, I’d bet that you’d be surprised.”
There wasn’t much fan fair the next morning when Gaven prepared to depart for Gulba 4. Captain Sisko had wanted to keep a low profile though Kira, Jadzia, and Julian did drop by to see him off near the transport.

“Come back to us soon. OK? This baby may need an unbiased referee considering the number of people that are going to be involved.” Kira quipped taking Gaven by the hands and squeezing them supportively since she felt too uncomfortable in her body to go in for a hug.

“You owe me a fancy dinner party when you come back,” Jadzia muttered in the casual joking way she was known for that had a slight edge of seriousness to it. “Travel safe.”

Gaven was smart enough to let Dax hug him whether he wanted to be embraced or not.

“Kira’s right, we’ve been spoiled having a second doctor on the station with such good bedside manner. Once our regulars find out you’re gone, I won’t hear the end of it.” Julian tried to sound casual but failed somewhat. His quip was coming off as more half-hearted and crestfallen than upbeat because he still felt uncomfortable letting the man leave them just yet.

“I promise I’ll be back as quickly as I can. It seems I would risk disappointing several people if I overstayed my time. In any case, I have to make sure this little girl gets back home safe and sound. She’s going to be her people’s destined leader when she’s done growing.” Gaven said with a proud kind of tonality that spoke of a thick sort of intimacy between himself and the alien child who had been clinging to him while he said his goodbyes.

Kira and Jadzia exchanged glances with each other that expressed their surprise. While they had both been aware the Alien woman was on the station to start negotiations about entry into the Federation of planets; no one had realized that the child was an active and essential part of the delegation. They were also both caught off guard by the level of connection Gaven felt towards the Aliens even though Jadzia had been implying for weeks that he was developing in intimate rapport with one of them.

“Do you ladies mind if I speak to the Doctor alone for a few moments?” Gaven politely asked.

“Sure.”

“Of Course.”

Jadzia and Kira said at the same time overlapping each other.

Both women stiffened, and Kira nodded indicating Jadzia could go ahead and speak for them both. “We’ll have a coming home party for you when you get back. Take care of yourself, Dr. Ore.”

“We’ll just be over here…Julian.” Kira said in an amused fashion at their display. Both women then quickly backed off.

“You know, sometimes I think those two gush like school girls about you when we’re not around.” Julian theorized.

“Really? I would have thought they wouldn’t hold back on our account, Doctor.” Gaven dryly quipped as he adjusted the child more comfortably on his hip.
“I don’t think I need to remind you that I don’t approve of this. You’re not well, Gaven. Having that child latched to you for the duration of the trip to Gulba 4 could seriously speed the disintegration of your physical health by months. And, frankly, I don’t know if I can figure out an adequate treatment for you if you are not on the station for me to examine and test things on. I know the captain has given his blessing, but I’m speaking as your doctor and hopefully your friend when I say that I’m seriously concerned for you.” Julian said in a quiet pressing tone.

“You’re just going to have to trust in me, Doctor. And have faith in yourself. Sometimes some things are more important than one’s physical well-being. This trip, as far as you and I know is not going to kill me. This isn’t some feeble attempt to run away this time. This is me exerting my freedom and doing what’s right. I need this mission, Julian. This may be the only thing I do that is of my own desire and free choice. Plus, I believe this trip will help me in other ways I can’t explain to you right now. I know you don’t approve and your reasons are sound, but do me the small favor of pretending like everything is going to be fine and you’re going to pull off an extravagant miracle of modern science while I’m gone like you seem to do so often. I know if you put your mind to it, you’ll make significant strides in your efforts and you’ll make it look a lot harder to pull off than it actually is for someone like you or me.” Gaven said in an equally low tone of voice that, by the end, caused Julian to stiffen visibly despite his usual ability to hid it when someone genuinely saw something about him he did not want them to see.

At that, the alien emissary put her hand on Gaven’s side and gently led him away so that he missed the bulk of Julian’s internal reaction to the end of what he’d said to him.

“I don’t have a good feeling.” Julian muttered to himself as he dragged himself into an about-face and forced himself to walk in the other direction towards where Kira and Dax had moved away. Julian realized Gaven had made him feel exposed to the degree that he didn’t dare reveal in any visible way outside of what appeared to be a general concern for the good doctor. It was unnerving how easily Gaven achieved this and how frequently. Even Garak who was famously perceptive had not caught on to Julian’s secrets. Gaven though seemed to notice what the others did not and it made Julian wonder sometimes.

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In the several weeks Gaven was gone from Deep Space 9, several significant things happened.

Sisko, Odo, Dax, and Garek were accidentally caught up in an involuntary attempt by Odo’s mind to “link” causing them to get an all too real glimpse of the Cardassian’s occupation of Bajor.

In another incident, Odo and Quark had nearly died of exposure when they crashed landed on a desolate planet.

And in another incident still, Captain Sisko began seeing visions warning against Bajor’s admittance into the Federation of Planets. The visions nearly killed him.

Kira’s life was also put into jeopardy when she was abducted for her role in an incident that killed innocent Cardassians.

All of these events Gaven was excluded from being apart of and knowing about, and it was probably for the best that he had missed the various parties. His own business of Gulba 4 was as mysterious and unknown to those on Deep Space 9 as their antics were to him. Gaven’s personal experiences were also less dramatic though possibly just as impactful, and when it was time to return to Deep Space 9 finally, Gaven was sad to go but also purposeful in his departure.

His return also was no less comfortable than any of the other’s experiences had been. Julian’s predictions about his health deteriorating had come true, and when he finally stepped off the transport
back onto the Station, there could be no doubt that he was indeed ill.

If his general appearance wasn’t enough to prove it, the significant numbness in his left leg that was producing a pronounced limp said enough.

At the time of his arrival Jadzia and Dax were the only ones able to get away from their duties to meet him and while both of them were happy he had returned both were as equally stunned by how he looked. One was just more diplomatic about it than the other.

“What in the hell? What have you been doing on Gulba 4, Gaven? You look like you should be on a med cart!” Jadzia disapprovingly proclaimed as she exchanged shocked looks with Kira and rushed forward.

Kira might have liked to come along with her, but her tummy was keeping her at a slower idle.

“You do look a little worse for the ware, doctor. Julian is going to kill you.” Kira muttered.

“Yeah right, like he doesn’t look half gone already!” Dax blurted.

“Peace, ladies. As you can see I’m still vertical so don’t write me off completely.” While he may have looked terrible, there was a notable sense of ease in Gaven’s manner and tone that hadn’t been there before. He seemed almost rested despite his emaciated and haggard state.

“We’re glad your back Dr. Ore,” Kira said warmly giving the man aside hug since she was too big around to come at him from the front.

Though she didn’t say anything, Kira felt the man briefly weigh her down more than usual. He was weaker than he looked she realized, though since he was still standing, she thought it better not to draw attention to this fact.

“And how is baby doing? Still enjoying itself, I see. I’m happy I got back in time. I was looking forward to being here for the birth. It’ll be my first one outside my planet. You will allow me the honor of assisting in whatever way I can, won’t you?” Gaven inquired.

“Are you kidding? I’m going to need a referee when this baby is ready to arrive. I am glad your back Doctor. Come on. Dax and I will walk you back to your rooms.”

“You will let me throw you a party when you’re set again, won’t you Doctor Ore?” Jadzia asked as they all walked together.

At this Kira gave Dax an exasperated look of disapproval and shook her head slightly.

Dax caught her expression and quickly corrected herself. “Oh. I mean. Nothing big or anything. Maybe just a little one. The stations pretty busy these days.”

“I’m sure I’ve missed a great many adventures. You all will have to fill me in.” Gaven said.”Jadzia, I was wondering if you could see that the cargo I brought back makes it to the lab in the infirmary and that my report gets to the captain. I think everyone will be pleased with the progress that’s been made, but I’ll talk about that later.”

Dax and Kira escorted Gaven as far as his quarters before he hugged them both and told them he’d speak to them in the morning to update the rest of the staff. The duo left him reluctantly to go about their various duties and secretly fret about him in their own ways.

When Kira and Dax were finally gone Gaven sighed heavily and shut his eyes. He was tired. It had
taken a great deal of effort to walk to his quarters, and the trip back to Deep Space 9 had been uneventful but long. Indirect pain pulsed down one leg while the other ached with the strain of having to support more of his body weight. Limping over to his favorite sofa, Gaven fell into it more than sat and took a few moments to collect himself. Everything felt strained as if his immune system were running out of steam and might break down. For all his physical troubles Gaven felt happy for the first time in recent memory. He felt less haunted and more like his old self before his world had utterly fallen apart. He felt like he could be content now even if he failed to outlive his current situation.

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Julian was analyzing radiation samples when a call came through for him.

“Hello, Dr. Bashir. It's Dr. Ore. I’ve returned to the station. If you could pull yourself away from your work for a while and drop by my quarters, I would be most appreciative. Ore, out.”

Julian was expecting to hear when Gaven returned to Deep Space 9 and immediately a satisfied grin came upon his face at the knowledge. Though there had been much to keep the doctor occupied, Julian had noticed a kind of subtle boredom creep into his world. He missed having Gaven around maybe because more than anyone else, to Julian, Gaven felt like an equal to him. Even a rival in some ways since it was true that in some things Gaven did indeed eclipse him.

With a jovial skip in his step, Julian put away his work and took off for the rest of the day under the guise of having a pre-meeting with Gaven before their staff briefing in the morning.

His happiness however at their reunion was short-lived because the second he arrived and Gaven let him in all the good feelings he was building evaporated at the sight of the gravely ill Dr. Ore.

“Gaven…Gaven, what happened?” Julian immediately went into triage mode moving to the other doctor's side and cradling the side of his jaw with his hand to better examine the man’s pupils while he fumbled through his medical bag at their feet. On instinct, Julian began to pull his hand away so that he could tap his comm badge and signal a medical emergency.

But before he could do so, Gaven griped his lower arm and pulled it gently away from the com badge. “It’s all right Julian. I’m stable, just tired. I promise I will let you hem and haw over my disintegrating health later. We have things to talk about.”

“Don’t be so difficult. What you need is to be in the infirmary. How bad is it?” Julian had gone into complete assessment mode as he took out his tricorder and ran some vitals.


“Pain?” Julian pressed as he tested the muscles that ran from Gaven’s hip to his shin. He couldn’t feel any noticeable atrophy, but it was only a matter of time if the weakness persisted.

“No,” Gaven said. “Not related to this anyway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Did you maim yourself somewhere while you were away?” Julian demanded.

“Doctor, you really need to start reading the reports I send you. Here.” Gaven gingerly reached for his datapad and handed it to Julian.

Not even bothering to hide how quickly he could read, Julian skimmed the contents. “You did it.
There are enough samples here to generate inoculations for almost all essential crew. You used your tissues.”

“That was what we agreed would need to happen if the Oum wouldn’t cooperate which I can almost assure you will be the case,” Gaven remarked in that even way of his to calm the waters when he knew Julian didn’t approve.

“But why not do it here on Deep Space 9 if you were serious about going to that extreme?” Julian asked.

“The facilities on Gulba 4 were more than adequate, and besides I wanted some privacy. I’ve had the samples taken to the lab so that we can work on them together.” Gaven almost looked pleased about the business.

“Where did you pull the samples from?” Julian already knew but waited for Gaven to tell him any.

“My skin, obviously. Mostly from the back and upper legs. Some of it is still healing.” Gaven admitted.

“Come on. Let’s see.” Julian indicated for Gaven to turn and pull up his shirt.

Gaven braced himself for the impending outburst he knew was coming.

“Gaven, what the Hell is wrong with you? It doesn’t look like you used a regenerator on any of this. Don’t you realize the level of scaring that causes? Guh of course you do. That’s probably why you didn’t use one unless the advancements on Gulba 4 are really that inadequate. Some of this looks angry. Your lucky you haven’t gotten a staph infection or worse by now. And what is that smirking expression about?” Julian said as he pressed his lips together and glared at the other doctor.

“Nothing. I’m sorry. You’re right.” Gaven tried to school his expression into something resembling remorse but failed.

“You think this is funny? You bloody alien. I’m done trying to understand you today.” Julian rose up out of his kneeling position and waved his hands dismissively while he stepped back into the room.

“I’m sorry.” Gaven chuckled lightly. “I know it's hard to understand, Julian. I just…I feel happy. Doing this has made me happy. I don’t know why. I feel better than I have in a long time. Relieved, even.”

“Feel like you’ve paid your pound of flesh, I suppose.” He muttered knowing full well Gaven probably wouldn’t get the reference.

“Penance of a dying man maybe,” Gaven said lightly though with a more serious edge.

Julian sighed and walked back towards Gaven before sitting down beside him.”You’re not a bad person, Gaven. I don’t care what went on when you were back on your home planet. You deserve a fulfilling and healthy life, and we’re going to find a way to help you. I promise.”

“Any progress with the poly radiation research?” Gaven inquired.

“Per your recommendations, we’ve calibrated one of the shuttles to resist the poly radiation, but further testing needs to be done to measure how effective the shielding will be. Until I can get my hands on something infused with the radiation, our best plan of action would be to inoculate a small research team and send them into your system to study the radiation first hand.” Julia explained.
“Is the captain still planning to contact the Oum?” Gaven inquired.

“Yes though I think he’s been waiting on your return to make an effort. They are your people after all.” Julian replied.

“We need to avoid enlightening them to the fact that I’m alive and in the Federation’s custody.” Gaven’s tone had dipped off again into a more serious mental space.

“That sounds almost optimistic of you.” Julian quipped.

“While I find it almost impossible to believe the Oum would answer any hails sent their way, the nature of my predicament with them has encouraged me to keep an open mind.” Gaven smiled a little through his evident exhaustion.

“I know you won’t let me drag you into the infirmary right now, but would you at least be willing to let me give you some vitamin injections and a pain reliever? After the briefing, I’d also like to take a closer look at that weakness in your leg. We can probably brace it for now so that you’re not dragging yourself all over the place without support.” Julian negotiated.

It occurred to Julian that though the other doctor was resistant to being ordered about, he was usually willing to comply with most of Julian’s wishes if he worded it in the form a question.

“Of course, Doctor.” Gaven said as he settled more into the sofa and was entering some information into his datapad.

Despite Gaven’s swiftly declining health, Julian noted with some satisfaction that he did seem much better psychologically than he’d been when he’d left. Perhaps, Julian admitted in his mind; it had been short-sighted of him to try and stop him from taking his trip. Whatever the cause of the man’s change of spirit, Julian was happy for him as a renewed sense of hope for the future settled in his chest.

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The next morning, everyone met again in the captain’s briefing room to give their updates. Per Julian’s suggestion, Gaven had begun a strong vitamin regiment and was now sporting a subtle leg brace and a forearm crutch for extra support. Beyond that, he looked a little off color but better than he had compared to the previous day.

“Good morning everyone. Let’s get right to it, shall we? We have a lot to catch Dr. Ore up on this morning. We’re all very pleased you’ve returned, Doctor.” Captain Sisko said warmly.

“Progress is being made on the force Field calibrations. We’re pretty much ready to configure a shuttle and give it a test run.” Dax said.

“The only problem is we have nothing to test it against,” Miles added. “If the planet Oum is on the border of Delta quadrant it’ll take a while to send a team out there in the range of the planet to try it first hand. And of course, we also have to go out there without tipping anyone off to what we’re up to.”

“Perhaps we can compromise and reach out to the Vulcan’s for assistance on the matter. They’ve been near the region before and may have data we can compare our own to regarding the shielding. They may even be willing to act as a beard while we send our people. I know based on everything we’ve been reading, it seems like a long shot to try and reach out to the Oum. But we won’t know exactly where we stand if we don’t. I think once Major Kira recovers from the baby, we’ll focus on
“In the meantime, Dr. Ore and I are ready to move forward with developing a vaccination for those directly exposed to Poly radiation. It won’t work in all cases such as with long term exposure, but in short exposure periods, we have good reason to hope for the best. We’re going to need tissue samples from numerous individuals to text against the poly infused samples Gaven obtained for us. Senior staff should be first and then those working in essential station areas.” Julian said.

“As for testing the poly radiation, the Vulcan’s may still have the container they found me in when they pulled me from space. Its external haul would be infused with poly radiation. If you’re certain we can create a bearer here on Deep Space 9, then we can start preliminary testing. The artifact is technically mine so they may be willing to borrow it to use or a piece of it and if not you could probably study it wherever it’s kept on Vulcan.” Gaven proposed.

“Sounds like progress. Will you compile a list of Vulcan associated, doctor?” Sisko requested.

“I’m compiling it as we speak. There.” Dr. Ore put down the datapad he’d been typing into.

“Good. I think everyone knows what your tasks are. Yes?” Sisko asked, glancing around the room.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Good. Let’s get on this people. Meeting adjourned.” Sisko said with an air of excitement that everyone else also felt.

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The rest of the day swiftly went on. Everyone was eager to get started on their projects because they saw how everything was beginning to take a tangible form. Word had come late in the day from the Vulcan representatives that they indeed still had the container they had found Gaven in and were comfortable with releasing it to Deep Space 9 with Gaven’s consent.

The remnants weren’t due to arrive for a few days, however, and so everyone focused on other tasks. Gaven also remained in his quarters at the request of Julian. Until they had enough volunteers, it seemed pointless to push the doctor to work more than he had to and for once Gaven didn’t argue with Julian about it.

Not surprisingly several of the station's officers dropped by to contribute their tissue samples so that Julian could at least get a small start on their project. Dax was one of the last to drop by.

“How’s it going so far?” Jadzia asked while she waited for Julian to finish taking the small tissue sample he needed.

“Fine, considering how hush shush we have to be about it. I have confidence we can make substantial progress in developing a vaccination. It has to be calibrated for everyone individually for now, but thankfully Deep Space 9 is one of the most diverse communities I’ve ever served on. It gives us an advantage in this case.” Julian admitted.

“I take it Dr. Ore provided the test tissue. That was…” Jadzia was cut off by Julain.

“Stupid. He didn’t need to go to that extreme. We could have done it gradually and far less invasive here on the station.” He said.

“You seem upset about the situation. I would have thought you of all people would be excited.” Dax
“Gaven’s health is unstable. As far as his time here goes on the station, I am his physician, and I would have never agreed with what he did to himself or the way he went about it.”

“Julain it had to be done,” Dax said reproachfully.

“Yes, yes. I know. I just wish Gaven hadn’t done it without me. I could have helped him, and maybe he wouldn’t have come out as worse for the wear. On some level he’s convinced he’s going to die over all this, maybe he’s even subconsciously trying to speed the inevitability along. I find it frustrating. I find him frustrating. I’ve never dealt with such a secret and stubborn man.” Julian lamented.

“At least he’s back now where we can all support him.” Jadzia sighed and adjusted herself so that she could get back to work for a few more hours. “I’m sure he didn’t mean to leave you out, Julian. Sometimes I think he just hates to be vulnerable especially in front of you. His respect for you is obvious. He trusts you may be more than any of us. But we can’t forget he’s still hurting over things we don’t fully understand.” Dax observed. “He has a right to be secretive and like I’ve said before if you want to know how he feels about things, so ask him. In the meantime, I’ve got work to do. Don’t think about it too hard. OK?” At that Dax pecked him on the cheek and hurried out without a second thought.
The next day it was Odo’s turn to be confronted with strange and uncomfortable feelings about where he stood with certain people. Much to his surprise Quark had shown up in the infirmary to present him with something he couldn’t say no to. A baby changeling, I Quarks possession no doubt because of one of his many shady deals.

At first neither he, Doctor Bashir, or Sisko knew what to make of the situation.

“Are you sure it poses no danger to us, Constable?” Sisko asked with both amazement and weight as he and Odo discussed the situation with Julian following along.

Odo found himself instantly alarmed by the question. “When I was first discovered, I didn’t know what I was. I had no memory of where I was from. I didn’t even know I had the ability to mimic other forms.”

“Why would the Founders send such helpless creatures out into space?” The thought seemed cruel to Sisko.

“To find out if the species they encountered posed any threat. What better way to gauge another race than to see how it treats the weak and vulnerable.” Odo offered.

“I see your point,” Sisko remarked as he allowed himself to consider the matter for a few seconds before going on. “How long before it can take humanoid form?”

At this question, Odo’s anxiety swelled slightly. “Several months. Why?”

“Well, there’s still a lot we don’t know about your people. The Changelings could provide Starfleet with invaluable information about the Dominion.” Sisko pointed out.

“With that being the case, I like to be allowed to work with it—to teach it how to shapeshift,” Odo said hastily.

“Oh, I can’t think of anyone better qualified.” Sisko agreed, though there was a quiver of hesitation in his tone. “You might just want a little help. Maybe you should contact Dr. Mora.”

Odo’s eyes widened at the suggestion which had caught him off guard. “Mora? Why?”

“Well, he managed to find a way to communicate with you. He obviously knows what he’s doing.” Sisko observed.

Odo wasn’t so sold on the matter, knowing the doctor better than the captain did. “Maybe so, but…I prefer to do this alone.”

“It's your call,” Sisko replied, accepting the other man’s resistance on the matter. Of course, he wasn’t about to just leave it at that, and before he left Odo alone, the captain turned at the last minute to leave a parting remark. “But, huh, it’s always nice to have someone around to help change the diapers.”

I’ll…keep that in mind.” Odo said with genuine consideration.

While he knew the captain was right, deep down he wondered if Sisko understood what he was asking and the underlying threat Odo sensed was on the horizon if the sick changeling lived. He
certainly needed help, but Dr. Mora wasn’t the first choice that came into his mind.

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“The purge was almost 100% effective. The concentration of isotopes is nearly negligible.” Dr. Bashir explained gently sometime later as he and Odo hovered over the container that contained the infant changeling’s sickly natural form.

“Well it certainly looks healthier,” Odo observed appraisingly.

“Well, I’d better go check on Kira. Did you hear? She in labor?” Bashir asked, realizing rather quickly that Odo’s attention couldn’t be swayed just then from anything other than his unexpected arrival. “I guess you have your own baby to think about.”

This last word did manage to penetrate as Odo straightened somewhat in response to the doctor’s choice of words. Was it true he was indeed acting like an anxious father? Odo didn’t have time just then to consider the deeper meaning within the possibility.

“There is still a small degree of instability in its morphogenic matrix. But I’m hoping it’ll level out. I’ve set the computer to monitor for biomimetic fluctuations just in case.” Julian reassured him as he prepared to leave.

Once alone, Odo began to converse with the changeling despite knowing it probably couldn’t understand him yet. Old hurt had swelled in him as memories of his painful beginning surfaced and a deep sense of protective hopefulness came over him with such strength he had no choice other than to embrace it.

“No. I’m not going to make the same mistakes with you that were made with me.” Odo found himself promising.

At that moment Odo gave himself over to the irrational love and connection he felt. Things were indeed going to be different this time. He would make sure of it.

“Come on.” He said almost breathlessly. “I want to show you something.”

Later after Odo had taken the changeling around to some of his favorite places, tell it about the station and promising that it could live there forever if it wanted, he returned to the med lab to give it more room.

Alone again with the changeling, Odo couldn’t help but regale it with awe and pride about what it was and what it could be someday. His love for it and the excitement of raising it to be everything it could be in spite of his deficiencies was gaining rapid momentum in the Constable’s mind. The more he felt and thought about it, the more he was determined to help and teach the changeling on his own without the interference of Mora or anyone else who might have possessed ulterior motives.

His conviction set when the doors of the isolation room opened and a familiar voice sliced through all of Odo’s lofty visions of what was to come.

“No!” Doctor Mora called in greeting as he intruded into the room.

“Dr. Mora. What are you doing here?” Ado demanded hardly believing his eyes.

Surprised by is tone, Dr. Mora approached him. “Well, I heard about the changeling. I came to help.”

After a short and testy conversation between the men about their specific intentions, both saw it wise
to leave the medical room for a while. Odo, in particular, was upset. Upset about everything and he wasn’t sure who to turn to with Dr. Bashir and Kira being occupied. With most of his most important allies unavailable, something finally occurred to him again that had crossed his mind earlier. Dr. Mora wasn’t the only one on the station outside of himself intimately familiar with the changelings. There was Gaven. Odo knew from past observations that Gaven would understand his position and feelings. He had to talk to him.

He had to talk to someone.

Gaven was in his quarter getting ready to drop in on Kira who had extended an invitation to assist Dr. Bashir during the delivery. He was surprised when his door rang, and a disgruntled Odo was let into his living quarters.

“Odo…What is it?” Gaven could tell something was wrong.

“If that man thinks…Of all the people. I just can’t believe this is happening.” Odo fumed.

“Odo, what?” Gaven was deeply concerned.

“What, haven’t you heard? Quark acquired a baby Changeling. It’s sick. It has been in the infirmary most of the day under the care of Dr. Bashir.” Odo explained.

Gaven looked about as stunned as Odo had in the beginning. “A baby changeling…Was Dr. Bashir able to stabilize its condition? What are they going to do with it?”

“Yes. It’s not completely out of the woods yet, but the Doctor was able to remove the radiation isotopes that had sickened it. And what do you think they’re going to do?” Odo asked.

“Well given my experience with Starfleet and their feelings on the Dominion, I’d say they’re going to do everything they can to exploit this opportunity,” Gaven said tensely.

“Not if I have anything to say about it, Doctor. I’m not about to let anyone poke and experiment on it like I was. To abuse it and treat it like a science experiment instead of the sentient life that it is. Dominion or not, this is just a baby. An infant. Barely aware of anything happening to it. Captain Sisko agreed to allow me to handle the situation as I saw fit and mark me when I say I still plan to do just that. But somehow the presence of the changeling has gotten back to someone I’d rather stayed the Hell out of it.” Odo explained.

“Who?” Gaven was doing his level best to stay calm and impartial.

“A Dr. Mora. Mora was the Bajoran scientist who discovered me. He’s here on the station thinking he is going to be involved in this. But the truth is I don’t want him anywhere near the changeling. I can’t tolerate the thought he might try one of his…tactics. Do you know he actually suggested that I wasn’t fit to teach the changeling? He likes to go around pretending he was a father when he was nothing but a too eager scientist back in the old days. He actually tried to manipulate the situation, dangling access to his knowledge about changeling development in front of me in exchange for his involvement all because he thinks he’s the only one that knows.” Odo fumed nearly on the verge of tears.

“I’m sorry he hurt you, Odo.” Gaven placed his hand upon the other man’s shoulder in support.

“What happened to me is…Irrelevant. His tests. I can teach the changeling to shapeshift without such a measure. Do you know that after all these years Dr. Mora isn’t even sorry?” Odo asked rhetorically.
“I’m sure that’s not completely true, but I believe he’d not think twice about making you believe it was. What can I do to help you?” Gaven asked.

“Your knowledge about the changelings is extensive, is it not?” Odo inquired with a tinge of hope.

“Yes.” Gaven pulled away and crossed his arms. “As you know my people hold the changeling species in highest regards. All of those of my culture are brought up with a basic understanding of them, and they are one of the few off-world species I was permitted to study at length.”

“Would you be willing to help me help the changeling in whatever way it needs?” Odo asked.

Gaven’s face flushed slightly. “It would be my pleasure to help you Odo in whatever way I can. Though it's important I not draw too much attention to myself. Kira has invited me to attend the birth of the O’Brien’s baby. I’m going there now but after I’ll make sure to check on the changeling and share my thoughts. I…I’m very happy for you, Mr. Odo. Congratulations.”

At that Gaven unexpectedly moved forward and gave Odo a brief hug before shaking his fists in his hand in a congratulatory gesture.

Though surprised by this Odo could almost feel how genuinely happy the other man was for him. It appeared that he’d come to the right person.

~@~

By the time Gaven parted with Odo and made his way to the birthing area that had been set up for Kira most of the excitement had already come and gone. It looked as if Kira wasn’t going to deliver that day at all. Gaven arrived just as the Bajoran midwife was on her way out.

“Well I hope I haven’t missed the excitement,” Gaven said, announcing himself to the assembly.

Kira’s face lit up when she saw him. “Oh, I almost forgot you were coming. Please come in, Dr. Ore. I want to introduce you to some people. I don’t know if you’ve formally met Keiko O’Brien and this is Shaakar Edom the first Minister of Bajor.”

“A pleasure to meet everyone. And what seems to be the trouble here? I was expecting to meet someone important today.” Gaven approached them coming up alongside Kira to hug her and acknowledge the unborn child still in her womb.

“We hit a snag.” Kira chuckled In spite of the situation.

“Traditional Bajoran births require the mothers to be completely relaxed in order to induce dilation fully,” Bashir explained as he finished putting away his tools.

“I see. May I?” Gaven requested indicating he wanted to see for himself the state of the child’s wellbeing.

“Of course.” Kira eagerly allowed him to press gently upon her swollen stomach knowing he could link directly to the child.

Seeing this seemingly intimate act, Shaakar Adom cleared his throat slightly.

“Well, the baby is happy even if the rest of you aren't. I anticipate at least another week or two.” Gaven remarked.

“God, that’s what the midwife said.” Keiko blurted trying to cover up her apprehensions with
supportive positivity. “We’re all very excited.”

“Of course. This is just for-shadowing for happy days to come.” Gaven agreed.

Before the conversed further, Shaakar Odom gently excused himself. “I still need to go re-arrange those plans. I’ll check in on you later if I can.”

“Oh OK,” Kira said allowing Shaakar to kiss her on the temple.

“Well if you don’t need us I think we’re going to go back to our quarters. I’m sure you’ll join us later Kira?” Keiko said.

“What? Are we already going? But I was just starting to get the hang of this cymbal-” When Kira wasn’t looking Keiko kicked Miles lightly in the shin signaling him to follow here. “I mean, I suppose I could use a little more practice. We’ll see you later.”

When everyone had gone except Kira and Gaven, Kira sighed heavily. “Why do I get the impression everyone is suddenly mad at me?”

“Not mad, just disappointed. Come on. I’ll help you off that bed. I take it that Bajorans don’t believe in bed rails.” Gaven quipped.

“Har Har. It's not like I want to be pregnant any longer than I have to be. None of this was my idea, you know? I mean I never imagined myself having my own children, and now I’m completely responsible for the well being of someone else’s. Have you ever thought about having children, Dr. Ore?” Kira got the rest of the way to her feet and leaned heavily on Gaven for temporary support.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. I did plan to have children.” Gaven hesitated. “My counterpart on Oum and I were in the final planning stages.”

“Oh no. Please. I'm not insensitive, am I?” Kira asked a little taken back.

It was the first time she’d ever heard Gaven talk about his personal life in this way.

“No Major, it's fine. It's in the past. Clearly, my life went in an unexpected direction.” Gaven shrugged and began to walk her out. “But yes, once upon a time having a child was very important to me.”

“Well for the record. I think you would have made for a wonderful parent.” Kira wobbled to the door along with Gaven. “What am I going to do? I have to go back there and face the O'briens.”

“They do understand, Kira. But I tell you what; I have a surprise for you and Keiko that might make you both feel better.” Gaven hinted.

When they got back to the O'brien’s quarters it was clear in spite her best efforts to cover it up that Keiko had been crying, no doubt overwhelmed with deep disappointment she hadn’t wanted to take out on Kira.

“Mr. And Mrs. O'Brien, do you mind if I come in for just a second?” Gaven asked after he’s released Kira from his arm.

“Huh, of course, Doctor Ore. We were about to put supper on.” The chief looked almost grateful to see Gaven maybe because the presence of the other man made him feel less outnumbered after such an emotional ordeal.
“Oh yes please eat with us, Doctor.” Keiko insisted, ever the gracious host.

“Another time. Thank you. I know this is an exhilarating and stressful time for all of you. Chief, I was wondering if I could barrow Keiko and Kira for a little bit. If it won’t delay your meal too long.”


“I don’t know what he’s planning, but I suspect it’s a good thing,” Kira assured her.

“Since I think none of us got what we wanted today, I thought I might offer a present to you ladies since I missed out on the celebration when I left. In my travels and studies of other life forms I’ve discovered a few talents of my own along the way.” Gaven said.

Kira gasped lightly. “I know what this is. Gaven, are you sure?”

Gaven smiled lightly while briefly shutting his eye. “I suspect Keiko can be trusted.”

“Just what the Hell are you all going on about?” Miles asked feeling as if he wasn’t being let in on a joke.

“Gaven has a particular talent. A telepathic predisposition. It’s one of the reasons he’s such a good doctor. I think he wants to help us talk to the baby.” Kira offered.

“What? You can do that?” Miles asked in disbelief.

“Something like that. It’s more biological than psychic, but now that the baby is farther along it isn’t difficult. All three of you already have a biological and emotional link with the child. I can help you open a channel. Come on. Everyone sit down.”

Miles and Gaven helped Kira lower herself onto the sofa before Miles and Keiko took a seat on either side of her. Gaven carefully took a position on the coffee table in front on of them with his crutch down on the floor.

“Alright. I’m going to open the channel first with Kira and once it’s established you both can join in.” Gaven explain.

“What do we do?” Miles asked.

“Wait for my word and then rest a hand on the baby. You should feel a rush and then you’ll be connected. It may feel uncomfortable for a moment, but I promise the discomfort will subside.” Gaven reassured them.

Everyone got in position, and after a few moments with Gaven forming the link he exhaled sharply and nodded. “Now.”

Both miles and Keiko gently placed one hand on either side of Gaven’s and waited. Sure enough within second Keiko gasped and her eyes went wide and began to well with unshed tears.

“Oh my god. Miles…” Keiko stared at her husband who had a surprised look on his face only not as intensely as his wife had.

‘It’s happy. I can actually feel what it’s feeling.” Miles muttered.

“The connect goes both ways. The baby can feel your love for it. It knows who you are and can recognize you.” Gaven quietly explained since he had to maintain his focus.
“It’s like he’s inside me still. It feels so real. I’m so happy to be your mommy.” Keiko said to the unborn child.

“Everyone here loves you,” Kira said as she tried her best to keep her composure.

“We’re going to see you soon my fine boy,” Miles promised.

Gaven held the link for several minutes before fatigue forced him to disengage. Miles caught him by the arm to steady him as he pulled away since it seemed as if Gaven was at risk of passing out.

Coming entirely into himself a satisfied smile broke out on his face. “Well, I think my work here is done. Please, carry one everyone and have a good supper. I must be away. I still have another house call to make today.”

Carefully Gaven got to his feet only to be instantly seized first by Keiko who thanked him and kissed him on the cheek and then by Miles who gripped his forearm to shake it with sincere gratitude. Kira just laughed at this display as she saw Gaven blush intensely at the shows of appreciation and affection.

“Yes. It was my pleasure. Kira, I’ll be sure to be there when it’s time.” Gaven promised.

“I think it’s safe to say you’ll be more than welcome.” Kira chuckled and encouraged Gaven to bend down so she could give him a parting hug. “Thank you for what you did.”

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Though tired, Gaven had one more stop to make. He wanted to see the young changeling for himself.

The moment Gaven entered the isolation room he gasped at the sight of the changeling sitting in its container and unexpected tears welled up in his eyes.

Julian had just finished his last surgery for the day and also came to check on the changeling when he saw the emotional expression on the other doctor’s face.

“Gaven, are you alright?” Julian asked idly trying to pretend he hadn’t noticed how moved the other doctor was.

Gaven let out a sigh. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath until Julian interrupted him. “All my life I’ve studied them, doctor. Never once in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would meet one. And now I’ve met two and one a newling. Doctor, this may be one of the finest moments of my life.”

“You sound like Odo,” Julain remarked.

“I’m sure. Speaking of, Odo told me the changeling was sick with radiation exposure.” He mused.

“Tetryon radiation. I’ve successfully purged it of the isotopes, and it’s stable now or nearly so.” Julian explained.

“Mm. There could be residual damage the equipment isn’t seeing.” Gaven remarked.

“How do you propose we test for it? I’ve done about as much as can do already.” Julian frowned.

“If there’s a problem at this stage it’ll be on the cellular level. Since radiation damages, cell walls and
changeling’s rely on their ability to manipulate their cell structures when shapeshifting we need to develop a treatment in the event something goes awry. Luckily we have Odo.” Gaven remarked.

“Odo can’t change form. They’ve altered something preventing his morphing abilities.” Julain reminded him.

Genetically he’s still a changeling. Granted it would be much easier if Odo could link with it. We could keep them together long enough for the baby to repair and duplicate its genetics off of Odo’s genetic framework. Baring that I can develop a therapy to do the same thing if we need it.” Gaven explained.

“Well, you are the resident expert at alien genetics. If anyone has a solution, you would.” Coming around the table, Julian briefly scanned Gaven.”You seem tired today. Maybe it’s wise to put off further doctoring until tomorrow. Just a suggestion.”

“I agree. I’ll see you later, Doctor.” Gaven lingered a moment longer to gaze at the changeling before he took his leave.

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Later, Julian had agreed to meet up with miles for after dinner drinks.

“I’m telling you, Julian. It was incredible. The experience made Keiko’s day.” Miles discreetly remarked happily having relayed what Gaven had done for them earlier. “He’s a strange kind of man. Isn’t he?”

“No more strange than any compassionate person, I would say. Though sometimes I do think he overcompensates.” Julian remarked throwing one of the darts in his hand and making sure it landed well but not too well.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Miles asked.

“I don’t know. Gaven just always wants to be so helpful. He is always inserting himself into everyone's situations. Always ready with just the right talent or a bit of knowledge or a kind word. But does he genuinely ever share himself with anyone? No. Has he mentioned to anyone what he did while he was away on Gulba 4? No. He went and came back, and that was that. Sometimes I wonder under all that politeness and accommodating grace if there isn’t someone else there.” Julian pointed out.

“Well even if that’s true, he can’t really share much. Can he? Half of everything is shush shush, the rest is nothing but pain and torment for him it seems. I mean what exactly do you want from the man?” Miles inquired.

“I want him to be…Less perfect.” Julian admitted.

“You mean more human.” Miles corrected him. “As far as I can tell the man is pretty buttoned up. Except when he’s working or paying house calls I seldom see him out on the promenade or conversing with anyone outside of the senior staff. I mean, he’s got no real friends.” Miles noted.

“That’s not true. I’m Gaven’s friend. Kira and Dax adore him and see him every chance they get.” Julain protested.

“Look, all I’m saying is there’s a right bloody difference between being friendly and available to folks and actually being their friend. That man’s got himself over a barrel with Starfleet. If he’s not 100% cooperative what do you think would happen?” Miles asked.
“I see your point. Reminds me a lot of Garek.” Julian remarked.

“Yeah well, all I know is that he helped smooth over an otherwise very stressful situation today. I don’t want to sound ungrateful…” Miles began.

“But this arraignment with the baby and Kira would have never been your first choice. I understand. Kira knows that too. We all need to be as kind as possible to each other about it because once the baby is here none of it will really matter.” Julian reassured him.

“At least I’m not the only one having parental problems. What exactly are we going to do with this changeling on board?” Miles inquired.

“Take care of it. Raise it well. I think Odo is warming to the idea of playing the father.” Julian replied throwing another dart.

“You really think it’s going to be that easy do ya? That the federation is just going to let a changeling grow up here without any interference what so ever. I’m amazed they haven’t already whisked it away by now.” Miles pointed out.

“The Changeling is an innocent sentient life form. It hardly knows what it is yet.” Julian argued.

“Yes well that’s not always going to be how it is, now is it? Once that thing starts holding shapes and mimicking everything it sees. In times of war, there isn’t any such thing as being Innocent. One way or another someone or something pulls you into the mix. All I’m saying is that I think you all better be realistic about the consequences of that changeling being here. Sooner or later it is going to come to a head.” Miles warned him.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to cross that bridge when we come to it. In the meantime, it's your turn to shoot.” Julian said effectively ending the subject for now.
Chapter Summary

So Baby Blues is a re-imagining of the Season 5 episode "The Begotton". Some of the content was taken word by word from the episode.

A week later.

“Do you know whose arriving today?” Jadzia asked as she helped Gaven look over the specs of the containment Field they were calibrating to receive the carrier remnants currently en route.

“Honestly I didn’t bother to look. I’m sure whoever it is will prove useful.” Gaven replied.

“You know, this might be a chance for you to feel better for a while. If there’s enough Poly saturation, you could probably benefit from direct exposure.” Jadzia pointed out gently.

Gaven scoffed. “I’m sure that’s probably true. Though I’m not exactly eager to go crawling back into my would-be coffin for a radiation treatment anytime soon, frankly, I was hoping I would never have to see the container again.”

“Can I ask you something about that? Is launching undesirables out into space something that happens much or did your people make a special exception in your case? If that’s too personal, you don’t have to answer.” Jadzia had been curious for ages, and she suspected she knew the answer but wanted to understand better what the motivations had been if it had indeed been unusual.

“No. My people don’t make a habit of it. Part of the reason the Oum are isolationists is that we can’t survive very well outside of the confines of our sun. The very thing that protects us from outside interference is the thing that also holds us hostage in the universe. My people are space capable in spite of this, and there have been instances of rebellion where others left either against the populaces will or through rare circumstances of leniency. What became of any of them over the centuries is unclear. My circumstances were unusual. My people found themselves in an uncomfortable position that I was kind enough to solve for them.” Gaven said wistfully.

“The exile off of your homeworld was your idea.” The subtext of what Gaven was implying seemed clear.

“As you’ve probably concluded by now the Oum is staunchly against destroying life. They are also staunchly for accountability in all things. When I broke with one of our most treasured and sacred cultural traditions, I knew I had to be accountable for that defiance. I…I am still what I am. Unorthodox as I may be, I do feel an amount of responsibility to uphold the honor of my people. By leaving me in space to die at my request, my people felt the conflict of my original defiance resolved. In turn, I also stayed true to my individual and divergent principles.”

Jadzia nodded in understanding. “You knew there was a possibility you could live, so you gambled.”

Gaven smiled self indulgently. “Yes. I figured there wasn’t much more I could lose. May I ask you a personal question? I’ve been reading about the Trill recently. You’re joined with a Symbiote as I
understand. How many host lifetimes has Dax enjoyed, yourself included?”

Jadzia laughed. “This is my ninth.”

“Fascinating. And you share all the collective memories of your past incarnations as I understand it?” Gaven asked.

“Yes. That’s generally the idea.” Jadzia smiled at his interest.

“Very interesting. I’d like to hear more about your people someday from your perspectives. Well, I think we’ve got the force field calibrated the best we can. The Vulcan team arriving can refine it further for you.”

“I agree I think we’ve done about enough. At this point, I’m happy with it if you are.” She agreed. “How about we take an hour and have some lunch. I could introduce you to some alien cuisine if your feeling brave enough.”

I think I can stomach some experimentation.” Gaven agreed.

A little later Jadzia and Gaven were situated at a discreet table at one of the best Klingon eateries on the station. Although Gaven politely declined consuming anything that just happened to be still alive, Jadzia found he was more than willing to try just about anything else.

I’ve meant to ask you something else. Knowing everything you know now? If you could go back to…You-know-where, would you?” Jadzia inquired after the got through the first course of Gagh and Krada legs.

Gaven thought the question over for a moment.

“You know, all my life, I’ve been naturally curious. I always wanted to know as much as I could about everything I could. I’ve always wanted to…feel connected to things greater than myself. My people’s technology is on par and even rivals many other developed worlds and my planet and culture are as rich as any, so, over the years there was much I could study right in my back yard that I was content with. But there were limits as well. There were expectations of me on Oum that were less than flexible and enjoyable. While I ultimately still mourn my home and am troubled over the circumstances connected to my departure, I’ve realized in recent times that I have more freedom now than I could have ever hoped for if I had stayed.” Gaven admitted.

Jadzia patted the Doctor’s fore-arm to show her solidarity though she privately reminded herself that Gaven had gone from being a kind of slave on Oum to an indentured servant of the Federation on Deep Space 9. That wasn’t precisely freedom and least not to the level she hoped he would experience someday.

“Staying, as I’ve said, would have meant forfeiting everything I still cared about and cherished. It was better to take my chances among the stars then die on my homeworld having only half lived.” Gaven concluded.

At this point, Jadzia had read enough about the Oum to piece together apart of the puzzle about Gaven that he had yet to reveal. Jadzia reminded herself to run her thought by Kira as soon as she could since she had been given the chapters regarding Gaven’s cultural practices.

“Here’s tidbit you might find interesting. I’m the first person to be expelled from the planet in over a thousand years.” Gaven explained before pooping a tomato like vegetable side into his mouth. “I must admit I feel somewhat proud of that accomplishment sometimes.”
Jadzia laughed and encouraged him to clink his glass with hers.

“Thank you for this. For inviting me out. I know I can be…distant much of the time, but I do appreciate the friendship that’s been extended to me here on the station. I just want you to know that if things get more difficult or complicated in the future and I’m forced into things I’d rather avoid… I’d like you and the others to know that in spite of everything I have found you all to be some of the most courageous and honorable people I’ve ever met.” Gaven said.

Jadzia felt touched by his sentiment and conscious of the underlying implications Gaven was hinting. Sometimes it was hard to remember that the Doctor was not there helping them all by his own choice. Gaven was with them because the Federation wanted things from him and as tensions continued to mount it was unclear what could happen if Gaven suddenly stopped cooperating with them. Jadzia was not so naive to think it was always going to be as easy as it was now. If things went badly it was possible that the good doctor could wind up on a different side of the war field than the rest of them were if he lived long enough.

It was a sobering realization. “No matter what happens, Dr. Ore. I think I speak for more than myself when I say we will always think of you here as a good man.”

Gaven raised his glass in a subtle solute. “May I always remain in the prophets good graces.”

~@~

As Dax and Gaven were coming to terms with the realities of their positions, Odo and Dr. Mora were about to do the same as they worked together trying to stimulate and encourage the infant changeling’s development.

Up until now Odo and Dr. Mora had come to an uneasy working relationship rooted in the understanding that Odo was ultimately responsible for the changeling’s progress plan. Mora seemed to accept the arrangement for the most part though had anyone been watching it was clear to see that Mora was bored of and concerned by their lack of progress.

It was only a matter of time before the issue came to a head.

“What are you doing?” Odo demanded when he caught Mora running some scans without prior consent as they worked together in the isolation room.

Endlessly taken back by Odo’s constant antagonism and suspicion of him, Mora stopped what he was doing and imploringly explained himself.

“I’m measuring its volume.” Sighing in frustration, Mora stepped away to log the data on the wall console. “It’s been here a week, and it’s only grown 17 percent. After three days in my lab, you were twice that size.”

Annoyed by his tone, Odo lashed out sternly trying to keep his temper in check. Almost everything Mora said to him sounded like a criticism or a justification that Oda didn’t want or need. “Well, maybe I was anxious to grow up so I could get OUT of there.”

Mora ignored the dig and tried to sound more reasonable. “My point is, you’ve made no progress. By this time I’d already gotten you to mimic half a dozen simple forms.”

“I’m trying to gain its confidence, not teach it tricks.” Ado insisted.
It’s a shame you’re not a changeling anymore. You could link with it and teach it everything it needs to know.” Mora said pointedly.

“You make it sound like it’s my fault.” Odo accused him incredulously.

“It might very well be,” Mora said without pulling any punches. “Let’s face it, Odo. Your shape-shifting ability was somewhat limited. Maybe that’s why your people were able to force you to take a humanoid form.”

“That is pure speculation,” Odo said in defensive outrage turning away with anger.

“Let’s run a few tests and see.” Mora challenged, half hoping Odo might see the benefit of the exercise.

“Oh! You are just dying to get me into one of your contraptions, aren’t you?” Odo was practically yelling now as he turned back around to confront the scientist.

“I’m trying to help!” Mora confessed hoping for once Odo would take him at his word.

“I am not about to submit myself to another round of your experiments,” Odo said firmly.

“Everything I did to you was for your own good.” Mora desperately reasoned.

“Ha!” Odo scoffed.

“True, some of the tests that I subjected you to proved inconclusive.” Mora conceded passionately.

“The vacuum chamber springs to mind.” Odo reminded him. “The cytoplasmic separator…Come to think of it, the protein decompiler as well.”

“How could I know until I tried?” Mora rationalized. “By the Prophets, Odo, I wasn’t even sure you were a life-form.”

“I wasn’t sure about you either,” Odo remarked as the men stood nearly chest to chest.

“Once I realized you were sentient, oh, the Cardassians wanted to know everything about you. I was under enormous pressure to come up with results, and I did.” MY technique worked. The fact that you are standing here whining about it proves it.” Mora proclaimed.

Seething inside, Odo made his most deeply held belief about his past known in the form of damning accusation. “You enjoyed watching me suffer.”

“You really believe that? How pathetic.” Mora countered. “If it wasn’t for me, you’d still be sitting on a shelf somewhere in a beaker labeled ‘Unknown Sample.’”

“If it wasn’t for me, you’d be a nobody.” Odo rebuked. “Starfleet wouldn’t hire you to judge a science fair.”

Their mutual fury was starting to wind down now.

“I’m getting a little tired of sitting around watching you, but I can’t seem to pull myself away.” Mora was steadily winding up for another strike. “I can’t wait to see what next preposterous thing you’re going to try.”

Odo simply stared daggers at the man.
“Who knows? Maybe in a couple of months, it may get so tired of your incessant chatter that it might actually DO something.” Mora said in exasperation.

“Oh, you’d just love to get your hands on it, wouldn’t you? You could sell tickets on the Promenade. Dr. Mora’s chamber of horrors. Open for business. Right this way!” Odo made a dramatic show with his arms like a man acting on a stage.

The dramatics promptly came to a close when Odo looked to the door only to see both Dr. Ore and Captain Sisko watching them. Neither Ado or Mora could say how long the men had been watching them go at each other.

“Captain. Dr. Ore.” Odo straightened regaining his self-control almost instantly.

“How’s it going, gentlemen?” Sisko said evenly with an expression that portrayed nothing.

Odo cleared his throat and squared his shoulders trying to regain some semblance of dignity.

“Making progress, Sir.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Sisko dismissively said as he relaxed slightly and entered the isolation room with a stoic-looking Gaven following a discreet distance behind. “I was just talking with Starfleet Command. They want you to establish communication with the changeling as soon as possible.”

“At the rate we’re going, that is still a long way off.” Mora interjected.

“Better not be too long. Otherwise, Starfleet is going to want to take over the project.” Sisko warned them impartially.

“Sir…” Odo was stunned by this threatening revelation.

“As long as your making progress, there’s nothing to worry about.” Somehow Sisko’s words almost sounded sorry.” Feeling his point had been made, Sisko began to turn, stopping to relay further orders. “Oh, by the way… Starfleet wants you to file daily reports for their review.”

“Understood, Sir.” Odo nodded.

Sisko then glanced over at Gaven. “See if you can give them a hand.”

Gaven remained frozen where he was. A strange expressionless mask overcast his features that just half an hour prior had been full of warmth and camaraderie.

“Carry on.” The captain said finally departing from the room.

Both Odo and Mora glanced at the changeling in contemplation before Mora had finally had enough for one day.

“Now you understand the kind of pressure I was going through.” Mora glanced at Gaven who was still a slight distance away and had yet to speak. “I brought my old equipment from Bajor. Maybe it’s time we started unpacking.”

Done, for now, Mora nodded to Gaven and took his leave to allow time for Odo to think about everything that had been said and revealed.

At a loss, Odo exhaled audibly and shook his head from side to side.

“It’s going to get worse,” Gaven said evenly. “You do understand that, don’t you?”
Odo glanced sidelong at Gaven. “I…Think I’m starting to.”

“If the changeling keeps developing here, its only a matter of time before Starfleet will step in. Personally, I don’t understand what they think they’ll have to gain. This child knows nothing of the agenda of the Founders. It just a baby. The federation is supposed to care about the rights and well being of other life forms. This changeling is not a threat to them, and it shouldn’t be treated like a thing.” Gaven said evenly.

“I know, Doctor. Trust me, I of all people know.” Odo glanced back towards Gaven. “How much of all that did you and the captain overhear?”

“We arrived about the time Mora remarked about you not being a changeling anymore. You know he’s wrong, don’t you? Just because you’ve temporarily lost your shifting abilities doesn’t make you any less what you are.” Gaven remarked.

“If you don’t mind, doctor. I’d rather not talk about it further. For now, why don’t we just focus on the most pressing problem at hand.” Odo said.

“What isn’t happening exactly?” Gaven asked flatly.

“Dr. Mora seems to think that the changeling isn’t developing its volume as quickly as it should. Should we be concerned?” Odo asked.

Gaven approached the container the changeling was resting in and moved to place his palm over the top of the container, but just before he made contact, his hand began to tremor ever so slightly and Gaven pulled his hand away.

“Are you alright?” Ado asked bluntly.

“Yes. Sorry. Seeing a newling like this first hand is still a little overwhelming. I am concerned it’s not doubling its volume or showing any response to a stimulus. It may just not be strong enough yet, or there may be a more worrisome reason. It’s possible for example that the radiation it was exposed to did more damage than Dr. Bashir thought.”

“How can we know for sure?” Odo inquired.

“It's hard to say. Dr.Bashir’s done all the testing he can think of.” Gaven admitted.

“Can’t you just…” Odo asked, unsure how to frame his question.

“I don’t want to link with it if I don’t have to. At least not right now. I’ll see what else I can do if it’s damage from the radiation stunting its growth I may be able to develop a new cellular regeneration technique. Changelings only need one cell to lattice off of to self-repair. Like I said before, solid or not, your still a changeling and your cells are complete in regards to the data they carry. I’ll need a sample from you to begin developing a treatment.” Gaven explained.

After receiving a tissue sample from Odo, Gaven spent the rest of his day in his office diligently trying to create a new cellular regeneration procedure that could be utilized in an emergency. His door remained closed until much later when a call from Kira caused the Doctor to stir. The baby was coming for real this time, and both the O’brien’s and Kira wanted him there as a witness.

When Gaven arrived, he was met with the frustrated looking visages of Miles and Odan standing in the hallway instead of in the delivery room. It appeared as if they’d been thrown out.

“Gentleman. Everything alright?” Gaven asked.
“No, it is not. We’ve been bloody well banished thanks to big mouth over there.” Miles muttered.

“It takes two,” Odan said with an acidic tone.

“Give them a minute, and maybe they’ll let you back in. Pregnant people are notorious for changing their minds.” Gaven reassured Miles.

“If you’re going in there could ya do me a favor and try to reason with them?” Miles asked hopefully.

“I’ll do what I can. Have a heart, one way or a nothing you're going to be a father again today.” Gaven genuinely smiled and made his presence known before he was promptly let in.

Seeing this Odan turned in disbelief and neared Miles. “Why does he get to go in, just like that?”

“Don’t worry. Dr. Ore is a good man. Trust me. He could be the best chance we have at being let back in.” Miles muttered appraisingly.

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Meanwhile, as one baby was making its way into the world, another baby was struggling to stay in it. True to Dr. Ore’s suspicions the radiation had sickened the changeling more than had been known initially and Odo had been called away to the infirmary while Bashir and Dr. Mora raced to stabilize it’s.

“The radiation must have damaged its cytoplasm in a way we weren’t able to detect,” Bashir explained as he was all fire and passion as he did his level best to succeed.

“There must be something you can do.” Odo insisted.

“You might try an enzymatic induction. That might stabilize the biometric fluctuations.” Mora suggested.

It's worth shot.” Bashir said hopefully as Dr. Mora encouraged Odo to step outside so that they could work.

As they scrambled in another part of the station, Kira was entering the euphoric final stages of her delivery. Through all this Gaven remained in the background. Despite what he’d promised Miles, he had no intention of saying a word to the women seeing as he was quite convinced Kira would relent on her own and let the gentlemen back in. Something Gaven hadn’t told either Kira or the O’Brien’s was that every time the link with the child, he had been able to share in the experience of the host equally. This had been especially true when Gaven had connected all of them the week earlier. For Gaven, it wasn’t a detail that needed sharing, it was something that he had privately benefited from, and it would have been inappropriate to point it out.

He had looked forward to seeing the conclusion of the situation, and as he watched Kira bring the baby forward, Gaven could feel a twinge of sympathy from his womb that amused him mildly.

“Here he comes.” The midwife remarked with satisfaction.

“Keiko. Would you do me a favor?” Kira asked gently.

As Gaven had expected in the final moments, Kira had relented and asked for the others to be let back in.

Seconds later the sound of a baby’s first cry made everyone present smile with joy and make faces of awe. Gaven’s own eyes welled with tears that he held silently back.

Everyone was moved, and just as the baby was being introduced, an electronic message broke through on the wall console.

“Would Dr. Gaven Ore please report to isolation room one. There is a medical emergency.” The computer chimed.

Gaven’s eyes went wide at the sound. Isolation room one was where the changeling was being kept.

“I apologize to everyone. Please excuse me and congratulations.” Gaven swiftly headed for the exit as fear began to set in once he hit the hall.

In spite of his lousy leg, Gaven practically jogged back to the infirmary catching Odo just outside the room looking grave.

“Odo.” Gaven breathed.

“It the changeling, doctor it’s destabilizing.” He explained.

“Come with me.” Not wasting any more time, Gaven entered the room with Odo coming behind.

“Julian, where are we?” Gaven demanded.

“We’ve tried everything Dr. Mora, and I can think of to do. The treatment you were developing is our last chance, but I didn’t dare try to administer the protocol without you.” Bashir said swiftly.

Gaven swiftly stepped aside and pulled up the computer console beginning the process he’d developed as he injected something into the changeling’s sickly for.

“Damn.” He said, thirty seconds later.

“What’s wrong?” Odo demanded.

”The cellular treatment is taking hold, but the newling is too weak now. It's immune, and cellular replication systems are shutting down.”

“What can we do?” Oda asked desperately.

“Odo, we can’t do anything. But you can. If you link with it, it may be able to piggyback off your immune system enough for the treatment to take full effect.” Gaven said.

“But I can’t. I’ve lost my linking ability. I’m not a changeling anymore.” Odo protested.

“Yes, you are. You’ve never stopped being who and what you are. Now, damn it. I need you to try. Please. What do you have to lose?” Gaven reasoned instantly.

Mora took up the changeling’s container and brought it swiftly to, Odo. “You can do this. I know you can.”

Taking the container from him, Odo looked at the changeling and then up at Mora. “I’ll try.”

He then poured the sickly baby into his hand while the others looked on — Bashir with deflated sorrow, Gaven with flinty determination, and Dr. Mora with fatherly hope.
At first, nothing happened.

“Please.” Odo implored it. “Don’t die. There’s so much I want to show you. I was going to teach you how to be a Tarkalean hawk, remember?”

As he spoke the changeling began to stir and slowly absorb into Odo’s hands. For a moment, everyone but Gaven thought this was an indication of the end as Odo showed them his hands and Bashir hastily scanned them.

“What happened? Where did it go?” Mora asked in alarm.

“It somehow integrated itself into Odo’s body,” Bashir observed.

Suddenly Odo began to groan and pull away from them, his eyes going wide in pain or shock.

“It can’t be!” Odo exclaimed.

“What?” Mora breathlessly said as he helped Bashir support Odo.

The men stared in wonder as Odo steadied himself and moved away from them towards the exist leading out onto the promenade. Seconds later he suddenly shifted out of his clothes and took off into the air in the form of the Tarkalean hawk. He was flying over the promenade majestically as screeching his joy.

“It worked,” Gaven said quietly behind them. “Watch.”

As Odo landed and realization set in he shuddered lightly cupping his hands as the newling separated from him pooling back into a slightly rounded form. “You’ve done it little one.”

Being too far off for the other’s to see, Odo soon after returned to where the other doctors were.

“Odo,” Bashir said.

“It’s alright, Doctor. Everything is alright now.” Odo said pragmatically.

“The Changeling?” Mora inquired.

“See for yourself…Grandpa.” Odo mirthfully said as he held out his hands. “Come on. They want to see that you’re alright too. Indulge them a little.”

To both Bashir and Mora’s relief and amazement, the baby changeling made itself known by gently shifting into different basic shapes in his hands like a child showing itself off.

“Don’t let it get too excited. It’s still weak and will need lots of care before its completely well, but I think it’s safe to say that this crisis at least has been concluded.” Gaven said. “Congratulations, Mr. Odo. I’m glad you’ve recovered yourself.”

“This wouldn’t have been possible without you, Dr. Ore. Thank you. Thank all of you for working so hard.” Odo said earnestly.

“Since we’re sharing the good news. Kira successfully delivered just before I was called away. It’s a boy. Well, I think I’ve had just about enough excitement for one day. If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I think I will depart. I’ll be in my quarters if anyone needs me.” Gaven said, bowing slightly to all of them before he took his leave.

“Strange kind of man. You’d think he’d want to stick around.” Mora remarked.
“He is strange indeed, but that’s part of his charms.” Odo quipped.

“If you’ll excuse me a moment,” Julian said. “I’ll be back shortly.”

Julian excused himself and tried to catch up with the other doctor.

“Gaven. Gaven, wait.” Julian called as he caught the doctor idling through the edge of the promenade as he headed back in the direction of his quarters.

“Hello, Doctor. Coming along to walk me home I see.” Now that he was away from the infirmary a tired, unhappy seriousness had overtaken Gaven’s features.

“What you did back there was amazing. Aren’t you happy about it? Why don’t we get together later and celebrate.” Julian proposed.

“Of course I’m happy, Doctor. I’m happy that I could spare Odo the pain of losing something so important to him. I’m happy there was recourse this time and that I had enough time and opportunity to do something about it.” Gaven said.

“So what’s gnawing at you then? And don’t try to lie to me or sugar it. I know you better than that by now.” Julian said as they continued to move together.

“I just can’t help wondering if…” Gaven hesitated.

“Gaven, what?” Julian pressed, encouraging them to pause in place.

“If…It would have been better for the changeling to die. Think about it, Julian. Tell me honestly that you believe it’s going to be allowed to learn and exist here with Odo and among all of you. Tell me that isn’t going to be problematic. Tell me that as it grows and becomes its own person with its own wants and abilities that the people here won’t secretly resent its presence. Don’t you see? I may have just condemned that creature to a life that may never be fully it’s own. Now please, Julian. Let me go home in peace. I have had a long day, and I just want to not think about it all for a while. Is that alright with you?” Gaven said wearily.

Julain sighed. “Fine. Fine. Do as you like. Far be it from me to stop you.”
Guilt and remorse seeped out of him the moment Gaven was back in his quarters.

Gaven regretted cheapening what should have been a moment of profound satisfaction for Odo and the other doctors. He lamented, in particular, allowing his conflicting feelings and actions to affect his relationship specifically with Dr. Bashir.

Why had Gaven insisted upon pouring his lemon juice into the other doctor’s cream? Sometimes Gaven caught himself being specifically hostile and less emotionally inhibited around Julian in a way that made him feel uncomfortable and out of control of himself. Granted, of anyone on the station Julian had seen Gaven at his most vulnerable on more than one occasion, but that didn’t excuse or make it more permissible for Gaven to act out around him. When Julien had tried to stop him on the promenade, Gaven had once again found himself emotionally compromised and compelled to vent at the other Doctor. It was a compulsion Gaven didn’t understand.

Gaven sighed in frustration and plunked himself down on his sofa before rubbing vigorously at his face as if doing so could wipe away his fresh regrets. For a moment he nearly thought about leaving again and going to find Julian. For what purpose Gaven wasn’t sure. To apologize, perhaps, or to see if he could salvage his blunder and celebrate their medical achievement after all. But before he could put anything into motion, the computer piped in to alert him to the fact that the Vulcan science team’s transport had docked and that he was to rendezvous with them within the hour.

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Jyruss Cheval took another deep breath as he sat with the small science team that had volunteered to transport the remnants of the pod Gaven Ore-Oum had been extracted from. The pieces were being transported from the Vulcan homeworld to Deep Space 9. Of the group, Chival was the only one intending to stay on the station for an extended period to assist and supervise the exchange of data. The others were just along to ensure that the package was delivered and kept properly contained before they continued to Earth for other scientific business.

Cheval felt the impatience that was threatening him subside as he guided himself through a long series of Vulcan breathing exercises. It was unbecoming of him to feel as much as he did about his present task. Cheval’s time with Gaven had been short in comparison to the other Vulcans who had been in charge of his care after they initially transported him back to Vulcan. While the elders had conducted their investigation into what had transpired on the freighter, Cheval had been the first one to mind meld with their alien refuge and had later been the one to bring him out of stasis when the freighter had come under attack.

Since then he’d tried to put the encounter behind him. Although mind melds allowed for one to view the memories and experiences of another, Vulcan’s were supposed to be disciplined enough for the mind meld not to affect them emotionally. The experience was supposed to serve as nothing more than an exchange of information. And yet over the many preceding months, Cheval had often found himself dwelling on Gaven’s experiences which were indeed terrible and tragic. To be expelled from one’s world…unspeakable. To lose a bondmate…Unthinkable.

Although Gaven had not asked him specifically to come to the station, Cheval’s name had surprisingly been included on the list of contacts that had been given by Gaven to Captain Sisko.

Logic suggested that if nothing else Gaven knew Cheval’s presence was a possibility that that reason, though given that Cheval wasn’t anyone of notable importance it was unclear why the Elders
had encouraged him to make the trip with the science officers in the first place. In spite of this, Chival was satisfied at least that he would have the opportunity to converse with the other man again if only on the grounds of casual curiosity.

Cheval felt his impatience surge at the brief thought of seeing the good doctor again. A few of the other Vulcans traveling with him took notice but said nothing. They didn’t have to. Cheval could sense a kind of indirect disapproval of him that they undoubtedly felt regarding his distinct lack of discipline and Vulcan like composure. In spite of himself and his higher ideals, Cheval couldn’t prevent himself from feeling a certain amount of…resentment for their impersonal judgment of him. Vulcan’s were supposed to be master’s of their feelings, and while many convincingly were, Cheval knew that the real depth of his species emotional capabilities was profound. It was because their race could possess such strong feelings and aggression that they had taken such extreme measures to purge themselves of all illogical impulse.

As Vulcan’s went, Cheval was considered a weaker specimen of their race in this regard. The sooner he got to Deep Space 9 and could send the rest of the team on their way, the better.

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That evening many departures were happening. It seemed like just about everyone was in the docking bay halls. Kira and Odan were saying their goodbyes as Odan prepares to return to his duties on Bajor, Dr. Mora was also leaving since he had responsibilities on earth to fulfill and Odo was also seeing him off. Finally, Dax had agreed to join Gaven and the Captain to meet the Vulcan team, and Julian was on call in the infirmary to receive them.

It was due to be a late night to cap an already exciting day for just about everyone.

Jadzia met Gaven halfway to the docking bay with her datapad in hand when she caught sight of him through a frown slowly settled upon her features.

“Well, you don’t look happy. Everything all right?” Jadzia asked as she pulled up beside Gaven.

“Fine. Just a little out of sorts this evening. Shall we?” Gaven didn’t want to talk about the earlier events of his day.

“Kira had the O’Brien’s baby today. You were there, right?” Dax was trying to strike up a conversation mostly because she got the distinct impression Gaven was particularly upset and doing his level best to hide the fact.

“Yes. A boy. I must admit Bajoran deliveries are fascinating. The euphoria of the final moments. Amazing. I’m glad I was allowed to see it.” Gaven admitted.

“I heard that wasn’t the only baby you looked out for today…” Jadzia was ever insistent on having her satisfaction.

Gaven sighed. “Yes. The newling was in distress. But Dr. Bashir, myself, Dr. Mora and Odo were able to intervene in time. There should be no reason why the little one won’t have the best chance possible now to develop fully.”

“Odo is better too, I’m told.” Jadzia pressed.

A slight smile finally cracked Gaven’s face. “That I can take absolutely no credit for. It can be purely attributed to Odo himself and the special bond he’s managed to foster with the little changeling. It was…Something to see.”
“There’s the good Doctor I know and love. Come on. The transport should be here by now.” Jadzia patted Gaven on the back in a masculine fashion as they rounded the corridor.

As Gaven and Jadzia were almost to their destination, Odo and Dr. Mora was also saying their final goodbyes.

“Well. How does it feel to be yourself again?” Mora asked. His tone was filled with delight.

Odo chuckled. “It feels…Right. When I think how things could have gone…”

“We should all be grateful for the outcome we had. I’m delighted. Odo, very glad for you and me.”

“For you?” Odo asked.

“Yes. I’ve decided I’m going to look at what happened today as a gift. To you, first and foremost. But also for me. I feel as if I understand something I didn’t before. You’ve always been amazing, Odo. But now see that I should have treated you more like my son than my subject. I regret that I’ve made you feel like that’s all you were to me. It isn’t true.” Mora confessed.

Mora’s words struck Odo with a mixture of remorse and empathy. “I think…I finally understand now how much I meant to you…But, it’s nice to hear you say it all the same. I can imagine now what you must have gone through when I left.”

Mora couldn’t help but beam in a restrained way that was probably designed to keep him composed. “I knew you had to find your own way in the world, so I let you go.”

Odo felt his composure slip slightly. “I realize now I should have included you in my life. I was wrong to cut you out of it.”

“It’s not too late, you still can include me, and I hope you do. You’ve got a big responsibility ahead of you now. It is both a joy and a feeling of sorrow no matter what you do. Believe me. I hope you will allow me the opportunity to catch a glimpse of your efforts now and again. I wish you well. From one father to another.” He said,

Mora then extended his hand to shake, but the shake quickly dissolved into a fatherly embrace and both men finally let go of their differences once and for all.

“Take care of yourself, Odo. And…Take care of the little one for both of us.” Mora said.

Caught by emotion all Odo could do was nod his agreement as Dr. Mora broke away from him and continued down the docking hall without looking back.

Seconds later Kira came from the opposite direction to meet Odo.

“Kira. I thought the O’briens were having a party.” He observed.

Kira nodded. “Shaakar and I stopped by. I didn’t feel much like celebrating.”

“Oh?” Odo inquired, wanting to understand Kira’s reasoning.

“It just…I got into this because the O’Briens need my help. I never wanted a baby.” Kira confessed. “But now? I just wish I could hold him in my arms…and never let him go.”

Odo nodded. “I think I know how you feel, Nerys.”

Sensing there was more they both needed to say between them, Kira nodded. “Want to take a walk?”
“Ah-huh.” Odo agreed.

As they began to walk side beside, Odo put his arm across her back, and they disappeared to places unknown together.

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When Dax and Gaven finally arrived at their destination, they saw that the envoy was already present and that Captian Sisko was already in the process of receiving them. There were seven Vulcan's in total. Most of them academy personnel and a few younger students who were already experts in their field. All of them were stoically facing Gaven except the one who was murmuring with the captain directly. He was tall by human standard but less developed than the other Vulcans.

As Gaven neared them, he felt a buzzing in the back of his head as a cold sweat broke out between his shoulder blades.

As if the Vulcan could specifically sense Gaven’s reaction, he slowly turned around to face him.

“Cheval.” Gaven breathed the name as his softer green eyes locked with young blue ones.

As expected the other man showed no reaction to his name or the fact it was explicitly Gaven who had spoken it. And yet there was a kind of exchange between them. So subtle that no one else caught it.

Per proper etiquette, Cheval nodded acknowledgment. “Dr. Ore.”

“Since all of you are familiar with the Doctor, I would also like to introduce my Chief Science Officer Jadzia Dax. She’ll escort you gentlemen to our science department and bring you up to speed. We’re eager to utilize your expertise on radiation shielding.” The captain said.

“I understand it's late, but I think we’d all appreciate getting the carrier remnants transferred and properly secure before we conclude this evening. So I will leave you to it. Please make yourselves at home for the short time you will be staying on our station.” Sisko said.

Half an hour later everyone was gathered in a part of the cargo area that had been modified to act as a holding bay. Jadzia worked with half of the Vulcan’s as they looked over the poxy shielding and helped Jadzia tweak it for better efficiency. There wasn’t a lot to adjust thankfully. Julian was also there examining fresh samples of the radiation first hand as the other Vulcan's carefully unloaded the remnants and positioned it for study.

That left Cheval and Gaven to watch the entire operation.

Gaven looked more stern than the Vulcans did. His arms were crossed over his chest with his forearm crutch resting against his thigh, and for once he made no effort to hide his black mood.

“Does…Watching this pain you?” Cheval finally asked.

“Yes,” Gaven said bluntly knowing he could be frank and blunt about his feeling without causing offense.

“Perhaps it would be more logical to retire then. The science teams are more than capable of handling all of this.” Cheval pointed out.

“I… could walk you to your quarters if you wish.” Cheval offered tentatively.
“I suppose that’s reasonable. I must say Cheval. I’m surprised that you’re here.”

“You clearly knew my presence was a possibility since you provided my name along with the others to Captain Sisko. Considering I am the only civilian representative here, I would be curious to know why you include me?” Cheval asked.

“Now whose asking questions they already know the answer to?” Gaven asked rhetorically.

“You’re right. I don’t have any desire to continue standing around here anymore tonight. I’m tired and in bad humor. If you want to come along with me, you can. You don’t exactly seem in high spirits yourself.” Gaven observes.

After saying his goodbyes to Dax and Julian and promising to pick up with them in the morning, Gaven allowed Chival to escort him back to Gaven’s quarters.

By the time they arrived fatigue was starting to set in. Gaven had been all over the station that day bearing witness to one thing and helping put out the fires of another. As the day had worn o his limp had become more pronounced and his features more haggard.

“Guh, come on. Sit down Cheval and tell me what’s gone on since I saw you last.” Gaven insisted as he eased gingerly down upon the corner of his sofa.

“There isn’t much to say. You recall my expertise is in botany since I saw you last I’ve been on one of the Vulcan moons experimenting with crop development in low oxygen environments.” Cheval explained.

“It sounds lonely,” Gaven remarked.

“Isolation seems to suit me,” Cheval said having taken a eat at the glass dining table.

“I don’t believe that’s true. But if it pleases you to say it, then fine.” Gaven said dismissively.

“Before when I asked you why you included you and me stated that I already knew why…I assume you were referring to what transpired on the freighter.” Cheval pointed out.

“You saved my life,” Gaven said. “And then you saved the lives of everyone else.”

“I brought you out of stasis. That is all. It was you who warded the Breen ship off of us.” Cheval corrected him.

“Did you honestly ask to walk me here to argue about who did what?” Gaven asked.

It was clear that Cheval wanted to confront him about something. Gaven wasn’t sure what it was about, but he could tell the younger Vulcan man was disturbed. Vulcan’s were such strange creatures. To feel as much as they did yet strive always to suppress their feelings, both impressed and disquieted Gaven.

“What’s wrong, Cheval?” Gaven asked him gently.

“I find myself…I find myself dissatisfied. Since we melded our minds, I find myself unsure and restless in my work and day to day life.” Cheval admitted.

“Why?” Gaven asked.

“I have found myself repeatedly concerned for you, for your well being.” Cheval sighed. “For a long time, I’ve wanted to find you to make sure you were well.”
“You’ve been worried for me?” Gaven inquired.

“Before and during your time on the freighter, I sensed the depth of your suffering. Even before the mind meld, I could feel your intensity. The impression has stayed with me.” He explained.

“I’m sorry. It was never my intention to affect you like that. I can promise I’m in far greater control of my feelings now than I was. But somehow I suspect my feelings aren’t really the issue here.” Gaven observed.

“You are trying to imply it is my feelings that are of concern. I assure you, I am in control of myself.” Cheval insisted.

“I never said you weren’t in control. You’re a Vulcan. Albeit a somewhat eccentric one, but I would never call your sense of control into question. I included you on my list because you are perhaps the only being outside of Oum that understands the extent of what I feel and have experienced.” Gaven said.

“You haven’t told anyone of your direct experiences on Oum?” Cheval inquired as some of the pieces began to fall into place and appease his curiosity.

“No, and I see little reason to. Now that I’ve been exiled. It isn’t as if I can ever go back. My crimes on Oum would likely be seen as trifles most anywhere else. The Oum themselves can’t claim that they haven’t gotten their satisfaction in the business. Wouldn’t you agree?” Gaven asked.

“The Oum intended to kill you second hand. They have not succeeded. Therefore, it would be only logical to assume that their will has not been fully satisfied as you claim.” He reminded him.

“What exactly could they do? Come after me? I’ll take my chances. No Oum, save for myself, have left the planet in a thousand years if the records are to be believed.” Gaven replied.

“I see. In any case, You still haven’t explained…” The other man persisted.

“I’m dying, Cheval,” Gaven said bluntly. "You know as well as I that without consistent exposure to my planet’s sun, I cannot sustain. Choices I’ve made have already accelerated the process. I thought that having you here would make it easier emotionally.”

“You may have picked a poor subject. I am a Vulcan. Feelings are not exactly my strong point.” Cheval said.

“Maybe so, nevertheless, you are perhaps the only person in the universe; I don’t have to explain myself to.” Gaven countered.

“You are implying that the awareness we fostered through the mind meld makes you more transparent to me. While it is true that I have shared in your memories and past impressions, I would not go as far as to say that knowledge allows for complete understanding. There are many things outside of the facts that as a Vulcan and as an individual not of your species I fail to understand.” Cheval explained.

“I’m sorry. I was too bold in my wording.” Gaven corrected himself. "We, of course, barely know each other. The intimacy associated with the telepathic connection we briefly shared was indeed powerful in the moment, but should not be misinterpreted for something it was not. Nevertheless, I am not a Vulcan or a human for that matter, and so it pleases me to look upon you as a friend. If that seems too illogical or uncomfortable, I can…”

“No.” Cheval interrupted abruptly. “I…I…Welcome the honor of being your friend. It has always
been difficult for me to cultivate intimate relationships even among my kind. I have always observed a certain resentment towards myself, for not being able to embody the classical archetypes and hallmarks of my species fully. In this, we are, perhaps, more alike than different. I appreciate your non-typical qualities immensely."

“I want you to know that the sentiment goes both ways. Vulcan or not, I don’t judge you for who you are. I’m glad you’re here and that you’re accepting of my sense of camaraderie.” Gaven said gently.

Cheval considered for a moment. “I…Have made tentative plans to remain on Deep Space 9 for an extended duration if necessary. My botany research is not pressing, and I have no other obligations to occupy myself with. I would be interested in staying on the station until your destiny reaches its logical conclusion.”

“It seems you planned to stay regardless,” Gaven observed.

Cheval pursed his lips. “I confess that it was my initial intention to remain for as long as you required me and to remain for a time even if it proved that you did not. I wanted to see you again. I felt compelled to see you.”

“What was the tipping point?” Gaven asked.

“After you left my planet, I found myself in a persistent state of agitation and unrest. Eventually, I sought out clarity and guidance to ease and unburden myself. The Vulcan Elders concluded that there was unfinished business between us. Shal’el, in particular, encouraged me to come to you. She thought it would help to quiet my mind in light of the unexpected aftermath of our earlier encounters with each other. It was she who ensured I was included on the travel manifest.” Cheval revealed.

“Your mother is a wise woman.” He remarked. “Really. I’m glad you’ve come.”

For several minutes neither man spoke, though the much younger Cheval watched Gaven intently.

“You are tired and unwell. I should leave you for the evening.” Cheval said at length.

“Hm?” Gaven had allowed his mind to wonder for longer than he’d intended because he was indeed fatigued and unwell but mostly because he’d been thinking on Cheval’s impressions. “No. I mean, I am tired, and I will retire soon. But I would like you to stay a bit longer if it satisfies you to do so.”

“You...are in want of my company?” Cheval asked in a manner that suggested a surprising undertone of youthful hopefulness.

“Yes. I am in want of your company for now. That and I was thinking about what you said earlier. About how you wished to unburden yourself. I know you’ve told me in brief that I affected you and because you are a Vulcan I know you have been breed to be not as forthcoming with your feelings. I would greatly like to understand you better. Would you be willing to share your thoughts and impressions with me again?” Gaven asked tentatively.

Cheval’s steady gaze that always hinted at mild despondency widened as he considered the implications of Gaven’s request.

“You are asking to touch my impression and share your own. Do you think that is well advised?” Cheval inquired.

“If you wish I could withhold myself and allow only for what you wish to share with me.” Gaven was steady enough in his abilities to influence the mind-meld and resist aspects of it up to a point.
“No. I have no desire to keep anything from you or to have you withhold anything from me.” Cheval reassured him quickly.

“Then shall we?” Gaven gently urged shifting slightly upon the sofa to clear space for Cheval to sit beside him comfortably.

Cheval pressed his lips but ultimately did remove himself from his chair and with only the briefest of hesitation join Gaven upon the sofa.

Adjusting themselves briefly so that they were both comfortable enough to accomplish their ends, Cheval placed his fingers upon Gaven’s face in the traditional form while Gaven gently gripped his other wrist so that he could connect in his own way.

“I open my mind to you. What I have known; you will know.” Cheval’s spoke.

Gaven’s grip tightened over so slightly upon Cheval’s wrist as they open themselves to each other.

In moments Cheval was made aware of all that had happened since the last time they had been together. Much of it not much more comforting than what he had discovered the first time. New scaring experiences had had. Cheval saw how Gaven had been tortured for information after he’d been taken from Vulcan under false pretenses. He felt the seemingly endless emotional conflict Gaven had known within himself since coming to Deep Space 9. He experienced the deep grief Gaven still harbored over the loss of his Bondmate on Oum and his struggle to reconcile his need for interpersonal discourse against his overwhelming desire to remain ever apart.

In turn, Gaven saw and felt directly how the strength of his original feelings and memories had effected and disrupted Cheval’s life. He saw how difficult it had been for the Vulcan to purge himself of the emotions that were not his own and how his actual feelings were forced more candidly to the surface in ways that were traditional unbecoming of a Vulcan. Gaven felt how isolated Chival felt and how often he hid away from his people to conceal the depth of his sensitivity. He saw how others of Cheval’s race treated him and rebuked him for his unchecked emotionality which though subtle by most people’s standards were an eyesore to other Vulcan’s around him. He touched Chival’s loneliness as well as his strength.

A few minutes later they broke their link, and when Cheval opened his and looked upon Gaven with a better understanding, he saw that Gaven’s own eyes were still closed.

“Doctor, Ore. You may release me now.” Cheval placed his hand atop where Gaven was still holding onto his wrist, but he didn’t pull Gaven’s hand away.

Hearing Chival’s natural urging, Gaven opened his eyes revealing the strain of unshed tears.

“I’m sorry.” He said in a hushed, breathy manner.

“You should not be,” Cheval told him. “We have both experienced much. ‘Because of you, I understand the conventions of some emotions much better than I might have. I do not regret out contact then nor now. Nor should you.”

“Thank you.” Gaven earnestly said before he pulled out of Chival’s grasp and stood to move a few feet away from him towards his alter table.

“I noticed you have not been purging your feelings as the Oum are trained to do,” Cheval remarked.

“No. I find myself preferring to immerse myself as much as possible in my feelings as of late.” Gaven confirmed.
“May I make an observation? From what you’ve shared with me it would appear that you are conflicted about the concepts of life and death.” Cheval said.

Gaven did not immediately comment and instead turned back around to face Cheval with an expression that gave the Vulcan leave for going on.

“On Oum, you were determined to live. Defiantly so.” He continued.

“Yes,” Gaven confirmed at length. “Lopel’s death was a tragic accident. He never believed in the traditional notion that the bonded should be tied to their counters in death as they were in life. I promised him that if anything ever happened that I would resist the cultural practice. It was a subject that we both agreed upon and that I honored.”

“And yet, you willingly went through with Vell-Par. It was you who proposed that you be placed within the death capsule and launched into orbit around the planet. Had you remained in that state much longer than you surely would have died which was what the Oum believed to be your intention.” Cheval pointed out.

“The ritual of Vell-Par. The honorable death. Yes. I took that path. Defiant as I was, I could not deny that my resistance was causing confusion and unrest among my people an because of my love for my kind I found myself compelled to offer forth some kind of resolution that all could live with.” Gaven explained.

“But you didn’t ultimately honor the ritual of Vell-Par and instead used your extrasensory abilities to call out through space.” Cheval pointed out.

“Yes. Where in you and your people rescued me. What of it?” Gaven was waiting calmly for Cheval to get to his primary point.

“You fought through all of that and what came afterward to live. Yet now that you have succeeded you seem reluctant to go on. You speak freely of your death as if it’s certain when it is not. You resist the notion of using the capsule remnants as a temporary way of receiving Poly radiation exposure that would strengthen you and help you prolong your quality of life and lifespan. In light of these facts and behaviors…” Cheval was about to go on, but Gaven held up his hand.

“If you're suggesting that I’m sabotaging myself…” Gaven began.

“I am observing that you perhaps are unsure if you want to live or die and giving you my reasoning behind the observation.” Cheval corrected him.

“You should go for now. I’m tired.” Gaven said for lack of any better response. “I’m sorry to have kept you as long as I have.”

“As you wish, Dr. Ore. It was not my intention to offend.” Cheval immediately stood and began to walk towards the door in a manner that seemed almost uncertain.

“May I say, Doctor; that speaking as your…Friend, I would not enjoy seeing any harm befall you. Goodnight.” At that Cheval left Gaven to his thoughts which he suspected would be fitful and unsatisfactory.
The next morning, the Station proved to be a twitter with all kinds of happier activity. Odo was intently focused on furthering his relationship with the baby Changeling who was still under observation. Kira was still enjoying the afterglow of giving birth and bonding second hand with Kirayoshi, and everyone felt a new wave of optimism about being able to further their efforts regarding the benefits of utilizing the poxy radiation to advance their cause against the Dominion.

As expected Gaven had slept in fits that had been attributed to more to his physical strain than anything else and when he arrived in the infirmary, he looked grave as if he was in more physical pain than usual.

“Gaven! Just the man I wanted to see.” Bashir said as he caught sight of the Good Doctor. “You look miserable.”

“I didn’t sleep well.” Gaven noted how Julian looked to be in top form and was in higher spirits than average.

Though it usually amused him to see the other doctor this way, this morning he wasn’t sure he could stomach it and quickly looked for a way to escape into his office.

“I have an idea I wanted to try on you. Come and take a look.” Bashir insisted.

Having little choice in the matter, Gaven tried his best to put aside his bad humor and followed Julian into the lab. On the table, he saw what looked to be a collection of ten small titanium alloy disks sitting in a containment field.

“I see you’ve been busy this morning. What are they?” Gaven asked.

“They’re poxy saturated titanium alloy disks harvested and fashioned from bits of the capsule remnants. We’ve got them in a containment field now to prevent any unwanted poxy exposure, but I’m confident that we won’t need to worry about it once I implant them under your skin.” Julian informed him.
“You want to implant those.” Gaven reiterated.

“Not all of them at once of course. We could start with two or three and see how your system takes to them. It’s not a forever fix because over time your body will absorb the radiation in full, but these could buy you a significant amount of time and help you feel better.” Julian assured him.

“Very interesting.” Gaven muttered.

“Well don’t say it like that.” Julian protested. “Gaven, don’t you understand? This could work for you. I would think you’d be pleased.”

“I… I am Doctor. Thank you. I see no reason why your concept shouldn’t work. Your efforts are truly remarkable.” Gaven remarked honestly trying hard to at least hint at pleasantness.

This didn’t satisfy Julian who preferred enthusiastic praise over all other kinds, but he decided he didn’t want to pick a fight with the other Doctor or let Gaven spoil his happy mood.

“Come on. Let’s get you in an isolation room.” Julian encouraged him.

Once they were alone behind closed doors, Julain decided to be straightforward. “Gaven, I think it might be wise for you to go on an anti-depressant regiment. It may help even out your moods. I also think you should start letting me give you something for the physical pain I can tell your in.”

“I will do whatever you think is best, Doctor.” Gaven conceded.

“What? Since when? You almost always fight me on these things.” Julian pointed out in an amiable tone.

“That’s not true. I only fight you when you’re wrong, and this time I see no defect in your reasoning.” Gaven reassured him.

“Oh.” Julian rolled back onto the balls of his heels. “Well isn’t that a nice change.”

“Julian, I feel I owe you an apology about the other day. I’m sorry I went off on you on the promenade. Please forgive me.” Gaven said reproachfully.

At first, Julian didn’t say anything. He merely stood back from Gaven and stared at him for a while.

“I forgive you, Gaven.” He said at length. “And I have a confession to make.”

At this remark, Julian casually leaned against the wall and put down his scanner.

“If it hadn’t been for you, the changeling baby would have died. I… I gave up. I mean I would have likely given up if it hadn’t been for you. It was my fault that the changeling destabilized, to begin with. When I purged its system of the radiation, I assumed instead of looking further that it was enough. If you hadn’t been there to diagnose the problem and create that new treatment, I can assure you that the changeling would have indeed perished.” Julian confessed.

“You ran every possible test you could have, Julian. There was no way you could have known that the damage was as extensive as it was. It wasn’t your fault.” Gaven said evenly.

“Oh, I know. It’s just that I was so ready to throw it all in. That’s one of the many notable differences between us.” Julian observed. “I’ve never seen you once give up on anyone or thing. Even when the odds were completely stacked against you, you take things as if everything is ultimately surmountable. It’s one of the things I like the most about you. I would hate to see you hesitate to
apply that trait to yourself."

Gaven couldn’t help but snort amusingly that neither gave or rescinded his agreement. “You're a good Doctor, Julian.”

“Thank you. Now come on. Let's get these implanted.” Julian said.

About twenty minutes later Julian had the disks implanted under Gaven’s skin. One at each wrist and the other at the base of his back. Gaven was then put under strict orders to monitor himself and report back if anything felt a miss.

The rest of the morning Gaven and Julian worked side by side running various tests using the poxy radiation. With a few more days of research, both were confident they could begin applying what they would learn to their inoculation research. It was a pleasant experience for them and a far cry from how Gaven usually liked to work. Julian’s jovial enthusiasm eventually managed to ease Gaven’s darker mood coupled with the fact that Julian had shot him up with both a mild pain reliever and an even milder round of anti-depressants. All of it felt like a kind of turning point where some of Gaven’s natural resistance was relaxed.

As the day wore on Gaven’s attention began to wane. He had expected to see Cheval in the infirmary when he arrived that morning and yet it was already after one and Gaven still hadn’t seen him in spite of seeing the other Vulcans throughout the morning come and go.

By one-thirty Gaven finally dismissed himself early from his work to find him.

Upon not finding the young Vulcan at his quarters, Gaven took a rare stroll through the promenade nonchalantly looking for signs of him. Eventually, he ended up at Quarks where he finally found Cheval sitting by himself at one of the tables sipping at some blue-green concoction that he did not appear to be enjoying.

“What is that and why are you drinking it?” Gaven couldn’t help but ask.

“I believe it is called a…Blue Hawaiian. Some tropical Earth drink. As for why I am drinking it, I thought I would try to be…Adventurous.” Cheval said raising the glass to examine its coloring. “My experiment is garnering mixed results.”

In spite of himself, Gaven couldn’t help but smile fondly. Something about the Vulcan’s youthful oddness seemed to amuse him endlessly and put the doctor at ease.

“I was expecting to see you today.” Gaven remarked as he settled down in an adjacent seat.

“I had planned to call on you at dinner time. Surely, you have had much to do today.” Cheval revealed setting the glass back down and pushing it away from him.

“Yes though I was expecting you to stop by the cargo bay or at least the infirmary regardless of whether I was occupied or not.” Gaven admitted.

“I cannot conceive why. I am a civilian, not a member of Starfleet or an ambassador here representing Vulcan at this time. I should think my opinions on anything as well as my uninvited presence would be disruptive to those working on this station.” Cheval reasoned.


“You look much better today. Tired, but in better spirits.” Cheval observed.
“The Doctor has begun me on a poly radiation therapy regiment that he hopes will garner results.”
Gaven explained.

“I’m glad you are choosing to be proactive about your health.” Cheval said sincerely.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do with yourself while you’re on the station?” Gaven asked.

It was hard to imagine the Vulcán simply remaining indefinitely idle.

“I am uncertain.” Cheval admitted.

“I might encourage you to speak with Keiko O’Brien. She’s a botanist and might be able to give you
some idea about what could be done with your skills. You might consider Bajor as well. It’s close
enough that you could come back to the station whenever you wish.” Gaven suggested.

“I will take your suggestions under consideration.” Cheval said as he settled his hands upon the table
and looked down upon them thoughtfully.

This display of youthful shyness struck Gaven as a particular trait unique to him, and it occurred to
Gaven that he perhaps made the younger man nervous, or, at the very least, self-conscious.

“Well…I suppose I should get back to work. Did you still want to stop by later?” He asked calmly.

“Yes. I would like that.” Chival said softly.

“I should be back by six. May I?” Gaven indicated to the drink Cheval had seemly discarded before
he picked it up from the table and took a large sip from it. “Mm. Not bad. Next time try something
called a Fuzzy Navel. I think you’ll like it better.”

After this suggestion, Gaven took it upon himself to head back to the infirmary and continue his
work. Gaven didn’t look back as he departed, but if he had, he might have caught the look on
Cheval’s face which indicated intense bewilderment.

Quark in the meantime had been managing bar close to where the men had been sitting and of course
because he was always eager to make a sliver of latinum and because people tended to forget the
natural range and depth of the Ferengi’s hearing had of course been shamelessly eavesdropping on
their conversation. While Quark always enjoyed having dirt on people the strange Doctor had proved
particularly challenging because though he liked to take meals in Quark’s bar and restaurant, the man
seldom spoke more than two polite words together when he was there.

Since his arrival there had been much-hushed talk about Dr. Gaven Ore. Most people seemed to
know a strangely small amount of information on the man given he was supposed to be so brilliant
and such an asset to the Federation. Interest in him was unusually high despite this, and most of the
general conversation by people about the man was kept mostly to conjecture, much to the Ferengi’s
disappointment. After a mild inquiry of his own, it didn’t take a rocket scientist to realize the data in
the computer’s about the Doctor were mostly a fabrication. Quark had spent enough time doctoring
information over the years to tell the difference between carefully organized facts and a carefully
constructed fiction. As far as he was concerned whoever had done it had done the job poorly, and
there was just no excuse for shoddy work as far as Quark was concerned.

The appearance of the Vulcán Cheval was equally surprising considering that although Gaven was
courteous and generous to just about everyone he did engage, he kept almost no company publicly
and seemed a reclusive sort in general. Yet he’d treated Cheval just now like they were almost
friends. Quark surmised the almost in part because of the look of shock on the Vulcán’s face when
Gaven had so intimately drunk from his cup without warning or consent.

“There is something very strange going on around here.” Quark concluded.

While he was naturally very curious, Quark was also careful not to dig too deeply unless he knew for a fact that what he discovered would be profitable. Anything outside of that might have proved an unnecessary hazard to the Ferengi’s health.

This time though something irresistibly interesting had passed between the two conversing men. Gaven had mentioned he was being exposed to poxy radiation treatments. Considering that poxy radiation was both rare and generally harmful to most species, there was absolutely no justifiable reason Quark could think of to expose someone to the stuff, particularly a generally vulnerable species like that of humans. Given that poxy radiation only existed in a few remote systems also got Quark’s attention. Was it possible that Dr. Gaven Ore was something other than human? And furthermore, he wasn’t human than what was he and why was he going to such lengths to conceal it?

Quark puzzled over these questions as he tried to isolate angles that could be profitable. But for once his heart wasn’t quite in it. If something was going on, then it certainly wasn’t a small thing. Starfleet had to be in on it which meant that the truth was probably known on the station but only among a handful of people. If it was that big of a secret, then it was perhaps unwise for Quark to do anything that could result in unwanted harmful exposure. Then again, sometimes just knowing about the existence of a secret was profit enough.

Quark decided to hold off on doing anything just yet, though he was eager to dig a little bit and refresh himself about which known systems had poxy radiating suns and how many of those systems were inhabited. Quark couldn’t imagine that there were very many.

As for Cheval, Quark observed that the Vulcan was battling something. This was amusing in and of itself to Quark because he couldn’t remember a time he ever saw a Vulcan show any real sign of emotion outside of occasional frustration and annoyance. Cheval seemed a slightly more sensitive example of his species. Deep Space 9 seemed to attract many aliens who were not generally typical of the races they were apart of for one reason or another. Quark’s pitiful brother Rom came to mind as did Worf, and Odo. While all had strong ties to their cultures, they were not typical representations of those cultures. Rom was Rom. Worf had been raised predominately by humans, and Odo had gone as far as to defy the standards of his people enough to warrant them taking away his shapeshifting abilities which he’d only just gotten back.

Since Gaven had left Cheval had gotten a distant pensive look on his face as he stared at the mostly empty glass resting between his hands. While most might have thought he was merely caught in deep concentration, Quark instead thought he was trying to qualify something in his mind.

“You look at odds. Here. Try some Gulbian beer nuts. Thinking is better on a full stomach.” Quark offered, unable to resist bothering the Vulcan.

A large cup of beer nuts was produced from behind the bar and carried off to Cheval’s table by Quark personally.

“Thank you.” Cheval broke his concentration long enough to give a slight nod of acknowledgment to Quark. “Though, I am not at odds.”

“Ah well, far be it of me to go round making judgments about people I don’t really know. Nevertheless, I don’t like seeing people conflicted in my bar and you, sir, strike me as a man conflicted and that’s bad for business. See, it depresses the atmosphere. Now usually a little melancholy helps sales around here, but at this hour there are not enough people to take advantage of
so as the proprietor I have to protect my revenue streams as much as I can. Now, let me see if I can’t use my bar-tending gifts of deduction and guess what’s on your mind. Um. You don’t like your drink. That’s fair. We’ll get you another. You don’t know what do do with all you’re free time…Well, that’s what holo-suites are for, and since your a tourist I’ll give you a two for one session and knock ten percent off of the base cost of your first session…As a welcome gesture.”

Cheval didn’t bite and only stared at Quark without comment, so the Ferengi moved on and went in for the kill.

“Now, If your real dilemma is that you’re worried about the good doctor Ore…” Quark was hoping to stimulate a conversation for research purposes of course.

There was the right button. Quark observed when he saw Cheval color ever so slightly and doing so presumably for being so transparent.

“He is well liked here on Deep Space 9, is he not?” Cheval interjected swiftly.

“Well, It’s hard to say. Dr. Ore isn’t exactly the most demonstrative person around here, you see. I hear it told that he’s very good at what he does though. You didn’t hear this from me, but, I’ve heard it proposed that he may even rival our resident CMO…But, Shhh. As I said, you didn’t hear that from me. As for my personal opinion as the proprietor here? Overall, he seems to keep to himself, so your guess is as good as mine.” Quark said casually.

“I am surprised that the good doctor wouldn’t attract more open camaraderie.” Cheval remarked.

“Oh, I dunno. He does seem to be liked by many people. And I think many people around here would like to think of him as a friend If he’d let them once in a while. But for whatever reason, he’s just stodgy about reciprocating sentiment. Though, huh, he seems to get along with you pretty well. Trust me. It’s my job to notice these things. I mean…He’s never said more than two words to me before. Not that it hurts my feelings. With you though, it seemed he couldn’t wait to talk.” Quark mused as he pretended to be casual when he was acutely interested in the Vulcan’s reaction.

“I see. I admit…I should very much like to get to know him better. Though perhaps I should be more obvious about my receptivity.” Cheval mused.

“Though that presents a small problem. I can’t claim to know much about human customs in terms of hospitality and preemptive friendship gestures.” Cheval was careful to show no signs what so ever that he knew anything about Gaven’s actual identity and origins.

“Ah. Well, that one is easy. He invited you to dinner. Again, I noticed. You should bring him a gift. Nothing too ostentatious. So that rules out food or wine.” Quark snapped his fingers. “You know what? I know just the thing. You should give him a plant. Everyone likes a plant to brighten up their living space. Call it an old Human tradition someone told me about one time. And it just so happens I think I have just the thing. This morning I was helping set up arraignments for a Bajoran wedding I’m catering, and the florist let me keep some of the flower samples as a kind of goodwill gesture. Trouble is they don’t really go with my bar’s motif. Maybe you could take one off my hands and give it to the doctor. Human’s love that kind of thing.”

Cheval considered this plan a moment. “A plant would seem an acceptable gesture of gratitude and mutual hospitality. What kind of flowers are they?”

“A type of Bajoran Orchid. Very fragrant, sturdy, and long-lasting. Let me go get one, and you can decide for yourself.” Quark offered.
To Quark’s delight, Chwval agreed to look at a specimen. Being a botanist, plants were of chief interest to him anyway and gift or not he might have been tempted to buy a sample off of Quark regardless if it proved particularly interesting. Quark encouraged him to wait at the bar while Quark scuttled swiftly into the back to track down his brother. For once Rom’s tendency to tinker on his breaks were about to prove useful.

“Rom! Where are you? You know, it’s out of brotherly courtesy that I let you have breaks at all. The least you could do is be snappy about it when I need you for something.” Quark complained.

Seconds later Rom appeared at his elbow. “Sorry brother. I’ll do better next time.”

“Never mind that. Rom, is that organic bug you’ve been working on finished yet?” Quark griped his brother by the shoulders enthusiastically.

“Well…Yeah, but it doesn’t have a long shelf life. I mean it’ll still transmit up to twelve hours of information, but after that, it decays. I was hoping to get it up to at least three days…” Rom said with a humble though hopeful tonality.

“Yeah, yeah. We don’t need it to work that long. Tell me a prototype is ready to go?”

“Well, sure. But, I only got one…I mean…” Rom confessed.

“Get it and conceal it on this plant. I just overheard a fascinating conversation that I want to follow up on.” Quark insisted.

Rom reluctantly did what he was told, and a moment later the organic bug was disguised to look like just a normal bulge in the orchid’s stem.

Taking the orchid from his brother, Quark swiftly brought it back out to Cheval and presented it to him. “Here we go. If you like it, you can have it for say a sliver of gold-latinum.”

Cheval studied the plant carefully for several seconds until it got to the point where Quark was sure his plan was going to be found out before it ever got off the ground. To his relief, the organic bug remained hidden.

“It is acceptable.” Cheval said at length. “May I open a line of credit with you to cover the expense in the short term?”

“It would be my pleasure.” Quark agreed. ”Right this way.”

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For once Gaven found himself apprehensive about something other than his many past regrets and the political intrigue he found himself entrenched in. Maybe it was the drugs Julian had shot him up with or merely a side effect of the implants doing their job. In any case, for the first time since his exile from Oum Gaven found he felt pleased with himself.

The sentiment felt almost foreign to him in light of all the negative things he’d experienced and felt since leaving Oum and because it had been so long since a truly happy state of mind had been his to enjoy, Gaven couldn’t help but be judiciously suspicious of its existence within his psyche. The source of his preemptive pleasure was, of course, rooted within the prospect of hosting Cheval that evening. The awkward circumstances and nature of the intimacy that had been generated now by not just one but multiple mind-melds since they’d met only enhanced his interest in their reunion. Coupled by the fact that they were still very separate and different people with very little first-hand knowledge of each other, this caused Gaven to experience a kind of giddy anxiety that felt entirely
out of character for him.

This mixture of self-indulgent pleasure and anxiety was enough of a distraction for Gaven that he ultimately begged off the rest of his work for the day almost immediately after he returned to the infirmary. As he mulled over his new feelings and tried to make sense of them, for once Gaven wished he had someone in his life that he could truly confide in. But, despite being on good terms with many of the station’s staff, Gaven had yet to develop what he considered to be a personal enough relationship with anyone to feel comfortable talking through his thoughts just then. Barring this ability, Gaven knew there were other options available to him. How long had it been since he’d purged his emotions? Not since he’d left Oum.

Similarly to many other cultures, the Oum had developed a strong appreciation for meditation and similar therapeutic practices. This was especially important to the Oum because of their empathic abilities and common communication barriers. The concept of purging emotion was considered necessary to the normal Oum’s health and well being because it was believed that repression could cause physical illness and mental instability. Since leaving Oum, Gaven had resisted the meditative purging process. In some ways, he’d been afraid to let go. So he’d defiantly held on to and internalized everything he’d experienced since his exile. Gaven had learned to tolerate suffering and make friends with his sense of loss. But until now he hadn’t considered how painful and disorientating it could be to feel anything other than turmoil. It disturbed him to realize he’d forgotten how to enjoy things.

Furthermore, the last thing Gaven wanted to do was drive Cheval away or disrupt the Vulcan’s life more than he already had. Cheval wasn’t on the station just because Gaven had presented him with an opportunity to come when he’d included Cheval’s name on the list of contacts he’d given to the captain. Cheval had been having personal problems because of Gaven. Questions that were persistent and troubling enough that Gaven was convinced that sooner or later Cheval would have tracked him down whether he’d extended an invitation or not. In some way, he felt like he owed the other man something. But was there more to it than that?

Trying to calm his confused thoughts, Gaven sank into his sofa and tried to breathe through his feelings which were a jumble of manic thoughts, cloudy self-doubt, irony-laced amusement with himself, and the ache deep within him that was now a permanent part of his Psyche.

It was already half past three if he was going to handle entertaining Cheval in a few hours Gaven needed to do something to get his head on straight.

For once he needed to confront what he felt directly.

The exact purging process was a little different for every Oum, but the general idea behind the practice was to take any disruptive emotions and cycling thoughts, process them, and then expel them through guided meditation and visualization. Gaven had resisted purging his consciousness for some time, but now he saw no other choice if he was going to move forward.

Slowly getting up, Gaven moved to the display and gently picked up the small pulsing box bringing it back with him to the open area in front of his sofa. Placing the box in the center of the floor the then proceeded very awkwardly to get down on the floor in spite of his bad leg. Eventually, he succeeded and settled into a semi cross-legged position before the pulsing box so that he could focus on its blue light and begin the meditative process that would allow him to plunge within himself beyond what was known and into the depths of the unknown self.

In this middle space where memory met imagination, Gaven found himself transported to a different time and place. When he opened his eyes, he found himself in front of the home he had shared with his bond-mate Lopel Nor-Oum. The time was mid-afternoon. It was a balmy day accented by
the sweet breeze that was indicative of the late Oum springtime. The sky that day was only partially clear causing the hazy Oum’s sun to cast a slightly orange hue upon the landscape that enhanced the natural green tones in the patchy grassy iron-rich soil and the unique trees. Gaven was sitting fully cross-legged in the grass with a telepad in his hand. He had often sat there in such a manner while composing his many essays and personal observations. For what seemed like a long time Gaven managed to forget himself and reality entirely. For all that he knew he was back home on Oum living out his normal life as if everything that had happened had not occurred. This absence of sense generated a feeling of utter peace and security within Gaven the like of which should have lasted him through his lifetime. For a time Gaven drank it all in knowing it as his only truth until something seemingly outside of him disrupted his peace of mind with a harsh crashing reality.

“This is far from a time to idly rest, my Gaven Ore-Oum. I am dead; I’m sorry to say. But you? You are alive…” The disembodied voice came from directly behind Gaven and was heard close to his ear. As the voice spoke, Gaven could feel the owner’s rough palm run up his back and over his shoulder to embrace him from behind across his chest.

For Gaven, the familiar voice seemed to invade his serenity and threaten the tranquility he was enjoying up until that moment. As awareness began to blossom in him, he felt the familiar biting pain of remembrance, though this time because he was in the place between his consciousness and conscience, the usually violent awareness of his life’s suffering felt far away and vague to him.

Putting down his telepad, Gaven gripped the man’s forearm that was presently anchored across his and around his waist and pressed it even more firmly against his body. As he did this Gaven’s mouth that had been turned down in a pensive expression softened and lifted into a feeling of familiarity and fondness. Lopel Nor-Oum was nothing more than a figment of Gaven’s imagination and yet now he felt as real to Gaven as anything could feel.

Gaven tugged on the other man gently urging him around his body so that he could pull Lopel into his lap and cup the man’s face in his hands.

Lopel Nor-Oum was a jovial type. The kind of person who was full of mirth and mindful humor. His hair was a mess of sun-bleached ringlets, accented by warm brown eyes, and tan skin. Like much of the dominant class on Oum, Lopel was biologically afflicted thanks to the genetics he’d inherited and because of the poxy radiation that saturated everything around the Oum people. Lopel’s calves were fused to his thighs, and his skin was rough and marred from repeated infection. One brow bone dipped down lower than the other, and his spine was slightly misaligned and crooked. Yet for all his physical defects, Lopel’s stunning smile and cheerful disposition made him undeniably appealing. By Oum standards, Lopel was considered beautiful and, indeed, because Gaven had loved him beyond all measure; Gaven’s eyes saw only flawlessness and felt only love for his looks, manner, and characterization. Lopel had indeed been a much liked and respected society figure. He was opinionated, mentally and emotionally intense, and fearless to a fault. But now he was dead. Unknown by anyone but Gaven off their planet.

“Well, Gaven Ore-Oum.” Said Lopel. “So I see you have finally come to face me. And now, what do you think?”

Gaven let out a deep breath. “I think, I don’t know what I’m doing anymore.”

“What exactly is there to know?” Lopel scolded. “You are an Oum, but now you are also a free man. You can go anywhere and do anything you like.”

“But what is there left for me without you? Without Oum? How can I let it all go?” Gaven asked seriously, though his expression was soft.
“You might start by remembering that you are not on Oum anymore. Look where you are, my love. Look what you’ve come now to know. Are you really so friendless in the universe? Have you not experienced some worthwhile things?” Lopel pressed.

“I have known nothing but misery since leaving you.” Gaven muttered.

“And yet you have brought such resounding joy to others since you’ve been gone. Think of Kira and the O’Briens. Of Odo. Of Bashir. Have you not known worthwhile things with them? You can’t hide you’re true feelings from me, Gaven Ore-Oum. I know you as well as you know yourself. Your growing care for these aliens is real and powerful. And so very important.” Lopel reminded him. “But I see it isn’t enough for you yet. You’re not ready to let any of them in, and I bleed for you in light of that fact. Is there really no one you will allow into your world?”

“Cheval.” Gaven breathed. “He knows more about me than anyone here. He came looking for me even before I provided the means for our paths to cross again. I feel things for him I should not. Things I’m afraid of. Yet I know he can sense my fears and that given a chance he would go out of his way to dispel them. I trust him and like him very much. I admit.”

This time Lopel smiled wide and brightly and pressed his hands to the sides of Gaven’s face before pushing his lips to Gaven hard and pulling away in a playful, knowing manner. “Why Gaven Ore-Oum, I do believe you have a crush. I’m so proud and happy for you.”

At this declaration, Gaven flushed hot and mirrored his partner’s expression of playful pleasure and radiant joy. “You are my bondmate, Lopel Nor-Oum. In death, as you were in life. I will never stop loving you.”

“My love for you exceeds all limitation.” Lopel Nor-Oum vowed. “But just consider that if I have loved you than others may grow to love you too and that if they do it is because you are so much more than just my bondmate and beloved partner. You are so much more than what our people would have allowed you to be. Don’t make yourself unhappy Gaven Ore-Oum. The universe is capable enough with or without your encouragement. Resist at your own peril and know that while I am always with you, I can’t be with you anymore. If you’re even to stand a fighting chance, you must be willing to let it all go. Time is much more fleeting than you think.”

Tearing Gaven allowed Lopel to pull his face into the side of his throat where his pining tears were lost in the curly nap of Lopel’s hair as Lopel held Gaven and whispered almost silent reassurances into his ear.

And for what felt like a long time; time and space, consciousness and illusion, blurred together and carried Gaven deeper into himself. Almost as if he was trying to search out the lost fragments of his evasive peace of mind as it weaved through the alleyways of his wounded heart.

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Gaven came out of his meditative trance more quickly than was healthy due to the punctual arrival of Cheval and the invasive sound of his door being rung. The sound tugged just firmly enough in the back of Gaven’s consciousness that it broke his purging state and caused him to come crashing back into conscious awareness. The suddenness was almost cruel as he experienced the realness of his projection crumble and the strength of the feeling it had evoked become dull and far away. That was the purpose of the Oum purging ritual, to encourage mental processing and emotional distance. Gaven had primarily avoided the practice since being expelled from Oum preferring to live entirely
within his memories and feelings no matter how debilitatingly painful. The effect of the purge was almost immediate. Gaven felt the familiar emptiness of his feelings and the relief their absence afforded him. The state of mind wasn’t permanent, but for now, it would linger until his mind could generate more emotional trigger points.

The door rang a second time while Gaven struggled to recover himself and get up off the floor. After finally getting to his feet, Gaven scrubbed at his face a moment and then limped without assistance to his door. By the time he opened it, Cheval’s back was half turned as if he’d been contemplating waking away.

“Cheval. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Please come…” Before Gaven could finish his rushed invitation, Cheval caught a glimpse of his face and interrupted him.

“Dr. Ore, is everything all right?” The alarm in Cheval’s voice was cutting in its abruptness and was surprisingly assertive for the usually shy and uncertain Vulcan.

Gaven blinked a few times as he tried to catch up with himself and understand Chival’s reaction.

“Yes…Yes, I’m fine. Everything is…” Gaven muttered.

“No. It is not. Come. You will sit down immediately. I insist upon it.” Cheval set the big paper package he’d been holding down on the floor inside the apartment and stepped forward placing his palm flat against Gaven’s chest so that he could nudge him back more fully into the apartment. He then took Gaven by the upper arm and ushered him the short distance into his living room.

“Cheval. It’s all right. I’m all right.” Gaven reassured him more firmly, making sure to turn into Cheval so that they were face to face and so that Gaven could plant his free hand on Cheval’s shoulder and gripped it firmly as if to compel the Vulcan to reassess him.

Cheval, who was only a little shorter than him, took the opportunity to look straight into Gaven’s face and did reassess his features.

Had Gaven been able to see himself from Cheval’s perspective, he would have better understood the younger man’s alarm. Gaven’s eyes were irritated and rimmed in red. There was a noticeable sheen of moisture in them as if he had been holding back tears. His general demeanor seemed disheveled, scattered, and disorganized compared to his typical astuteness and orderliness. All of this coupled with how long it had taken Gaven to answer his door had given Cheval good reason to be alarmed.

“You look distressed. What have you been doing?” Reluctantly Cheval released him and tilted his head ever so slightly to the side.

“I’m sorry. I was meditating and lost track of time.” Gaven said apologetically.

“You were not just meditating.” Cheval objected. “Please explain to me what has happened so that I can better understand.”

Gaven sighed audibly and conceded as he settled down upon the arm of his sofa as he often did when he didn’t entirely want to give up control.

“Before you arrived I was attempting to purge some uncomfortable emotions and thought processes. But, I miscalculated…I failed to anticipate that it was perhaps a poor thing to undertake under the current circumstances and time constraints of our meeting.” Gaven began.

Stepping back and hugging himself, Cheval considered this explanation. “Do the Oum not embrace strong emotional states?”
“Yes. We do embrace our feelings. My species, on the whole, have strong emotional receptivity and empathic abilities that we do actively cultivate. But, like your people, my people have come to understand the importance of self-control. Our emotional purging practices allow us to examine our stronger impulses, feelings, and repetitive thought processes and then we can release them as our needs and objectives necessitate.” Gaven explained.

“I see. Vulcan’s have similar approaches for practicing and maintaining self-control.” Cheval related. “May I say something?”

“Of course. Please, be candid.” Gaven encouraged him.

“Given the extreme nature of your experiences as well as the emotional and psychological disturbances those experiences have caused you, I do not believe you should attempt your traditional purging ritual alone. It is logical that because your emotional burdens are so complex, it may be dangerous or at least hazardous or you to carry on without proper support. It is important that you are choosing to confront that which disturbs you, but you must also take into consideration that your act of confrontation may also present undue stress and incapacitation in and of itself.” Cheval observed.

Gaven listened with great attention before he ventured a response. At length, his eyes slowly fell to the floor between them.

“I’m sorry I scared you.” Gaven reproachingly said at length. “I should have waited.”

“There is no need to apologize to me. I only wish to express my concern as…Your friend.” Cheval emphasized the word “friend” as if he were trying it on.

By now he had relaxed considerably and was almost back to his usual shy and uncertain demeanor. But Gaven had been allowed now to glimpse Cheval’s inner strength as well as his compassion. His concern for Gaven was real and not something either man took lightly.

“I would like, if you will allow me, to help you.” Cheval remarked.

“Cheval, I…” Gaven began to protest.

“I do not want to be invasive. The things you do to cope with your experiences and life are your own business. I simply want to offer my assistance for after your attempts. You might find that you need someone to care for you who…” Cheval’s tone was almost manic in his bright and careful willingness and this time it was Gaven’s turn to beat him to the punch of his thoughts.

“…Understands.” Gaven finished Cheval’s thought for him.

“Yes.” Cheval confirmed.

“I have a silly idea.” Geven said at length eventually quirking a grin. “Why don’t we start this evening over? I know Vulcan’s aren’t much for theater, but perhaps you would humor me in this instance.”

Cheval suppressed a knowing look of amusement. “You wish for me to step out of the room and pretend as if I’ve just arrived.”

“I did say it was silly.” Gaven reminded him.

Not surprisingly Cheval did rise and, after picking up the package he had placed on the floor, triggered the entrance. He then stepped out into the hall and allowed the door to close.
Gaven remained where he was on the edge of the sofa somewhat bemused by the fact that Cheval had gone along with his idea. In the back of his awareness, he could almost hear Lopel’s words again reminding him of his virtues. The purging made the words barely recallable, but in spite of the dull numbness that blunted his feelings and thoughts, Gaven’s attraction to the young Vulcan nudged its way through his awareness urging him gently on in spite of it.

After a moment, the door sounded again, and Gaven eased himself off the edge of the sofa and approached. This time he was determined to meet Cheval properly. Schooling his features into an emotionless vein, he took his time before tapping the door mechanism.

As expected Cheval was waiting for him on the other side and this time Gaven took his presence in.

Cheval was dressed in a simple Vulcan style tan tunic and tailored pants. The casualness of his attire made him look younger than he was. It was a detail that would have been lost on someone not familiar with the species in their natural environment of Vulcan. Gaven had been on the planet long enough to recall important impressions about Cheval’s people. Gaven in is information gathering mode let allowed himself to not other trivial things. For instance, Cheval was tall by human standards though petite in body frame by Vulcan comparison. Knowing what he knew of Cheval through their unique circumstances that had thrown them together and through their repeated telepathic contact, Gaven recalled how Cheval had commonly been targeted and harassed by his Vulcan peers for being less robust than they were. Even as an adult Gaven had witnessed some of the indifference and disrespect Cheval still often endured.

Gaven’s impression was of course very different. He considered Cheval to be gentle and sensitive. His life experiences had encouraged a timidness and sorrowful placidity that gave Cheval an air of undeserving tragedy, but Gaven knew that with the slightest encouragement Cheval could lift himself above his upbringing. Like Gaven, Cheval was used to being overlooked and undervalued because of what he did not represent. This was perhaps the relatable theme between them. Among their worlds and in spite of both men’s many personal achievements and admirable qualities both had been cast as insignificant by their own kind and as oddities by everyone else.

“Dr. Ore. May I come in?” Cheval asked dutifully even though they both knew the question was unnecessary.

Gaven curbed an amused smile and stepped back then gestured for Cheval to enter.

“I have brought you something for your space here.” Cheval announced.

Gaven hadn’t looked at the package until then, but he could tell what it likely contained.

“You brought me flowers.” Gaven observed.

“Yes. A type of Bajoran Orchid.” Cheval watched expectantly while Gaven carefully removed the paper.

Once the paper was removed to reveal the white-flowered plant its sweet, potent fragrance pleasantly began to waft through the space. Gaven looked at the plant longer than was necessary and then to Cheval who had settled back down on one side of the table.

“I like them very much. Thank you.” He said sincerely.

Cheval pressed his lips and bobbed his head in acknowledgment.

After disposing of the brown paper, Gaven settled himself at the other side of the table. “Would you like some tea? I acquired a Vulcan variety that I recall you favoring during the final stages of the
freighter’s journey to Vulcan.”

“Jasmine tea. My mother used to grow her own on Vulcan.” Cheval remarked as he let gave pour out a cup and pass it to him.

“How s your mother, by the way?” Gaven asked.

“She is well and pleased that we are reconnecting.” He replied.

“Why is that, do you suppose?” Gaven inquired flatly.

“I suspect she feels gratitude towards you for saving my life and the life of the others when our freighter came under attack.” Cheval said politely.

“As I recall, you were the one who brought me out of stasis. We saved the freighter’s crew together. My only real service to your people was tending to the wounded after the fact. Even the business with the Breen…It was your idea to alert them to my existence, and it was your scientific expertise that helped the crew stabilize the warp core before it imploded.” Gaven pointed out gently.

Cheval made no reply and instead both men sipped at their tea for a while.

“If I may say, my people should have watched over and protected you more closely on Vulcan. You deserved asylum. Given who you are and what you had done, the High Council would have welcomed you as an alien refugee.” Cheval remarked scowling sightly with dissatisfaction.

“It wasn’t anyone’s fault that I was abducted from Vulcan. Even the Federation has failed to produce any concrete explanations of the facts in the matter and, frankly, it doesn’t matter to me one way or another. I’ve come to terms with the reality that the moment I resisted my prescribed destiny on Oum, I lost control of the direction of my future. It seems that is the price I am meant to pay for my exile and my freedom.” Gaven pointed out dismissively.

“This is not freedom.” Cheval contradicted firmly. “I don’t fully understand what the Federation is holding over you that you would help them as you are at the cost of your civil liberties. You are not a criminal nor does it seem anyone plans to take responsibility for the crimes that were perpetrated against you under the guise of the Federation when you were taken from Vulcan and tortured for information that you did not have. It seems to me you are being drawn into a conflict that should not concern you.”

Do you want me to justify it to you?” Gaven asked calmly.

“No, Doctor. I would like you to qualify it to me. I am not interested in judging you for your choices. I wish only to understand them.” Cheval replied.

Gaven considered his response carefully.

“When I was exiled off Oum and left to die in space, my life lost all context and meaning. Maybe the moment Lopel Nor-Oum died it happened. In any case, the irony of my situation is that I was exiled from Oum because I dared to uphold the idea that my life had it’s own unique purposes and meanings outside of what I was born to be. Being launched into space and forgotten about was a statement about being insignificant to Oum and anyone else. Since then by fate or design, time and again, I found myself at the mercy and service of strangers. What I am…who I am…seems always to be both vitally interesting and only important so far as it is useful to those who know anything about it. I know that I am caught in the crossfire of the current conflicts of our time. If I’m not warding off Breen attacks, and concocting science that both preserves life and exploits its weaknesses; then what am I doing?” Gaven posed.
“Is there nothing you want for yourself? Have you not developed desires of your own?” Cheval asked.

“Everything I wanted, I left on Oum. I don’t know how to aspire to anything grander than servitude. It’s the one thing I was bred and groomed for. As for this business with the Dominion, the Oum have modeled much of our values around our past experiences with the Changeling culture. We by no means worship them, but we have a deep seeded respect for their value. From what I’ve gathered off my world the changelings have become as bitter and as isolated as my culture has in mind. The Federation should and do fear them greatly. The conflict with the Dominion is rooted in the difference between individualism and collectivism. The sum of my own life has been centered around the same argument. I believe individualism should be allowed to exist and prosper without domination. But I fear the annihilation strategy of conquest. It seems to me that what the Dominion can not control they will seek to destroy. For those on the other side of that equation, the temptation to annihilate before they are annihilated might prove too strong. Someone has to maintain the balance.” Gaven said.

“Someone like you?” Cheval said rhetorically.

“For now I seem valuable to all sides. In the end, though, I will adhere to only what I think is right. No matter the consequence.” Gaven said quietly.
The Spider and the Flies

Chapter Summary

Note: This Next Chapter is a re-imagining of Season 5, Episode 14: In Purgatory’s Shadow. It was necessary to play with this episode in light of the fact that the changeling child lived and would soon be coming under Odo’s direct care and guidance.

PLOT NOTE: Readers have also expressed an interest in seeing me include Garak in the story. I admit he’s been absent so far mostly because I didn’t feel I understood the voice of the character well enough to do him justice. But then again, who doesn’t love Garak and who doesn’t want to see what could happen if he were to catch wind of what’s been going on. So Garak will, of course, appear now in the story and will continue to be an important character from this point on.

I would like to take a moment to address the original series plot twist involving Bashir presented in Episodes 14-15.

At some unknown point, Bashir was apprehended by the Dominion and held at Internment Camp 371. The concept, by the writer’s own admission, was poorly done and left a terrible couple of plot holes given they never really clarified when and how Julian Bashir was abducted. By some accounts, it was just before the events in the Episode: Rapture. If this is to be believed then that means several events including the death of the baby changeling and the birth of the O’brien’s son were actually all carried out by the Changeling impostor.

For me, that’s just too much to try and have to work around and it undermines all the emotional character development that happened in between Rapture and By Inferno’s Light. So we’re not going there. We’re going to assume that Bashir was never captured and that the Changeling posing as him infiltrated when Kira was set into the Wormhole with the Defiant to confirm the Dominion Invasion.

Enjoy.

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CHAPTER 10: The Spider and the Flies

Much had happened since the arrival of the sick baby Changeling. While Odo did not generally like rapid change, this time it seemed like everything that was occurring now was bent directly in his favor. The life of the changeling being saved had been miracle enough, but for Odo to have his identity returned thanks, in part, to his bond with the newling…This had undone something in Odo he hadn’t realized had been bound up. He was a changeling once more and along with that had come a new, unexpected responsibility. A responsibility Odo had never seriously considered undertaking until now.

“Well, Papa? I bet you can’t wait to put this all together.” Kira remarked with all due pleasure as she helped Odo carry his old things back into his rooms.
“I must admit, had this happened under other circumstances it may have been less satisfying then it feels now. When I thought I was going to be a solid forever, I tried to let go of most of what I’d been. But now? It’s exciting. So much more exciting and joyful than I ever imagined it would be. I, of course, am glad to be able to shapeshift again but…”

“But now you’re going to have a baby in the house, and they consume all your thoughts.” Kira chuckled. “Trust me it’s completely natural. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you. I must admit there were some enjoyable things about being a solid. Sleeping in a bed comes to mind, though it’s out of the question now that I tend to revert to my gelatinous form when I sleep. Small sacrifices, I suppose.” Odo remarked wistfully.

“Ah well, we can put it in storage for now. What about these PADDs? Finding and Winning Your Perfect Mate by Dr. Jennings Rain…Parenthood For the Unorthodox Parent by S. J. Walzer…” Kira read aloud.

“Uh…I’ll take those. Research purposes. At first when I thought I was going to be a humanoid for the rest of my life and then later with the baby…There were certain things that I felt…” Odo began.

“You don’t have to explain, Odo.” Kira remarked sensing his discomfort.

“I only read the first three chapters of the first and haven’t started the second.” He reasoned.

“Maybe you should finish them.” Kira encouraged him.

“The first seems like a waste of time. Romance is for solids, and I have an example to set now.” Odo replied as if he was trying to convince himself of something.

“Odo, you ARE a solid eighteen hours a day, and as a role model I would think you’d want to show this new changeling that they don’t have to feel limited about pursuing anything that’s important to them regardless of the obstacles,” Kira argued. “Furthermore, I’m sure there are plenty of women on this station who would be very interested in you if you’d give them a chance.”

“I’ll…Keep that in mind, Major. Though right now romance is the last thing on my mind. The doctors say the changeling baby should be well enough to leave the infirmary soon and I want to get everything in order before that happens.” Odo explained.

Kira looked as if she was planning to say something but the computer system cut off her thoughts.

“Dax to Kira and Odo.” The voice said.

“Go ahead, commander.”

“There’s something we’d like you to take a look at in OPS.” Dax relayed.

“We’re on our way.” Kira confirmed.

As it turned out one of the Federation’s listening posts in the Gamma Quadrant had picked up what first appeared to be a Cardassian Military Code, however, none of the usual encryption algorithms could decode it. After sending it to Bajor with no immediate results, the assembled officers concluded that the station’s resident Tailor and former Cardassian spy Elim Garak could perhaps shed some light on the message for them and was promptly summoned to look at the information. The call had interrupted Garak while he’d been taking brunch with Ziyal and Julian.

“I’m sorry for the interruption.” Garak said in his typical eager and theatrical way as he returned to
his friends at their table a little while later.

“Well? How did it go?” Ziyal asked brightly.

“I’m afraid I disappointed them. I think they were hoping that the message they picked up would contain the key to defeating the Dominion. You should have seen the looks on their faces when I explained to them that it was a five-year-old planetary survey report.” Garak emphasized.

“A planetary survey report?” Julian asked rhetorically with a look of distaste.

“That’s the look, exactly.” Garak said pointing to Julian for Ziyal's benefit.

“I thought you would have been a little disappointed, too.” Julian remarked gently as a confused expression played across his feature. “After all, it could have been from one of the survivors of the Cardassian fleet that was lost in the Gamma Quadrant.”

“Oh, I’d given up hope on ever finding any trace of them long ago.” Garak proclaimed dismissively.

“Really? I never saw you as a giving-up type.” Ziyal remarked mirthfully.

“There comes a time when one must face reality, my dear. Those people are gone and are never coming back.” Garak insisted with great effectiveness. “Well…My young Friends, I’d like to stay here and chat all day, but I have dresses to make, trousers to mend. It’s a full life if a trifle banal. And do tell Captain Sisko that I’d be more than happy to decode any Cardassian laundry list that come across his desk.”

Rising out of his chair Garak touched hands with Ziyal and took his swift leave.

In his wake Julian leveled a suspicious glare in is general direction that came from knowing the man as well as he did.

Filled with pleasure, Ziyal turned back to Julian to confess herself. “My father would be furious to hear me say this, but…There’s something about Garak I find…fascinating.”

“Yes, he has his moments.” Julian agreed with a sour look of concern still present across his features.

Shortly after, Julian concluded his brunch with Ziyal and headed back to the infirmary with some haste. Gaven had taken Julian’s morning shift so that he could have time to make his brunch with Ziyal and Garak, but now Julian needed to beg a further favor from him.

“Gaven, I need you to do something for me if you would.” Julian asked.

Gaven had just finished up his morning rounds when the other Doctor found him.

“Something wrong, Julian?” Gaven asked in his flat, deadpan manner while he scrubbed down his hands.

“I don’t know yet. It could be nothing. I just have to check on something, and I don’t know how long it will take. Can you take point, please? I’ll make it up to you later.” Julian pressed.

Gaven took a moment to look Julian up and down before he bothered responding. “All right. It isn’t as if I have anything else to do.”

“Thank you. If everything goes well and quickly, I’ll stop back and relieve you early.” Julian promised.
“Julian.” Gaven said sharply just before the other man was about to leave. “Be careful. Whatever you're about to get yourself into? Remember, it’s not a game.”

The off-hand comment made Julian pause, but instead of inquiring he looked Gaven straight in the face and nodded. “Right. Thanks.”

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Julian wasn’t the only one in a hurry that day.

While the doctor begged off his shift, Garak was busy swiftly packing. Per usual, Garak had not been wholly or even at all honest about the details of the encrypted code he’d been asked to look at.

Knowing its actual contents, Garak was eager to get off the station as quickly as possible. He was so keen in fact that he didn’t bother to generate an excuse for shutting down his shop that day. His plan was simple. Steal a runabout and leave to take care of business, consequences be damned.

Garak made it as far as the runabout without attracting suspicion and used one of his contraband gadgets to hack the door locks. It looked as if he was going to be home free, at least for this part of the trip, until a familiar voice landed a fly in his proverbial soup.

“Going somewhere?” Julian inquired as he swung around from the front of the runabout’s chair and pointed a phaser directly at Garak.

“I really must remember to stop underestimating you, Doctor.” Garak said swiftly as he tried to recover his surprise at being caught so seamlessly.

“How did you know?” Garak asked self indulgently.

“You mean, that you were lying about the contents of the message? You said that you’d given up on the Cardassian survivors who were lost in the Gamma Quadrant. Well, Ziyal was right. You’re not the giving up sort.” Julian deduced.

“Very good, Doctor.” Garak said with satisfaction, while putting down his bag. “You’ve come a long way from the naive young man I met five years ago. You’ve become distrustful and suspicious. It suits you.”

“I had a good teacher.” Julian responded satisfactorily. “What did the message really say, Garak?”

It was a call for help. From Enabran Tain.” Garak disclosed, carefully watching Julian’s reaction.

“Tain?” Julian wrinkled his nose. “But you said you’d seen his ship destroyed by the Dominion.”

“I did, but Tain was head of the Obsidian Order for twenty years. If he can survive that, he can survive anything.” Garak pointed out. “I have to find him, Doctor. I owe it to him.”

“You don’t owe Tain anything.” Julian objected. “He had you exiled from Cardassia.”

“Yes, but, aside from that, we were very close. He was…My mentor and I’m not going to turn my back on him.” Garak picked his words carefully but was ultimately firm. “If it’ll make you feel any better, you can come with me. All you have to do is come up with an excuse why you need the Runabout, and we could leave immediately.”

Julian didn’t look moved.

“Let me get this straight. You want me to lie to my commanding officer, violate Starfleet regulations,
and go with you on a mission into the Gamma Quadrant, which will probably get us both killed.” Julian reiterated as he settled back into his chair.

“I’m ready when you are.” Garak said.

It was worth a shot if nothing else.

“In that case…Let’s go. To Captain Sisko’s office.” Julian replied as he trained his phaser back on Garak.

It appeared the jig was up.

“How do you know that the message isn’t a fake?” Captain Sisko asked a short time later in his office where Julian had escorted Garak at phaser point. “That it was really sent by Tain?”

“The code sequence was personally designed by Tain and myself. No one else knows it.” Garak replied insistently. “Now, somehow he got that message out, and I have to follow it back to its source.”

“Did the message contain any coordinates?” Sisko pressed.

“No. Most of it was an identification code. The rest of it was just one word “alive”, repeated over and over again. So it should be easy enough to triangulate the source.” Trying to emphasize the strength of his feelings Garak took a step toward the captain and sought to compel him further.

“Captain…Tain might not be alone. There could be others. Troops from the Cardassian-Romulan fleet, survivors from the Dominion attack on New Bajor, and even crew members from those Federation ships that disappeared in the Gamma Quadrant. This is a mission of mercy. You can’t ignore it.”

“”I’m still not totally convinced that it’s a genuine message.” Sisko argued. “But I suppose there is only one way to find out.”

“Captain,” Julian interjected. “You can’t let him go. It’s too dangerous.”

“Your concern is touching, Doctor, but I assure you I can take care of myself.” Garak insisted.

“Maybe you can.” Sisko conceded. “But you’re still not going alone.”

Garak’s eyes widened again seeing another opportunity to bring Julian into his fold. “Doctor? I think you’ve just volunteered.”

“Dr. Bashir isn’t going anywhere. But I do have someone else in mind.” The captain said.

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The order had come down from Benjamin personally that Worf was to accompany Garak. A detail that had Jadzia Dax in a rare rage when she happened to find out, not from Worf, but the Captain that he was to go on the mission.

“I don’t know what makes me angrier—That you agreed to go into the Gamma Quadrant with GARAK, or that I had to hear it from Sisko.” Jadzia fumed as she walked back an forth while Worf stoically sat nearby polishing his weapon.
“I was going to tell you.” Worf said firmly but calmly.

“When? On your way out the airlock?” She demanded.

“A Klingon warrior does not have to explain why he chooses to face danger, not even to his par’machkai.” Worf remarked, quoting Klingon sensibility.

“So…In other words, you were afraid I’d make a scene. That I’d embarrass you, maybe even cry.” She said pointedly.

“You are capable of anything.” Worf replied, believing his own words.

“Don’t worry Worf. I won’t be shedding any tears over you.” She replied just as earnestly.

Worf sighed. “Ah. Then you came to wish me a good death in battle.”

“No.” Jadzia said bluntly quirking her brow. “I came for these.”

In a showy manner, Jadzia reached slowly into a nearby drawer to remove a small handful of music rods.

The gesture had the exact effect she wanted it to have as Worf’s eyes widened in complete surprise. “My Klingon Operas.”

“Well, you won’t be using them for the next few days.” Jadzia reasoned coyly. “Somebody might as well enjoy them, and I promised to introduce Dr. Ore to them. Now seems like a good a time as any.”

At this Worf turned away and crossed the room.


“You have a tendency to misplace things.” Worf replied after turning around.

Jadzia scoffed mockingly. “And you’re afraid I might lose your precious Operas?”

“Yes.” Worf admitted flatly.

“It’s a distinct possibility. If I were you, I would hurry back.” Jadzia said innocently. “That is…If you want to keep your collection intact.”

Jadzia neared Worf, the ever-present passion between them smoldering now and oozing up through the surface of her tone. Not surprisingly the couple embraced passionately and exchanged a lover’s kiss. Their quarrel was utterly forgotten.

“Have a glorious death…Or don’t. It’s up to you.” Jadzia reassuringly said before she turned away and walked from the room leaving Worf both dazed and confused as well as inspired.

In Dax and Worf’s case, their goodbyes were always worth their quarrels.

While Worf and Jadzia had their lovers tiff and mending, Garak was doing his best to explain to Ziyal why he needed to leave the station. Her shock was evident, to his satisfaction, but Garak couldn’t resist stoking the fires of her confusion and pain at the thought of his departure.

While he knew perfectly well that Ziyal was fond of him, a more substantial part of Garak secretly wanted the reassurance of her regard for him.
“You can’t go to the Gamma Quadrant.” Ziyal protested.

“Oh, I can…and I will.” Garak corrected her. “I have to.”

“But if something were to happen to you, I…” Ziyal began. “I don’t know what I would do.”

“Oh, I’m sure you could find someone else to eat your meals with. Not that you’d have to. I fully intend to return.” Garak reassured her.

Ziyal shook her head gently. “It’s not just the meals.”

“Yes, I know.” Garak tore his gaze away from her hiding his true feelings. “I’m the only other Cardassian on the station.”

“It’s not that either. You know that.” She insisted. “It’s just that you’re intelligent…and cultured and kind.”

Garak wanted to laugh at her “kind” description of him. Given that he had spent a lifetime conducting business for the Obsidian order and torturing too many people to name with proficiency and glee, "kind" was not a word he would have ever assigned himself. As wrong as Ziyal was thanks to her ignorance of him, it was entirely possible that she was also right so far as his conduct towards her and others he cared about was concerned.

“My dear, you’re young, so I realize that you’re a poor judge of character.” He pointed out.

“Why do you always make fun of my feelings for you?” Ziyal said in frustration.

“Perhaps because I find them a bit, huh, misguided.” Garak offered knowing the right word was actually “uncomfortable”.

“Well if this is what you think, why do you spend so much time with me?” She asked, her feelings stung.

As always Garak couldn’t bring himself, to tell the truth even though it pained him to tell a half-truth. “Because I’m exiled…and alone, and a long way from home. And when I’m with you, it doesn’t feel so bad.”

“I’m glad I could help.” Ziyal said gently.

“Ziyal…No matter what happens, no matter how bleak things may look, I promise you I will come back.” It was the closest thing to a profession of love Garak could manage. “You have my word.”

“I believe you.” Ziyal reassured him.

Seconds later their sweet moment was destroyed by the unexpected arrival of Ziyal’s father, Dukat.

“Take your hands off her!” Surprising them both Dukat wasted no time in seizing Garak by the shirt front and threatening to drop him backward over the balcony near their table.

“You touch my daughter again, and I’ll kill you.” He promised.

“Go ahead. Kill me. She’ll never forgive you, you know.” Garak baited him while Ziyal protested from the sidelines.

The scene attracted the negative attention of almost everyone in sight, and just as Quark was ready to spring into action, an unexpected interloper intervened.
“Gul Dukat, I presume. I believe you had some routine Business with Dr. Bashir today among other
things. Seeing as I have agreed to take over his shifts that means you have business with me. Now
you wouldn’t know it, but I’m planning to be very busy today, and I would kindly appreciate it if
you wouldn’t complicate my day further by killing this Gentlemen on the promenade. Best case, I’d
have to subdue you and try to save his life, and I really don’t have time for that right now. Not to
mention I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your blood pressure down before I have to see you.” Gaven
had been eating at his usual table alone when the trouble had started.

Turning Dukat glared at the stranger. “If I were you I would learn to mind my own business.”

“Yes. Yes. We should all mind our own business. But I’m afraid, gentleman, that I can’t have you
fighting in my establishment. Take the good Doctor’s advice and settle your disputes somewhere
else.” Quark interjected.

“I will act as I please, Ferengi.” Dukat growled.

“Well, then you’ll excuse me while I call Security. I’m sure Odo will get a big thrill out of having
you locked up in one of his holding cells.” Quark urged.

“Father…please.” Ziyal implored him.

“Public opinion seems to be running against you.” Garak quipped as Dukat still had him half
hanging off the balcony. “You know…I think that actually helped my back.”

“Let’s go, Garak.” Quark said slyly. ”I’ll buy you a drink. Dr. Ore? I’m sure you have places to be.
Don’t let us hold you up any longer.”

After being released, Garak glanced towards Ziyal and touched hands with her once more. “A
pleasure…As always, my dear.”

He then couldn’t resist a final quip at Dukat for Ziyal and his own benefit. “You do have a lovely
daughter. She must take after her mother.”

As everyone began to disburse, Ziyal glanced sidelong at her father. “You’re wrong about Garak,
father. He’s a good man.”

Calming now, Dukat leveled a fatherly look at his daughter. “You have no idea how much it pains
me to hear you say that.”

Sighing dismissively Dukat tried to smooth things over. “It is good to see you again, Ziyal.”

Smiling at his effort, Ziyal clasped his arm. “It’s good to see you too, father. What are you doing on
the station?”

“Oh, I had a little skirmish with a Klingon Battle Cruiser. My ship was damaged, so I came here for
repairs, a check-up, and to spend some time with you. And I can see…We have a lot to talk about.”
He said squeezing his daughter’s hand.

~@~

As the hours ticked on, much began to happen. Julian was caught up in meetings most of the day.
Worf and Garak had left and been gone for almost 24 hours. Gaven had agreed to pick up Julian’s
workload for the next few days and had a tense though civil exchange with Dukat as he checked him for minute injuries from his previous battle.

All was calm about the station until word started coming in of a possible imminent attack by the Dominion. Soon after contact with Worf and Garak were lost entirely and everyone began to fear the worst.

Though Gaven had his hands full, Bashir kept him in the loop as meetings progressed. Much of their plans to protect against a changeling invasion weren’t entirely in place yet, and even if they had been, there was still the Jem’hidar forces to contend with. To confirm things Kira was sent alone with the Defiant and was met with the shocking reality of their situation. The Dominion was indeed coming. After engaging a brief battle, Kira made it back in through the wormhole though unbeknown to her she was not alone.

Tired and anxious for the impending Dominion invasion, Bashir hurried on his way back to the infirmary to check on Gaven and to see if they could expedite any of their plans before the Dominion ships arrived. While traveling through the promenade Julian caught sight of a young child crying alone near the side of one of the shops with a badly scraped knee. Being a doctor and with everyone else scattered and either trying to get off the station or hunkered down, Bashir instantly stopped to assess the situation.

“Well hello, little one. That looks uncomfortable. Where are your parents?” Julian inquired.

“They’re inside. I fell, and it hurts.” The child cried.

“Shh. Come on. I’ll take you to them, and we’ll get you all patched up.” Julian picked the small girl up in his arms and hurried into the abandoned shop to meet the girl’s parents. But once inside he found the space completely abandoned. “Hm. Strange. I don’t see them.”

Once they were inside and out of eyesight. To Bashir’s horror, the little girl suddenly transformed into what appeared to be a white-haired yeti and attacked him. Julian didn’t stand a chance and was almost immediately incapacitated, bound, and left for dead in the back of the shop.

Shortly after the impostor shifted again. This time into Bashir himself and adjusted his uniform.

“Yes. Strange, indeed.” The changeling replied in a perfect replica of Julian’s voice and tonality.

~@~

Captain’s Log: Supplemental.

A full-scale Dominion invasion appears imminent. Still, I remain confident in my crew’s ability to face this crisis as they have so many others—with dedication and with courage.

“Our last listening post in the Gamma Quadrant just went dead.” Kira confirmed as the impostor Bashir looked on between the officers.

“That was right on the other side of the wormhole.” Dax added trying to remain calm.

“Which means the Dominion’s fleet is just minutes away. Doctor Ore reports we have no other alternative on his end. Cheif!” Sisko barked.

“Nearly ready.” Miles replied.
They were bout to try and blow the wormhole as a last-ditch attempt to shut down the invasion.

“Worf…” Jadzia couldn’t help herself.

“Is a Klingon Warrior.” The impostor Bashir coldly remarked. “He’ll understand.”

“Neutrino levels in the wormhole are rising.” Kira said.

“If we’re going to do this, it’s got to be now.” Sisko said.

“Ready.” Miles responded.

“Here goes nothing.” The impostor Bashir remarked prophetically.

“Activate the graviton emitters.” Sisko ordered.

Kira did what she was told and before holding her breath muttered a barely audible prayer of forgiveness.

Seconds later, Miles executed the command.

Everyone seemed to hold their breath as the beams tried to do their work until an explosion erupted from one of the consoles near Miles.

“We’re losing it.” Dax announced.

“What happened!” Sisko demanded.

“Someone sabotaged the emitter array.” Miles explained.

“Captain! The wormhole is opening!” Someone yelled.

“Battle stations!” Sisko barked while they all watched the ships emerge through the hole.

Minutes later Dax and Kira took their battle positions on the Defiant while Dukat came into position with his ship.

“Nobody fires until we have orders from Captain Sisko.” Kira ordered as she settled into command.

“There sure are a lot of them.” Dax remarked.

“That’ll just make it harder for us to miss.” Kira assured her.

“They’re still not responding to our hails.” Miles muttered back on Deep Space 9.

“I think they’re trying to intimidate us.” Sisko observed.

“Well, it’s working.” Miles replied. “I don’t believe it. The Dominion ships are turning away from the station. They’re laying in a new course.”

“Heading?” Sisko asked.

“Straight for Cardassia.” Miles said in wonder.

“Dukat’s ship is breaking formation. He’s going after the Dominion fleet.” Dax observed.

“Open a channel.” Kira demanded. “Dukat. Stop trying to be a hero. Get back to the station.”
“Your concern is touching, Major.” Dukat said over the view screen. “But I think you misunderstand me. I’m not attacking the Dominion fleet. I’m joining it.”

“What are you talking about?” Kira asked skeptically.

“I’m afraid I have a confession to make, Major. For the past few months, I’ve been conducting secret negotiations between the Dominion and Cardassia. And as of last week, Cardassia has agreed to become part of the Dominion.” Dukat explained.

“You can’t be serious.” Kira said in disbelief.

“Good-bye, Major. You and I on the same side. It never seemed quite…Right. Did it?” Dukat asked rhetorically.


“Too late. He’s gone.” Dax confirmed.

~@~

The next day the officers gathered to listen to Dukat’s deplorable speech about Cardassia’s defection to the Dominion. Almost everyone was still trying to absorb the depths of what was happening.

About everyone except for Gaven who had been stuck in the infirmary since the day before without relief. This was further complicated when the Klingon Ships started to arrive in droves many with wounded.

“Julian. Where the hell have you been and what is going on around here?” Gaven demanded as the impostor Julian arrived in the infirmary just as casualties were coming in.

“War, Doctor. Haven’t you been getting my briefings?” The impostor Julian asked just ever so more coldly and deadpan then the real Julian would have.

His strange tonality was not missed by Gaven who was acutely sensitive to all Julian’s expressions.

“Let’s get to work.” Was all the impostor said.

“This is a dark day. Not only for the Klingon Empire but for the Alpha Quadrant itself.” The Klingon Gowron said as he conferenced with Captain Sisko while his wounds were being tended.

“So what are we going to do about it?” Sisko asked.

“I will do what must be done. Pull back. Pull my forces out of Cardassian space, fortify the Klingon Empire and prepare for a fight to the death.” Gowran said passionately.

“Maybe there’s a better way.” Sisko offered as he handed him a PADD.

“The Khitomer accords?” The Klingon questioned.”The treaty between the Federation and the Klingon Empire is dead.”

“But we can bring it back to life again.” Sisko argued. “This is the most fortified position between here and the Klingon Empire. There will be a Starfleet task force here soon. If you could bring your fleet here—”

Sisko rallied.
“Then we could stand united against the Dominion.” Gowron finished, before turning around to face him. “And if we do…”

“We might have a chance.” The impostor Bashir affirmed.

“Think of it. Five years ago no one had ever heard of Bajor or Deep space 9, and now, all our hopes rest here. Where the tides of fortune take us, no man can know.” Gowron said handing back the PADD.

“They’re tricky, those tides.” Sisko remarked with zeal while the stoic impostor Julian looked on.

Unbeknown to any of them Gaven was in the background listening. His attention acutely trained on Julian in particular.

Soon after, the impostor Bashir left the infirmary with no word as to why or when he’d be back. A short time later he was lurking about the station. Sabotaging more systems as he went without anyone’s notice.

Later the remainder of Gowron’s ships arrived, and the expected Federation task force was only hour away. Meanwhile, Odo and Kira began to discover more evidence of sabotage. In response, Sisko encouraged Kira and Odo to double their security measures and reach out to Gowron’s forces for extra support. To add further fans to the flame, Dukat revealed his intentions to reclaim Deep Space 9 if the Federation did not follow suit and join the Dominion. The Captain was not amicable to this plan asserting that Dukat was welcome to try.

Nearly five days into the conflict, Gaven was growing increasingly suspicious of Julian’s strange behavior. His instincts told him not to make any movements until he was sure. Was it possible that the saboteur everyone was looking for was Julian? If it was indeed possible, then Gaven surmised it was also more plausible that the person everyone thought was Julian was someone or something else entirely. There were ways Gaven knew of testing his theory. However, the problem remained that if the current Julian was an impostor, what then had become of the real Julian? Had the interloper subdued him somewhere? Had they spirited him away? Or killed him outright? The very thought of the final possibility sent chills up Gaven’s spine. It became his main priority to figure out where Julian was and to secure him if possible before he made any other moves.

Gaven began his secret investigation by first trying to deduce precisely when the Doctor had likely been replaced. When had the subtle changes in his temperament first become noticeable?

Unlike Julian’s mental recall that was only nearly perfect, Gaven’s enhanced abilities and alien background meant his recall was perfect. The problem was, Julain had been mostly away from Gaven since the current crisis had begun.

Nevertheless, Gaven was able to loosely determine through his recall that he’d started noticing Julain’s too cold and unfeeling demeanor right around the time Kira had returned with the Defiant through the wormhole. A quick analysis of the reports Julian had sent him also showed a telling and subtle change in writing style that was most noticeable in the briefing that Gul Dukat had attended. That was almost five days ago Gaven Calculated. If Julian was alive but injured somewhere, Gaven had to find him as soon as possible.

His discoveries narrowed the timeline. He’d personally noticed a change in temperament when Bashir had failed to check in on him as promptly as expected as the injured Klingon’s first began to arrive.

What had he said? War, Doctor. Gaven recalled how calculatingly he had said it. While Gaven of all
people knew Julian hid much of his real temperament and personality, the man had always gone the extra mile to conceal it around Gaven. An effort which had only made the cover-up more evident to him. But this other Julian no longer tried to conceal himself. How he presented was who he really was. That meant that there was a good chance the Impostor had tangled with Julian while in route to the infirmary. Which meant it was possible there touchpoint had been somewhere along the main promenade.

Gaven knew he had to be subtle from there on out. Almost all the everyday civilians had fled the station. Many, including Cheval and the O’Brien’s, had gone to Bajor for temporary refuge.

This meant the promenade would be empty enough to look for clues, but it also suggested it would seem odd if Gaven were witnessed poking about and loitering for no apparent reason. Still, he had to try.

Gaven walked the promenade in sweeps using his breaks and meal times as a cover since the infirmary was quite full. His superior abilities helped make those sweeps as detailed as possible as he looked for anything out of the ordinary. A sign of looting or trespass among the shops, evidence of a battle in the nooks and crannies between the shops. Traces of blood. On his third sweep through the promenade on his way home for dinner Gaven finally found what he was looking for. A light in the back of one of the semi-secured shops was flickering on and off as if something was disrupting its power source. Although there was no sign of breaking and entering Gaven knew it was possible that Julian could have been lured into one of the establishments since an attack out in public would have been noticed.

Another interesting point was that this particular store, a small rug shop, was not as secured as the others. After all, rugs weren’t exactly a hot commodity. At least not the ones being sold there. Not caring if he was breaking the rules or not Gaven made sure no one was immediately about and cut into the shop’s side entrance where it would be less noticeable. If he got caught, he could always fall back on plan B and convince Odo to conduct an investigation.

Using the flickering light as a guide, Gaven made his way through the rug shop and into the back storeroom where he’d seen the slight flickering through a side window. Gaven’s sensitive senses could smell something was amiss right away. The room reeked of stale sweat, blood, and urine.

“Oh, Julian by whatever power’s there might be let you be here and be alive.” Gaven hoarsely said as he looked about the space.

At first glance, he saw nothing, but as his eyes swiftly adjusted to the dim flickering light, he caught the sheen off of a pair of boots sticking out from underneath a set of heavy rolled rugs. As Gaven took a closer look, he could make out a familiar hand sticking out of the mess.

“Julian. My Gods. Julian, it’s me. Dr. Ore. Julian can you hear me.” Gaven didn’t immediately try to move the heavy carpets Julian was hidden beneath.

Instead, he knelt down and gently felt for Julian’s pulse via his wrist. To his relief, Gaven could make out a subtle thready pulse. Julian was alive but barely. Given the stench of blood in the room, it was all too possible that he had experienced some internal or external injury that had caused him to bleed out slowly. If that was the case, it was also possible that the pressure of the rugs against his body had been the only thing keeping him alive.

“Alright, listen to me if you can. You're in shock, Julian and badly injured. If you can understand me, I need you to be strong until I can assess the damage and stabilize you.” Reaching through the rugs, Gaven began to feel around using his empathic abilities to tease out the danger points as he went.
As he linked with Julian’s body the pain was almost unbearable, and yet Gaven focused his attention, pushing through the signals Julian’s body was sending him to zero in on the damaged areas. His assessment via this approach indicated that Julian had fractured most of his ribs, bruised his kidney, shattered part of his jaw and had his face badly beaten with other superficial wounds all over his body. Whatever had attacked him had been mercilessly violent. The most troubling was a wound on the side front of Julian’s head. This was the source of most of the bleeding, and although Gaven didn’t think he’d fractured his skull, there was always a possibility that he had or that he’d suffered brain trauma in general.

At least now Gaven knew he could risk moving the rugs away from him without causing further damage. As he did this, the release of heavy pressure caused Julian to sputter and open his eyes as he gasped for air.

“Julian, Julian try to relax. You’re badly injured. I need you to hold still.” Gaven ordered.

In spite of this, Julian was trying to speak through his painful jaw and weakened state. “There… There…Changeling. Aboard. Danger.”

His rasping was barely audible.

“I hear you. I promise I’ll do something about it as soon as I can. I need to get you to the infirmary and alert the captain.” At this, Gaven decided to throw all other caution to the wind.

Changeling on board or not, his priority was to Julian’s wellbeing.

“Computer, Medical Emergency at my coordinates. Dr. Gaven Ore to Captain Sisko. Sir. We have a serious problem. There is a changeling that’s been posing as Dr. Bashir. He should be considered extremely dangerous.” Gaven said.

“Tell me something I don’t already know, Doctor. We have a crisis of our own up here and reason to believe the suspected changeling is no longer on board. Tell me, some good news.” Sisko replied.

“I’ve found the real Doctor Bashir. He’s alive but badly wounded. I’m waiting on a medical team now. Good luck, Captain. May the Prophets smile on us all. Dr. Ore out.”

While Gaven had been busy searching for, discovering, and tending to the wounded Julian, the changeling impostor had by now high-jacked the Youkon and revealed himself to be heading for the nearest sun. No doubt he intended to destroy it and in one fail swoop wipe out every living thing within range their side of the warm hole. Luckily, thanks to Major Kira’s quick actions her ship was in hot pursuit. Moments later the high-jacked runabout was destroyed. They were narrowly foiling their enemies plans of mass destruction.

“The roundabout’s been destroyed.” Miles confirmed.

“If the sun had gone nova, it would have wiped out the Dominion fleets, too. Chief, scan for those warp signatures again.” Sisko ordered.

“Captain…”

“They’re gone, aren't they?” He asked in mild awe.

“All I’m reading is normal background radiation.” Miles confirmed.

“The warp signatures must have been faked.” Captain Sisko concluded.” The Dominion’s real fleet never left Cardassian space. This was all an elaborate trap——an attempt to destroy the station and
Bajor, and cripple the Federation and Klingon fleets, without ever firing a shot. Tell our Friends out there to stand down. Armageddon will have to wait for another day.”
Awakenings

While most everyone who was left on the station was having celebratory reunions now that their loved ones had returned, Dr. Gaven Ore was held up in the station's surgery personally doing his level best to make sure that Julian Bashir didn't die.

Along with his extensive injuries, Julian had been found in such an advanced state of dehydration that it was a wonder he hadn't expired just from that. He'd also lost a significant amount of blood which should have had a similar kind of effect given how long he had been laying in the carpet shop. While everyone was happy to chalk up Julian's medical status as a run of the mill miracle, Gaven knew better. He knew both by personal experience and by the subtle signs sprinkled throughout Julian's medical history that his ability to survive wasn't a miracle at all. Gaven was almost sure that Julian was alive because he was genetically augmented. Whether his advantages included control over his bodily systems or he was merely more robust because of his augmentation, was hard to say. Nevertheless, Gaven was convinced of the fact by now and was not particularly bothered by it.

For Gaven, genetic augmentation was practically expected on Oum. The science was the entire reason why his culture had survived and had ultimately been able to thrive under the harsh conditions of constant poxy radiation exposure. Gaven was aware that the Federation of Planets regarded genetic augmentation in a somewhat harsher light and though he didn't know the exact particulars of the political and cultural attitudes and concerns involved, Gaven had enough good sense not to confront Julian about it or reveal that he harbored any suspicions whatsoever about his genetic status. Assuming it was true, there was nothing for Gaven to gain by exposing the other doctor. Julian seemed so insistent on carrying on with his elaborate charade that Gaven felt it best to allow him to do so. It privately saddened him to suspect that Julian had spent possibly his entire existence holding back who he was and what he was really capable of. In his mind, It was both a waste and a pity. Humans were a strange race; Gaven had begun to think.

Besides needing a massive blood transfusion and fluids, the to the bone gash across Julian's skull needed to be carefully cleaned, closed, and watched for infection. Though there hadn't been a skull fracture, it was unclear if Julian had suffered additional brain damage. One of Julian's lungs had also collapsed and had required the temporary installment of a chest tube and ventilator. There was so much swelling across his damaged rib cage that it was amazing that Julian could breathe even with assistance. For now Julian was in a medically induced coma. Further brain trauma would need to be assessed after he woke up and started breathing on his own again.

Gaven operated using a combination of astute mechanical skill and his empathic instincts. His surgical work was utterly precise and truly beautiful to behold. Above all else, Gaven was an absolute professional. He didn't dare let his feelings trespass over what he was trying to do. Julian's well being was too important to him. Not to forget, there were quite enough concerned people who were anxiously waiting for Gaven to finish his work so that he could update them. Certainly, Gaven felt they deserved his very best.

Several hours after Julian had first been moved into surgery, a tired Gaven emerged from the operating suite to meet Julian's many friends. The most vocal of whom was Miles O'Brien.

"Well, Doctor? How is he? When can we see him?" Miles asked impatiently.

"I managed to stabilize him. He's still on a ventilator, but that's just a precaution until the swelling goes down in his chest and I know for sure there won't be any further risk of incident or infection. The next several days are critical, and for now, he's been placed in a medically induced coma for his safety. Assuming all goes well, it's possible he will make a full recovery." Gaven informed them.
"It's only possible? So that means you're not sure." Miles demanded.

"As I said, the next several days will be critical. I will be monitoring the situation, but there are simply some things brain scans won't tell us. I ask that for your own sake and Julian's, that you all be patient. I'll be able to make a complete assessment when he wakes up." Gaven reassured them.

"Damn those changeling bastards!" Miles yelled.

"Calm yourself, Chief. We are all alarmed and worried." Sisko said gravely. "What do you think, Doctor? How far along are we on our detection strategies?"

Gaven sighed.

As expected, it always came back to the same question.

How to stop the Dominion.

Righteous as that question was, Gaven, wondered how much longer things would go on before the problem became, how do we destroy the Dominion? Gaven knew some had already quietly begun to make the leap. What if they all made that leap eventually? Given what he'd personally witnessed, it wouldn't be altogether surprising. But it would be disappointing, and it would be something Gaven couldn't comply with.

Nevertheless, he was willing to help the Federation of Planets protect themselves from invasion because he believed in their right as beings to exist without molestation. As far as Gaven was concerned, the Changelings had become the very thing they feared most. Oh, how he bled over that knowledge given his people's unique history with the Changeling species.

“Doctor Bashir and I have developed our inoculation course far enough to begin phase one of our testing. I can start taking volunteers after the first clinical trials prove successful. The more diverse in species, the better.” Gaven confirmed. “But with all due respect to the station's situation, I would like to make Dr. Bashir's health and wellness my main priority for now. At least until he's conscious. I know what he means to all of you, and furthermore, he is leading the inoculation project as far as all of you and the Federation are concerned. With respect to that, I don't want to proceed too far without him if I don't have to. I'm sure you understand me, Captain.”

“Indeed, let's hope our resident CMO recovers quickly.” Sisko remarked.

There was a subtle warning in his tone that hinted, Sisko wouldn't pressure Gaven if he could avoid it but that such consideration had an expiration date under the circumstances. It was a private reminder to Gaven about what his position on the station was. He was there because the Federation of Planets required his skills and knowledge. While they were attempting to be patient and accommodating to him about appeasing their needs, it was only a matter of time before desperate necessity forced the Federation to put the squeeze on Gaven, in spite of the fact that he owed them nothing and had no obligation whatsoever to aid them given who and what he really was. Then again during times of war, what was fair and right tended to become inconsequential. Almost everyone Gaven had met on the station came from alien races who had broken their codes of morality and ethics (if they had any, to begin with) when the going got rough enough. Human's, in particular, seemed to have a long history of exploitation when it came down to matters of individual or collective survival. As high minded as the Federation's ideas had become, this was deep space they were floating about in. This was the edge of the Frontier. This was a war.

A battle over the issue of agency vs. Control. Both variations of the same driving agenda.
Collective survival.

For the next week, Gaven stayed true to his word and practically moved into the infirmary full time. With so many allied ships in the area, most of the wounded had returned to their respective people, and the station was still largely deserted and on lockdown while the Station's staff tried to regroup and collaborate with Bajor and their other allies.

This allowed for Gaven to focus almost all his medical and personal attention on the unconscious Julian whom he hardly left alone.

Periodically, Julian's many friends came to see him, and it was only during such visits that Gaven seemed to break his constant vigil and leave the infirmary for short periods. After a while, some of them started to come around just so that Gaven would take some personal time for himself.

“Do you think Julian's going to be alright, Elim?” Ziyal asked in her childlike way that was all bald honesty and troubled innocence.

“Of that, I have no doubt, my dear. I have never known our Doctor Bashir to back down from a worthy challenge, and I happen to have it on good authority that he is under the care of a certifiable miracle worker where matters of one's health are concerned. Have no fear.” Garak reassured her.

It was, of course, a lie on Garak's part. At least so far as his confidence of Julian's fortitude was concerned. In truth Garak, like all of Julian's closest friends, was wracked with deep seeded worry that would not be decreased until Julian was fully conscious and back to his old habits. Furthermore, he knew almost nothing about the mysterious Dr. Ore outside of the information that came Garak's way via the second-hand chatter on the Promenade and in Quark's regarding his many strange attributes and various contributions to the station as an obscure Federation Specialist that until recently no one had ever heard of.

Being a former spy and a general busybody who liked to have a healthy awareness of all who entered his sphere, Garak had meant to make Gaven's acquaintance ever since the fight on the promenade. It was at that time that Garak had first met the man and sensed in the good Doctor a kind of pent up ferocity that was kept under exquisitely tight control. Garak detested being indebted to anyone, especially in matters of life or death, but in this particular case, he minded the business with extra acute interest. Despite not knowing the Doctor, he had sensed some of Gaven's darker capabilities and understood that had his fight with Dukat escalated to attempted murder, Gaven would have had no qualms about subduing the unsuspecting Dukat and making good on his promise to preserve Garak's life. The thought almost made Garak regret narrowly escaping Dukat's wrath if only because it would have been delightful to hear of Dukat's embarrassment at being taken apart by a mere human man later. Furthermore, it would have been an additional treat to rub salt in Dukat's wounded pride by surviving his murderous efforts.

If Gaven succeeded in saving Julian Bashir's life, Garak's sense of debt to the good Doctor would be double fold and poetically complete.

The couple had arrived close to dinner time, intending to dine together at Quark's after they finished paying their respects to Julian. Upon departing from his bedside, they lingered awhile at a respectable distance as they watched the strange doctor whom neither was well acquainted with, return from wherever he had gone and attended to their friend. Despite his comatose state, Gaven could often be found keeping vigil at Julian's bedside quietly talking at length with the other doctor as if he was awake. Sometimes he poured over one of Julian's more troublesome unresolved medical cases or read aloud one of Julian's favorite holo-novels that Miles had recommended to him.
Except when visitors were present, Gaven seemed to always be at Julian's side. Sometimes, when they were utterly alone, Gaven would even break his usually stoic silence about his history and solemnly relate memories of his life while on Oum. Though he steered clear of any subjects relating to the details of his final months and rarely related stories of his bondmate outside of his service to his bondmate's house and his work in the capital where he was a scholar and specialist.

“He's very attentive. Don't you think?” Ziyal observed.

“Why yes, I do believe he is. Perhaps it is best we not disturb them further and move on with our dinner plans.” Garak suggested more for his reasons than for anyone.

The more he watched the Doctor painstakingly interact with Julian, the more curious he became. It was not a great secret; the doctors tended not overly to associate with each other on a personal level. It was a point that was curious to Garak in light of the additional fact that Julian usually avoided talking about the guest doctor as much as possible whenever Garak tried to inquire about their scientific progress and the various rumors being whispered about the station regarding Gaven. It didn't take a spy as astute as Garak to realize some intrigue was going on. Still, Dr. Ore was very well liked, and now Garak could see why.

“I don't think I'm going to have time to come back after dinner but you should Elim. I'm sure Julian would appreciate it, and I know how worried you are for him. Plus you could bring Dr. Ore some dinner on your way back. I hear he's hardly left the infirmary since Julian was put under.” Ziyal encouraged him compassionately.

“An inspired Idea, my dear. I shall do just that. Come. Let's not delay any longer. As much as I worry for our beloved CMO, I am equally grateful for our time together especially in light of recent events.” With his eyes lingering still on Gaven's back, Garak extended his arm and eventually led them away.

At the very last moment, much to Garak’s satisfaction, Gaven subtly gave in to the feeling he was being watched and slowly glanced behind him. For the briefest of seconds, he caught Garak boldly staring at him. This time right into his eyes, and to Garak's secret delight, Gaven subtly nodded to him. Gaven's gaze was full of intelligence and steel. In return, Garak only smiled thinly and with a bit of flare broke their eye contact immediately turning away and striking up a lively conversation with Ziyal as he swiftly led them on to Quarks.

Gaven made no move to catch them; under the circumstances, he did not doubt that Garak would be back.

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“Rom, do you have that audio script ready yet?” Quark demanded impatiently.

Business had been slow allowing for the Ferengi to focus on other matters besides the bar.

Quark's primary interest as of late was, of course, finding out if his suspicions were correct about Dr. Gaven Ore. If it was true that he was an alien from an obscure culture somewhere, Quark thought it might be possible to corner the market on information and possibly open up some unique and highly lucrative profit streams. If his planet was specifically exotic and or hard to access, the trade possibilities alone or rather the smuggling possibilities could be worth a fortune. Not to mention that the doctor's talents were limited to the station for now, but there was no telling who would come calling if it turned out the Federation was keeping an alien prodigy under their thumbs.
“Yeah. I got it right here. But, huh, maybe...Maybe we shouldn't listen to it. Dr. Ore seems like a nice person, and I just think...” Rom muttered with his classic uncertainty.

“Rom, since when have I ever encouraged you to think about anything? Whose the business mind around here? Hm? I am. Now if it turns out there's nothing useful on there, I'll personally burn up the recording, and we'll pretend we never executed this experiment. But in light of the fact that there COULD be something useful on there, we can't very well just ignore the ninth rule of acquisition.” Quark reasoned.

“Opportunity plus instinct equals profit.” They both said in unison.

Before listening to the recorded transmission they’d gotten from the bug in Gaven's quarters, Quark had assembled a short list of planets (there weren't many) that were known to contain life, and that circled a poxy radiated sun. The list was ordered from the most well known to the most obscure and only included five options. While many of them would be noteworthy, Quark had his hopes set for one of the more obscure options.

As Quark took over the task of listening to the recorded transmission he at first was a little taken back by the intimacy his keen ears were picking up on between the subjects involved. Perhaps something was going on between the Vulcan and the good doctor after all. It was an unusual mental image but not completely surprising to Quark who had seen plenty of interesting relationship combinations come through his bar over the years.

Briefly distracted by the thought, Quark almost missed the first mentioning of the planet Oum as Cheval and Gaven spoke about their respective meditation practices.

But when the men began to discuss an apparent freighter attack they'd survived together, Quark caught the mentioning of the planet Oum and that Gaven had been in stasis when the Breen had attacked them. The information that followed was not particularly detailed, but it bespoke of great tragedy and personal pain. Among other things, it confirmed that Gaven was indeed not human and that his presence on Deep Space Nine was not an accident. It seemed as if the Federation had recruited or compelled the doctor to assist them in their efforts against the Dominion and that Gaven felt he had no choice but to comply. Like Cheval, Quark shared in the perspective that none of it sounded very fair or particularly right. But then again, they were living in confusing and desperate times.

“So, he's an Oum. I gotta admit he's caught me by surprise there.” Quark remarked.

“What are we going to do about it, brother? It sounds like the Federation is trying to keep his identity a big secret.” Rom observed.

“Nothing for now.” Quark muttered slyly. “These sorts of things tend to become public knowledge eventually, and then we might be in for an interesting ride. I have to hand it to our good doctor; he's taking it all in stride. But everyone's got their breaking point. I'd be interested to see him hit his. With any luck he may end up being more right about his value then he knows. As for us, we should observe Rule of Acquisition 208. Doctor Ore stirs up a hell of a lot of questions, and I'm willing to lay down odds that the answers are more dangerous to know then the questions are to ask.”

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Julian Bashir remained in his medically induced coma for ten days. It was just long enough for his substantial injuries to heal enough to bring him out of immediate danger. When it was time to bring
him out of it, Gaven notified the captain and requested his presence. It was agreed between them that they would hold off on inviting anyone else until Julian could decide for himself who he wanted to see.

“Well, doctor what do you think?” Sisko asked upon surveying Julian in the isolation room.

“Physically he should recover without further complication. His brain scans show a healthy amount of activity, but I want to stress that there may be issues we won't be able to see until he wakes up and begins his mental and emotional recovery. It's unclear what he will and won't remember about the attack. I have reason to believe the attack on Dr. Bashir was specifically vicious. The changeling that attacked him intentionally hurt him in ways that would prolong suffering. When he comes to he may have a violent reaction to waking up. He also may or may not be able to communicate effectively.” Gaven neglected to tell the captain that Julian Bashir should have died from his injuries before they found him.

“Thank you, Doctor. I understand. Please proceed and let me know how I may be of additional help.” Sisko agreed.

Gaven nodded and began the process of reversing the coma. In most cases, it could take hours for a patient to come out of a medically induced coma, and the process was more gradual as the body came back online at its own pace. Again, Gaven had refrained from mentioning that Julian's brain scans had been abnormally active the entire time he was under. Given that Julian was an Augment, this did not surprise him and was the reason Gaven had gone above and beyond to engage Julian as much as possible while he was unconscious. Gaven suspected that Julian would come out of his coma almost immediately and that the experience of waking up would prove dramatic. As Gaven administered the final part of the process, he gripped Julian firmly at the wrist so that he could open a biological link with him and monitor his biological response. Thanks to this Gaven knew the exact second Julian became consciously aware and was able to anticipate his adrenaline filled reaction.

As Julian shot up on the med bay bed with his eyes wide open and blazing, Gaven caught him across the chest and firmly demanded that he remain calm and try to breathe.

“Julian, you're all right. You need to stay calm, or I'll have to sedate you. Don't try to speak. You're still injured, and the Captain and I don't want you to hurt yourself.” Gaven didn't let go of him, and after a tense thirty seconds, Julian did allow Gaven to ease him back down on the medi-bed as he tried to curb his mania turning his face away from the captain and squeezing his eyes shut without saying anything.

“I want you to know, Doctor, that the changeling threat has been neutralized. The changeling that attacked you is dead, and for now, the station is safe. On behalf of your many friends and colleagues, we want you to focus on getting well, and we're all grateful that you're still with us.” The captain reassured him.

“Julian, I know you're afraid right now, but it's over. I promise.” Gaven rested his free hand across Julian's forehead and leaned down, his other hand still firmly covering Julian's wrist as he silently urged him to try and relax.

“Do you want something for the pain?” He asked in a low firm tone.

Thanks to the biological link that was still fully engaged, Gaven could feel what Julian biologically felt as sensory awareness of the part of him still actively healing came forward.

At this question, Julian opened his eyes, and though they were filled with tears, he managed to look Gaven in the face and nod slightly.
“Fine. I'll take care of it. I'm going to speak to the captain now. Can you hold out for a minute or do you want me to administer something right away?” Gaven wanted to give Julian the option of dealing with his suffering in privacy rather than in front of the captain.

His slight head movements told Gaven he wanted to wait until the captain was gone.

“I hear you. I'll take care of it.” Gaven promised.

Reluctantly, Gaven broke the link which served to intensify Julian's discomfort once he wasn't sharing the burden of his biological impulses with Gaven.

“Captain, If I could speak to you over here.” Gaven stood and adjusted his plain uniform encouraging the captain to step just outside the room with him.

“He's in pain and needs to sleep. I want to give him a few more days to rest and come back into himself, and I want to run some cognitive tests to make sure his language and thought centers are fully intact. I will leave it up to you to alert his family and friends to his condition, but for now, I want to avoid a lot of guests until Julian asks to see people.” Gaven said.

“Of course. Thank you, Doctor. Was there anything else you wanted to say?” Sisko asked.

“Yes. As you might imagine it could take several weeks for Doctor Bashir to be service ready again. Possibly longer if his mental state proves hard to cope with, I think it might be wise to bring in a temporary Starfleet doctor to take on his workload. I'm certainly capable of carrying on as an assistant doctor here but you and I both know why that might prove complicated later on. I just...This charade is becoming more complex than I feel comfortable with. While my medical skill level has been proven comparable to what is expected of a Starfleet doctor and more I just think it might be best to limit my exposure here. The people of Deep Space 9 may not appreciate being lied to all this time if the truth ever becomes known.” Gaven admitted.

“I understand you're feelings, Doctor. Starfleet has been notified of the situation and is taking steps, but the conflict at hand is making it difficult to pull needed staff from other Starships. Until we can get some more help here, you may prove to be the best option we have. I want you to know that my officers appreciate what you've done for us and the sacrifice your making for everyone involved. You're a good man if I do say so off the record. When you have time would you stop by my office? I would like to discuss some things with you.” Sisko asked.

“Of course, Captain. Once Julian is stable and resting, I'll make an appearance. Thank you for your kind words. I do appreciate them.” Gaven agreed stoically. “Now if you'll excuse me. I must attend to my patient.”

Sending the captain on his way, Gaven scoffed under his breath at his situation and returned to Julian side. Though he was trying to keep still, Julian was thrashing slightly and trying to hold back his discomfort.

“I'm sorry, Julian. I shouldn't have delayed. You'll feel better in a minute. Hold on.” Gaven moved to set up a hypo-spray of pain relief that he intended to mix with a sedative but was delayed when Julian tried to grip at his arm.

“D-don't sed-ate me.” He murmured in a voice hoarse and broken from lack of use.

“Fine. But you need pain relief. I can't guarantee it won't knock you out once it's administered.” Gaven warned him quietly and calmly.

“St-st-.” He tried to plead.
Gaven sighed and pulled up a stool settling down beside him after dosing him with the hypo-spray.

“I won't leave you. Just try to relax for a while and conserve your strength. I'm going to keep you well and safe. You have my word.” Gaven promised.
It didn't take very long for Julian to settle and fall into a deep sleep. Deep enough that Gaven felt comfortable letting him rest. Gaven planned to do a full medical assessment of Julian once he awoke, but in the meantime, he planned to make good on his agreement to see the captain. The attack on Julian Bashir had brought something out in Gaven he hadn't anticipated. Attachment.

Attachment to any of the officers on Deep Space 9 felt like dangerous territory. Attachment to anyone with ties to Starfleet felt dangerous mostly because at the end of the day Gaven was without a planet or real affiliation with anyone or anything. While he admired most of the alien races and individuals he'd encountered so far and respected their beliefs, Gaven was an Oum. An alien not affiliated with the Federation of Planets and not bound by their moral and ethical rules and attitudes. If the people of Deep Space Nine ever discovered who and what he was, how would they react? Gaven suspected many of the alien civilians wouldn't care so much. But the humans? The officers he was helping take care of and protect?

Furthermore, there was always the possibility that Gaven might decide for one reason or another to stop helping the Federation and it was unclear what could happen if he quit. Would they try to compel him? Label him an enemy or a security risk? Throw him away into the universe as if what he'd already done for them didn't matter? It was hard to know what could happen. But what he did know is that his growing attachment to some of the people working on the station was becoming a problem.

Gaven appeared in the captain's office just before brunch.

“Captain. I've dropped in as I promised. Is this a good time to speak to you?” Gaven asked in his stoic manner.

“Yes. Please come in, Doctor. Can I get you something to eat or drink?” Benjamin asked kindly.

“Huh. No. Thank you.” Gaven replied not yet sitting as he leaned into the wall near the door.

“Come and sit down then.” Benjamin encouraged.

After Gaven complied, Benjamin went on. “Well. How are you doing with everything? I know things have been somewhat chaotic since you've arrived and it hasn't been very easy for you.”

Gaven sighed. “Things have been better in some ways. I don't regret agreeing to come here. You were right about the good I could do on the station, and I'm glad you convinced your chain of command that it was wise I be placed here. You're people...”

Gaven wanted to express how impressed he was with everyone he'd met on Deep Space 9 and how deserving they were of praise, but he couldn't quite bring himself to be so forward. To allow his respect and admiration to sound too personal. “Everyone has been very cooperative and kind to me. I
admit its been...Surprising.”

“Well, you're very well liked and admired on this station by many people. I would go as far as to say that you've become a regular figure in our day to day lives. I can't imagine how difficult it's been for you since leaving Oum. But it's been my hope that you've found a sense of stability being here. Starfleet has been more than impressed with your contributions especially to Starfleet's medical database on alien biology and your genetics work. I hope you realize that we may be able to achieve new medical breakthroughs because of your scientific insights.” Benjamin went on.

Gaven said nothing to any of this. Most of his projects were just something to keep him interested and occupied while on the station the fact that they were proving beneficial to anyone else was not something he thought about very deeply.

“Which brings me to why I wanted to speak to you.” Benjamin said at length. “Have you thought much about your future since being on the station?”

Gaven nodded. “I haven't committed to any specific course. Under the circumstances how could I? Who I am is a carefully guarded secret, and the work I'm doing is contingent on the changing tides of the Dominion conflict. With that being said, I have cultivated some limited ties with Gulba 4 and representatives of Vulcan have expressed that I would be welcome to resettle myself on their homeworld as well. Though being that they are a Federation planet, their open-handed sentiments could change.”

“You seem overly concerned that the Federation might lose faith in you.” Benjamin observed.

“What is that old Earth saying, captain? Something about not looking a gift horse in the mouth? I'm concerned that I may not always be able to be so forthcoming with my knowledge and skills and that if I were ever to halt my contributions I would perhaps no longer find myself in your Federation's good graces. We both know that if the Federation gets desperate enough all ethical decorum could be swiped from the table simply as a matter of survival. I don't ever allow myself to forget that I'm just one man. An alien in an unfamiliar quadrant that's without a people or a real place in this universe. Understand me when I say I'm not blind to what that means.” Gaven said evenly.

“Well, contrary to how it must feel, you're not obligated to do anything for anyone. It's true that the Federation has been eager to enlist your help and that they perhaps have been a bit hasty with their treatment of you. But rest assured, you are still a free thinking individual and, as I promised you at the beginning of all this, I have every intention of reminding people of that fact and holding them to it. You may not have a planet to call your own anymore, but you do have rights as an individual and...You do have friends.” Sisko said in a manner that hinted he knew that Gaven didn't exactly see it all that way.

“I know it bothers you greatly to continue your work and life under the guise of something you're not.” Benjamin acknowledged.

“No. It's been a necessary aspect. And It was my request to conceal my origins. I may not be a citizen of Oum anymore, but I do have an obligation to preserve my people's cultural wishes
regarding what information is shared about my home planet and culture. Some would already say
I've revealed too much. In hindsight, I admit that I sometimes wonder if it was a mistake to bring
about this masquerade. Nevertheless, what’s done is done. I intend to see it through.” Gaven
informed him.

“If I may say so, I think you're incredibly hard on yourself.” Benjamin observed patiently. “I believe
you have much to offer the universe and that you deserve to be accepted for who you really are. You
have already proven yourself to be a talented man of principles, discipline, and sacrifice. I've kept
Starfleet abreast of your many contributions not just to this station but to others you've helped. The
leaders on Gulba 4 have extended complimentary words as well as the Vulcan ambassadors.”

“Have they? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Captain, with all due respect, can we move on from
my various merits and get to the point of why you've really asked me here?” Gaven insisted.

“Yes, of course. You should know that I've issued a formal recommendation to Starfleet on your
behalf and I wanted to tell you that I've since received word from my chain of command that
Starfleet would be interested in finding a medical or scientific commission for you if you want it.”
Benjamin revealed.

“I'm being invited to join Starfleet.” Gaven looked genuinely surprised.

“If you were to accept you would be required to go through some formal training, but your
preliminary equivalency tests show more than an adequate aptitude for specializing in your preferred
field range of talent and interest. It's very probable you could skip certain aspects of the training and
be assigned almost directly to a commissioned position of your choice.” Sisko explained. “It's an
opportunity to begin again in a place you'd be supported.”

It took a long time for Gaven to process what the Captain was offering him and for several minutes
they sat together in silence as Gaven thought about what he wanted to say next.

Sisko allowed him this contemplative leeway knowing it was something that cut to the quick for the
other man.

“Captain,” Gaven said at length and as carefully as possible. “Your gracious esteem honors me, but I
must decline.”

“Alright. Do you want to talk about why?” Sisko asked.

Gaven groaned and stood up so that he could turn about in the room. In spite of all the progress he'd
made in the many months, he'd been on the station glimpses of the grave, and the disturbed man that
Gaven had been when he first arrived began to flicker in his countenance once more.

“I can't become one of you. Please don't misunderstand me, captain. From what I've learned about
your people, about what the Federation is and what it stands for, I will admit a certain affection for
what the Federation has achieved and admiration for the many worlds and people that are part of it. It is astounding to know such things in the universe exist, but that doesn't mean that it's wise for me to become apart of it. I...I don't belong there. I am an Oum and still hold to many Oum ideals and standards. If I were to join Starfleet and become an adopted member of the Federation, I would truly have to abandon every part of the world of which I used to belong. I won't do that. But for now I will continue to help you, and when I have exhausted what I can do, I will leave Deep Space 9.” Gaven insisted.

“If that's what you want. The offer is open-ended as of now so if you ever change your mind...” Sisko urged amicably.

“How is Dr. Bashir doing?” Sisko asked gently noticing that Gaven stopped pacing at the mentioning of Julian's name and seemed to relax a little.

“He's sleeping for now and was talking. It's a good sign. I have reason to believe he may remember his attack in some detail and he needs more time to heal physically and emotionally. Assuming all his cognitive abilities are intact, I anticipate a swift enough recovery, but there may be long term effects. I recommend he get some counseling and be fully evaluated before he returns to work. I trust Starfleet has protocols about these things, so I'll leave it up to you and them to make actual decisions about his long term care.” Gaven encouraged.

“I see you're still focused on pulling back your work in the clinic. I’ve been reading the reports you’ve been sending in, and though you don’t say it outright, I’ve been reading through the lines and see that you're concerned.” Sisko observed.

“Yes. Though you needed the help, I feel it has perhaps been a mistake to embed myself as deeply as I have among your personnel. I'm not a certified Starfleet doctor. A doctor is a professional term I never thought to even apply to myself. It certainly wasn't a title I owned on Oum.” Gaven admitted.

“Nevertheless you are a healer and a worthy scientist very capable of rivaling even some of my top people in your given specialties. Is your skill level common on your planet?” Sisko asked out of purely personal interest.

Gaven scoffed. “Everyone physically capable on Oum is educated in the foundations of healing though not all of us pursue it to the same degree. It's elementary for us because most of the people of Oum have some personal afflictions that must be regularly managed medically and emotionally.”

“And Oum, like you? Is it common among your class?” Sisko asked more gently.

“Of course.” Gaven said too lightly. “Bondservant's like me have an obligation to care for the Oum we are bound to. We are trained from birth to do whatever is necessary to preserve the lives of those we are responsible for. Some Oum with a particularly great need could have more than one attendant all fully capable of medical intervention, as many as five or six. All are selected to be genetically compatible with the primary Oum and trained accordingly to care for them.”
Genetically compatible.” Sisko echoed. “Fascinating. Excuse me if I'm being presumptuous, but you're saying bond-servants are expected to be...”

Gaven saw Benjamin struggle to find the right phrasing but knew what he wanted to know.

“Yes. If necessary, we willingly give up our lives for our Bondmasters offering our tissues and such. But it's rarely that desperate anymore.” Gaven reassured him.

“You were more than Just a bondservant though.” Sisko pointed out.

“you're right. My Bondmaster was also my Bondmate, or rather, I was his. It means I had permission from the government to carry his genetic offspring that would be later entitled to the inheritance of his titles and property.” Gaven clarified.

“Only a carrier.” Sisko ruminated.

Gaven nodded. “Not a genetic contributor. As I’ve explained, the Oum are very particular about what they create. I’d only be allowed to contribute my genetics to an Oum host with a similar classification as my own.”

“I see. Thank you for answering my questions.” Sisko said.

“You're welcome, Captain. Its...Nice to be able to speak about my culture so openly. We should do it again sometime. Maybe next time you can explain this human game called baseball I've been reading about.” Gaven said pleasantly.

“Careful, Doctor. I may do one better and convince you to join my team.” Sisko teased in a tone that was only slightly in jest.

“Well, I must go. I want to be there when Julian wakes up and begin his cognitive tests. Thank you for making time for me and for saving a place for me too...On your team. It does mean something to me.” Gaven assured him standing and preparing to leave.

“Gaven, before you run away, I want you to know that I’ve contacted another doctor who has agreed to stand in for Dr. Bashir temporarily. If you no longer want to take on rounds in the infirmary, you won't have to, but I’d like you to wait long enough for the other Doctor to settle in.” Sisko remarked.

“Yes. Of course.” Gaven bowed respectfully. "Thank you, Captain. For once again respecting my wishes and acknowledging my feelings.”

“Anytime, Doctor.” Sisko stood and showed Gaven out watching him until he vanished entirely into the station.

“Until later, Pinocchio.” Sisko said to himself before shaking his head and returning to his seat.
Gaven swiftly returned to the infirmary, relieved to see that Julian was still asleep. It gave Gaven a chance to steal away into his office for a while and think about what he’d exchanged with the captain. Did Gaven want to leave Deep Space 9, now or in the future? What did he want? There were merits to what Benjamin was offering him. Gaven could carry on his scientific pursuits, for example, and do so in an environment where he could work openly and collaboratively. Though Gaven had never owned the title of Doctor on Oum, the captain was correct in that Gaven was a healer and so far had conclusively demonstrated himself to be worthy of professional consideration. The medical equivalency exams he’d taken before coming to the station proved his competences in medicine and his preferred scientific specialties. Overall the training would more likely than not only involve what was required to get Gaven fully up to speed with Starfleet’s regulations and operations. Even with all that was also possible, he could come on board as a civilian; however, since Gaven was not a member of a Federation planet, he would likely have to apply for citizenship status somewhere first.

Gaven had to admit that he found profound satisfaction in the occupation of Doctor and Scientist and his time on Deep Space 9 had afforded him one of his deepest dreams. To seek out and celebrate the varied life present in the universe. And yet with all that considered Gaven knew in his heart of hearts that he didn’t want to pursue that path. The price he’d paid on Oum had been too high to rope himself into another collaborative network of societies simply because it was easy.

Gaven saw himself as an alien thrust into a foreign quadrant. He was perhaps the first known Oum to break his cultural practices and be placed in a position where he could learn and explore or if he wasn’t, he was the first of his time. For this reason, Deep Space 9 could not become his permanent home. Deep down Gaven understood that much about his future, if nothing else.

As he ruminated about his situation, Gaven heard something stir outside of his office. The noise was too subtle to be Julian. Getting up with his crutch resting in his office, Gaven had gotten into the habit of limping about in small spaces rather than always relying on the crutch for support. He left his office to follow the sound.

“Well,” Gaven said. “I think you must be feeling much better. Attempting to stretch a bit, eh?”

The sound had been coming from the lab where the changeling baby had been sitting in its container surrounded by a force field. The container was now on its side and had become too small to hold the changeling who had doubled in size effectively. Now the creature was moving along the perimeter of the force field as if examining its limits.

“Odo is going to be very happy to see your progress, little one. I think its high time he takes you home.”
“By the Prophets, this is so exciting.” Kira exclaimed as she helped Odo ready his quarters before he headed to the infirmary to pick up his new guest.

“Yes. I must admit it is exciting. While taking on the regular care of the changeling baby was the obvious plan, I must say I'm as nervous as I am happy. I haven't lived with anyone since my time with Dr. Mora and, that aside, I find myself both...Giddy and terrified.” Odo admitted.

“Aww. You just described parenthood. Everything you're feeling is perfectly natural. No parent knows exactly what they're doing when they first start. But that's part of the fun of it. I know it must feel scary given you don't exactly have any template for raising a changeling, but it's not like you weren't a baby yourself once. When in doubt try to pull from personal experience.” Kira encouraged him.

“Yes, well my experiences weren't exactly ideal, as you know. Nevertheless, I see your point.” Odo agreed. “I head Doctor Bashir is awake.”

“I'm glad of it. I can't believe the changeling who attacked him stowed away when I was coming back to the station.” Kira remarked.

“You shouldn't blame yourself. It's inevitable that some Dominion operatives would infiltrate here. The trick in the future will be to make sure that we know about it when they do. I love my people Kira, But I can't condone such blatant savagery. Anyone that comes to this station intending to cause malicious harm must be stopped and properly dealt with. I'm just glad this time the station was able to avoid disaster.” Odo said.

“You know, you shouldn't blame yourself either for this. You're not responsible for what the Dominion has done.” Kira reminded him gently.

“Yes. I know. For myself, I never worry. But when I think of the possibility that the Federation may one day look at this new changeling as a threat, I sometimes wonder just what I could be responsible for. It's only a courtesy that I'm being allowed to take charge of the changeling. Albeit many would love nothing more than to see it locked away in some science compound somewhere. The reality is that they could change their minds at any time.” Odo explained.

“Odo,” Kira stepped up to him and gripped him by the shoulders. “I have every faith that you are going to raise this changeling to respect and appreciate the life and people around it. Just as much as you do.”

“Thank you, Nerys. I dearly hope you're right.” He said softly.

Gaven was still working in his office when Kira and Odo arrived and quietly came out to greet them.

“Hello, Constable. Major.” Gaven was genuinely pleased to see them but as usual, kept his face reserved and tone polite. “Well, are you ready for this?”

Kira and Odo exchanged stoic looks that eventually eased into smiles.

“He’s ready.” Kira finally remarked. “You can do this, Odo.”

“Yes.” Gaven agreed. “You’re the best person to undertake this adventure. Come on. Let’s go see.”

In light of the things that had been going on in the station, Odo had not been able to visit the infirmary as much as he would have liked and it had been nearly five days since he’d checked on the changeling last.

“There we are.” Gaven said happily.

Odo lowered the shielding on the containment room and stepped inside. His surprise was evident.

“Why...You’ve gotten so big. I guess it’s a good thing I thought to get you your own bucket. These lab containers won’t do anymore.” Odo remarked slowly approaching the blob who upon realizing he was there immediately moved towards him in a puddle the size of a bike tire.

“Now now. When we’re in mixed company it’s polite to try and take a recognizable shape, Come on now. Show the good doctor and Kira what we've been practicing. You can do it. I’m right here.” Odo encouraged it.

To everyone’s satisfaction the changeling slowly doubled upon itself and for a few minutes took a very loose humanoid shape about the size of a toddler. As of yet, there were no distinguishable features or digits, but it was an impressive display nevertheless.

“Look how capable they are already. Do you know it took Dr. Mora over a year to get me to take a similar shape.” Odo said with excited pride.

“The progress is indeed impressive. You have a sharp one on your hands, which reminds me. Have you thought about a name?” Gaven inquired.

“Huh. Well. Not really. I mean I thought maybe I’d wait and let them pick one for themselves.” Odo admitted on the fly.
“Odo, I don't think anyone wants to go around referring to this one as “the changeling” all the time. Maybe you should consider just a temporary nickname. You have one, after all.” Kira reasoned.

“It would be preferable to have a name to put down in the records but if you want to wait...” Gaven reassured him patiently.

“I admit it’s not a bad thought I’m just not sure what I would pick.” Odo admitted.

“Your name is derived from a Cardassian word, is it not?” Gaven inquired.

“Yes...When I was discovered before Dr. Mora realized I was a life form I was held in a beaker marked “unknown sample” the Cardassians chose to interpret this into the word “Odo’ital. Loosely translated it means “Nothing.” Odo explained. “For this little one though I think we can come up with something better. Maybe a Bajoran word. Something like..Kajel.” Odo said at length.

Kira looked visibly surprised.

Seeing her expression, Odo began to reconsider. “Well, it was just one idea...Maybe something else.”

“No.” Kira said as she recovered herself a little at took Odo by the shoulders. “Odo, I think Kajel is a beautiful name for this changeling. You should keep it for now.”

Gaven didn’t inquire, but it was clear by his expression that the significance of the word was lost on him.

“Alright, Nyres. Kajel it is then.” Glancing at the doctor, he then clarified. “In the Bajoran language, Kajel means Freedom.”
The Good Doctor's Repose

“I'm sure Odo that you will do very well with the little one. I'm pleased you'll be taking them off my hands.” Gaven remarked warmly.

“I must say, Dr. Ore. I appreciate what you've done for Kajel and I. None of this would have been possible without your influence. You must come by and see us. It's possible that you know more about the changeling species than almost anyone within the Federation. I might...Like you're perspective now and again.” Odo remarked.

Gaven's brows arched subtly.

“I only know as much as what's been passed down through the generations of my people, Mr. Odo. I'm by no means a practical expert. But, I confess, I would like to keep an eye on your progress and, of course, if I can be of any assistance...It would make me happy to help you where I can.” Gaven admitted.

“Speaking of helping people, how is Dr. Bashir doing?” Odo asked seriously.

“Fine. I think he's going to be fine in time. He's out of the coma, and I'm sure in a few more days he'll be up to tell all of you how he feels for himself.” Gaven informed them carefully as to preserve Julian's privacy.

“We're all glad to hear it,” Odo remarked. “Well, take care of him, Doctor. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to get Kajel home. Kira?”

“I'll be along in a bit, Odo. Go ahead.” Kira encouraged him.

Once Odo was gone Kira turned to face Dr. Ore again. “You look tired, Gaven. Have you been feeling alright? The hours you've been pulling here in the infirmary are ridiculous. I know the station's been short staffed, and you've been focused on taking care of Julian which I'm sure everyone is grateful to you for, but...”

“The captain has sent for a replacement doctor to pick up the slack here in the infirmary. I'm just holding things over for a few more days before he arrives. I'm sure you're aware of my original intentions to scale back my professional capacities such as they are here on Deep Space 9.” Gaven confessed. “I can't deny that I've been...Overextending myself lately. In light of everything that's happened, I don't regret any of it, but...”

“Maybe when things settle down you should take a break. Maybe travel. Bajor is just a transport away. It's not like you'd have to go far if you didn't want to.” Kira suggested.

“I'll keep that in mind. I've been reading about Bajor. Your people are truly admirable.” Gaven remarked.

“Bajor has come a long way since the Cardassian occupation. In many ways, we're still recovering. Anyway, you should come over sometime, and we'll talk. Seriously though, I think you deserve a rest after all this. We need more people like you in the universe. Don't forget that.” Kira chastised gently.

Gaven scoffed and nodded his head. A reserved smile settled over his features. “Thank you, Nerys. Keep an eye on Odo for me. We'll talk soon. I promise.”
“I plan to hold you to that, Doctor.” Kira said with mock authority before they both broke out into a chuckle and Kira took her leave.

Sighing to himself once Kira had left, Gaven limped back into his office intending to try and get some actual work done before he checked in on Julian again. Kira was right in her assessment. Gaven felt more fatigued than usual. His movements were stiffer than normal, and as he limped back into his office, he leaned more heavily on his forearm crutch for support as he went. Gaven had felt unwell when he'd woken up that morning. Nothing too serious just slightly off color. The tea and toast he’d replicated early that morning were still sitting at his desk utterly untouched and looking neglected. His appetite had been poor the last few days, and that morning he hadn't wanted to eat at all.

Just as he was sitting down the computer alerted him to the fact that he had an incoming transmission from Bajor he’d been expecting. It was no doubt from Cheval.

“Greetings Doctor Ore. I hope you are well.” The Vulcan said.

“I am, Cheval.” Gaven lied. “It’s good to hear your voice and see you. I presume your retreat to Bajor since the conflict has been uneventful. When are you coming back?”

“On the next transport. With your permission, I’d like to come to see you directly as soon as I arrive.” There was the slightest tinge of urgency in the Vulcan’s tone.


“Very well. Expect me for dinner.” Cheval agreed before ending the transmission.

Gaven smiled self indulgently at the thought of seeing Cheval again. In the chaos of the recent Dominion attack, Cheval had fled off the station along with countless other civilians, and neither of them had had the time or opportunity to check in with each other or say goodbye. It was something to look forward to now that he was due to return.

Gaven was able to get about another hour of work in before the monitor at his desk indicated that Julian was waking up again. Easing up out of his chair he left his office to check on him.

Julian didn't notice Gaven arrive in the room at first. He wasn't fully awake yet and looked fitful and distressed. Deep circles were visible under his eyes and the side of his head where the gash had been made him look unkempt and vulnerable despite the superb expertise of the stitching that would eventually ensure the wound healed with minimal scarring. Julian was presently curled into a slight ball with the blanket crumpled around his neck as if he'd been gripping it in his sleep. Interestingly, he was laying on his bad side as if he hoped burrowing his head into the edge of the med bed would lessen the throb of knitted flesh.

“Julian,” Gaven said firmly in an even tone. “It's time to wake up.”

At first, Julian didn't stir, but after a minute or two of silence between them he finally groaned and eased onto his back.

“What time is it?” Julian asked hoarsely.

“About ten hundred.” Gaven confirmed. He liked to go by civilian time, but for Julian's sake, he stuck to the standard military time used by Starfleet. It seemed easier. “How do you feel?”

“Like Hell.” Julain muttered lowly.
“Very descriptive, Doctor.” Gaven replied flatly. “How much pain are you in?”

Julian didn't reply immediately.

Gaven could tell Julian had woken into a black mood. Something far deeper than generic pain or even depression was at work. Julian was angry, Gaven surmised.

Nearing him slowly, Gaven stopped just short of Julian's bedside. Close enough to glance at the monitor readings of the med bed, but not so close as to risk upsetting the other doctor with his nearness.

“I hate when you do that.” Julian muttered unexpectedly.

“Care to be more specific?” Gaven dryly asked as he adjusted one of the medi sensors.

“When you play the circumspect servant. The way you cautiously hover and yet feign polite indifference. The way you hold yourself back in waiting. Your damned self-deprecating air that you hide behind. It's exhausting. I wish you'd just...Give it a rest once in a while.” Julian muttered irritably.

“I see your mental faculties are firing at full cylinder today. If you think you are going to get out of a full neurological exam and EEG, you can just let go of that idea right now.” Gaven said evenly choosing not to respond to his observation. “Do you want to try some breakfast first or are we going to get straight into it today?”

“Stop side stepping me.” Julian hissed.

“I'll think about it when you manage to shake this beastly attitude you've decided to adopt this morning. Why don't we get back to dealing with your pain, then we'll try some clear broth and dry toast? Afterward, we'll start the exam and get the EEG over with. I'm tired today and would like to spend a night in my quarters for once.” Gaven's tone indicated he was no longer giving Julian a choice in the business.

“I'm not hungry.” Julian said in a mildly defiant manner.

“Fine. Then we'll start the exam and the EEG. I'm asking you to cooperate. Once we're done, you can carry on as you like.” Gaven encouraged him to raise the medi bed to an upward position as Gaven pulled up the nearest wheeled stool.

In spite of his bad mood, Julian caught the very subtle signs of mental strain and physical fatigue Gaven was experiencing. It was hard to tell if it was merely a matter of him being overworked or if it was a sign that Gaven was not well that morning. It would be like him to go making himself sick for the sake of others. The latter was a bad habit Gaven would have to learn to break someday, Julian thought disapprovingly.

“Well? Let us begin.” Gaven began by testing Julian's alertness and attention span. “Please tell me the names of earth's months.”

Dutifully Julian repeated the twelve months of the earth year.

“Good. Now repeat them in reverse order.” Gaven challenged.

To his satisfaction, Julian rattled them off even faster in backward order. It was good to see his sense of pride was still firmly intact.
“Now spell transcontinental forward and then backward for me please.” Usually, Gaven would have used a much simpler word, but he knew now that Julian was much more advanced than the average human and he wanted to test him at an appropriate level of ability.

Julian glared at him but did as he was asked with perfect results.

It was time to test his sense of orientation. “Please tell me your name? Where are you? And the date?”

Julian rolled his eyes.

“My name is Julian Bashir. I’m laid up in the infirmary on Deep Space 9 located in the Alpha Quadrant.” He went on to recite the proper year and then computed the most probable date. All were accurate.

“I'm going to give you three words, and in five minutes I want you to repeat them back to me. The words are BALL, HAT, and SAN FRANCISCO. Repeat them back for me and then I'll begin the timer.” Gaven instructed. “Now please tell me who the captain is on Deep Space 9 and who was in charge of the station before the captain.”

Growing annoyed with the testing, Julian began to rattle off the desired information and for good measure added in extra factual details until the time ran out.

“Do you recall the three words I asked you to remember?” Gaven inquired.

“BALL, HAT, SAN FRANSICO.” Julian repeated.

“Please do as I direct as I say them. Look down. Look up. Point to the door. Point to the ceiling. Point to the source of illumination in this room.” As Julian did these things, Gaven perceived that his hands tremored when he tried to hold them in their positions. Gaven didn't think it was a sign of mental damage as much as it was a sign of emotional strain and physical fatigue. Nevertheless, he would have to run other tests to make sure Julian's nervous system hadn't been damaged in some way.

Gaven went on to have Julian identify the components of several common things around the room and also had him repeat back words and phrases of varying complexity. He then had Julian read from a data pad and identify some common pictures on it. He went on and tested Julian with some standard mathematical calculations. Tested his ability to discern left from right and went through other basic sequence testings. As they went, he noticed Julian's hand tremors slowly increased. Gaven monitored this through the remainder of the examination. He was noting among other things Julian's uncharacteristic agitation. His depressive mood and his mild disinterest in covering for his abilities which Gaven knew were more advanced than anyone else knew or suspected.

Gaven tested his reflexes and vision and recorded his findings diligently as he went. They worked together as long as possible until Julian's patience wore out and Gaven thought it best to stop and not push him further for the time being.

“Well? What's your professional opinion, Doctor?” Julian's tone was clipped.

“Your physical endurance is remarkable, but your emotional state is unstable.” Gaven commented honestly. “My recommendation would be as much rest and as little stress as possible.”

“Unstable.” Julian scoffed.

“Mental health is not my area of expertise, but I know trauma when I see it, and so do you. I'll leave
it up to Starfleet to decide for themselves. Right now my job is to heal your body. Do you want a pain killer yet?"

Julian sighed and nodded as he laid back on the medi bed.

Gaven dutifully fixed a hypo-spray and administered it to him.

“By the way. You will eat something today, Julian. I can't leave the infirmary until you do.” Gaven insisted.

“Yes, yes. Clear broth and white toast. You have my word. Just not right now.” He muttered the fatigue was evident in his tone.

“Fine. While you're resting, I might as well start the EEG. After, I'll leave you alone for the day.” Gaven promised him.

The men worked in silence for another hour or so. In that time, Julian's mood slowly relaxed, and by the end of the EEG process, his generalized anger had subsided into peckish irritability that was further blunted by a mixture of fatigue and the pain inhibitors he was being given.

“Well, that's that.” Gaven said at length as he recorded the information from the EEG onto his datapad to analyze later. “I think it's time you eat.”

Julian had been half asleep with his eyes closed and his hands folded over his chest. The other wakeful side of him had been quietly monitoring the subtle sounds of Gaven's movements and presence for the last hour. In spite of his moodiness towards him, Julian had found Gaven's presence to be soothing and reassuring. It occurred to him that whenever Gaven was with him, there was a sense of inexplicable safety between them. A kind of deep trust that overrode their many differences of style and opinion. Since he'd woken up out of the medically induced coma, Julian found his waking hours were wrought with deep anxieties. Though he had little desire to entertain his worried friends just yet, he had found being left alone that inevitable panic and distress set in. Distress that became tolerable only when he was either unconscious or when Gaven was with him.

This was explicitly evident to him when Julian felt his tepid anxiety begin to spike at the realization that Gaven intended to leave the infirmary for the day. Julian found himself desperate to have him stay, though he fought the irrational feeling with all his concentrated effort. In spite of this, other thoughts slipped past his resolve. Was it true that while Julian had been comatose Gaven had camped out in the infirmary all that time? Had he done so for Julian's benefit alone or had there been some broader necessity? Why did he even want to know so badly? Why did it matter?

As he listened to Gaven's shuffle around the room, Julian noted several things purely through the input of his higher sense of awareness. He noticed, for example, that Gaven had taken recently to limping about in confined spaces rather than using the support of his forearm crutch to even out his gate. This resulted in a grating shuffle to his movements rather than something smoother. Today it was even more pronounced, and instead of a shuffling, Julian could hear more of a dragging effect as if Gaven's bad leg was weighing him down more than usual. He'd also noticed how quick Gaven had been to end their arguments. Though the men were often known to speak to each other in a language of subtle challenges and grinding ultimatums, their conversation today had been unusually straight forward. Gaven hadn't wanted to fight with him and had gone to great lengths to avoid and ignore Julian's baiting. Even his uncompromising insistence that Julian eat before he left felt brittle and breakable.

What was wrong with him today? Julian wondered. Surely, Gaven wasn't sick. Could it be that the poxy radiated implants were failing somehow? Not likely, Julian concluded. All testing of Gaven's
radiation treatments before the station had gone into crisis had proven positive and appropriate for his needs. Julian suspected something else was going on with him, but thanks to his own compromised well being Julian was not in a position to play doctor for the time being. If something was indeed amiss, Julian had to trust that Gaven would handle it for himself.

Opening his eyes and tugging off the rest of the sensors, Julian sighed. “I think I'll take that toast and broth now. Some coffee would be a nice touch.”


“I suppose that can be allowed.” Gaven conceded with a nod of approval. “I'll bring the patient his tray.”

Gaven picked up his forearm crutch and headed for the entry so that he could slip off to the replicator in the adjacent room.

“While you're at it, why don't you replicate something for yourself and eat with me.” It was a statement and not a request.

“Please.” Julian added coarsely for good measure.

Gaven half turned at the entry to look back on him.

“If you like.” He said at length before he turned back around and disappeared.

A short time later Gaven returned. Two stacked plates of toast, Gaven's cold serving and Julian's warm one were being balanced in is crutch hand. In his other hand, he was carefully balancing two lidded cups of broth and small cup worth if steaming black coffee stacked in a little tower. Considering he wasn't at his best, it was a fascinating thing to see Gaven carry it all into the room without spilling anything.

“You're a real marvel sometimes.” Julian observed.

“Servants universally tend to have a knack for tea service.” Gaven quipped intending a sardonic sounding joke at his own expense.

Julian inwardly cringed, realizing Gaven was referencing Julian's earlier remarks.

“Gaven...” Julian started reproachfully.

“Don't read into things so much, Julian. I was honestly just trying to make a joke.” Gaven said frankly.

“I still shouldn't have...” Julian struggled to frame his thoughts.

“Told the truth?” Gaven offered, a slight smile setting across his lips as he pulled the bed tray across Julian's lap and set his lunch down. “In every respect, I WAS a servant on Oum. I was the very definition of it.”

“I'm not really apologizing for what I said as much as the reason I said it.” Julian confessed. “I'm sorry I tried to hurt your feelings. It was wrong of me.”

“Apology accepted.” Gaven said before he pried the lid off of his serving of steaming broth and took a tentative sip from it.

“If I may say so, you don't seem to be feeling well today.” Julian observed.

“Have you been the only one running things around here?” He asked, shaking off his fatigue while he looked skeptically at his dry toast.

“When the Dominion attacked all civilians and non-essential personnel were encouraged to evacuate and, anyway, it’s not as if you had a large staff to begin with. You are the medical backbone of this station, Julian. I’ve remained only because it was necessary that I picked up the slack both to keep up appearances and to keep things together long enough for you to recover yourself.”

Julian scoffed. “Well, it doesn't look like I'm going to be much good for anything for a while. I must admit I'm glad you're the one taking care of things in my absence.”

“Only for the immediate moment. The captain is expecting a temporary Starfleet doctor to arrive any time now to stand in for you until you're ready to come back.” Gaven explained.


“No idea. Whoever they could find in close enough range.” Gaven suggested.

“But...Why? You're perfectly capable of...” Julian began to protest hoarsely.

“I'm not really a Starfleet doctor, Julian. It was at my request that someone legitimately qualified take over in your absence. It's the right thing for everyone.” Gaven said firmly.

“Gaven, what about our work? We're right on the cusp...” Julian was getting agitated, and his body wasn't tolerating it well.

He began to cough and wheeze painfully.

“Shhhhh. Peace. Steady yourself. I don't like you getting excited right now.” Gaven checked Julian's vitals and waited for him to relax and quiet. “We're far enough into the project where you and the others can continue with the trials without my constant input.”

When Julian looked like he was going to rally and try to spit out a rapid response to this, Gaven stilled him by putting a hand to his shoulder applying subtle pressure until he eased back against the bed. “Please don't fight me on this, Julian. At least not until you're well enough for us to fight about it properly.”

“We WILL be fighting about this eventually.” Julian promised him just shy of vehemently.

“I look forward to it. Try to sleep for now. I need to depart for the day, but you know you can reach me if you need something.” At that Gaven sipped down the rest of his broth, dimmed the room's lights, and sighed before he forced himself to step from the room.

Julian was fighting exhaustion, but he wasn't so far gone to miss the sight of the plate of toast Gaven had left behind. Though he'd finished off the clear broth before he'd gone, he'd left his serving of toast completely untouched.

~@~

It was later than Gaven had wanted it to be by the time he made it out of the infirmary and into the
open promenade. People were beginning to return to the station. Many tentatively and all much more subdued than they would have otherwise been had the recent dangers not occurred.

Gaven supposed some of them had no choice but to return. Whatever their origins, the shop owners and merchants relied on the traffic of the station for their livelihood. Even in the worst of situations, there would always be those who remained. Quark came to mind as did Odo. Characters who had weathered the station through the Cardassian occupation of Bajor, through Bajor's revolt, through the coming of the Federation and now the threat of the Dominion. Gaven was both impressed by such adaptability and dismayed by the implications of it.

His own culture was not like these space dwellers. The Oum preferred predictability. They perpetuated order in all things with little room for deviation. On Oum, every man and woman knew their exact place. Change was often painstakingly slow on Oum and was carefully plotted.

Until now, Gaven reminded himself.

Had his role as an accidental revolutionary been predictable? Had it been slow and in any way intentional? No.

“I never wanted to defy my people,” Gaven answered himself under his breath as he limped with unusual slowness back towards his quarters.

He knowingly had defied them. Gaven had defied his prescribed role, his people, and his culture absolutely and not once had he felt remorse in doing so even though it had destroyed the fabric of his known reality. Why? Why had it been so easy to do?

“They should have killed me for it.” Gaven muttered.

Even at this remark, he felt his mind rebuke him. He was reminded of the way of Oum. The way the Oum sidestepped even justifiable murder. Gaven knew that he hadn't overcome the moral and ethical indoctrination of his people; he had merely found something more potent to believe in.

Thoughts of Lopel Ner swept across his mind.

Memories of when the Ner bloodline had bought him in the Foundling House. How he learned later that his very birth had been carefully orchestrated to benefit the Ner genetic line. A genetic match to both Lopel and his sire Gulvere. Gulvere had been a patient, but harsh, sort. A linguist specialist and scholar of the highest acclaim. His mate Verda was a silent and highly judgmental mute and string instrumentalist. The Ner family was prominent enough to be able to afford two genetically compatible bond-servants. Gaven, who was destined to be inherited by Lopel Ner and Hadna who was a young adult when Gaven had been brought into the Ner household, the genetic bond-servant of the middle-aged Verda.

Oh, how those first weeks and months in the Ner household had terrified Gaven. He felt crushed against cold iron bars of demanding responsibility. His whole existence was designed to sustain the life of the members of his bond-house. Yet he had outlived every last one of them. How blasphemously corrupted it all seemed.

“Lopel, what did you think my life was going to amount to? Why could you not have allowed me to join you in death? To remain is agony and yet to defy you and your whims, even now, seems impossible.” He muttered, suddenly frustrated with himself.

Gaven carried on this way all the way home, his muscles aching in a slow rolling fashion across his body. He couldn't ignore the overwhelming compulsions to sleep and was momentarily distracted
from his memories by the thought of falling into his bed the moment he arrived home.

Home. Was that what the station had become? A home? Ridiculous.

Edging a curved corner, Gaven lumbered down the final corridor like a man running from smoke. The entire time his eyes locked pensively to the floor. Gaven was lost in memory now and lost in his confused feelings. What was the matter with him today? The thought was vague and sat on the far edges of his awareness.

As he neared the entry to his quarters, Gaven failed to notice the figure walking from the other side towards him. The two men might have collided in transit had the character not caught Gaven by the shoulders urging him to step no further.

“Doctor Ore.” The figure was calling Gaven to attention pulling him unceremoniously into the hear and now.

It was only then that Gaven realized he’d been dream walking. A phenomenon where an Oum triggered the usually ritualized meditative purging of feelings through his unique recall. His body jerked as his eyes focused as if coming acutely out of a trance.

“Thealing.” Gaven breathed the Vulcan's name on a exhale.

Cheval's grip subtly tightened. “Why are you he-”

Gaven's question was abruptly cut off.

“You're nose. It's bleeding. Come inside now. You must allow me to address it immediately.” Cheval looked back and forth from one side of the corridor to the other checking for signs that anyone had been walking near the doctor.

Luckily no one was about.

Guiding him inside, Cheval perched hin on the edge of his sofa arm and immediately disappeared into the bathroom to retrieve a towel.

As he did this Gaven suddenly became aware that the entire front of his monotone dark gray jumpsuit was saturated nearly to the middle of his chest with thick blood so dark it was black against the fabric. Instinctively Gavin clapped a hand over his nose as he took stock of the situation.

Seconds later Chival returned with a towel in one hand that had been wetted down with warm water. And an equally warm basin of water.

The blood about his mouth, neck, and chin had already begun to dry and was tacky to the touch.

“Please permit me to aid you.” The Vulcan's words were rushed and imperative in tone as he pushed forward not waiting for Gaven's consent and began to wipe at his face directly about the nose which had thankfully stopped actively running with blood.

Gaven allowed these administrations in stunned silence.

“Doctor, are you in pain?” Cheval asked.

“No. I mean, I just, ache.” Gaven admitted quietly.

I ache. A simple phrase yet one that Chival knew was loaded with multiple meaning.
“You're weak from the blood loss and soiled. You must allow me to help you. Come.” Cheval abandoned the blood-stained towel and bowl upon the floor and gripped Gaven by the upper arm and shoulder helping him into the bathroom.

“I need to remove your bloody clothes. If that makes you uncomfortable, I will cease and allow you to do it yourself, but they must come off.” Cheval had taken the time while in the bathroom before to start up a hot bath.

The steaming water was already half full, and Gaven was grateful for the calming sound of flowing water.

Gaven allowed Cheval to ease off his soiled jumpsuit. There was no point in trying to salvage it. As Cheval peeled the jumpsuit half way down Gaven's firm body, Gaven suddenly gasped sharply and gripped Cheval by the forearms halting his action.

“Did I hurt you?” Cheval asked in sharp dismay.

“No, but you need to stop all the same. It's all right.” Gaven reassured him as he let the other man go.

Cheval stepped back to allow more space for Gaven to move. He could hear a mixture of fatigue and acute control in Gaven's tone along with something else. Something much more vulnerable.

As Cheval looked on Gaven hooked his thumbs into the slightly elastic edge of his folded jumpsuit and pulled the sides as far away from his flesh as possible. He then took a deep breath and in one fluid motion forced the jumpsuit downwards to crumple at his ankles. It took a great deal more strength to stand back up. His body now fully exposed to the Vulcan.

“I see now.” Cheval said as his mind connected observational points. “I'll try to be more careful in the future. How long does your monoestrous cycle last?”

“Ten days unless implantation happens.” Gaven said, his body shuddering slightly. “I didn't even think...”

“You don't have to justify it. Clearly, the poxy radiation therapy you've been undergoing has allowed your biological reproductive functions to return.” Cheval observed.

“Yes. A problem I hadn't anticipated.” Gaven admitted.

“What is problematic about it?” Cheval asked.

Gaven hesitated.

“The estrus stage can be painfully debilitating and may begin any time now. I can't believe I didn't see the signs.” Gaven chided himself.

“How can this be eased?” Cheval asked pressingly.

Gaven looked him square in the eyes, proving he wasn't ashamed to discuss the subject but also not eager to elaborate on its intricacies. “It doesn't matter.”

Gaven reached out and let Cheval help him step from his jumpsuit and then help him into the steaming water. Usually, it would have felt almost scalding at this temperature, but Gaven was grateful for the intensity against his red edged and irritated abdominal slits. He was thankful that the sensation of wet heat was overriding the acute arousal that had briefly overwhelmed him and was now lingering over his body caused by Cheval accidentally brushing his fingers across his inflamed
abdominal slits.

“It does matter if it can help you prevent needless suffering.” Cheval argued.

“No. Painful as the experience is going to be; it's not going to kill me.” Gaven retorted.

“No.” Cheval agreed diplomatically. “It will just debilitate you completely. I cannot allow you to whether such an experience alone.”

“I don't need you to baby me. I'm perfectly capable of handling this on my own.” Gaven insisted.

“You don't know that for certain.” Cheval challenged.

Gaven had to admit to himself that the Vulcan was right reluctantly. He didn't know because Lopel Ner, his lover, and bondmate, had been with him through the initial experience. Gaven had only experienced his new monoestrous cycle one time just a scant few weeks before Lopel had died. Being new to the process they had failed to achieve implantation due to a misunderstanding of the timing process. They never got a second chance. Lopel had died, and Gaven had found himself shortly after embroiled in social defiance so rare and dangerous that his people had launched him into space alive within a shielded orbiting tomb to die slowly.

The lack of poxy exposure had caused his monoestrous cycle to halt, but thanks to Julian's poxy therapy disks that had been implanted under the skin, it appeared the cycle had resumed. On some level, the thought made Gaven deeply happy as well as profoundly grieved.

Neither emotional state was particularly useful at the moment.

“There is no shame in cultural mating necessities. The Vulcan culture has Pon Farr for example. A biological necessity that can kill if not properly addressed.” Cheval remarked.

Gaven sighed heavily. Cupping some of the water in his palms to cleanse his bloodied face with. “I'm not ashamed of my reproductive needs.”

“Then what exactly is the problem? Besides the fact that you're bond-mate is dead.” Cheval was not afraid to be blunt, and he knew enough about Gaven's life details to err on the side of accuracy.

“Oum sexually and emotionally bond for life. We do not take on other partners in love or reproduction.” Gaven said evenly.

“You are not on Oum anymore.” Cheval pointed out firmly but with compassion.

“I know.” Gaven remarked in a defeated tone.

“I'm not proposing you violate your cultural strictures.” Cheval cautioned as he picked up a nearby washcloth and dipped it into the water so that he could wipe along Gaven's chin and neck cleansing the places where the water either didn't reach or where his nearly black blood had dried too wholly to be easily removed.

Gaven knew Cheval meant he wasn't proposing to be taken as a make-shift lover though he couldn't help but wonder if Cheval would have offered himself if he'd thought Gaven would be receptive to the plan. If things were different would Gaven have responded to such overtures of their developing friendship? Would he have perhaps made overtures of his own along the same vein?

“Will you at least explain what is involved?” Cheval inquired.
“The difficulties in the situation are due to the hormonal reproductive conflict of the sexes. Some Oum are born naturally intersexed with various reproductive abilities. Others fall into a more traditional two sex binary where their reproductive capabilities are restricted unless a subject is modified. Unlike Oum who are naturally intersex, modified Oum run the risk of their bodies chemically rejecting the unoriginal cellular structures that function via a separate hormonal cue. In my case, my body wanted to reject the process of my modified womb and reproductive organs. It can cause intense pain, fatigue, and muscular strain. Rapid spikes in blood pressure are common which can lead to intense headaches, nosebleeds, and heightened anxiety. Blood pressure spikes and intense muscle cramping are most common during the proestrus stage but can be eased through the release of various pleasure centered hormones.” Gaven explained.

“I see. That would be why you were able to avoid most of the effects the first time when Lopel was with you.” Cheval said showing he understood the situation.

“Once the Estrus stage is complete there is an intense phase after which there is a small window of opportunity for implantation before the uterine lining is absorbed and its component reorganized for the next cycle.” Gaven explained.

“Fascinating.” Cheval remarked.

“Unlike some species, implantation is automatic as long as a suitable genetic coupling is available and achieved.” Gaven explained, his eyes closed and he rested his neck against the edge of the tub. “I should have recognized the beginning signs. If I'd realized earlier, I may have been able to devise a hormonal blocker and prevent the cycle from fully initiating. Now it's too late. It must be endured.”

“Have you considered reversing your modified biology?” Cheval asked more out of personal curiosity as a scientist.

“I'm not interested in doing that. I worked too hard to earn my carrier rights.” Gaven insisted.

That bit was curious, Cheval thought. Gaven claimed he would never take another partner casually or otherwise and yet he wasn't interested in removing his carrier abilities despite the difficulties that preserving the modification entailed. Was he subconsciously receptive to taking another mate and producing offspring as a carrier? Or was he holding onto the ability because of its connection to his past?

The logical part of Cheval argued that it was not his business to question Gaven's motives. But the deeper emotional part of him felt disturbed and protective of Gaven's interests.

“I believe you are perfectly capable of seeing yourself through this.” Cheval said at length. “I feel though that having adequate support through it would make it less difficult.”

“I don't object to your presence, my friend. Nor do I object to your concern for my well being and your impulse to help me. I'm sorry if I made it seem otherwise.” Gaven remarked.

“There was no offense. I simply wish for you to understand that you are not the only one with strong convictions. I told you before of my intentions to remain with you through your time here on this station.” Cheval reminded him.

“I remember.” Gaven agreed.

“Then you should also remember how it disturbs me to see you unwell.” Cheval pressed.

Gaven opened his eyes and turned in the water to peer at the Vulcan. For the moment, Cheval's eyes were cast down staring into the tiled floor. Gaven could see traces of Vulcan despondency, and it
tore at him.

“I'm glad you're here with me, Cheval.” Gaven said, reaching out then to grasp the Vulcan's hand squeezing it.

Cheval, who had raised his eyes now to look at him, was tempted to lower his head and lift Gaven's hand to press it against his cheek but resisted the impulse.

“For once, the servant should allow himself to be served.” Cheval remarked squeezing Gaven's hand in return.

~@~

Forty-five minutes later, Gaven limped heavily into his living room. One towel was draped in a U across his neck and shoulders, and the other was fastened low around his hips. At some point, Cheval had left him to relax in the water alone. When Gaven emerged he discovered the Vulcan putting the final touches on their dinner.

“All of these dishes are high in iron and other nutrients. You should eat a little of all of them if you can.” Cheval remarked as he fussed about subtly adjusting various details of the table setting.

As he watched him, Gaven wondered if there wasn't something of an artist in the Vulcan.

“And here I was planning to cook for you tonight.” Gaven shook his head lightly.


“Better for now. Though, stiff.” Gaven admitted.

“Tomorrow I'll bring you a Vulcan salve to rub into your muscles. Your body is more robust than a human and requires a stronger curative.” He insisted.

Gaven eased down into one of the table chairs and observed the Vulcan. He seemed distracted and nervous. His movements were always gracious but now also were more deliberate. It made him think of the edge of urgency he'd heard in Cheval when they'd communicated earlier that day.

“Was there something you were planning to tell me tonight.” Gaven asked gently.

At this question, Cheval abruptly stopped his Vulcan fidgeting and forced himself into an aura of placidity.

“Yes. I was planning to tell you that I must return to Vulcan in a few weeks.” Cheval began.

“Why?” Gaven asked patiently.

“To negotiate the details of my impending marriage.” Cheval replied in a small voice.

Gaven's eyes widened. Of anything he might have expected the Vulcan to say, this particular subject had not occurred to him.

“I'm sorry. I can't claim to know anything about Vulcan bonding or marriage rituals. Would you elaborate?” Gaven asked evenly.
Cheval took a seat and let out a controlled exhale. “In my culture, it is customary for Vulcan parents to arrange suitable marriages for their children at birth. The practice is not universally observed but is still preferred and largely expected among the higher Vulcan classes. At eight the intended Vulcan juveniles are telepathically bonded so that -to quote the rights- though we may be apart, we are never parted. Never touching and always touching.”

Cheval went on.

“I have always had a respectful relationship with my intended, T’Yel. We...” Cheval stumbled, growing silent for several seconds as his features subtly melted into something that resembled resignation. “We were very well suited for each other.”

Gaven caught the keyword in the Vulcan's phrasing. Something had changed between him and his intended, Gaven surmised, and now Cheval was concerned about the pending arraignments.

“Have you seen or spoken to your betrothed recently?” Gaven suspected that Vulcan bonded did not always stay in close contact throughout their engagements.

Cheval sighed. “No. Not for some time.”

The Vulcan did not appear particularly proud of this statement.

“It has not been my intention to avoid her. T’Yel and I have always tried to maintain a certain quality of direct contact. As children we were friends, and we have long agreed that our parents were wise to pair us. Not all Vulcan pairing of this nature are ideal.” For a moment Cheval's tone brightened as he remembered he and T'Yel's past understandings.

“If you'll excuse my use of terms, you do love T’Yel. Don't you?” Gaven was well aware that Vulcan's were capable of love and that many did indeed love their partners and express a deep devotion to them. The psychic bond they shared was part of that devotion.

“Yes.” Cheval agreed understanding Gaven's question.

Again there was that resignation. Cheval wasn't telling Gaven the whole story. He was holding back details and sidestepping certain direct questions. Unusual for a Vulcan.

“When was the last time you spoke to T’Yel?” Gaven repeated his question.

“We saw each other briefly before I left Vulcan to come to Deep Space 9.” Cheval said evenly.

It was clear to Gaven that whatever had been done or said during that meeting had not been pleasant. It was possible, Gaven realized, that T’Yel had not wanted him to leave the planet. Gaven also knew perfectly well that although he had set up the circumstances that had justified their reunion on the station, it was likely that Cheval would have sought him out eventually once he knew where Gaven was. The Vulcan had admitted as much already in their past conversations. Was it possible that whatever disturbance that was going on between Cheval and his intended was Gaven's fault? It was no secret between them how their unusual alien connection had caused real and lasting difficulties for Cheval that he was still trying to address. It was logical to suspect then that if Cheval and T’Yel were psychically bonded that both might have also been affected by the experiences of the one.

Once again a wave of guilt washed over Gaven. Though it had never been his intention to cause harm to anyone, it seemed that he inadvertently had and it was unclear how Gaven could correct the problem. Even if he sent Cheval away, the memories of their sharing would remain, and its effects would persist for the Vulcan.
“What are you going to do when you return to Vulcan?” Gaven asked.

“I want to speak to T’Yel and find out why she has initiated our marriage proceeding so early. I also want to consult with my mother.” Cheval said tapping into that reserve of strength Gaven admired so much in him.

“Well...That all makes sense. You should go back. We live in delicate times, after all.”

“There's something else.” Cheval noted.

Here it was, Gaven thought bracing himself.

“I...I would like you to return with me.” Cheval spat out quickly.

Gaven took a moment to process this statement slowly. Under other circumstances, Gaven would have looked at the idea of returning to Vulcan as another potential opportunity to settle down. Similarly to the People of Gulba 4, Vulcan society and culture was something Gaven felt meshed well with his sensibilities. Despite being an Alien, he thought he could blend on such planets and even carve out a useful existence. But to be called back to Vulcan by Cheval? That was something else. It was something that needed a more in-depth consideration.

“Why do you want me to return with you?” Gaven asked.

“It is my wedding.” Cheval pointed out bluntly. “Is it not customary for friends to attend such functions?”

“That does seem to be the general sentiment among most of the cultures I've encountered.” Gaven agreed flatly.

“You don't approve.” Cheval observed.

“No. I very much do approve of witnessing the life celebrations of those I like and care about. But my witness is not why you're asking me to come to Vulcan. If you don't want to tell me the real reason, then I won't press you, but unless I know the real reason I can't promise you that I can justify breaking away from my responsibilities here. I'm still the Federation's...” Gaven had wanted to say ‘inmate’ but diplomatically said, “Guest.” instead.

Cheval, who had been sitting with his hands clasped on the table in front of him while he watched Gaven pick at his food, sighed and pulled them back suddenly to let them drop at his sides.

“Under the current circumstances it is my belief that T’Yel has changed her mind regarding the appropriateness of our union and if so, she will attempt to challenge the rites and deny me when I return to Vulcan.” Cheval confessed.

“And?” Gaven didn't know enough about this particular aspect of Vulcan culture to anticipate why Cheval found the matter so alarming.

“If T’Yel initiates the challenge of Koon-ut-kal-fee, I will find myself in a position that requires me to fight for my claim on her. I do not relish violence. I neither wish to kill or be killed simply to observe tradition.” Cheval said, clearly agitated.

He's afraid, Gaven realized with some alarm.

“Must it come down to a death match?” Gaven pressed.
“I do not know. There have been some instances where the opponent only had to break the blood fever and incapacitate their rival. Even at that, the task is dangerous because incapacitation alone is not always strong enough to correct the chemical imbalance of the blood fever. If the imbalance where to continue unaddressed it would kill the Vulcan subject anyway. It seems the logical reason why a death outcome would have been traditionally preferred.” Cheval mused.

“A mercy killing.” Gaven nodded. “What exactly does T’Yell object to so suddenly?”

Cheval didn't reply. He merely looked at Gaven straight in the eyes his own eyes reflecting that subtle unhappiness that was born out of knowing one was not and could never be perfect.

“She objects to me.” Gaven scoffed and sighed deeply.

“Don't you think my presence on Vulcan would only agitate her further?” Gaven certainly thought it would.

“Part of T’Yel's difficulty is that she does not understand you nor does she understand the bond you and I share. In spite of the telepathic link between us as betrothed, she does not understand.” Cheval pressed.

“More like she simply doesn't like it.” Gaven mused out loud. “Well, I can't say I blame her much for that. You know...If I had conceived the influence my selfishness was going to have on the people floating about in the stars; I don't know that I would have gone through with it. You, the conflict with the Dominion. I'm trying to disengage from it all, but every time I turn around I find myself more deeply woven into the greater pattern of lives that, until I left Oum, I had no idea even existed.” Gaven argued.

“I am not asking you to repair what has become undone between T’Yel and I. I have no expectation of you doing anything about the matter to influence it what so ever. The fact remains that outside of my mother and T’Yel, I have no other significant ties. I have never mastered the art of social discourse among my kind. For most of my life it has seemed I have never done anything to warrant attention or support from my peers whatsoever. In this way, it is perhaps appropriate for T’Yel to reject me now just as it is appropriate that I endure the consequences of my other inadequacies as a Vulcan. You are the only real friend I have ever had, and there are few instances in life where a man can know the character of his demise. If I am not to persevere in this instance of a challenge then in my final failure I would like the comfort of knowing I did not face the coming of my time alone.” Cheval finished his lengthy speech and began to look away.

“Enough.” Gaven's hand slammed down on the table between them as he forced his voice into a tight, strict tone forcing Cheval to return his full gaze to him.” You are not a failure. What of your many accomplishments? Your ambassadorship? The men and women you saved? The way you saved me? I will never understand this incessant Vulcan fatalism of yours. I know you worry about not living up to the Vulcan ideal and you think not being able to do so makes you lesser than those that can and do. But you're wrong. You are wonderful and absolutely deserving of peace and happiness just the way you are.”

The men were almost glaring at each other now. Gaven had demanded Cheval's complete attention as he delivered his rebuttal and now the men were weighing their words as if both were trying to make an invisible scale balance between them.

“It is not fatalism.” Cheval said carefully.

“What is it then?” Gaven tested.
“It is the Vulcan Paradox. The necessity of my people to allow ourselves to be ruled only by intellection through logic because it is in our base natures to be ruled by our violent depths of feeling. The necessity to seek reason devoid of the biased of passion is what keeps our baser tendencies in check. It is our defining fail-safe, and one, not every Vulcan is destined to master. I am not sure I am a Vulcan who wants to master my emotions. When I speak of the consequence inherent in my unique nature, I speak of it in terms of measurable likelihoods. The likelihood of success, in this case, being statistically unfavorable. I am capable of passionate violence as much as the next Vulcan, but when pitted against another of my kind I am at a clear and obvious disadvantage. Do you understand?” Cheval asked.

“Yes.” Gaven agreed. “Now you understand me. We will go to Vulcan together and try to find a way out of this catastrophe of Vulcan nonsense. Barring a reasonable alternative, we will, in the meantime do something else that, with any luck, will equalize the odds if not tip them to your favor. If you're telling me I might have to watch you kill yourself in a few weeks just because we're friends, then you damn well better believe I'm going to have my say in the business.”
“Julian, if you expect me to be able to do this then you have to hold still.” The day after Gaven had run Julian’s cognitive tests the men were at it again.

This time Gaven was trying to get to the bottom of Julian's hand tremors, and the testing process was annoying them both. At first, the issue hadn't been immediately apparent, but as Gaven had tested him, Julian's mental fatigue began to cause his focus to slip and cause the tremors in his hands to be more evident. By the time they were two-thirds of the way through the testing process Julian could barely hold a straw cylinder steady enough to lift it more than a few inches without dropping it. Julian was struggling to cope with this significant limitation, and Gaven was struggling to deal with a difficult patient while he secretly was battling his discomforts.

Gaven's major muscles ached, and the edges of his abdominal slits had moved from being erotically sensitive to irritated and painful. Just breathing in and out caused the fabric of his monochrome uniform to rub his body wrong. Not to mention Gaven was entirely paranoid about the hemorrhaging nose bleeds that could strike at any moment, and that would be difficult to explain. After their dinner discussion the night before, Cheval had eaten with Gaven in silence and then helped him to bed remaining with him for several hours as they tried a meditative tactic to help reduce Gaven's symptoms and help him sleep until other therapies could be contrived. The subject matter they had discussed had weighed heavily on Gaven's mind when he'd woken up early that morning to find Cheval had meditated on the floor of his bedroom through the night while he'd slept.

It wasn't the first time someone had saw fit to watch over Gaven through the night during times of trouble, but unlike some of the other times, it had felt uncomfortable to realize Cheval had remained with him unasked. Why did the Vulcan insist upon doting on him so? And why did the idea bother him so much? Gaven didn't have time to answer these questions.

The sound of Julian swearing under his breath as the cylinder he was trying to handle fell for the hundredth time out of his hands, pulled Gaven back into the present moment.

“Damn, damn, damn it!” Jullian cursed.

“Try to take it easy, Julian. In a minute or two we'll try again. Now for the last time hold still so I can do the probe scan.” Gaven ordered.

“I'm sorry. This is just frustrating for me. Look. Look at my hands. I can barely make a fist without shaking. I don't want to do any more of this.” He miserably protested as he sat in a chair at the exam table they were working at looking a hot mess.
“You don’t have a choice this time — doctor’s orders. Furthermore, you were in a coma for two weeks. You already know that it’s unreasonable for you to expect everything just to come back overnight. The shaking is probably just temporary, but I have to make sure.” Gaven insisted.

“Guh. I just want to go home and pretend none of this happened.” Julian admitted.

“I know, and as soon as we do this and find out the results we can think about transferring you into outpatient care. Some rest and recuperation at home for a while and it may all indeed turn out almost like normal.” Gaven muttered.

“Your bedside manner is reassuring, Doctor.” Julian remarked cuttingly.

“And your sarcasm isn’t.” Gaven quipped back. “There. We’re done. You’re free.”

Gaven helped Julian stand and bumble back to his bed.

“Let’s talk about something other than me for a while. Yes? I’ve been listening to the reports you’ve submitted since I’ve been under on our little pet project. You’ve made quite a few strides, I see.” Julian observed.

“Yes. Enough that Starfleet can probably start running their clinical trials. As I’ve outlined in my analysis Deep Space 9 is ideal for the initial testing process, but eventually, Starfleet will want to go beyond the station and sample a larger test group.” He said evenly.

“I don’t want to think about what the brilliant minds of Starfleet will do with our work right now. I’m just glad we’re making progress. You know, Gaven, there’s something I’ve meant to say to you since I woke up.” Julian muttered evenly.

Gaven felt a cold sweat threaten to break out down his spine. An irrational reaction to Julian’s choice of words. After the unexpected nature of the conversation he’d had with Cheval the previous night, Gaven felt wary of surprising revelations from those around him. What was he afraid of? What could Julian possibly say to him that was any more unnerving than what Cheval had said? Gaven recognized his nervous anxieties regarding the matter and tried to accept them. Steeling himself, Gaven settled into the rolling stool near Julian’s sick bed to listen to him.
“I happen to know that I would have died out there in the carpet shop if you hadn’t found me when you did. I...” Julian wanted to say something else specifically about the attack he survived but found it too complicated.

“I think you’re a wonderful doctor and a good man. I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you’ve done since coming here to the station. I appreciate you. Lots of people here, appreciate you. And not just because of what you’ve done to help me.” Julian said carefully.

“I know they do.” Gaven replied quietly. “I’m glad you’re alive, Julian. You’re a very beloved figure here and a good doctor in your own right. I’ve learned a tremendous amount about many things thanks to you.”

“Yes. Yes. Were both very admirable and important.” Julian muttered not wanting to risk losing his thought stream. “The captain dropped in on me yesterday while you were gone and mentioned to me in more detail that your planning to stop helping in the infirmary all together once the replacement Doctor arrives. If I may be so bold? I think it’s a mistake. I know you don’t really think you belong here, but you're wrong. You belong here as much as I or anyone else does.” Julian said firmly.

“I appreciate that sentiment.” Gaven started to say.

“It’s not just a sentiment. It’s a point of fact. Anyway, I suppose I of all people can’t convince you to change your mind, but I just wanted to make sure you knew how I felt about it. And don’t think for one moment that now that I’ve said it you need to go contradicting me.” Julian grumbled darkly but with good intent.

At that Gaven chuckled. “Alright. I will humor the invalid. But Julian, you need to accept that at some point I will leave Deep Space 9. I want to do so on a positive note, but...I’m afraid it may not come out that way if I overstay my time here or overstep the privileges Starfleet has extended to me. You're the doctor assigned to this station. This is your home and your people. Do you understand?”

Julian could hear the strain in Gaven’s tone. Until recently he had only been superficially aware of the man’s sadness and profound commitment to his principles, and there was something else at work in his tonality today that Julian couldn’t pinpoint. Something he did sense was that since the attack on Julian's life, things had changed between them somehow and Julian felt like he could see aspects of the other doctor he hadn’t understood or cared to notice before. He could also sense that Gaven was trying to pull away from all of them.

“Sure, I understand. But I still think you’re wrong and I just hope one of these days you’ll agree with me.” He said quietly.
Gaven didn’t reply directly to his remark and instead gingerly rose from the stool.

“The new doctor is supposed to arrive sometime today.” Gaven remarked. “Did the captain tell you?”

“No. But he may not have gotten word when I spoke with him last. Do we know who it is yet?” Julian asked.

“A Doctor Jeremiah Fisk.” Gaven confirmed.

“Fisk? I wonder where in bloody Hell they drummed him up.” Julian remarked in a surly manner.

“Do you not approve?” Gaven asked.

“Of Fisk? Jeremiah's a fine doctor. I'm just surprised. I didn't realize he was still practicing and I certainly would have never expected him to be floating out in this part of the quadrant. Last I heard he was retired and teaching full time in the Academy. “

“What's his specialty?” Gaven asked.

“Inter-Stellar Ethnology and Exobiology along with the standard doctoring fare. Though, last I heard he'd branched off into Forensic Psychology. Fisk always was a stickler about knowing the why of things, particularly where alien ethics were involved. He ran one of the best and most grueling Medical Ethics courses in living memory. He also happens to be one of the nicest fellows I've ever met who made it particularly shameful when students couldn't pass his exams.” Julian explained.

“You had him at the Academy; I take it.” Gaven surmised.

“Yes. Though I had a somewhat prodigal reputation at the academy, Fisk's courses were some of the hardest ones I took and some of the most rewarding. We're lucky to have him if that's indeed who's coming. I can't wait to hear what he's been doing with himself.” Julian said sounding tired though in better spirits.
“I look forward to meeting him.” Gaven remarked.

Julian sighed, rubbing at his hands briskly. “I certainly hope we figure out what the Hell these tremors are about. I rather like my hands and would enjoy playing darts again among other things.”

“Speaking of darts, Julian. When are you planning on letting your friends and colleagues see you? Almost everyone has been at the infirmary at one point or another asking me about you.” Gaven asked.

“Almost everyone?” Julian was keen to know who hadn't dropped by.

“Almost everyone I've known you to acquaint yourself favorably with. With the notable exception of Chief O'Brien...” Gaven remarked.

“Miles? Miles hasn't been to see me?” Julian sounded genuinely surprised.

“He took the changeling attack on you very personally and why shouldn't he? You're his best friend. Since the day you came out of surgery I've heard he's been on the engineering and science teams like a beast trying to finish and perfect the station's defense initiatives. Everyone took your attack particularly hard. At some point, I think you need to make a gesture or allow them to make a gesture on your behalf.” Gaven encouraged him.

“I'm not ready to see anyone yet. Not like this.” Julian muttered. “I...I just want more time. Just a little more time.”

“You can take all the time you need, Julian. You're just starting your recovery.” Gaven reassured him.

Julian sighed and shut his eyes. “I feel like nothing is ever going to be the same again.”

“You're right. Nothing ever will be the same. The universe rarely changes that much. But people? They change all the time. You're going to get through this.” Gaven insisted steadily.

“I can see now why so many people sing your praises.” Julian observed. “And most don't even
know a tenth of what I know about you.”

The end statement sounded more intimate in Gaven's ear than Julian had probably meant it to be.

Part of him felt satisfied by the possibility.

For all their fighting and disagreements, Gaven found himself wanting Julian to understand him. Certainly, many of the others did to a limited degree. Kira and Dax liked to ask him about his culture frequently and often referred back to the reading he'd given them. Captain Sisko also enjoyed conversing, and the two had spent several days in meetings together discussing the circumstances of Gaven's past and the value of his contributions if he agreed to come to the station. People like Odo, Worf, and Miles preferred to take him as they found him and were generally uninterested in anything else unless it was pertinent to the safety of the station and, of course, Cheval knew him through their mind melds. But Julian? Julian Bashir was a strange case. On the one hand, he seemed frustrated that he couldn't seamlessly befriend Gaven as he did with so many others that intrigued him. And yet every time Gaven had allowed him an opportunity to become better acquainted, Julian had flummoxed the opportunity by either making a fool of himself or getting into a power struggle with him.

Gaven thought back to the things he'd told Julian while he was comatose. He'd done it to keep the doctor's mind stimulated, or so he told himself. The brain scans showed Julian's mind reacting to these conversations and yet...Now that Julian was conscious, Gaven wondered how much he might remember of them.

Before either of them could say anything else, Gaven heard the screen in his office ding indicating he was receiving another off station call.

This time when Gaven excused himself, he could hear Julian preparing to follow him. A good sign.

With his forearm crutch, Gaven was able to move with far more confidence.

“It's Doctor Fisk.” Gaven remarked.

“I'm not surprised. He's famous for his personal touches.” Julian remarked as he tucked his hands under his folded arms and hung back leaning against the frame of Gaven's office.
“Well Hello there. Dr. Ore, I presume.” A chipper sounding man with a Canadian accent said.

“Hello, Doctor Fisk. Your presumption is correct. Is everything all right?” Gaven asked.

“Peachy.” Fisk chirped. “I just wanted to say I'm almost there. I hate these computer systems announcing my arrival to places in advance like people are incapable of figuring it out for themselves.”

Gaven didn't remark on this statement but smiled lightly.

“Oh and before I forget. I'm old, and it does happen these days...Don't bother meeting me. I'll find the station's infirmary on my own. We can save the fanfare for when this conflict with the Dominion is over. Okey Dokey, Pokey. Doctor Fisk out.” At that, the screen blinked off.

“Is he always like that?” Gaven asked looking over his shoulder.

“Ye-up. If he weren't so damn brilliant, it would almost be annoying. Trust me you'll get used to it almost immediately.” Julian reassured him.

“Okey...Dokey...Pokey...” Gaven repeated the words slowly with a humorous, whimsical air. “Must be a human thing?”

“Mhm, more like a Dr. Fisk thing.” Julian corrected.

“Hmph. Interesting.” Gaven let his head turn back around, and the men were silent for a minute.

Julian continued to focus on his turned back thinking in that space of time how he liked Gaven best this way. The times when they just sat or worked in silence together. Gaven was one of the most steady people Julian had ever met, despite his occasional episodes of emotional instability.

Gaven could feel Julian staring at him and once again it brought about a quiver along his spine. This time though Gaven simply allowed it to go on and didn't try to analyze it. This was the side of Julian Gaven preferred. The side of him that was quiet and reflective and the side of him that noticed everything.
“You should try for a shower today. That head wound is closed enough now that I'm not worried about it anymore. I'm sure you'd like Dr. Fisk to see you at your best, limited as that may be right now.” Gaven suggested.

“Guh. Yes. I will. I've still got the stink of surgical disinfectant on me.” Julian muttered.

“Mm. Are you going to be alright?” Gaven asked swiveling around.

“You're sticking around for a while aren't you?” Julian asked lightly.

Gaven nodded.

“Then I'll be fine.” Julian remarked.

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Forty-five minutes later, Julian appeared looking haggard and worm but the tidiest he'd been since before he'd been brought to the infirmary. He had changed into a thigh length tunic that was sapphire blue and dark slacks. It was a flattering color on the man, and Julian had intentionally picked it for that reason.

While he'd been away, Gaven had felt his blood pressure begin to climb and, worried it would lead to another nose hemorrhage or worse, had self-administered a hypo-spray to curtail the issue. The sooner Doctor Fisk arrived, the better. Gaven desperately wanted to return to his quarters to meditate then sleep off his miserable discomfort. If things progressed in another day or two, he'd have no choice but to confine himself to his quarters entirely.

Still, it was worth sticking around long enough to see Julian looking more like himself again. It was a comforting sign of progress and healing. It also served as a reminder to Gaven of the fact that he did care genuinely about Julian. Until this moment Gaven hadn't fully intellectualized how much he cared nor had he processed how afraid he'd been when he'd found Julian horribly wounded in the shop barely clinging to life. It was the fear that had driven Gaven all through the long surgical process as he'd personally proceeded to try and save Julian's life.
Gaven allowed himself to feel his deep relief in the business, but the sensation was short lived. Just as soon as he'd settled into the comfortable feeling of accomplishment and compassion, other worries and private shames began to seep into his good feelings souring them. Where a pleased look of pride and satisfaction should have prevailed, Gaven's concentration began to drift and a mild frown set upon his mouth while he momentarily disappeared inside himself attempting to silence his creeping insecurities.

All of his struggles were mostly lost on Julian, up until the last second when the doctor stopped fussing over his appearance long enough to glance sideways at his companion only to suddenly see the colorless look of the other doctor's features that were etched with fatigue and the sullen distant look of malaise upon his face. Up until that glimpse Julian hadn't considered things from Gaven's perspective how the pressure to perform must have weighed on him all this time, not just for Julian's sake; but for the intricate web of friends and associates who fretted over him. Julian had heard the subtle details from the captain about Gaven's devotion to his care. Benjamin had such a subtle way of implying much while saying little. Why had Gaven cared so much about his particular well being?

These thoughts produced an equally troubled frown of the younger Julian's features as he stared openly at Gaven, both men now lost in contemplative thought as they lingered in Gaven's office.

“Well, well. It looks like I've arrived just in the nick of time.” A bright and chipper voice suddenly cut into the heavy space like cool water being thrown from a large basin flooding everyone's attention causing both Julian and Gaven to break their contemplation to turn their faces up to the tall newcomer.

“You boys both look a little worse for the wear. If I didn't know better, I'd be hard pressed to decide which one of you was the patient. Doctor Ore, I presume? Good to meet you, good to meet you.” The tall elder doctor crossed past Julian to take Gaven's hand in a firm exaggerated shake with both his hands grinning a wide toothy smile that curled at the corners of his square face.

Gaven awkwardly stood as they shook hands and did his best to hold on for the ride, managing a thin grave looking smile of politeness. “Doctor Fisk, it's good to meet you at last.”

“Yeees. Likewise.” Fisk narrowed his small eyes at Gaven letting is glasses slide slightly down his nose to peer down at him over the top of them in a scrutinizing manner. He then let go of Gaven and turned sharply towards Julian. “Come along, let's get you boys settled down somewhere so we can all have a good long talk and get acquainted. I won't ask either of you to show me around just yet, but I do want to be able to jump right into the mix.”

The doctors settled into the somewhat large medical conferencing room just off of Julian's office.
Fisk seemed well updated in advance about the recent events on the station. No doubt he had been briefed in full before he arrived regarding current events and the various research efforts that Deep Space 9 was leading. He'd also been informed about Julian's condition and Gaven's identity though he seemed to carry himself in an endlessly open way that allowed everyone to feel like they could converse casually with him about any given subject as the natural conversation allowed.

“So you've come down with a case of the shakes, I see.” Fisk said as he looked over the results of the most recent testing that hadn't been included in his earlier briefings before he arrived at the station.

“My assessment is that the tremors aren't neurological and shouldn't require more advanced internal medicine to treat.” Gaven remarked stoically.

“Yeees. It does seem to be rooted more in emotional and psychological trauma than anything else. Horrific brushes with death tend to do that to a man.” Fisk agreed. “Well, Julian the good news is that I see no reason why you can't continue your recovery at home starting tomorrow. I'm willing to let you bunker down in the infirmary one more night to give you some time to get used to the idea but after that, boy, it's outskies. You're getting the boot until I can prove your mentally and emotionally on the straight and narrow again. Think of it as a little vacation.”

“Wait, what?” Julian blinked a few times. “You're not expecting me to go off to my quarters and just sit there for eternity waiting to get better. I may not be good for much right now, but that seems a bit excessive to me.”

“Standard procedure. I'm sorry doctor, but you're taking a medical leave of absences. I'm not banishing you from the station, although a trip to Bajor might be good for you right now; but you are being kicked out of the infirmary formal for no less than the next eight weeks. I may be willing to shorten it if, and only if, you attend regular therapy with me and show significant enough progress for me to alter my medical recommendations. Come now, boy. I know you well enough to have high hopes that you'll be back in your office doctoring lickity-split.” The elder doctor said magnanimously.

“Gaven...Say something.” Julian demanded deeply scowling as he looked at Gaven expectantly.

“What? Do you think I have the clout to change his mind? I don't have seniority here and rightly so. I'm sorry, Julian; but if your positions were reversed you know you'd have to say the same thing to a patient in your position. And anyway...I agree with him. You need time. No one is saying you have to take it cooped up like an invalid, but you're not going to be able to maneuver yourself out of the situation so don't try. I'm sure Dr. Fisk has no intention of you changing your general routine.” Gaven flatly said as he huddled against the table looking tired and uncomfortable.
“You could at least pretend not to take his side for five minutes.” Julian grumbled dismissively.

“I'm too tired today for aimless pageantry.” Gaven remarked dryly.

“You'd do well to take some leave too, my fine fellow. You're looking a bit blue...Literally.” Dr. Fisk remarked on Gaven's unhealthy pale appearance that was making the blue veins under his skin far more visible than usual, nearly belied his alienness.

“Gaven, what's been going on with you the last few days?” Julian muttered leaning casually over the table and looking at him around Dr. Fisk.

“Hormonal changes. More evidence that your handiwork has paid off, doctor. There's no need to be alarmed. Though, I admit, I feel exceedingly uncomfortable and intend fully to retire to my quarters for the next several days without disturbance if that's alright with you, Dr. Fisk.” Gaven said, not meaning it as a real question.

“You boys do what you need to do. I've handled more rinky-dink operations than this on my lonesome. If I need anything, I'll let you know. Speaking as a doctor, I'm prescribing as much recreation as you can handle, Julian. Gotta get your motor skills back up to snuff. And as for you, my fine man, you need rest and recuperation. I might recommend a visit or two to me as well if you're willing. Unlike this one over here, I can't require you to pursue any mental health services under the circumstances, but it still might be nice to have a chat. Only when your feeling better though AND don't feel afraid to call me around if your 'Hormonal changes' start getting the better of you. I do make house calls. Well, this has just been splendid. I'm pleased as punch to be here to help. Come on, Julian. I want to give you my own once over, and we can swap stories. It was interesting meeting you, Doctor Ore. I hope we can become friends.” At that, the tall toothy older doctor grinned wide and all three stood up as he once again profusely shook Gaven's hand and then began to shoo Julian into an exam area.

Gaven tilted his head bewildered by Doctor Fisk's mannerisms and shook his head as he doggedly prepared to head home. “What a strange man.”
True to his word when Gaven, left the infirmary on the day Of Jeremiah Fisk's arrival he went directly to his quarters and stayed put. Strict instructions went out to everyone not to disturb him unless it was a critical emergency and word also began to spread that Julian Bashir was due to return to them all if not to his duties on the station.

Right off the bat, Jeremiah seemed to fit right into the station's operations. A naturally well-mannered man, if a bit eccentric, he quickly took over Julian and Gaven's rounds like an experienced grandparent overseeing the infant childcare of their grandchild instead of their far less experienced children's abilities. For being a gentleman of eighty-six, Jeremiah was surprisingly spry with dynamic energy and had a quiet getter-done attitude. Only slightly awkward, the man was old enough not to care if other people understood him or found him odd. What he cared about was getting results and having a grand old time while he did it.

“I must say, J. You are one lucky son of a gun. That doctor friend of yours is a certifiable genius at surgery. Look at that artistry.” Fisk mused as he gave Julian one last once over before he signed his discharge paperwork and sent him home as promised. “I can almost guarantee in a year or two you'll hardly see any scars and his scientific contributions...I'd almost kill to have his kind of mind. I just bet the Federation would love to have him in the ranks for real. Think there's any convincing him?”

“Not a chance in Hell.” Julian muttered with absolute certainty. “Frankly, I'd say that he's justified in his feelings. The Federation has made significant mistakes in handling him.”

“Yeees. Unfortunate, that. And all very hush, hush. Starfleet never is very good about owning up to their mistakes especially when it comes to first contact scenarios. But maybe in time, we can make some of it up to him. In any case, I'm glad I was out this way. It's been a real treat to see his handiwork firsthand.” Fisk pulled back from Julian ticking the final checks off on his datapad. “Well son, I think your physically in one piece, and that means that it's safe for me to kick you out of here for a while officially. Don't worry. I know you'll be back to your antics in no time. Well? How do you feel?” Fisk asked stepping back to observe the other doctor like someone watching a somewhat complicated work of art.

Julian who had been staring into the floor glanced up now at the older man. “Honestly, Remi? Off the record, I feel downright afraid, and the worst part is I don't know what I'm afraid of. What if I never go back to feeling like me again?”

“Hm, that is a pickle. You haven't fundamentally changed, J. Oh sure, you may go about things a little differently for now. Think and feel things you didn't before, but that's not because your experiences have necessarily changed you. These experiences may simply be bringing out other aspects of who you are that you didn't know were there. While you're out on leave, I want you to
focus on getting to know this new and different Julian. I want you to try to think about what this Julian needs, what he wants. Most importantly I want you to avoid making good or bad judgments about what you discover, at least until we start up your therapy sessions and we can look at what you've learned about yourself objectively and together. I also think you should touch base with your friends and support networks. The Captain tells me you haven't been willing or interested in seeing your friends. Now while I'm happy to explore with you why that might be, I want you to at least try to reach out to them in the meantime on your own. Let them know first hand that you're alright. “Jeremiah advised him.

Julian knew that Jeremiah was right. He owed it to all his friends to reach out to them, and when he thought about why he hadn’t already tried, he found himself unable to justify the delay. He only knew that everything in him had wanted to avoid it.

“They could have come to see me.” Julian muttered under his breath as if trying to justify his actions.

Julian immediately felt himself shrink shamefully at his self-serving words. Gaven had told him many times about the visitors he’d had during his coma and after. If Julian had been unconscious or asleep during these visits then that had not been anyone’s fault, it was understandable that no one had been willing to rouse him for fear of damaging his healing process. The one exception had been the Captain. Benjamin had come several times, usually when Gaven was away, to brief Julian and to offer him words of quiet encouragement.

Both Benjamin and Gaven had patient diplomatic manners and caring natures that when combined with their focused introspective principles made them inspiring and trustworthy people. Julian had come to rely on both men. Benjamin because he was the station’s Captain and Julian’s ranked superior, and Gaven because he was Julian’s rescuer and his collaboration partner and fellow healer. Collecting up a few things from his office, Julian had the irrational thought that once he walked out of the infirmary, he wouldn’t return to it again. A silly notion indeed, given that Fisk had already arranged for his therapy checkups and medical follow up as a patient. Shrugging off the paranoid feeling, Julian picked up the small crate of things he planned to take back to his quarters and with a deep breath stepped back out of his office. For a second as he eyed the way out of the infirmary, he felt his courage falter and swiftly began trying to craft a plausible excuse not to be made to leave. But his irrational thinking was just as quickly cut off by the familiar sound of someone clearing their throat in another part of the infirmary a few feet to the side of him.

Turning his face, Julian almost startled. “Miles.”

“Hello, Julian.” Miles greeted him uncomfortably.

“I thought,” He began, looking awkward. “I mean, I heard you were being released today.”
The friends stared at each other.

“Oh, Hell...What can I say? I thought you might like a friendly face to walk you back to your quarters. I promise I’ve not let anyone plan any sudden surprises or ambushes. Though it was a mighty effort to keep Dax from throwing you a bloody fete the second she heard you might be coming home. You owe me a dart game for every day you’ve been in here, by the way. You’ve no notion how dull it’s been playing by myself.” Miles muttered in his Irish brogue, awkwardly shuffling where he stood.

“Well, Darts may be off the table for a little while; but, huh, I could use a drink now and again. I hope the family is well? I’ll have to come by and visit Keiko and the new baby...Soon.” Julian said trying to get into the flow of their small talk.

“Oh...Oh, yes. We’d love to have you over for dinner when you feel up to it. Molly asks about you daily. And, Huh...” Miles began to feel his composure slip slightly and grew quiet briefly staring at his shoes. “Oh, to bloody Hell with it. You damn well scared the bloody piss oughta me, and if that deplorable changeling bastard hadn’t almost killed you, I might be of a mind to do it in his place.” Miles bellowed in faux anger, pointing roughly at Julian and turning rosy pink.

“Oh, Gads! I’m bloody glad you’re yelling at me. I’d much rather people yell at me then cry.” Julian let out a long, loud breath and shook his head for both their sakes as he walked up to Miles and clapped him hard on the back. “Come on, old friend. Let’s go back to my place and see if Quark will take pity on me and send over a bottle of bourbon.”

“Oh no, this calls for the good stuff. None of that space grade contraband swill of Quarks. I got a little Irish delight waiting for us all ready to go.” Miles reassured him in a conspiratorial tone.

“Don’t let Quark catch you calling his human spirits swill. It might hurt his delicate Ferrangi pride.” Julian warned him with a chuckle.

“With those Ferrangi ears of his, tis a wonder he hasn’t heard us down the promenade already.” Miles quipped giving Julian a manly side hug before giving an onward and upward sign with his arm as they walked in unison together out of the infirmary.

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Along with everyone else that had been sworn off from disturbing Gaven, Jyruss Cheval also found himself temporarily on the outs the day after Gaven had left the infirmary and sent word to everyone he was not to be disturbed. Cheval had not been explicitly asked to stay away, but he had also not been invited to remain with his friend either and greatly suspected it was best to leave Gaven alone at least for a while to cope in his own way with his troubles. It was logical enough, though his desire to be with Gaven through his ills was not. The impulse was purely an emotional reaction to wanting to be near him in a way that Cheval knew he should have been alarmed by.

As he sat settled in Quarks, looking like a grim Vulcan statue, his mind and memories drifting between those involving himself and Gaven and those involving him and T’Yel.

“You want to be with him more than you want to be with me.” T’Yel had accused of him on the night before the morning he had departed for the station.

“I have been asked to attend the convoy to Deep Space 9.” Cheval had reminded her doggedly.

“Yes. Asked, Not told. Not ordered. You are not a specialist in the radiation sciences, and you are not acting as an ambassador. There is no logic to your attendance to that station. Do not stand there and omit the truth from me.” She had fumed staring at him under the weeping tree of their youth.

Cheval leveled his gaze at his beloved and pressed his lips. While he was often labeled as a Vulcan mouse of a man, there was some strength to him. It was a strength that only those he truly loved often saw demonstrated. “I must go there if I am ever to have any peace. I must break this strange bond that has developed against all our preferences.”

“That Oum has bewitched you. Why not allow the priestesses of Vulcan to intervene?” She demanded stubbornly though her resolve was beginning to weaken under her mutual love and concern for him.

“I have consulted with my mother. It was at her suggestion that I go and try to sort the matter out myself for all of our sakes.” Cheval revealed.

“Why?” T’Yel knew to tread carefully in regards to Sha’el.

Though part of the unfavorable order once labeled V’tosh ka’tur, now it was the Temple of Kar and was respected enough within Vulcan society as just another path of Vulcan balance. She’el was the temples High Priestess, and though she was discreet about the actual clout she held in their society,
her counsel was valued mightily by the Vulcan High Council and her perspective begrudgingly respected among the other purists of Vulcan.

“It was not Gaven’s intention to effect either of us, T’Yel.” Cheval slowly approached his beloved taking her hands in his. “He may not be aware of his continued impact, and I am certain that once he is he will work diligently to help undo it. Gaven Ore-Oum is a good and forthright man. You have seen as much in my memories. If you cannot bring yourself to trust him, then I ask you to trust in me. You are my light. My, K’diwa. Taluhk nash-veh k’dular.”

T’Yel allowed him to pull her into his embrace, and though she felt his sincerity and his deep love of her she could also sense the alien attachment he possessed towards Gaven Ore and it infuriated her to no longer feel only him within the interspace of their bond.

“Taluhk nash-veh k’dular.” T’Yel whispered the Vulcan saying back to him. The saying that translated meant, I cherish thee.

But T’Yel could not bring herself to let things go between them so easily. The psychic awareness of Gaven that she shared through Cheval only with less psychological context felt invasive and disgruntling. Like a thorn rubbing between the folds of her clothes pricking and irritating her endlessly.

Finally, she pulled out of his embrace and backed away from him slowly. “I may indeed still be you’re ashelik...Darling, beloved. But I now begin to question if you are my true and rightful T’hy’la. If you leave me now, I will not be held responsible for what might happen when you return.”

Cheval inhaled sharply at her choice if words and the threat he heard within them. They had quarreled rarely in their lives and had always avoided hurting each other with their words or actions. But of all the things Cheval might have thought her capable of throwing at him in the rare moments they did argue and fight, her accusation that she was no longer his T’hy’la, a word that meant among other things friend, soulmate, and lover; was almost beyond comprehension. Was she implying that if he left, she might enact the challenge of Koon-ut-kal-fee, breaking their betrothal and possibly inciting his death?

“We will speak of this further when I return. If you are unwilling to accept why I must undertake this pilgrimage, then it is something I cannot help. I always trust in your ability to do what is right and honorable between us, and I regret your lack of understanding.” Cheval remarked bluntly, his tone wounded.
“you should regret more than that, Jarrus Cheval.” T'Yel muttered, her composure slipping.

“I only regret what I have said and nothing more. Goodbye, T'Yel. I do not know when I will be able to return, but I will return. You have my word.” He stated firmly.

“At least I have that much.” T'Yel shrugged spinning away from him to march away back to her transport.

Cheval recalled how they had not spoken or looked upon each other again after that and how he had left the next morning promptly without her blessing or her departing presence.

Now back in the present, Cheval wondered at her many accusations searching for the probability of truth in them. On the convoy to Deep Space 9, Cheval had not made any plan as to what he was going to say to Gaven or how he might broach resolving their conflict. It was plain enough to see that Gaven had been alarmed to realize the depths of the disturbance he’d caused. It had been an unintended outcome on all sides. It was an accidental misunderstanding of the alien mechanics of their individual psychic and empathic abilities. Certainly, he had intended to come to the station to confront Gaven about it and to devise a way to mend things between them, but in light of what he had discovered upon reuniting with him and their continuous contact since; Cheval found himself considering things that had never crossed his mind until now.

Cheval’s mind drifted back to the evening he had found Gaven bloodied and nearly out of his wits. Fear had gripped him in a way he’d never experienced before as he’d ushered Gaven inside and begun to play caregiver for him. Never had he known anyone to be so beautiful in their vulnerability or so dignified in their suffering as he was. To the compassionate, it undoubtedly incited great regard regardless of the level of familiarity involved. To the sadist, it would have likely been exquisitely irresistible to resist enflaming.

Cheval noticed that when they were together, the strength of their shared awareness was more muted. No doubt because both were now aware of the necessity of self-control and psychic shielding and took care around each other regarding the matter to avoid unwanted agitation. As a result, his time with Gaven had felt more natural and comfortable, at times even pleasurable. When Gaven’s control had slipped allowing Cheval more access to his true feelings and continued pain, Cheval had responded with soothing mellow, emotional responses that tempered these negatives and provided supportive grounding. There had been one exception to this, where it was Cheval who had found the necessity to guard himself.

He thought back to the moments he had spent helping Gaven bathe and cleanse himself some days ago. Cheval had understood the situation even as Gaven explained it to him and had maintained a respectful and impersonal mindset about it. But he admitted to himself now that he had faltered
somewhat towards the end when Gaven had turned in the bath to gaze upon him. Cheval had been
quick to look away just before that point, hoping that Gaven would not read his true impulse which
Vulcan discipline had kept firmly abated. Now though he permitted himself, in a place of objective
reflection, to consider what might have been and he wondered again at T'Yel’s choice of words.

Among other things, the multifaceted Vulcan word T’hy’la also meant ‘brother.’ The gender
modifier was not commonly observed off world but was in the old use of the mother language on
Vulcan. T’Yel had deliberately used it in the masculine to lob her final and all-encompassing
suspicion.

Friend, soulmate, lover, brother.

Within the objective place he had crafted in his mind for safety, Cheval reflected on the deep
attraction he felt towards Gaven and frowned. Most elements of it he could understand in a way, but
the intense and smoldering sexual attraction he’d experienced as he had wiped at Gaven’s
bloodstained throat had been entirely unexpected. Vulcan’s in spite of their tendency towards logic
did not reject the notion of all kinds of desire and if that had been all it was Cheval could have easily
compartmentalized and disregarded it until he had cause to part from Gaven in full and go back to is
life elsewhere. What disturbed him in the business was that the desire that had unmistakably come
into his conscious awareness, easily rivaled other passions he had previously known and felt in his
life. And though he did not venture the idea that it eclipsed his passion for T’Yel he understood it
was a different kind of passion that was no less equivalent in strength and more pressing for its
newness and the proximity between himself and Gaven.

Perhaps it was this aspect that T’Yel had feared the most. Certainly, she was aware of it in some
abstract way, forcing Cheval to concede various points that T’Yel and Gaven had made both for his
benefit and upon T’Yel’s behalf.

Did they both understand things that he did not about the situation? If it was so, he was beginning to
catch up to them now.

Cheval sighed in controlled frustration as he attempted to consider how he was to proceed now. He
felt suddenly claustrophobic as Cheval realized he was potentially trapped within a paradox he did
not know how to extract himself from. Whatever Gaven might feel, he was honor-bound to observe
his cultural strictures regarding love and sexual bonding. There were undoubtedly many other
species who bonded for life with only one mate, though Cheval reminded himself that Gaven never
once suggested it was a biological absolute like it was for other species. Their past discussion had
indicated there was no real constriction involved outside of a societal and cultural one. Even if he had
been interested and open to considering Cheval, there was still the matter of T’Yel to think on.
Gaven had made it clear, so far, that he was not interested nor willing to take on any other lovers or bondmates. Cheval had every intention of respecting his wishes regarding the subject, but it was also clear that T’Yel would never be satisfied with the same assurance of disinterest.

Again, Cheval considered that T’Yel would possibly be justified in her threats to dissolve their betrothment and the thought profoundly pained him. He loved T’Yel and sincerely wanted to join with her completely, but he also admitted to himself that the situation with Gaven was a legitimate impediment to their happiness now. What was to be done? Was he to muddle along and allow fate to judge him and fling him how it chose?

Cheval thought on all of this with pensive and logical objectivity famous of all Vulcan’s when they genuinely tried. The only answer he could come to was to wait for more data before he let himself commit to any particular course. Though his problems were indeed worrisome and complicated, they could keep for now. Ultimately Cheval suspected the answers he needed would not be readily found on Deep Space 9. They could only be resolved when all three of them were together, and for that, he would have to wait till his return to Vulcan. A dismaying reality, indeed.

Through all of his contemplation, Cheval never noticed Quark watching him as he cleaned a series of glass beer mugs from behind the bar with a speculative look on his face. Doubly so, he also had no way of knowing that Elim Garak was also sitting at the bar Quark was manning watching the Ferengi watch Cheval. A look of rapt fascination was upon the exiled Cardassian’s face. Interested to see what was captivating Quark’s attention so completely, as only two things ever did, one being an opportunity for profit and another being social intrigue, Garek glanced back over his shoulder at the troubled looking and unfamiliar young Vulcan and then back at Quark.

“Is there an interesting story there?” He asked Quark as a broad smile broke out on the Cardassian’s face.

“Oh, but wouldn’t you just like to know.” Quark muttered to his friend offhandedly.

“I don’t seem to recognize that fine young man. Certainly, he’s not a member of Starfleet, nor here on a matter of diplomacy.” Garak observed, using his vast experience as a spy to discern these probable facts with ease.

“He’s a friend of our good Doctor Ore. My sources tell me they seem to have a little history between them.” Quark confided, not bothering to mention that he’d come by this information through less than honorable nor legal means.
“Dr. Gaven Ore has friends? Real ones? That is fascinating, indeed. I wasn’t aware that he moved in such ways.” Garak said in his light and almost melodic way of turning his phrases.

“Well...He is a very charming man when he wants to be, or so I’ve been told.” Quark confirmed.

“Oh, yes. Of course. I do not doubt it. What do you think could possibly be troubling the young man over there?” Garak asked idly.

“Hard to say.” Quark’s mind flowed back to what he’d heard and seen the last time Cheval had been in Quark’s establishment. “But if I had to wager a guess it’s either a lovers tiff or a bad business deal. Given who is likely involved, my money would be on the former.”

Garak blinked in genuine surprise before a boyish smile of pure and delicious delight blossomed over his features. “Are you suggesting that young Vulcan over there and our good Dr. Ore are lovers?”

“Well, if they’re not I wouldn’t be surprised if one of them wanted to be. Care to guess which one?” Quark remembered the look on Cheval’s face when Gaven had intimately drunk from his glass and grunted at the memory shaking his head. “People certainly don’t come in here looking like he does because they’re simply having a bad day.”

“Too true.” Garak agreed. “Too true. Well if it is a case of unrequited love, I certainly hope something interesting comes out of it.”

“Oh, I have no doubt that when it comes to Dr. Ore, we are due to be amply satisfied.” Quark dared to mutter.

“Oh? Do you know something I don’t, you crafty man?” Garak asked leaning towards the Ferengi imploringly.

All secrets eventually hungered for an audience. “Let’s just say I have a strong feeling that our Dr. Ore isn’t quite all he seems to be.”

Garek looked at Quark with an unmoved expression that somewhat left Quark wanting.
“I assume you’re referring to the suspicion that he isn’t...Hm, how shall we say, altogether human? Oh, come now, my dear. I knew that much already.”

Quark’s conspiratory expression began to deflate. Sometimes it was no fun talking to Elim Garak given his background as a Cardassian spy and Obsidian Order affiliate. Quark was perhaps more aware of Elim’s capabilities than most simply because he was a known scoundrel in his own right.

“Well if you knew that why are you just bringing it up now?” Quark demanded evenly in a hushed tone.

“I thought it was a common enough suspicion.” Garak lied. “You must admit his Starfleet record is one of the most atrocious snow jobs ever to be seen. Some amateurs I know could have doctored a better profile and at least come off half way convincing compared to what’s presently there for consumption.”

“You looked up his file too, huh?” Quark asked rhetorically.

“In any case, it does put a rather interesting spin of intrigue on it all: an alien romance, an incognito imposter clearly under the Federation’s thumb. I wonder who the Doctor really is. He certainly seems to know what he’s doing at least so far as his occupation is concerned.” Garak observed.

“Well, he did bring both a changeling baby and our resident CMO back from the brink of death. He’s got my stamp of approval for the latter if not the former.” Quark mused.

“Yes, indeed. He is a most talented healer to be sure, and the station is very lucky to have him in the capacity of a doctor.” Garak agreed.

“All in all, if I were you I’d keep my ears open and my head down. There’s been a Hell of a lot of drama going on around here as of late and then just lately it’s all suddenly settled down into a gentle lull. Something tells me something’s going to pop soon and big. Mark my words.”

“I always do, my friend. I always do.” Garak tipped his beer glass at Quark and smiled knowingly, glancing over his shoulder once more just for one last glimpse. “The young gentleman has interesting tastes. I admire that in a man.”
Though it was awkward at first to see Miles out of the blue and have him protect him all the way home with scowls and head shakes as they passed people who might have wanted to approach them. The old familiarity between them eventually won out, and by the time they were back in Julian’s quarters and were a quarter of the way through the spirits, Miles had smuggled in for them to indulge in they were back in the swing of things.

“He’s beautiful, Miles. A real tromper.” Julian said approvingly as he looked through the collection of new family images Miles had uploaded to Julian’s datapad. How is Keiko doing with it all?”

“You know, before the baby came, we were all a little worried, between you and I, that Keiko might somehow feel differently than she did the first time with Molly. But, to be honest, I think that linking thing Doctor Ore did for us really helped everyone along and now you’d never know that Keiko didn’t carry our little Kirayoshi through the entire pregnancy. The family is all thick as thieves together.” Miles mused proudly.

“And Kira? How has she been doing being separated from the baby?” Julian asked.

At this question, Miles sobered a little. “Well enough I think, she is little Yoshi’s Godmother. We’ve tried to let them bond as much as Kira has felt comfortable with. I know in some ways it’s hard for her. It was hard for all of us. But, I really do think it’s going to be OK. Plus, Kira seems to be enjoying helping Odo with his little bundle of terror so...”

Julian raised a brow at his friends choice of words.

“Don’t look at me like I’m a prejudice monster. I can’t help that having that baby changeling here makes my skin crawl; now can I?” Miles said reproachfully.

“It’s just an innocent baby. It has no notion of anything other than what Odo has been teaching it. To suggest you don’t trust its presence here is like saying you don’t trust Odo. But I understand your feelings, Miles. I don’t share them, but I understand them all the same.” Julian said sighing.

Miles quieted, realizing it was best to let some topics go. “With your permission, Julian. The senior staff would like to throw you a little party. Nothing big or fancy, just a small and casual welcome home kind of a thing. We all worried about you these past weeks. Now, if you’d rather see everyone on your own first, we could put it off or not do it at all. I just...I thought I would ask what you thought about it.”
“No,” Julian said flatly. “I mean, no, a party sounds fine. Might as well rip off the bandaid all at once and all that. Hell, ask Quark and Garak to help. I’m sure they’d appreciate being involved too.”

Miles wasn’t quite sure what to make of his tone, whether Julian truly approved of the idea or simply felt obligated to agree with it. Sensing the tension in the space had begun to rise, Miles changed the subject again.

“I heard Doctor Ore is stepping out of the infirmary for a while. Given the amount of time he’s put into a job he isn’t even obligated to do, I suppose he deserves a break.” Miles began.

“Don’t you know? It’s not a break he’s taking. Dr. Ore officially asked the Captain to replace him with a real Federation doctor.” Julian informed him.

“What? Why would he go and do a silly thing like that? I thought he was helping us with the inoculation development?” Miles asked.

“He is...Er, he was. I don’t know exactly. All I know is that he told the Captain that he felt the project was far enough along for the Federation to continue on their own.” Julian muttered.

“Is that true?” Miles asked genuinely curious.

“Well yes, in theory, we have enough information we could probably continue the research and development without his further input, but I’ve already told the Captain that I think doing so would be a mistake. That project is mine and Gaven’s brainchild. With me being forced into this blasted leave of absence I can’t work on it, and I certainly don’t like the idea of Starfleet just taking it away from us.” Julian’s tension was rising again.

“Huh. Well, maybe it's all for the best.” Miles said shrugging dismissively.

At this remark, Julian leveled a suspicious glare at Miles.

“What? All I’m implying is that maybe it’s right and good that Doctor Ore keep a lower profile. It isn’t as if he’s really a member of Starfleet medical. No one denies that Gaven is a brilliant healer, but you have to concede that the more involved he gets on the station, the more risk he’s affording. He’s
a bloody alien masquerading as a human. Don't you think there are some that would take issue with that in these times? Besides, I'm sure the poor man might like to have a life of his own eventually instead of cleaning up after all our troubles.”

“I suppose.” Julian conceded irritably. “I just wish...I don’t know what I wish.”

“You want to know what I wish; I wish we could get away from all this cloak and dagger business going on around here lately. But since I can’t have that, I guess I can try to be thankful for what I do have. I’m mightily glad you’re still here with us Julian. I don’t know what I would have done if that...If you hadn’t pulled through. Well, I suppose I should be getting on home about now and let you rest and get settled. I’ll let you know when everyone plans to get together are if someone else doesn’t beat me to it.” Miles said wiggling his brows.

“Dax.” They both said in unison nodding approvingly to each other.

“You’re going to be alright, aren’t you? You know you’re welcome over at our place any time.” Miles asked looking a tad worried about leaving Julian to his lonesome.

“I’ll be fine, Miles. I’ll let you know when I’m ready to come around for a visit.” Julian said flatly.

“Right. Well, don’t hesitate to call if you change your mind.” At that Miles approached Julian and gave him a warm and lingering hug, the faintest sound of a sniffle sounding near Julian’s ear that was quickly covered by a gruff cough. “Alright, that’s enough of that. Good night, my friend. Take care of yourself.”

Miles pulled away abruptly and shuffled as he forced himself to regain his composure.

Julian waved him off and walked him to the door telling Miles again to wish Keiko and the children well for him. At length Miles Finally left and although Julian had been grateful for his company he sighed a loud sound of relief once he was alone.

If this was what he was to expect with everyone upon first seeing them, it was going to be a long homecoming.

Julian walked back into his space and slipped into one of the dining chairs off his kitchenette. As of right now, he felt empty and troubled. He was disgruntled yet strangely at peace in the silence of his
quarters. Maybe it really would all work out in the coming weeks. For the moment Julian felt hopeful that it would be so.
Chapter Notes

Chapter 16-20 covers the reimagined events of the DS9 Episode "Dr. Bashir, I Presume" and adjust for several timeline differences to Julian's character and characterizations.

The first night Julian was home was a fitful one. As the evening had worn on Julian had tried to relax. He’d started with a simple, bland dinner, but had only taken a few bites before frowning and pushing his plate away with disinterest. Next, he tried reading one of his favorite spy stories but found it difficult to concentrate and ultimately gave up once his hands began to grow fatigued from holding the datapad. For a little while, Julian just stared at his wall or paced between the rooms aimlessly trying to figure out what to do with himself. He supposed he could always go out somewhere. Maybe to Quark’s. But the Doctor in him warned against overexertion. Trying to escape his discomfort wouldn’t help him deal with it, at least not so soon after returning home. Eventually, Julian simply stripped out of his clothes and started up a hot shower. This so far proved to be the best thing since the shower he’d taken in the infirmary had been swift and meant only to freshen him enough to be presentable.

In his home, Julian could take his time and truly cleanse his body. There was comfort in such simple things. He washed his hair first careful of the still healing wound along his scalp and then went on to lather his body methodically from head to toe. His hands felt along every major muscle as he checked himself for subtle signs of atrophy. He’d lost a bit of muscle tone which was to be expected, and Julian made a mental note that in the coming days he would begin a comprehensive exercise regimen to help regain his strength. A professional tennis player in his boyhood, Julian understood the advantages of physical conditioning that went beyond strength and endurance training. The exercise would help his anxiety and provide him with a sense of kinetic control that had been lacking since his attack.

After rinsing himself, Julian slowly turned up the heat on the faucet and merely let the hot water beat down upon him as he breathed in the steam deeply and slowly and let his mind wander. Not so surprisingly his thoughts drifted back to the carpet shop. Julian still didn’t remember much of what had happened. The attack had been so vicious and so swift it had all been a blur to him. Despite being badly beaten what he remembered most in the attack itself was the initial blow to his head and the horrific feeling of his skin being lacerated open by the Yeti creature’s claws. All he remembered of it was swiftly clamping both hands to his skull to stem the bleeding as the beast continued its assault. Something he didn’t understand was why the changeling assassin had bothered to leave anything to chance. Though Julian had been grievously wounded and left for dead, it didn’t make sense that the assassin hadn’t just killed him out right then and there. Instead, the creature had beat him to the brink of death and then merely buried him and gone on its way.

Julian’s mind reflected after that on the time he had spent incapacitated, unable to yell or alert anyone to his presence. Julian rubbed at his jaw, which although healed now with modern science still clicked a little and occasionally became inflamed. The stimulation of his hand triggered another memory. It was the memory of Gaven finding him. Julian had technically been unconscious, but he
remembered when Gaven had biologically and empathically linked with him and the shocking feeling of Gaven’s powerful emotions suddenly flooding his awareness and cutting through the excruciating physical pain. In retrospect, Julian realized he’d been fully exposed to the real Gaven in his purest form. The level of control the man exerted over his feelings were beyond anything Julian could have conceived on his own. His deep emotional conviction had bored down on Julian like a vice serving to rally and strengthen him as he fought to come back to consciousness. There were other feelings he could discern. All equally powerful and kept tightly compartmentalized. Fear, rage, confusion, righteous indignity, and shame. All of it was present in him. But beyond all of the other feelings he could identify in Gaven despite not having the benefit of the context of them, there was something else. Something not as easily compartmentalized as the rest. This other thing had pulsed like a rapid heartbeat reverberating through his awareness like a thunderous taiko drum as if to demand his own heart follow suit and keep beating no matter the difficulty involved. This thing Julian realized, only now, had been Gaven’s love. It wasn’t a romantic love per se, though Julian could now rightly imagine the possible power of Gaven’s love if he ever had the mind to aim the force of the emotion at any one person. Instead, it was a kind of universal love for all things. This was the root of who Gaven was, and Julian didn’t need any further context to know it to be the truth.

It boggled the mind for a man, such as Gaven, who had been so put upon by the forces around him, to love as he did. The memory of that awareness caused tears to well in Julian’s eyes and since he was alone and the falling water muffled all other sounds he allowed himself to weep for the sake of it.

Julian remained crouched in the shower even after the water temperature had begun to run cold, standing and stepping out only when his muscles started to ache in protest from the position he was crouched in. Turning off the water and stepping from the shower Julian simply patted himself lightly with a head towel and ruffled it through his very short cropped hair. It was hard to say what had done him more good, the shower or the weeping, but he liked to think it had been a combination of both for he felt mightily more human and in control of himself after. Not bothering to dry himself the rest of the way off, Julian threw his towel idly across the room and pulled down the edges of his sheet and grey comforter slipping into bed fully naked and feeling like he might be able to sleep.

Just as he was settling in, however, the telecom beeped indicating he was receiving a quarters to quarters call. Tired and because Gaven had been on his mind, he half hoped the call was from him. Julian had grown accustomed to seeing the other doctor every day and sharing at least one of their meals. In light of the last cryptic things he’d said before he left the infirmary, Julian wondered what he had meant. Fisk hadn’t been much help when Julian had asked him to speculate on it.

“Don’t ask me, boy. I’m just a doctor. I’m sure Dr. Ore is perfectly capable of coming back in here if he wants a consult on anything. If I were you, I’d leave it alone unless he brings it up first. Mystery is important in life.” Fisk had said, reflectively.

As it turned out the call was from, Dax.

“Well Julian, long time no speak. I just wanted to call and tell you that since you haven’t bothered to talk to anyone since you woke up, that we’re throwing you a welcome home brunch in the morning. I expect you to be there and to stay a respectable duration of time. Sedate yourself if necessary.” Dax muttered curtly.

“Hello, Dax. Good to hear your voice.” He muttered knowing this was her way of telling him she was angry with him.

“Isn’t it though?” There was a long pause.

“Dax...” Julian began.
“Don’t even try to apologize to me, Julian. Just do me a favor and show up tomorrow. That will be apology enough. The party is in the back of Quark’s at zero-nine-hundred, sharp. You better be there Julian. Dax out.” At that Julian was abruptly hung up on.

Figuring he probably deserved what he’d just gotten, which was considerably lighter a reprimand then what he had been expecting from Jadzia, Julian sighed and settled back into his bed. His body felt impossibly tired, but not surprisingly his mind was still active and wanting to fight his body’s urgings to sleep. Julian let his mind wander again, this time reflecting on all his friends and how grateful he was to have them all. Not being close to his parents and being an only child along with being forced to live a life of secrets had weighed heavily on him most of his life. His time on Deep Space 9 at the edge of the Frontier had done much to ease him and allow him to feel safe. Much of that could be attributed to the friendships he’d made. Yet even as thinking on all of that brought him comfort, there was a nagging seed of anxiety buried deep beneath his sense of personal security. Much of the privileges Julian enjoyed in more recent years was due to his affiliation with Starfleet. It was an affiliation that certainly would not have been possible if anyone had been aware of the genetic resequencing his parents had inflicted upon him when he was a child. What his parents had done had been highly dangerous and utterly illegal, and it had been some years before he had discovered the truth of their crimes and thus rejected them for it.

While Julian was generally open about who he was, the fact that he was a genetically modified human, living his life as if he wasn’t; meant that many of the most important things people knew about him were a lie. The facts were mostly the same, but the context and background truth around those facts had always been carefully concealed from everyone around him, known only to Julian and his parents. Sometimes it agitated him to think about it and how the exposure of the truth would have undoubtedly jeopardized his life and future that had always been so impressive to everybody.

Julian, of course, had no intention of ever revealing the truth to anyone. He’d spent so much of his later youth and adult life pretending, that it seemed impossible to imagine a life of absolute authenticity. Sometimes he wondered if anyone ever suspected the truth. Of anyone astute enough to even guess at the possibility, Julian had always pegged Garak as the one who would figure it out someday. But then again, Garak was an exiled spy, and though his talents were profound when it came to deduction, he somehow doubted Garak would have ever let on if he had suspected anything.

Once again his thoughts drifted to Gaven.

Sometimes Julian wondered if Gaven knew about his secret. There had been times in the many months that they’d known each other when he’d caught Gaven steadily watching him to such an acute degree that it had made Julian feel completely exposed. There were other instances too where he suspected Gaven had caught sight of his real capabilities either because they had been alone together or because Julian had not been acting with the strictest of discipline.

There were other more obvious signs that Gaven knew the truth. It was suspect in the way he said things to him sometimes.

In particular, Julian recalled the day Gaven had left for Gulba 4. He explicitly remembered the private phrasing Gaven had used just before they had parted ways when Julian expressed doubt that he’d be able to help Gaven while he was gone.

“I know if you put your mind to it, you’ll make significant strides in your efforts and you’ll make it look a lot harder to pull off than it actually is, for someone like you or I.” Gaven had said in a low tone of voice only meant for them to hear.

At the time Julian had felt suddenly and transparently exposed under Gaven’s gaze and the way he seemed to imply they were more alike than different from each other. Considering that Gaven was
also genetically and biologically modified, it was possible that he had been trying to hint that he knew of Julian’s enhanced advantage over his peers.

Julian perceived that if Gaven did know, or at least suspect things, then he had done much to protect Julian, never once bringing the question up or drawing attention to the times when Julian had not been as on top of his deception as he might have preferred.

Did he know? If so, why had he been so willing to protect him and go along with the charade?

Julian spent the rest of the night thinking about these questions and suddenly wishing for the first time in his life that he could confide in someone about who and what he really was. Genetic resequencing was so demonized among the Federation of Planets that Julian had never felt safe revealing the truth even to his closest and most beloved friends. Somehow it seemed appealing to tell Gaven. It felt safe, and Julian never felt safe when it came to the subject. This final thought felt soothing to Julian’s mind and spirit, and though it was early in the morning, he found that the more he thought on it, the more at ease he felt. In no time, he was finally asleep.

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Julian would have overslept that morning to be sure if Miles hadn’t decided to show up to Julian’s quarters early to escort him personally. Like Julian, Dax had called him in the middle of the night and threatened that if he didn’t ensure Julian was on time and presentable that morning for their event she would personally make both their lives a living Hell for their failure.

Not entirely sure what state he was to find Julian in, Miles had been sure to arrive a full hour and a half early so that there would be time to rouse and possibly sober Julian up before they had to be anywhere. Upon ringing him at precisely 7:30 at his quarters, Miles waited apprehensively for Julian to rouse and open the door.

“Come on; come on.” He muttered impatiently feeling stupid standing outside his door so long.

At length and only after ringing several more times did a burly eyed Julian appear looking exhausted but at least sober. Miles simply pursed his lips staring at him expectantly.

At first, Julian was confused by why Miles was there or what he wanted, but after a few seconds awareness very suddenly blossomed upon him. “Oh, shit.”

“Oh, shit is right. Look at you your not even dressed.” Miles muttered in exasperation at the fact that Julian was standing in front of him with nothing but a small towel knotted about his waist.

“Oh...SHIT.” Julian said more forcefully pressing the pad of one hand to his temple and retreating into his quarters. “What time is it? Please tell me I haven’t overslept.”

“No you haven’t bloody well overslept thanks to me, but your burning oil fast. It’s already a quarter past eight. What have you been doing in here since last night? The place is a pigsty, and you’ve been home less than twenty-four hours.” Miles said in slight disbelief.

“I was thinking. Give me a minute. I’ll be back shortly.” Shaking himself more fully awake and muttering something under his breath Julian padded quickly back into his bedroom not bothering to shut the door as he quickly dressed and groomed himself.

He was happy to have taken his shower last night as it cut his prep time in half.

In the end, Julian was ready with enough time to spare not to have to run down the corridors and through the promenade, but he wasn’t so fast as to get out of making them both walk at an
accelerated pace.

“Are you ready for this?” Miles asked as they went along en route to Quark’s.

“Assuming everyone has kept their word about keeping it low key, there shouldn’t be a problem. Hey, you want to try a game of dart’s later? The doctor wants me to try and, you know, keep with my regular routines.” Julian said.

“I’d like that, but I’m not sure if I’m going to have enough time later between this shindig and my work today.” Miles said regretfully.

“This evening maybe, just a test game?” Julian inquired.

“Can’t. I promised Molly I’d do some coloring with her this afternoon. With all this attention focused on the baby, I don’t want her to start feeling that we’ve forgotten about her.” Miles explained as they went.

“A father’s work is never done.” Julian remarked casually.

“You said it.” Miles agreed. “Still, it’s worth it. You should give it a try sometime.”

“Me? Oh no.” Julian shook his head.

“Why not?” Miles inquired, glancing sidelong at him. His tone was laced with mild surprise. “I bet you’d make a great father.”

Julian shook his head again quickening his steps. “I’m not exactly a family type.”

“Why do you say that? You’re great with other people’s families — mine for example. Molly dotes on you like a relative. I know you’re not very close to your relations. I mean, I’ve suspected enough since you never once talked about them to me.” Miles observed.

“Yes, but your family is different. We’re friends for one, and I’m not being expected to raise your children or deal with them when they are out of sorts outside of medically, that is. In general, I don’t know that children really like me very much. They see me as the dreaded giver of shots and someone who ruins all their fun when they bang themselves up.” Julian muttered.

“Yeah well, you still have a lot of time. Who knows, maybe you’ll change your mind someday.” Miles said dismissively rounding the corner.

Quark’s was finally in sight.

“How do I look. I don’t know if I can take Dax’s wrath today.” Julian asked waving at Leeta, one of Quark’s Dabo girls, as she caught sight of them from a distance.

“You look fine. Wonderful for a man who was in a coma as of late. Stop fussing and let’s get this over with.” Miles encouraged him nodding towards Leeta as she suddenly disappeared to notify everyone that they were arriving.

Heavily sighing Julian tried to prepare himself for what he was about to walk into.

To his relief, everyone had seemed to stick with the low key profile of the event. Those that were working were in uniform, but others like Leeta, Rom, Quark, and Keiko were dressed in casual though elegant enough dress. There was very muted music playing in the background in the style of soft jazz. There was only a small table of finger food, coffee, and lemonade set up along one wall
being fussed over by Leeta who was, in turn, being micromanaged by Quark who was playing bartender for the room with a small tray balanced on his hand expertly.

“There he is.” Dax announced warmly, all trace of annoyance wholly gone from her tone and features which radiated only fond compassion.

“Welcome home, Doctor.” The Captain said demurely, taking Julian’s hand and shaking it with fatherly admiration.

After that everyone gently took their turn personally greeting him. To everyone’s credit they all managed to keep their composure, and if there were any tears, then they were shed discreetly and covered with loving and supportive smiles of relief and encouragement. Julian had to admit that he was glad to be there among all his closest friends. Benjamin had briefed the staff already about his leave of absence, and the rest knew enough about Starfleet to know what to expect. Though most of his friends were there, Julian noted a few absent faces. Kira wasn’t in attendance nor was Odo. Garak and Ziyal weren’t there either. When Julian inquired casually to Miles about this, Miles explained that Kira was babysitting for the O’briens and would touch base with him another time, Odo had been there but had been called away early, and that Garak and Ziyal would be late for some unknown reason.

“He probably just wants to be fashionable.” Julian muttered as he sipped on some coffee and made small talk.

Out of the corner of his eye, Julian saw Rom and Leeta conversing quietly in a corner and was surprised to realize that the two were an item. Or, instead, if they weren’t, they were planning to be soon. Julian had dated Leeta at one point and recognized the signals she was sending. Though he couldn’t quite remember Leeta ever looking at him quite the way she was looking at Rom. Maybe it was love.

It occurred to him then that Julian was surrounded by all kinds of love at that moment.

The very fact that everyone was there was a testament to the love they all felt for him, but Julian also understood that just about everyone in attendance was coupled. Some married, others dating, and others still standing in as each other’s preferred companions had they been present. Julian was the only genuinely single person there, he realized. Save perhaps, for Benjamin who was a father to all and Quark who was happy enough to browbeat his brother and Leeta at every turn when they neglected their duties so that they could moon over each other.

Feeling self-conscious for some reason about this fact, Julian shuffled in place, scanning the room again for lack of anything better to do. Everyone seemed pretty keen on avoiding the subjects of his health and his recreational plans now that he was on leave. Not wanting to hover next to Miles the entire time, Julian searched for another ally and found himself wishing that Gaven was there. After everything he’d done for them all and specifically for Julian he was surprised the Doctor wasn’t there with them mutually celebrating.

Moving towards Dax, he touched her elbow briefly and muttered his inquiry quietly. “Have you seen or spoken to Gaven at all?”

“No.” Dax confirmed. “I know that we were all told not to bother him, but, confidentially, I did send an invite to him via a com message and then via his datapad. He never replied. Frankly, I’m a little worried about him. He didn’t seem well the last time I saw him.”

“Yes. He wasn’t well when I saw him last. When I tried to ask him about it, he waved me off and told me it was nothing to be alarmed about.” Julian muttered.
“Well, do you think he was downplaying something?” Dax asked.

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t put it past him.” Julian said evenly.

“Well there’s nothing we can do about it right now, I guess we’ll just have to check on him later.” Dax said reassuringly.

Julian might have pressed on about the subject more if it hadn’t been for the arrival of Garak and Ziyal. Both were dressed in complementary outfits that looked new and too fine a cut to be a mass production or a replication, suggesting to Julian that Garak had likely designed and crafted them himself. It explained his late arrival all too well.

“My dear, Doctor.” Garak practically purred as he let go of Ziyal’s hand while she grinned wide in her youthful innocence, watching Garak approach his beloved friend and held his arms open to embrace him.

Shaking his head and smirking at him, Julian played along and closed the few steps between them embracing Garak like a brother as they patted each other on the back. Of all of the greetings that had been had, this one seemed the sweetest by far, and everyone who looked upon the reunion between the men was moved. After a long moment masterfully timed, Garak pulled away as Ziyal neared them.

“Ziyal. You look beautiful, by far the prettiest lady in the room. Thank you both for coming.” Taking her hand in his, Julian squeezed it and cupping her artistic hands in his own, brought them to his lips kissing her fingers before he released them into Garak’s possession.

“Oh, Julian. We’re so glad you’re alright. I feel ashamed now to say I was so afraid we were going to lose you.” In her apparent innocence, Ziyal had not the tact to be anything else but completely honest about her feelings and concerns as tears freely slipped from her eyes causing Garak to dramatically produce a handkerchief for her as he shushed her and held her protectively at his side.

“None of you can get rid of me that easily.” Julian quipped glancing about the room to help ease the tensions with his jovial air of self-deprecating humor that everyone smiled at, even as he saw tears in many an eye being dashed away.

“I promise everything is going to be alright now. The doctors have assured me I just need some rest and relaxation and in a few weeks I should be right as rain.” He assured her stretching the truth a little.

“I think I can speak for everyone here when I say we are all glad to hear you say that.” Garak said candidly, knowing perfectly well Julian was saying it mostly for Ziyal’s benefit and loving him a little more for it. “Speaking of other doctors, is our mysterious Dr. Ore not here today? I was so hoping to make his proper acquaintance.”

“No. He wasn’t able to get away today I’m afraid. But when he can, I’d be happy to make an introduction. I find it nearly impossible to believe you two haven’t become friends yet. I somehow get the impression you’d like each other very much.” Julian pointed out.

“You know? You might be right. I look forward to the opportunity. Maybe in a few days, we can all take lunch. Well, my dear? Why don’t we give Doctor Bashir some breathing room and peruse the refreshment table? Hm?” Garak said turning affectionately to Ziyal and beginning to lead them away.

For the next forty-five minutes or so Julian spent his time circulating and catching up with everyone. One of the benefits of having been inaccessible for so long was that while Julian’s life had come to a
standstill of monotony, everyone else’s lives had progressed as they often did. So there was plenty of
idle conversation to be had that didn’t require Julian to say a single word about himself, much to his
relief. After a while, some of the officers began to excuse themselves so that they could get to their
duties and even Miles and Keiko begged off encouraging Julian to stay back long enough for them to
relieve Kira so that she might catch him before the party officially came to a close. Quark also left
after a while to check on his front end business outside of the back room, eventually also calling
Leeta and his brother away to help him. This left just Dax, Benjamin, Garak and Ziyal behind.

Happy enough with this smaller band, Julian talked everyone into starting up a friendly dart game
while he begged off to speak quietly with Benjamin.

“I hope you don’t feel put out about being put on medical leave, Doctor. I know it would never have
been your personal preference, but procedure is procedure.” Benjamin asked gently gauging Julian’s
reaction.

“Ah well, it couldn’t exactly be helped now, could it. I understand everyone is just following the
rules and I promise I am trying to be a good sport about it. I do see the value of a little relaxation, and
as for who you managed to find to step in temporarily, I’m more than impressed. Jeremiah Fisk is a
superb doctor and an old mentor of mine.”

“Yes, I know. That’s why I selected him. I’m pleased that you approve. Have you thought about
what you might do in your downtime?” unlike the others, Benjamin was in a position to ask Julian
specific questions that the others had tried to avoid in open company.

“I haven’t decided yet, though I’m sure a trip to Bajor will be in the cards at some point.” Julian
remarked speculatively.

They went on to idly converse as they watched the others attempt their hands at darts. Not
surprisingly Dax was in the lead followed hotly by Garak. for Tiyal’s part, she tried one or two shots
before bowing out preferring to act as Garak’s cheerleader instead of as an opponent.

After a while, Julian and Benjamin halted their conversation completely to watch the game.

In these moments of gaiety and friendship, the fact that a newcomer had arrived and was glancing
about as if looking for somebody were lost on them all. Unnoticed, until Julian felt someone
approach him from behind and address him in a dull, formal manner.

“Doctor, Bashir. I presume?” A man’s drawling voice asked, causing Julian to half turn and look
over his shoulder.

“Yes? That’s me.” He muttered, trying to place the voice and failing.

The stranger was standing a respectful distance away and was dressed in a grey shouldered Starfleet
uniform. He was a grave-looking slightly shrinking man a good decade, or so, older than Julian was.
The man was balding through the top of his head, but still had a fair amount of fawn brown hair
around the sides of his skull indicating that he had probably started losing his hair early in his adult
life.

“I’m Lewis Zimmerman director of Holographic Imaging and Programming at the Jupiter Research
station, and I’m here to make you...Immortal.” The man muttered in one long stream as he
approached Julian with an almost bored look upon his face.

Everyone remaining in the room halted what they were doing as the gentleman made his
introductions and exchanged quizzical looks with each other as he stated his business, effectively
crashing their party.

With a confused look on his face, Julian glanced from Zimmerman to the Captain. “Do you know anything about this?”

Looking speculatively from Julian to Zimmerman, Benjamin stared the man down. “No. Perhaps it would be best to cut the festivities short and reconvene in my office. Mr. Zimmerman, if you would come along with me please.”

Benjamin spoke with infinite patience, but he was not pleased by the disruption of this proclamation and wanted to get to the bottom of it immediately.

Dax waited until Zimmerman was out of the room before she approached Julian, taking his arm. “Well, what do you imagine that is all about?”

“I don’t know, but I aim to find out.” Julian muttered in reply.

~ @ ~

Thirty minutes later, Captain Benjamin Sisko was settled at the head of his conference room waiting patiently for Zimmerman to explain himself. Julian had arrived a scant few minutes after the Captain had, but had taken a few minutes more to look up who Louise Zimmerman was. His eyes widened in illumination. He then quickly joined the Captain entering the conference room last to stand near the door as Zimmerman launched into his explanation, not immediately sitting down.

“You’re familiar, of course, with the Emergency Medical Holographic Program.” Zimmerman began, finally easing down into one of the conference chairs on the other end of the table.

Benjamin kept his expression calm as he dangled an arm casually over his chair back leaning on the arm of his chair in the opposite direction.

“I’ve heard of it. It’s a hologram designed to provide medical assistance. During emergencies in Sick Bay.” Benjamin summarized simplistically.

At this response, Zimmerman rolled his eyes in a manner that was long practiced, and that gave him the expression of being put upon by someone far more ignorant of the facts then he was. “It does much more than provide assistance.”

Knowing that Benjamin wouldn’t appreciate the other man’s manners and tone, Julian interjected adding further context. “A holographic doctor can literally replace a starship’s medical officer during an emergency.”

Of this explanation, Zimmerman seemed to approve. “I’m surprised you don’t have one on the station.”

Benjamin looked as if he wanted to scoff at this gently spoken, but very apparent, criticism. For Zimmerman being a project director, he certainly hadn’t done any research about the station he was presently on. “The station facilities are Cardassian in origin. Most of our equipment is incompatible with Federation technology.”

“How unfortunate for you.” Zimmerman responded with genuine remorse, not for his insult, but for the fact that the station was not adaptable as of yet to support a technology that he thought essential and possibly even superior to actual flesh and blood medical staff.

Julian who had caught the inference just as the captain had. And who had drawn the same
impressions from it, rolled his eyes from behind Zimmerman’s back as he shuffled in place and leaned into the wall behind him beside the door listening.

“In any case,” Zimmerman went on. “The original EMH program was designed for short-term use only, but now Starfleet has requested a program designed to operate as a full-time doctor.”

“Full time?” Benjamin balked at the possibility a skeptical gleam shining in his eyes. “You're not talking about replacing real doctors?”

“No, no. Of course not.” Zimmerman muttered dismissively, as he shut his eyes almost as if in regret and rubbed at his temple as if he was exhausted by their conversation.

“Why is everyone so worried about holograms taking over the universe?” He asked no one in particular as he looked to the ceiling as if posing the question to some undetectable entity out in the void.

Once again, Julian interjected. Mostly to try to speed the conversation up so that Zimmerman would get on with his points and explain the reason he was there looking for him. “There are many situations where a holo-doctor could be more beneficial than a humanoid.”

“Such as?” Benjamin inquired looking to Julian whose opinion he trusted vastly more at this moment than he did Zimmerman’s.

“Research outposts, subspace communications stations, long-range exploratory vessels, and..” Julian was planning to go on before Zimmerman rudely cut him off.

“In short, anywhere that life support or living space is at a premium and where the primary mission does not require the doctor to leave Sick Bay.” Zimmerman summarized.

“I see.” By now Benjamin had taken the time to read through the briefing that had been sent to him on the matter and that he had failed to see sooner that morning because he had been helping Dax and the others with Julian’s party preparations. “So I take it then that they want to model this new EMH program after our own Dr. Bashir, here?”

The captain did not sound happy that Zimmerman had seen fit to invade their festivities uninvited and in public to broach the matter instead of waiting for a proper appointment and de-briefing with Benjamin personally first. For Julian’s part, he looked equally annoyed that he was hearing about this supposed honor now. It seemed that the concept had been in the works for some time. Certainly long before the attack on the station had occurred.

“Technically, it’s an LMH--Long-term medical hologram program. And, yes, Starfleet Medical has selected Dr. Bashir to provide the template.” Zimmerman explained waving his hand in the air as he spoke.

“Wait a minute.” Julian interjected. “Why do they want me for the template? Just exactly what was the selection criteria involved?”

“Furthermore, who was the template for the EMH?” Benjamin asked.

“Me.” Zimmerman said flatly looking like a man who had been betrayed, but who had resigned himself to the hard facts of life by now.

“It was my program after all. It only seemed logical to use myself as the model.” This was said swiftly, and Zimmerman bobbed his head from side to side as he said it, looking forlorn and depressed. “I have to admit. I don’t know what the exact criteria were for the selection process. But, I
suppose they likely wanted someone...More befitting Starfleet’s exemplary ideals.”

This statement and the way Zimmerman said it spoke volumes about the man. Benjamin looked genuinely perplexed by the other man’s attitude and looked quizzically over at Julian whose mouth had fallen slightly agape until he caught the captain looking at him.


“Hm? Oh, oh yes. Quite an honor. Indeed. I feel very flattered and important. Of all my many professional accomplishments, this, this, is certainly a feather in my cap. To be sure, sir.” Julian muttered crisply rocking back on his heels.

This time it was Zimmerman’s turn to roll his eyes at everyone else's tone and choice of words.

“It is nothing less than a shot at immortality.” Zimmerman said with poorly hidden exasperation.

“The original EMH program will probably still be in use for decades to come. I know. I designed it for that contingency. But, the reality is that the LMH program will undoubtedly last far longer than that. That is if I can work out certain technical problems.”

The last sentence was said almost under Zimmerman’s breath, as he adjusted uncomfortably in his chair.

A half a minute later Zimmerman pushed himself out of his chair and leaning over the table began to rattle off his list of demands. He expected the captain not only to put him up for no less than the next three weeks when there was scarce free space currently to be had, but he was also expecting to be given full access to the station’s central computer system. He also expected the full use of the station’s staff to install special equipment that would likely have to be specially adapted in order for the stations foreign programming to be compatible with it, and a way for Zimmerman to link up with his Lab back on the Jupiter station.

The list was exhaustive and no doubt it hadn’t been necessary to have it rattled off when it was likely outlined in the morning briefing sufficiently enough. Benjamin watched as Julian slowly became more agitated and to prevent him from stepping forward and telling the other Doctor off. He quickly rose to signal for Julian to maintain his control until Zimmerman left the room.

“Yes, yes Doctor. I entirely understand, and I promise that my First Officer, Kira is more than capable of seeing to all your needs. Though it may be a bit tricky to fulfill all your expectations given what’s been happening on the station as of late.” Usually, Benjamin would have taken the time to usher the man to his door, but the moment Zimmerman heard that someone else would be handling the arrangements that he required he swiftly turned away on his own accord heading out the door.

“You. Let’s go.” He said pointing at Julian and indicating he expected him to follow Zimmerman out of the room.

“Just a minute.” Benjamin interjected with such authority of command that Zimmerman froze in the doorway hunching his neck into his shoulders before glancing slowly behind.

“Yes? What’s the holdup. I have work to do.” Zimmerman demanded.

“As you can see, Doctor. Dr. Bashir is not on duty at this time and has been placed on medical leave for the foreseeable future. As such he isn’t obligated to take...Directions from you. But please, feel free to go on ahead and wait in my First Officer’s office. She should be returning shortly. In the meantime, I would like a word with my officer.” Benjamin’s tone settled into one of natural politeness.
Zimmerman didn’t reply to this in words but instead grunted in exasperation at being made to wait and promptly left the room.

Per Benjamin’s signal, Julian promptly shut the door and locked it before coming back into the room to plop down into a chair.

“What in the bloody Hell was that I just witnessed? You didn’t recommend me for any projects, did you?” Julian asked.

“Don’t look at me. I didn’t know anything about it. But, it’s a legitimate mission. See for yourself.” Benjamin handed Julian his datapad.

“Guh, By the Prophets. What exactly am I supposed to do about this?” Julian inquired after he skimmed the information.

“Well, technically you’re not fit for active service right now, so that makes you temporarily ineligible for the mission. But then again, it is a mission that you’ve been particularly recruited for despite that it seems like they’re still in the consideration process, if you don’t cooperate with this Zimmerman person, he may likely be reluctant to leave us. Mark me when I say, Doctor, that I would prefer him gone as soon as possible.” Benjamin said in his understated way.

“Yeah, I don’t particularly want him here either. I mean a few months ago, what he’s proposing would have seemed flattering and exciting. But right now...Right now it just feels invasive.” Julian admitted.

“It is a trifle mighty honor.” Benjamin agreed. “I’d congratulate you, but since you’re not happy about it, maybe it’s a moot point. You certainly have the right to turn them down provided they have other candidates in mind...”

“Would that be wise of me, under the circumstances? Starfleet has already dubbed me mentally unfit for duty. Standard procedure or not, until I’m cleared again, I could be looking at a slippery slope. Resistance to this project might look hostile on my part.” Julian muttered, noting that Benjamin was implying that Starfleet could potentially force him to agree.

Benjamin considered him patiently. “Well? Do you feel hostile about it?”

Julian leveled a look at Benjamin. “Do you want my on the record version of that answer or my off the record one?”

Benjamin wasn’t moved since both of them knew that at this moment Benjamin was intent upon letting Julian vent without any undue judgment.

“On the record, I’m very honored and proud to be considered for the LMH program. Off the record, I wish that Zimmerman chap had never come and I’m not looking forward to spending my first few weeks at home entrenched in his business which I’m sure will become very personal very quickly.” Julian muttered.

“Well, if you want, we can try to stall him. I’m sure you’re not the only candidate he could be interviewing, you’re likely just the preferred choice. Besides, once Zimmerman gets into it with you, he may discover some incompatibility that makes the business null en void.” Benjamin said reasonably.

“Yes. He did say something about there being problems he was still trying to work out. Depending on how big those problems are, the development of the LMH program may prove to be years away.” Julian speculated. “In any case, he seems to be a disagreeable sort. I hope I have the patience of mind
to deal with him, but in light of what’s happened lately…”

“Try to take things easy, Doctor. You’ve only just started at your recovery. No one is expecting you to be 100% yourself right now.” Benjamin reassured him.

“Yes.” Julian said simply, wondering how long such lax expectations would last. “On a separate topic, since I have you here, I was wondering if you’ve heard from Dr. Ore at all?”

“Yes, why?” Benjamin asked.

“Recently, like in the last 12-24 hours?” Julian pressed.

“Yes. We corresponded just this morning. Why do you ask?” Benjamin inquired.

“Well, it's just, I know you sent out instructions not to bother him, but he wasn’t at the party today and..” Julian was trying to avoid revealing that Dax had broke with their instructions and tried to contact him.

“You’re worried for his well being.” Benjamin finished Julian’s thought for him.

“Yes. It’s just, he’s seemed out of sorts the last few days medically, and he won’t tell me what it’s about. His wellness has been so unstable since arriving on the station and well, as a doctor I worry for him.”

“I bet you worry for him even more as his friend.” Benjamin pointed out transparently before continuing.

“The Oum are a complex culture. Though likely considered an eccentric by his kind, Dr. Ore is an equally complex man. Privacy seems to be important to him. As far as I know, he seems well enough. His daily updates are still coming in as they always do so I at least have no sense of alarm just yet.” Benjamin said carefully.

“But there is a reason he’s sequestering himself right now, and there is a chance he could be at some risk?” Julian pressed.

“I trust in Dr. Ore to make appropriate decisions about his well being. Beyond that, I won’t comment on what I know little about. I will reiterate that Dr. Ore has asked that he be left alone and I feel that he is entitled to have his wishes respected in this case.” Benjamin said, diplomatically.
Chapter Notes

Chapters 16-20 re imagine the events of the the episode "Doctor Bashir, I Presume" (Season 5, episode 16) some of the dialogue has been borrowed directly from the episode or reworked to include the changes to Julian's mental and professional state since being put on medical leave.

I also added a scene to the end of the previous chapter. Check it out.

For some reason, only half the chapter pasted. It's been corrected now.

Later that day, after a frustrated Kira had begun to set up a plan of action to hurriedly meet Doctor Zimmerman’s demands, Julian had tentatively agreed to meet with Zimmerman just to go over some details of the mission and what information Zimmerman might want from him. It was something of a relief to have Miles working hurriedly in the background trying to make adjustments to the computer system as he talked with Zimmerman.

“Gads, this is a long questionnaire.” Julian protested as he scanned through the data pad that Zimmerman had given him.

“Yes. I pride myself on my attention to detail.” Zimmerman replied choosing to ignore the criticism for what it was.

Julian resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he read one of the questions aloud. “Compare and contrast your eating habits at age five with those of ten, fifteen, twenty, and twenty-five.”

Overhearing this, Miles actually paused in his task to look over his shoulder as he muttered something along the lines of ‘that’s the stupidest question I’ve ever heard’ under his breath, rolling his eyes and turning back to his work.

Miles disdain was not lost on Zimmerman.

“It will be necessary for the holo-doctor to interact naturally with patients for weeks, possibly even months. The doctor will be expected to share amusing anecdotes, extend sympathy, swap dirty jokes, and even have culinary opinions formed by experience. I assure you these questions are far from stupid or ridiculous.” For once Zimmerman seemed genuinely proud and even giddy about his work.

At this ambitious list, Miles turned around again to look at Zimmerman with a bewildered expression on his face. “Do you mean to tell me that this program is going to include all of Julian’s personal likes and dislikes? Is that really necessary?”

“Of course it’s necessary.” Zimmerman replied passionately. “That’s why we bother to choose a human template in the first place.”

Zimmerman shook his head as if trying to ward away the audacity of his work being criticized.

“Look, all I’m saying is it seems a bit ridiculous. This thing is a hologram. He’s not real. What does
someone care what it’s opinion is on anything other than doctoring.” Miles muttered.

“Look. How about you do your job and let me try to do mine. This isn’t a matter up for debate.” Zimmerman began.

“Alright, alright. Everyone calm down. I don’t have a problem answering these questions, it just may take some time. Why don’t I take you out for a drink Doctor and let us get better acquainted. Jupiter’s a long ways away and I’m sure you could use some down time while our staff gets everything situated for you.” Julian offered, realizing that a fight was libal to break out if he didn’t do something.

“I...Suppose that would be agreeable. I assume you had something in mind?” Zimmerman asked, regaining his composure.

“Oh I’m sure I know a few good places that should satisfy you.” Julian replied. “Come on.”

~@~

A short time later, Julian and Zimmerman were perched at Quark’s watching the crowd excitedly gamble over Dabo while Quark’s Dabo Girl Leeta egged them all on and used her jovial sex appeal to drive up the bets. There was no mistaking that the young woman was good at her job and very easy to look at.

To Julian’s surprise, Zimmerman seemed to relax easily in the active and exciting environment going so far as to smile, a effect that took a decade off his usually sour features. Julian also noticed how he openly stared at Leeta, his eyes sparkling with amusement and glee as she bounced about and roused the circle of Dabo players in her tight earth tone body suit that left little to the imagination.

“I must say that we don’t have anything like this on the Jupiter Station. Or like her.” Zimmerman muttered in a dreamy fashion. “Who is she?”

A little caught off guard by his ardent tone, Julian considered Zimmerman sidelong and then looked back at Leeta remembering how she had once seemed equally as captivating to him.

“Her name’s, Leeta. An ex-girlfriend of mine.” Julian wasn’t sure why he had felt the need to include the second detail, but a part of him didn’t quite like the wanton glimmer in the other doctor’s gaze.

“You’re kidding.” Zimmerman remarked. “Who broke it off?”

“She did.” Julian muttered flatly taking a sip of his drink.

“Oh.” Zimmerman muttered, returning his gaze to Leeta. “I like her already.”

Julian’s mouth dropped open slightly as he saw this information only seemed to encourage Zimmerman as he remarked about adding her name to his interview list, making a notation on his data pad.

“I might also point out that I believe she’s seeing someone.” Julian muttered as he watched Zimmerman in mild disbelief.

“Oh, that doesn’t bother me. A lady can change her mind, after all.” Zimmerman muttered undeterred.

Resisting the urge to scoff, Julian re-focused his attention on the interview Zimmerman had
mentioned. “Excuse me, Sir. But may I ask, what interviews?”

“Standard protocol for my work. I’ll be conducting in-depth interviews with everyone. Friends. Colleagues. Family members. It’s all in order to build a more well rounded psychological profile for the LMH program.” Zimmerman explained.

“Oh, I see. Well by all means talk to who you’d like on the station. But, my family, do you think you could leave them out of all this? We’re not close and haven’t been for many years. I’d just rather they not be involved in my personal affairs. Do you mind, as a personal favor to me.” Julian implored him.

“Oh. Well. I’m sure I understand and since you don’t have a relationship with them it would be easy enough to exclude them given they wouldn’t really have anything relevant to add.” Zimmerman agreed.

“I appreciate that. Well, Doctor. If you’ll excuse me I think I will return to my quarters and retire for the evening. Do excuse me and enjoy yourself. I’d be willing to meet up tomorrow and work on the rest of your questionnaire.” Julian offered.

“Yes, of course. Tomorrow then.” Zimmerman muttered dismissively waving him off and returning his gaze to Leeta.

The moment Julian was out of sight and earshot, Zimmerman plucked up his data pad and made a swift note to himself. “Note: Contact subject’s parents immediately.”

~@~

The next morning, Zimmerman began his interview process covering almost all of Julian’s closest friends and colleagues. The one person not on his emmediate list was Gaven, but once Zimmerman discovered Gaven had been working closely with the other doctor and was responsible for the medical interventions that saved his life he was hard pressed to speak to him. Unfortunately, it was quickly discovered Gaven was not immediately available. Undeterred Zimmerman tried several times to contact him at his personal quarters, but was disappointed when the man seemed to ignore all his calls. Growing increasingly frustrated at not getting his way, Zimmerman ultimately went to the Captain with his complaints.

“Look, I don’t mean to be a bother, but I really do need to include Doctor Ore in my interviews and I don’t understand why no one is letting me speak to him.” Zimmerman protested pacing in Benjamin’s office.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Doctor. But Doctor Ore is on a leave of absence and has requested not to be disturbed. Certainly no one is keeping you from him. I’m sure in a few weeks he would be happy to meet with you and discuss Doctor Bashir.” Benjamin reasoned.

“I see. Let me be clear. I cannot complete the new personality algorithms for the LMH program without the valuable information these interviews are designed to provide. Doctor Ore may be one of the most important interviews yet because of his extensive working relationship with Doctor Bashir. Not to mention the fact that his close proximity during and after Doctor Bashir’s attack will allow me to ascertain what are current anomalies in the doctor’s personality versus what he was like...before his unfortunate assault.” Zimmerman insisted.

“I’m sorry, Doctor. It simply can’t be helped. Now I’m sure if you’d like to leave a list of questions may be Doctor Ore would be kind enough to answer you in writing at his convenience.” Benjamin reasoned.
Realizing finally that he wasn’t going to be able to force the issue, Zimmerman changed tactics softening his tone and settling politely into a chair folding his hands in front of him.

“I can appreciate that there’s been quite a bit of trouble on the station in recent months and that key medical staff were either wounded or placed into a position of extreme duress. Perhaps, and I say this very tentatively, you could arrange a com interview. I’d send a questionnaire, but these interviews are intended to be more organic in nature.” Zimmerman requested humbly.

“Let me see what I can do. But, Doctor. If Doctor Ore decides he doesn’t want to be disturbed then that’s the final word.” Benjamin warned him.

“Of course. Of course.” Zimmerman said assuringly.

~@~

A little later that day while Zimmerman was distracted with a date he’d arranged with Leeta, Benjamin took the time to stop by Gaven’s quarters. Dr. Fisk, per his promise, was already there making his house call.

It was Fisk who answered the door.

“Hello Doctor, and how is your patient today?” Benjamin inquired.

“Ah good afternoon, Captain. Doctor Ore is resting. He’s approaching the worst of his condition now, but I’ve managed to find a pain reliever that seems to be curtailing the jist of it for the moment.” Fisk explained. “The Oum biology is remarkable. Just remarkable.”

“Doctor Ore is a fascinating individual in general, Doctor. His biology notwithstanding. In your opinion, would it be better if he were moved to the infirmary?” Benjamin inquired.

“Oh no. This is a natural phenomenon. Everything about it ultimately seems to be stable enough so as long as he wants to remain here and no advanced treatment is required then I’m pleased to let him remain at home.” Fisk replied.

“Do you think it would be possible for me to speak with him?” Benjamin asked softly.

“I think that would be alright. He’s certainly awake, though the medicine I gave him might make him seem groggy and he is still in quite a bit of pain. Please, go in. I’ll stick around till your done.” Fisk indicated towards the bedroom.

Preparing himself for what he might see, Benjamin entered the bedroom to find Gaven propped up in bed. His shirt was off but the light sheet had been pulled up and neatly tucked around his chest. Benjamin noted how Gaven’s skin had taken on a decidedly eggshell blue tint and the major arteries and veins in his throat and face were clearly visible and looked black under his skin as they pulsed to the tempo of his heartbeat, strong and quick. Gaven’s eye lids were rimmed in dark red making them seem almost like they were bleeding and his eyes were dilated and bloodshot. In spite of his shocking appearance which left no question of his alieness, he looked like he was in pain but was peaceful enough.

“Captain. So good of you to drop in.” Gaven’s tone was raspy and quiet, but a soft smile played along his mouth. “What can I do for you?”

Compassion filled Benjamin's face as he neared Gaven’s bedside and sat down in the chair to Gaven’s left taking up his hand to squeeze it. What most people didn’t know was that Gaven and Benjamin were well acquainted by now, Benjamin being in the position of handler for Starfleet since
it had been conceived to establish the man on Deep Space Nine. While Benjamin knew about as much as anyone about the specifics of Gaven’s past, he had long benefited from many personal and private conversations with him that the others had not been privy to and since his first arrival on the Station, Gaven had regular conferences with Benjamin and sent him daily reports making the captain the most consistent person to talk to him. In light of their dynamic Gaven was at ease to tell Benjamin things he wouldn’t have told others.

“There’s a doctor visiting the station. He’s here investigating Doctor Bashir for a groundbreaking technological advancement that they want to model after him. Doctor Zimmerman has been conducting interviews with everyone regarding Doctor Bashir and he’s keen on speaking with you.” Benjamin explained.

“I know. He’s been around here half a dozen times and has sent me endless requests in writing. I must say, whoever this Zimmerman person is, he is nothing if not persistent. I’ve read the outline for the LMH program. I had no idea any such technology existed until now. I could see how it could revolutionize long range medicine, not to mention, help people who maybe didn’t have regular access to qualified medical personnel. Though I must admit, I’m having a hard time picturing a second Julian romping about the universe long after everyone else is dead and gone.” In spite of his features being drawn with pain, Gaven’s sardonic sense of humor still managed to shine through.

“You don’t have to talk to Zimmerman if you don’t want to.” Benjamin offered, clasping Gaven’s hand more firmly as a seizure like spasm ripped violently through his body momentarily making him unable to reply to the captain.

After several minutes, Gaven recovered himself enough to reply. “It’ll seems suspicious if I don’t eventually deal with him. Zimmerman strikes me as the relentless type, If he thought something was amiss, I feel as if he would want to pry. But as you can see it’s just not possible right now to speak with him and won’t be till I’ve overcome the peak of my present experience.” Gaven said regretfully.

“Is there anything we can do for you?” Benjamin asked.

“Doctor Fisk and I have been discussing the advantage of placing myself in stasis during the worst of it. But if I do that I can’t garentee when I’ll come out of it again. Could be hours, could be days.” Gaven explained.

“You put yourself in stasis after the Vulcans found you, didn’t you?” Benjamin asked, recalling the detail from their past conversations.

“Yes. It was safer at the time for everyone involved given my delicate mental and physical state.” Gaven confirmed. “I was pulled out of stasis by Jyruss Cheval later when the Breen attacked. In a sense, he saved my life twice over. First, by alerting the other Vulcans to my presence in space and then by awakening me before the Breen attack destroyed the freighter.”

“Would going into stasis relieve your condition?” Benjamin wondered.

“It would compartmentalize me from it until it passed. Yes.” Gaven affirmed.

“What about pulling you out of stasis in an emergency?” Benjamin pressed.

“Bringing me back into awareness is a matter of a shot of adrenaline to the heart. The stimulus will trigger a sudden return. Not ideal, but effective.” Gaven explained.

“I see.” Benjamin nodded. “Well, Doctor. Let us hope it wouldn’t come to that. I’ll let you rest.”
Benjamin let go of Gaven’s hand, guiding the tense limb back to his side before he rose up out of the side chair and joined Dr. Fisk in Gaven’s living room.

Jeremiah had been reorganizing his medical bag when the captain came out.

“Well, looks like I've done all I can do here. So captain, I heard Doctor Lewis Zimmerman is poking about the station interviewing everyone he can get his hands on.” Jeremiah remarked.

“Yes. He's here working on the new LMH program. Are you familiar with his work, Doctor?” Benjamin asked waiting for him as he finished putting his things away.

“Yeees. I was there when the medical board cleared the original EMH for wide spread use. Was never much of a fan of the concept, but I'm old fashioned. I know Lewis can be a bit of a handful, I had him as a student at the Academy. If he gets out of hand let me know. Lewis can be a bit...Devious, when he's trying to get his way. Something about the holo engineering field always seems to attract ducks like him. Is Doctor Bashir excited about the opportunity?” Jeremiah asked.

“Not as much as I suspect he might have been in the past.” Benjamin replied.

“It's fascinating how priorities can change. Well, I'm off. Do have a good day, captain.” At that, Jeremiah snapped his med bag shut and walked into the bedroom to give one final look and tell Gaven he'd call again soon.

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Later that evening, Julian found himself back in his quarters. He'd spent most of his day with Zimmerman going over more questions and getting a preview of his holographic template. The experience, though scientifically interesting, had also been somewhat unnerving and had strangely reminded Julian of the fact that he'd already had a copy of himself running about the station after he'd been attacked. While Zimmerman had assured him that the LMH’s personality would improve once the proper algorithms had been finished, Julian found himself little comforted. Mostly because it occurred to him that the hologram would never truly be like Julian. It would merely be limited to the person he pretended to be. In the past he might have never thought about it, but in the now the idea bothered him.

All day Julian had felt a strange sense of impending dread. A feeling that left him worried and dissatisfied with himself and everything around him. As much as he wanted to blame it all on Zimmerman and other recent events, a small part of him admitted that what he was most disgruntled by was the fact that Gaven hadn't reached out to him yet and that Julian wasn’t able to reach out to him in return. It occurred to him that, Julian didn’t like when Gaven kept secrets from him or chose to exclude him from his confidence. While this had always been the nature of their relationship, in recent weeks Julian had been the beneficiary of Gaven’s steady attention and though he had rarely talked about himself all that time, Julian felt that they had somehow crossed a bridge with each other that now made it possible for the men to become actual friends and not just polite colleagues. With the probable exception of Jyrrus Cheval, Julian was almost sure he was the closest thing now to a real friend Gaven had.

“Maybe, I'll just. Try to stop by.” Julian said allowed as he stood and planned to leave.

However, just as he was about to exist his com began to sound indicating a priority call. It was Dax.

“Hi Julian, the Captain would like you to meet him in his office. There’s something we think you should see.” Her tone was light and excited.
“Huh. Sure. I’m...On my way.” Julian muttered, privately perplexed at what could possibly be so important.

Deviating from his plan Julian went directly to the captain’s office. Dax wasn’t in sight when he arrived, but there was an easy looking Benjamin sitting at his desk waiting for him.

“Good evening, Sir. Was...There something you needed?” Julian felt awkward being out of his uniform just then.

“Come in Doctor, please. It seems we have another unexpected pair of guests to see you.” Benjamin said smiling.

Just then a bright eyed Dax practically skipped into the room. “Hello, Julian. Sorry to interrupt, sir, but the visitors to see Julian have arrived.

“Well? Send them in.” Benjamin encouraged.

Dax nodded and made a motion from the outer door for the guests to reveal themselves.

As Julian looked on at the scene a look of shock came into his expression followed by internal horror as he saw both his estranged parents approach slowly. Looking as if they were seeing a ghost resurrected before them in flesh and blood.

Unable to hide his alarm Julian’s mouth dropped open as he resisted the temptation to sneer. “Oh..My, God.”

Tears were visible in the Bashir’s eyes as they silently approached their son stopping just short of him as his mother extended her arms to gently embrace him.

“Oh, Jules. We were so worried. Look at you though.” His mother touched his face idly as if to ensure he was actually there before pulling away to compose herself and dab at her eyes.

The moment she was out of the way Julian’s father exuberantly embraced him tightly. “My dear beloved boy.”

It was all Julian could do but pat his father stoically on the back as if he were clinically reassuring a patient. In reality he wanted to throw his father off him and simply stormed from the room. Instead he caught the warm looks on both Dax and Benjamin’s faces and forced himself to curb his shock and anger into something that as least could have passed for polite emotionality.

“Uh, captain. Allow me to introduce Amsha and Richard Bashir, my parents.” His voice was quiet and low as he struggled to cover his deep seeded distress.

Stepping around his desk, Benjamin shook hands with Julian’s father clearly delighted to be introduced to them.
“I’m Captain Benjamin Sisko. Welcome to Deep Space 9.” Benjamin said, smiling.

“Thank you, captain.” The Bashir’s said. “We wanted to come sooner. As soon Jules was wounded, but we were too far away for the message from Starfleet to get to us in time. We are so grateful you have taken such good care of our son. We were completely ignorant of his current condition until we arrived.”

Dax came around then to stand beside Benjamin as the Bashirs sunk down into some nearby chairs, Amsha gripping Julian’s hand like a vice forcing him to come around the table with them.

“We assure you both, everything that could have possibly been done for Julian was done.” Benjamin said proudly.

“Doctor Gaven Ore, was simply amazing.” Dax agreed.

“We must take time to thank him personally then.” Amsha said.

“We owe him a great deal of gratitude.” Richard bashir agreed.

Julian grunted at these remarks, for once glad that Gaven was unreachable at the moment. Under no circumstances did he want his parents to meet anyone more than was absolutely necessary.

“Well tell us about yourselves. What is it you do, Mr. Bashir?” Dax asked.

“Oh...I’ve done many things.” Richard Bashir said dismissively feigning a humble air that he by no means felt. “At the moment, I’m involved in landscape architecture designing public spaces, parks mostly. I love the idea of working on projects that thousands of people will enjoy long after I’m gone. They're my...legacy, my gift to succeeding generations. Aside from Jules here, of course.”

How curious that his father thought to include him, Julian thought darkly as he listened to his father rattle way, his jaw clenching as he softened only when his father took a moment to look back at him proudly. Julian knew that in spite of it all his parents did love him, He loved them too, but that love was forever spoiled for him thanks to their actions.
“You must be very proud of your son.” Benjamin remarked approvingly.

“Yes.” Amsha agreed. “He is our greatest joy. We are so grateful to everyone here for taking care of him.”

“I hope he has done you all an equal service. There was a time we weren’t sure Jules would pursue medicine. You have to push children sometimes if they are to achieve their full potential.” Richard Bashir, said firmly.

At this remark, Jilian shifted uncomfortably doing his damndest to avoid rolling his eyes at his father.

More sensitive to her son’s feelings then her husband was, Amsha hushed her husband and encouraged him to swap fatherly anecdotes with the captain another time.

“We are much relieved now to see our beloved Jules is well. Perhaps we should, take this time now with him.” Amsha encouraged gently.

“Oh, yes. Of course. Maybe we could also visit with Doctor Zimmerman later as well. He caught us looking for Jules earlier.” Richard said.

“Zimmerman? What did he want with you?” Julian asked sharply.

“Something about interviewing us for a project he’s working on with you. We love to support your work” Amsha explained.”He was very persistent and told us he had been planning to contact us.”

“I just bet he was persistent, indeed.” Julian muttered darkly.

Shaking of his seething anger that he was struggling to conceal Julian quickly changed tacts. “Well, why don’t I see if I can drum up some accommodations for the both of you tonight. If you’ll excuse us, captain.”

“Of course.” Benjamin agreed.
“We hope to get a chance to speak to you soon. I’d love to hear some family stories.” Dax said kindly.

Julian let everyone say their goodbyes before he ushered them out of the room.

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To his credit Julian managed to keep his composure as he spent the next half hour settled his parents in. To his advantage they’re journey had been long and both were eager to rest and gather their strength without much conversation.

Once he left them his anger began to bubble more freely. Mostly centered around the thought that Zimmerman had been planning to go back on his word all along. In desperate need of a target, Julian went in search of the Doctor finding him easily testing the LMH with Miles.

“Chief, if you’ll excuse us, I’d like to have a moment or two alone with Doctor Zimmerman.” Julian had such a look of focused seriousness on his face that Miles immediately left them alone, sensing something was about to go down and not wanting to be in the crossfire.

“You lied to me. You had every intention of summoning my parents here despite explicitly promising me that you wouldn’t involve them in the LHM project. How dare you do such a thing.” Julian said angrily trying to keep his tone as even as possible.

“Technically your right. I did intend to contact them, but by a stroke of luck they came on their own accord and offered to participate one I told them how important their impute could prove to be to the project. I’m sorry if they're willing participation upsets you.” Zimmerman muttered dismissively attempting to side step him.

“You had no right to involve them without my consent.” Julian pressed poking Zimmerman in the shoulder and stepping with him.

“You’re acting as if I actually brought them here. I didn't. I merely offered them a friendly invitation which they gladly accepted. Get off my back.” Zimmerman muttered.

“You implied their participation was urgent and that you couldn’t complete the algorithm without them.” Julian accused him.

“So I embellished a bit. And it is urgent. At least to me. Like it or not, however estranged you may
be from them now, they are an important part of your background and I need to interview them with or without your approval. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a delivery to make.” Zimmerman muttered unapologetically as he simply turned and walked away from Julian who could do nothing else but stare daggers into his back.

Unable to confront him further, Julian sulked back to his parents temporary quarters. He’d promised to eat dinner with them but now he knew he wouldn’t be able to just despondently muddle through the meal like he might have planned to do in the past. Everything was different these days. Everything was so much more raw.

When he arrived his parents were already seated and at meal. Greeting him when he appeared.

“Sit down. We understand that you will be on a leave of absence from your work, Jules. I hope that won’t delay your research. You are still keeping up with it. Aren’t you?” Amsha asked.

“My leave of absence will mean I won’t have access to much for now, but since the work I’ve been doing is so important here, the captain has assured me I won’t be completely idle if I don’t want to be.” Julian muttered having no interest in partaking of their meal.

“I’ll never understand why you couldn’t have just stayed on earth and done your work. Maybe if you had listened to my advice five years ago instead of insisting upon leaving and taking your position here, you wouldn’t have...Well, I just hope that this frontier medicine dream of yours has been worth the risk to your life.” His father remarked.

“What happened to me is a risk that every Starfleet officer takes, The work I’m doing out here is beyond important and could save countless lives. I don’t regret any of it. Not five years ago, and certainly not now.” Julian muttered.

Quickly the conversation shifted away from Julian and back to his father’s work. Everything always predictably shifted back to his father’s ambitions, lofty and short sighted as they often were.

“Needless to say, I have some very good prospects on the horizon.” His father was saying as he proudly hinted to Julian how his landscaping work had attracted the attention of various unnamed people in lofty places.

Julian scoffed at this statement, not presently having it in him to avoid confronting his father. “Yes. You always have very good prospects and they always were just over that horizon.”
Julian’s acidic nearly belittling tone was not lost on his father, who eyed his son aware that he was spoiling now for a fight.

As usual, Amsha attempted to intervene, attempting to change the subject to safer territory. “Jules, maybe you should tell us something about the interviews we’ve agreed to do tomorrow. What kind of questions are they going to ask us?”

“Lord, I wish you would simply tell Zimmerman that you’ve changed your minds. Please, for all our sakes. He’s planning to ask you all sorts of questions designed to help complete the personality algorithms he needs. If you insist upon going through with this I strongly encourage you to keep your statements brief and to the point. His questions could prove dangerous and Zimmerman is a persistent knivving man. If you give him any lead at all he will hunt it out to its logical conclusion. You know what that could mean.” Julian said in a conspiratorial tone that was more pointed than usual.

Feeling as if his son was once again undermining their intelligence, his father’s face screwed up in protest. “I’m sure we can handle it.”

“I’m serious. Zimmerman won’t hold back. I implore you to not take this situation lightly. He’s going to be asking detailed questions about my childhood, and if you’re not careful—”

Julian was suddenly cut off by the frustrated and challenging tone of his father.

“You don’t trust us? Is that it? You may not have said it, but that’s what you meant. You really think that we’re going to slip up, say the wrong thing, get us all into trouble?” His father accused.

“Yes. Yes I do. Maybe not intentionally, maybe not even in a way you’ll realize until it happens...This isn’t like other times. There’s so much at stake if I’m exposed. This time our secrets could destroy my entire career. Zimmerman is too perceptive a man to not become suspicious if there’s even the slightest detail out of place.” Julian pressed manically.

“You’ve got alot at stake?” His father fumed. “Well, what about us? We could go to prison, Jules. Have you ever thought about that?”

“Of course I’ve thought about that!” Julian yelled, finally losing his temper. “That’s why I don’t want you to do it. That’s why I want you to take this seriously!”
“Always with that old tune. He always assumes we never take these things as seriously as he does. We’re not as bright as he is.” Richard fumed looking from his wife to his son. “We don’t have your gifted intellect so we can’t see the perfectly obvious.”

Fed up with his father’s almost childish tirade, Julian thew his napkin down and stood up pointing viciously at his father. “This is exactly why I haven’t been home in three years. This whole business is why I chose to come out here on the edge of the galaxy where I hoped I wouldn’t have to worry about the both you or any of this anymore.”

Julian quickly stormed from the room not able to stand being any his parents presence any longer as he stepped outside of their abode nearly blind with frustration and helplessness as shear panic overwhelmed him causing Julian to slam himself against the bulkhead and slide himself to the floor trying to get himself under control.

“I can’t do this. What do I do?” He asked himself.
Jyruss Cheval had been visiting the public part of the horticulture wing of the station examining various vegetable crossbreeds, when something on his internal wave length caused him to stop. He could sense even across the station that Gaven was in advanced distress. Not wasting time, Cheval dismissed himself from the space and headed directly to Gaven’s quarters. Cheval had respected his wishes for days now to be left alone, but his Vulcan reasoning told him that if he approached the doctor now he wouldn’t be turned away.

Not surprisingly when Cheval rang his quarters and announced himself the door opened.

Minutes later, Cheval was in Gaven’s bedroom assessing the situation. Displeasure clear upon his face as he spoke his mind to his friend.

“You should not have allowed it to progress this far without calling me.” Cheval said disapprovingly as he pressed his palm to Gaven’s forehead trying to soothe him as he watched the man writhe. “It may be risky now for you to enter stasis.”

“Well,” Gaven gritted his teeth as the labored against the rippling muscle spasms seizing spontaneously across his body by clasping at Cheval’s free arm tightly. “Then maybe…[huff] I won’t bother. It seems…[huff] I learn best...The hard way.”

“That is not humorous.” Cheval scolded.

“Oh, I don’t know. {huff, huff} Under the circumstances it somehow seems pretty humorous to me.” Gaven muttered sardonically.

In spite of the labor like pain of his current experience, he did find something strangely comical about it all. Though he suspected his humor to be a kind of chemically induced delirium designed to counteract some of the pain. A interesting feature of his species he’d never realized they had given
that he had never been present during the final birthing stages of any of his kind. One could read about such things and learn them factually, but experiencing it first hand was a different thing entirely.

Cheval pressed his lips. Unsure of whether the mild delirium was part of the process or an anomaly to be worried about. “Are you certain that you do not wish me to declare a medical emergency and summon Dr. Fisk?”

“No. It’s alright. This is all natural. No different then if I had gone into actual labor. I...I think it’s ebbing enough now to safely enter stasis.” As Gaven spoke his spasms seemed to lessen somewhat allowing him to loosen his grip on Cheval’s arm.

Cheval encouraged him to relax and catch his breath for a few moments before he tried to speak again.

“Cheval, I would like you to promise me something. If anything goes wrong on the station while I’m in stasis, I know you’d pull me out of it. But, if something goes wrong while I’m in stasis...Promise me you won’t let them try to revive me.” Gaven asked.

Surprised by this remark, Cheval sat down on the edge of the bed and took up Gaven’s hand again looking down at their joined palms. “I will not promise you something I cannot agree with. To my knowledge there should be no reason any harm would befall you while in stasis and if you believe that something might then it is logical that you should remain aware.”

“Cheval. Please. Just say you’ll adhere to my wishes.” Gaven shook his head knowing he wouldn’t really be angry with the vulcan if he tried to save his life in a instance like this, but wanting to hear him agree just for the sake of it.

“Perhaps this is something that should go into a medical directive.” Cheval remarked. “Why are you asking this of me?”

Gaven sighed.

“Just a feeling. An indulgence, perhaps. So many people want me around for selfish reasons. Even on Oum, even Lopel...He loved me and did what he thought was in my best interest...But he never asked me what I wanted nor do I really believe he would have been able to put his own wants aside for mine. Since leaving Oum I have been at the mercy of agendas much bigger than my own. I’ve
not been afforded the right to be my own person, free of the desperate needs of others.” Gaven admitted.

“Doctor, ethically you are entitled to your medical wishes to be observed. The doctors here on the station would agree with that assessment and since I am not in a position to be your power of attorney, I cannot in good faith make medical decisions on your behalf. However, so long as it is within my power, I promise you I will ensure people know your position and I will advocate for your right to choose.” Cheval said at length.

“Good enough. A bit on the long side, but good enough.” Gaven patted their joined hands.

“Are you ready now?” Cheval asked him.

Gaven nodded. If he was going to enter stasis it had to be now and they both knew it.

Gaven let go of Cheval and relaxed himself fully into the bed shutting his eyes. He could feel Cheval touch his forehead in order to monitor his retreat into himself. Using a complex series of breathing techniques Gaven began the descent.

Like all the times Gaven retreated into his psyche, he had little awareness that what he was experiencing wasn’t real. Like other times his mind had returned him to Oum. Specifically, to the Ner house. For the moment, Gaven was no longer the seasoned and haunted adult exile of Oum, instead he was a pale hawkish shy boy of fourteen his wide green eyes taking in the sights and sounds of the house. Gaven could feel the unusual heaviness that permeated the house. He had been given instructions to remain out of doors as much as possible, but the wailing of Verda’s bondservant Hadna had lured him in. Now Gaven lurked quietly at the end of the long hall in his senior master’s household. Mourning cloth had been placed over every window and light source seemingly shrouding the entire house in muted semi darkness. From his vantage point he could just make out the sight of the young Lopel Ner situated in a glossy armchair near the door as they conferenced over the remains of Gulevere’s mate. Though he couldn’t see Hadna, Gaven could hear her wails in the same room and he imagine that Hadna had thrown herself half over her mistress’s body.

Verda’s death would be the death promise of Hadna’s life as well. In some ways the women were more bound together than Verda and Gulevere were. As such it was the bondservant’s right to freely mourn. Gulvere and his sired offspring Lopel would be permitted their chance at a later time. After, Hadna completed her own death rites and both women were put to rest. For Gaven, no special consideration was to be observed. He was free to mourn as he wished provided it did not disturb the rest of the household and that it did not interfere with his other responsibilities to the house.

In spite of knowing all of this, Gaven had yet to fully understand what was about to happen. He didn’t realize that in just a few short days Hadna would be gone as well and that he would be left
alone with only his Bondmaster Gulevere Ner and Lopel Ner.

“Please, get out!” Hadna shrieked.

Gaven hadn’t been close enough to see what had prompted the outburst. If he had been he would have witnessed Gulevere Ner approach Hadna and attempt to comfort her as she openly wept into her mistress’s bed shroud. Never in all his life had he ever heard Hadna raise her voice to anyone and the power of her command practically shook the house and Gaven to his core.

After that, both Gulevere and Lopel had silently left the room. Gulevere hurrying away across the other side of the house to lock himself away in his observatory while Lopel lingered outside of the room as if struggling to know where to go or what to do with himself. It was a rare issue for the young and often brazen Lopel. In the dull light of the space his tan skin and sun bleached hair made him look almost like a lurking phantom in the dimness of the hall. Using his strong arms to propel himself in the house, Lopel made like he might walk away from Gaven who was still silently perched at the bottom of the villa’s stairwell. Yet at the last minute he turned around and started making his way towards Gaven. Gaven retreated further into the stairs but Lopel already knew he was there and Gave him a glare that dared Gaven to move away instead of waiting for him.

“I suggest, Gaven Ore-Oum, that you get your wits about you and get in there. This may be your one and only chance to say goodbye. Gulevere will be in private mourning until Hadna’s work is done. Go. Go, damn you. NOW.”

Gaven, who was far more timid than Lopel, only stared at the young man until Lopel grabbed him by the arm and dragged him from the stairs. “Do as you’re told, Gaven Ore-Oum.”

Gaven nearly fell into the hallway.

His head shooting back at Lopel Ner. A boy who was nearly the same age as him, separated only by two years. Lopel Ner simply stared at him, his deep brown eyes filled with awareness and dismay. Gaven realized Lopel was angry, even disgusted by something. But he didn’t understand what. Looking from Lopel to Verda’s door Gaven got up from the floor of the hall and made his way down the hall. The door had been left slightly ajar and Gaven could peer into the room to a limited degree. He noticed the wailing had died down and that Hadna was presently moving about the room in a dazed fashion opening up drawers and carefully arranging their contents.

“Hadna, can I help you?” It was all Gaven could think to ask and as the young woman turned to look at him a strange thought came over him.
Was it possible that Hadna was his *mother*?

It was the first instance where an inkling that he wasn’t actually on Oum nor actually in the time and place he was in struck him. *Mother* was not an Oum word. Yet if felt like the most appropriate description. Gaven thought back to when he’d first come to the Ner house. He had been six or seven at the time and he remembered how Hadna had been just out of her girlhood when they’d met for the first time. Certainly it was possible that she was within the birthing range of him. As Gaven looked upon her now he wondered at her dark curls and pale complexion. Her eyes and prominent feature were decidedly different in shape than his own, but the color and complexion was the same. It was possible that Verda had bred her with the Ner DNA to produce Gaven. Certainly someone had been bred with the Ner line to produce him and there were actually quite a number of possibilities for how that might have come about. None of this was proper Oum thinking. In any case even if Hadna had not been his mother, she had certainly acted like one throughout there shared time in the Ner household.

Mother, father, son, daughter. The Oum did not observe such familial attachments.

Yet...The room spun as Gaven grasped at his abdomen, a protesting spasm reminding him vaguely of his womb’s abject emptiness. And suddenly his reality was propelled forward in time and the spasm suddenly disappeared. He was now an adult standing in the country house Lopel Ner had ordered built upon Gulevere’s death. It was the same remote place, he had embraced Lopel in front of in another vision.

“Give me your honest opinion. What do you think, Gaven Ore-Oum?” Lopel had asked him seriously as he presented the space to him.

“It’s beautiful, Lopel. I can see you being very happy here.” Gaven had said approvingly, admiring the open concept, the natural abundance of light, and the remote nature of the building near the mountains which they both had always enjoyed.

“Not just me, my beloved. Us. This place is ours. Not just mine. Gulevere is dead. There is no more reason to keep up these absurd airs between us. I love you more than life itself. In this place if nowhere else on this damned planet, we can belong to each other because we want to, not because you are bound to me.” Lopel Ner said firmly.

Gaven felt himself resist this notion. He had always suspected that Lopel Ner harbored strange social beliefs that went against the grain of their society. What he was proposing now seemed impossible.
“I love you too. But...We are not equals, Lopel. I am your bondservant.” Gaven remarked, as if to throw a wall up between them.

At this, a glint of disgust mingled with pride came into Lopel Ner’s usually warm eyes as he scoffed and climbed up Gaven’s body.

Out of long practiced habit Gaven gripped at Lopel’s lower half supportively so that he could keep his hands free. The intimate nearness of Lopel made Gaven’s head swim and he audibly let out his breath. A serious glint remained in Lopel’s eyes as he cupped Gaven’s face.

“Do you really believe that makes you less than me? You are the most extraordinary person I’ve ever met. You are capable of so many things and yet our world would have you believe you have no right to any of them. If anything, Gaven Ore-Oum, it is YOU who are superior to ME in all the ways that matter most. I know you don’t believe it now and I am happy to spend the rest of my days trying to convince you.” As Lopel leaned forward to take possession of his mouth the swimming sensation intensified and Gaven felt as if he was falling backwards.

The next thing he knew, he was laying in bed, his fourteen year old self once more. Hadna was dead. Per Oum tradition, she had forfeited her life after finalizing the death rights of her mistress and both had been taken away to be bound as one and returned to the dust. Gaven had been permitted to assist Hadna with her final duties and again had been shocked to watch her order Gulevere and even Lopel about as if she was mistress of the household.

Both men had obeyed her every command without comment and, because she had bid it so, Gaven was permitted to speak on her behalf as an extension of her will. In his entire life he had never witnessed such a reversal of roles and it had both exhilarated and disturbed him. In her final moments Gaven had been by her side, assisting her as she took the poison designed to stop her heart. In her final moments, they had linked and he had stayed with her until he had felt her life slip away. More than anything, this had helped him to understand what death was for a bondservant. He had sensed how she had urged the poison on by sheer will alone to take her faster. Like all proud Oum like her, she had been happy to serve and to die in that service. Gaven had envied her as she died and now as he laid in his bed something in him felt ashamed and heart sick.

For all Verda’s harshness and even cruelty, Hadna had been truly devoted to her mistress Verda. Despite his many years in the Ner household Gaven found suddenly that he could not claim to share the same esteem for Gulevere. Though technically a bondservant for Gulevere as well as his offspring who shared his direct genetics, Gaven didn’t like the man and was glad upon his death that his bond-service would revert to Lopel. Grief encircled Gaven as he huddled in the dark thinking that now he was truly alone. Hadna, his one equal in the Ner household was gone.

Gaven rolled over onto his stomach as a painful empty ache once more gripped his body.
Why did he hurt so much? Gaven didn’t understand. He simply wanted to get away from it. Yet as he whimpered and writhed into his mattress he felt a familiar strong rough hand stroke the nap of his neck and massage a circle into the base of his neck.

“Lopel.” Gaven breathed trying to hush himself. He was thankful for the darkness. “Was there something...Why are you here?”

“I heard you crying and was worried for you. I’m sorry but I wanted to see that you were alright.” The older boy remarked. “I didn’t want you to feel as if you were alone.”

“I thought it was my job to look after you.” Gaven remarked bluntly curling onto his side and wiping at his damp face.

“How about we agree to look after each other from now on?” Lopel proposed. “Please. Don’t hide your tears from me.”

Gaven felt his skin flush at his request. “Lopel.”

“What? What do you need from me? You can ask anything of me without fear.” Lopel promised him firmly.

“It hurts. Please stay with me.” Gaven heard himself plead in a small uncertain voice.

Time seemed to move forward then, only, it was as if one night bled over into another without any day between them. All the time Lopel was there with him again and again. Sometimes telling him stories, other times caught in repose and curled beside him. Weeks blended into months in what felt like a series of heartbeats and in that span of time Gaven’s respect and esteem grew for the young Lopel Ner until it blossomed into a heady warmth that spread through him filling his terrible ache and banishing his loneliness.

One night, Lopel came sheepishly to him injured, no doubt from a stupid act of heroic adolescence. Gaven quivered as he dressed the wounds. Using his linking abilities to search out the subtle indications of discomfort and infection. Lopel had been prone since birth to skin infections and Gaven found himself fearing greatly for his wellbeing during mishaps like this one where his sensitive skin might be exposed to trauma and infection, Gaven didn’t speak, He simply tended to Lopel trailing his hands along his body and inadvertently teasing out any tension he found along the
“Does it hurt?” Gaven asked needing to break the silence between them. It was an empty question since Gaven could sense Lopel’s biological responses.

Lopel didn’t answer him right away but looked speculatively at him through the darkness in mild wonderment. “Your angry with me.”

Lopel leaned back on his hands as he sat in the bed just off to Gaven’s side. His arm capturing Gaven’s upper legs between them.

“Your injuries are minor, but the bandages will have to be checked and the broken skin cleaned regularly until the skin heals over.” Gaven felt his skin flush under Lopel’s gaze. Even in the dark the young man saw everything in him.

“Gaven Ore-” Lopel reached up to rub at the other young man’s cheek and as he did so he felt a hot tear graze his thumb. Gaven was angry with him, indeed, but there were other feelings there too in him. Conviction. Compassion. Love.

“Don’t, Lopel.” The young Gaven took Lopel’s wrist and guided it down to their laps. “Your life is my life. When you’re careless with yourself. You’re also being careless with me.”

The truth of this remark stung and shamed Lopel just then. How wise Gaven was to know the truth of his position. It occured to Lopel that Gaven was afraid to die. Or rather, he resented the idea of dying over Lopel’s poor judgements. The evidence of such self preservation made Lopel somehow hopeful.

“I see that you would not be happy to die for me, Gaven Ore-Oum.” Lopel observed.

“No. I wouldn’t.” Gaven looked away from him as he spoke.

Lopel caught the edge of his jaw and guided his face back into a straight on position.

“Good.” Lopel muttered with genuine satisfaction and blossoming pride. “Maybe someday you
might live for me instead.”

At this strange and unsettling remark, Lopel leaned forward and pulled Gaven into a chaste kiss. For his part, Gaven didn’t resist him and instinctively pulled Lopel into his lap, supporting him at the hips where his legs fused against his thighs. Gaven, still linked, could feel the rush of adrenaline and hormones being released within Lopel and began to shiver in response to the implications of it. It was then that Lopel Ner linked with him. Nearly a decade together, and in all that time Gaven had only ever linked with Lopel, as he mapped the other boy’s developing biology, his many ills, and his many biological responses. It was the expectation of every bondservant, the core of how they monitored the wellbeing of their bondmasters. In all that time, neither Gulevere nor Lopel Ner had ever mutually shared in the linking process with Gaven.

The young Gaven murmured, pulling out of their kiss which had suddenly taken on an overwhelmingly intimate tone. Instead of pulling away further from each other though Gaven and Lopel embraced each other tightly instead. Losing themselves in their mutual linkage.

“I promise you, I will never allow you to feel alone again. You are not just apart of me, an extension of body and will, Gaven Ore-Oum.” Lopel rocked them gently, sensing complexities within Gaven he hardly had imagined were possible, Lopel Ner had sought from that moment on to hold Gaven to a higher standard than anyone else.

In the coming years he would do everything in his power to elevate Gaven in their society and equip him with the knowledge, understandings, and intellectual power that would make it possible for Gaven Ore to survive him if necessary and hopefully allow him one day to move beyond all of their limitations.

For what felt like a long time Gaven swam in the delicious peace of their bond. To Gaven it felt completely present and suspended.

Outside of Gaven, Cheval slowly removed his hand. Satisfied at the signs of stability he saw and sensed in the reposed man. It was a strange thing, this Oum ability, to step out of time and space within themselves. Cheval had never observed an ability as complete as Gaven’s. Cheval thought on the purging process Gaven was capable of. It was possible, Cheval realized that Gaven was perfectly capable of emotionally and psychologically healing himself. It was generally a standard practice of mental and emotional wellbeing from what Cheval understood of the Oum. Yet, since leaving his planet, Gaven had extended his suffering. Unwilling to let himself heal and become whole again.

The concept was so illogical that Cheval struggled to understand it. Gaven was indeed a truly bizarre example of his species. Perhaps it was for this reason that the Oum had chosen to banish him from the greater populous.
Julian felt lost.

His anxiety about his situation going unabated no matter what he tried to do to calm himself down while he tried to reason his predicament out. If it had only been his parents visiting the station, or only been the arrival of Zimmerman, or only been his leave of absence to contend with, Julian would have felt in control and capable enough to handle his situation. But to have all three problems coverage on him at once...Julian not only felt lost, he felt trapped. Obviously, his parents where there because Starfleet had summoned his next of kin when it had looked like Julian wasn’t going to pull through. Despite his complicated relationship with his parents, Julian had never taken them out of his medical directive plan. For one, it would have been suspicious if he had and for another he simply hadn’t believed it would ever be a problem.

And now his worst nightmare was being played out in horrifying detail.

Now back in his quarters Julian thought back on the fight he’d had with his parents. No matter how he looked it it he was convinced that Zimmerman was a direct threat to them. Between his mother and father, Julian actually had a great deal of faith in his mother’s capabilities and respect for her in general. He often wondered sometimes what she might have been capable of if she had never married Richard Bashir or if she had ever left him through the course of their marriage.

In reality Amsha was a very bright, warm, compassionate, and intuitive woman. But her material intelligence and sensitivity was often handicapped by her proud, self-important, and thin skinned husband. It had always bothered Julian to watch her constantly dissembling herself for the sake of his father. Through all his ill conceived schemes and philandering blunders and social snafus, Amsha had stood with her husband even when the consequences of doing so had been grave. Sometimes Julian had felt angry with her. Wondering how she had really felt about him being augmented. Wondering why she hadn’t been strong enough to protect Julian. He had always wanted to think that Amsha had ultimately disapproved of the resequencing process that had been inflicted on him as a child.

As for his father, it was true that Julian felt superior to Richard Bashir. He literally was superior in every measurable way that one could be. But what Richard Bashir failed to understand or accept was that, Julian was superior because of his father’s actions and not in spite of them. Like all things when it came to his father, Richard probably never had the capacity to imagine what the sequencing procedure would or could do to his son. He had only ever thought about the fact that Julian needed to be improved upon and when those improvements had taken and taken well Richard had the nerve to feel resentment about it all. As if Julian derived sadistic pleasure at being so able to out think and out maneuver his father. Of his two parents, Julian understood that Richard Bashir was the weaker of
the two. He also understood there was little he could do to protect himself or his parents if one or both of them slipped.

The feeling of powerlessness consumed Julian and the worst part of it all was that he had no one to confide in about any of it. Not his friends, not his family, not his associates. The information was just too burdensome, dangerous, and complicated.

As Julian paced his living room trying desperately to find an answer or at least relief, his mind drifted back to Gaven. Gaven knew exactly what it was like to have to keep secrets from everyone around him. Genetic augmentation was common among his people as well. Then, for extra good measure, he also wasn’t really a member of Starfleet and so he wasn’t under any obligation to report Julian about his genetic status if he did find out. All that aside, Julian found he missed the man’s steady company and the unique trust they shared between them. It also bothered him that Gaven wasn’t reaching out or being more transparent with the conditions of his leave. Certainly if he was unwell, Gaven would have told him? For awhile worry for the other doctor outweighed Julian’s concern for himself and once again an overpowering temptation to try and visit, came over Julian.

“I just want...To check in on him. Surely there wouldn’t be any harm in that.” Julian spoke out loud as if he was trying to convince himself of something.

“Maybe, maybe I could just pop round for a tick.” Now Julian was absolutely trying to convince himself of the merit in seeking Gaven out at his quarters.

Slowly but surely he won his own argument.
The Good Doctors, I presume

Chapter Notes

Well, I would like to take this opportunity to note that this fic has reached a milestone of surpassing a 100,000 words and we're not even out of season 5 yet. I would like to thank those who have been kind enough to comment on the story so far. You are literally the reason I've had the strength to keep going and there is still a tremendous amount to come with this story. Please stay tuned and keep commenting. The party is just getting started up in here.

Julian spent the whole trip to Gaven’s quarters trying to think up how he might convince Gaven to see him on the off chance that he reiterated that he didn’t want to be disturbed. Perhaps humor was the way to go or self-deprecation. All he knew was that Julian was tired of being kept in the dark. Weren’t he and Gaven friends, after all? Wasn’t it Julian’s duty to look out for Gaven and his best interests as his friend?

To his surprise, when Julian rang and announced himself the door opened and Julian found himself being invited in by someone else.

“Hello. Excuse me, but Gaven wouldn’t happen to be here would he?” For a moment Julian struggled to place the other man, but eventually, his recall allowed him to remember that the Vulcan had been there when they’d transported Gaven’s tomb to the station.

“Doctor Ore is here, but not available for conversation right now. His condition has progressed enough where it was determined he would be better off placing himself in stasis.”

“Stasis.” Julian’s mouth curled as he spoke the word, both alarmed and confused by it. “Is he alright? Why is he in stasis?”

Cheval observed the young doctor. Though he was trying to cover it, it was easy to tell that Julian was deeply stressed and yet his apparent concern for Gaven, in spite of whatever ills he was experiencing for himself, caused Cheval to instantly appreciate him.

“If you would like to sit down, Doctor. I am sure Dr. Ore would not mind me elaborating on his condition. I have heard him speak of you before and I know he considers you his friend.” Cheval offered him a seat and then joined him at the table.

“My name is Jyruss Cheval. I knew Dr. Ore before he came to the station. I would like to stress that as far as I, Dr. Fisk, and Dr. Ore can tell...His current condition is a natural one, albeit presently painful to endure. Due to the side effects of his position, Dr. Ore thought it wise to sequester himself at home where he could endure the experience privately and not unduly compromise his identity on the station.” Cheval began.


“Dr. Ore told me you were able to treat him with poxy radiation. As a result, his health has vastly improved. So much so that his reproductive abilities have engaged once more. As you know, Dr. Ore’s uniquely augmented physiology makes it possible for him to carry offspring. In Oum with his
kind of reproductive configuration the Monoestrous cycle, specifically, the estrus stage, can be intense and incapacitating if not addressed. Dr. Ore did not foresee the swift return of his reproductive abilities and was not prepared when his cycle began again. By the time he realized what was happening it was too late to suppress the estrus stage and so it became necessary to simply endure it to its logical conclusion.” Cheval explained.

Julian digested this information slowly. Though he understood the words, he found himself struggling to wrap his mind around what Cheval was actually telling him. “Wait. Wait now. Are you telling me that Gaven went into heat?”

“Yes.” Cheval pressed his lips at the use of such a crass term.

Julian’s eyes widened at the confirmation of this fact. While Gaven had indicated he had carrying abilities, he’d never elaborated on the subject or talked explicitly about the intricacies of Oum reproduction.

“Is it standard for Oum to place themselves in stasis like this?” Julian asked, trying to fathom why such an extreme measure was necessary.

“The Oum can place themselves in stasis during periods of extreme physical and psychological distress. Without his Bondmate to help him with the biological process through their joining, Doctor Ore found himself in an extraordinary position of debilitating discomfort. In this case, entering stasis was the only way to alleviate his distress.” Cheval explained.

“Why didn’t he say anything?” Julian mused out loud thinking back to their final days in the infirmary together when he’d noticed Gaven seeming physically uncomfortable.

“Perhaps he did not want to burden you with the information.” Cheval offered.

“Yes, perhaps.” Julian agreed, though now he wondered at the young Vulcan, noting to himself how Jyruss Cheval seemed to be intimately aware of the situation and of Gaven’s real identity. “What exactly is your connection to Gaven, if I may ask?”

Cheval’s expression turned shy. “I was present on the Vulcan freighter that found him. We have since become friends.”

Julian sensed a more profound story there. As he watched the young Vulcan, he noticed a softness to him. There was also a kind of sad self-depreciation that he’d never seen in a Vulcan before. He also got a distinct impression that he was disturbing something. There was a subtle air of authority around Cheval when he spoke of Gaven, an intimate protectiveness that contrasted against his seemingly gentle demeanor.

“I am surprised Doctor Ore hasn’t been more transparent with you. I know he likes you a great deal and trusts you.” Cheval mentioned.

Julian hung off the edge of the high dining chair and considered his words. “Gaven is a very private man. He doesn’t like burdening people with his problems. If he chose not to tell me it was probably because he felt I have problems enough of my own right now.”

“Obviously, you came here to see him. Now that Dr. Ore is in stasis it is unclear when he will emerge without intervention. But I know he would be pleased to know you were here.” Cheval remarked.

Julian felt the hairs on his neck raise and at the sudden fear that Cheval planned to dismiss him.
“I planned to keep vigil over him; but if you would like to stay with him for a while instead, I believe Dr. Ore would approve. I would like to take an opportunity to speak with Dr. Fisk and update him personally. But I don’t want the doctor to be here alone.” Cheval offered.

“Oh..Of course. Of course. I can stay with him.” Julian’s eyes widened at the impromptu opportunity and nodded.

“Very well. Then I will leave you with him and be back in an hour.” Cheval stood and began to walk to the door. When he was a little more, then half of the way he stopped and half turned towards Julian. “Doctor Gaven Ore is...A good man. I am pleased he has found friends and allies here. He needs people in his new world. He needs to know that he is not alone.”

At this statement, Cheval nodded to Julian and stiffly left the apartment.

Julian only nodded showing he’d heard him.

Once Cheval was gone Julian let out the breath he’d been holding and ran his fingers through his hair. His anxiety was peaking again and the comfort he was hoping for seemed to slip elusively away from him. Pressing his palms to his forehead to get his racing thoughts under control, Julian lowered his hands and looked towards the bedroom. Gaven was in there. Julian wondered briefly where it was that Gaven went in his mind when he retreated like this.

Frowning Julian neared the door and peaked in.

The room was dimly lit, but not dark. Gaven was in bed atop the blankets his shirt off no doubt to decrease any irritation to his abdominal slits. His skin had taken on a light blue hue, and his lips were almost purple. Julian noticed how the rims of his closed eyes, as well as his abdominal slits, looked angry. Yet for all his unusual coloring Gaven looked tranquil enough. His dark hair was getting a bit long causing curls about his eyes.

Julian came more into the room and settled into the chair beside Gaven’s bed.

“Well, you’ve picked a fine time to be unconscious.” Julian said quietly as he knit his fingers together. “I had really hoped I would be able to talk to you about something. Gaven...I don’t know what to do. I’m afraid. For myself, for my family. Everything is going wrong all of a sudden, and I can’t fix any of it. I...I’m not ashamed of who I am. All the good I've done has been possible because of what I am. But I'm afraid others won't see it that way. I've tried my best all these years to keep certain things to myself. I don't have any idea what it would be like to live any other way. Maybe It's for the best that your not awake to hear this right now. I'm sorry to bother you with my troubles when you're clearly having plenty of your own. I just...sometimes I think you and I are more alike than we are different.”

Julian quieted for a minute as he watched Gaven, checking for subtle signs he was actually alright. He didn’t like that Gaven wasn’t being monitored medically in the infirmary while in stasis. If Julian had been actively doctoring he would have never allowed it. Gaven’s precarious health was too unpredictable for Julian’s taste, and it would be just like the man to get himself in trouble because he was stubborn and because other people didn’t know better. Sometimes it was so easy to forget that Gaven wasn’t human and it was hard to appreciate how uniquely alien he actually was.

“You should have told me about all of this, you know.” Julian said as he innocently brushed some of Gaven’s curls away from his irritated eyes. “I like to think we make a pretty good team when we put our minds to it. Maybe if I’d known, I could have found a way to help you. Then again, I suppose these days I can barely help myself.”
Julian settled back into the chair clasping his hands in his lap. Just sitting with Gaven felt reassuring somehow. As if, as long as Julian was sitting there with him nothing terrible could happen to either of them. Julian found himself wondering if Gaven had talked to him like this during his coma. His mind’s subconscious recall suggested he had, though at the moment Julian couldn’t recall any of the conversations.

“You've probably heard my parents are here on the station. Humans, we're generally raised by our maternal and paternal biological contributors. I was at least. I love my parents Gaven, but I find it difficult to be around them. It's been a long time since I saw them last and, had I not been injured, who knows how long it would have gone on being like that. I know they want to meet you. That much I would very much like. So please don't stay away for too long this time.” Julian said gently.

“You know, when I first met you, I found you intimidating. I'm sure I acted like a complete fool on more than one occasion in my efforts to try and impress you. I don't know why I felt the need to do that, but somehow I think It's made me a better person for trying. For most of my life, everything has come so easy. Good old Julian Bashir, always the one with the quickest smartest answer to any question. Then you came around, and I find myself asking more questions than I can find answers to. The next thing I know, suddenly I'm not the smartest most capable person in the room anymore, rather, I'm just one of them. Just one more person among many extraordinary people. Deep Space 9 attracts a great deal of talent. Everyone here is a specialist in their own ways. I admit I’ve not always been good at sharing the limelight. But in the end, the people I’ve met here are the closest thing to a real family I’ve ever had. Someday, I hope you realize that no matter what happens, you’re apart of us too. You're apart of our family.” Julian mused.

While Julian spoke at his bedside, Gaven was still lost within his inner world shifting at seeming random between different points in the past.

“You should have told me about all this, you know.” Gaven had been sitting outside in his favorite spot in the brilliantly green grass reading over Lopel’s speaking engagements for the month when the echo of an unfamiliar voice broke through, intruding briefly on his sense of reality.

Gaven’s head suddenly swum and purple spots appeared before his eyes causing him to drop his datapad and press his fingers firmly to his eyelids.

Julian.

The name came into his mind, but for the moment held no significance for him.

“What?” Gaven called out in confusion as the disorientation began to rapidly clear.

“I said, you should have told me it was so late already. We’ve certainly missed it again.” Lopel repeated himself as he came out through the front door to hurriedly meet him in the grass.

Gaven pulled his hands away from his face and blinked a few times, clearing his vision.

“You needed to rest. Have you even bothered to look at your upcoming schedule?” Gaven scolded.

Lopel shrugged with indifference. “You could always go in my place. You are a far better orator then I am.”

Gaven sighed. “I’ve already spoken on your behalf half a dozen times this last month. If you don’t start doing it yourself with more frequency than the officials may lose their patience and bar you from speaking on the council floor altogether. You are not mute. You do not need me to be your mouthpiece, and you know doing so draws unfavorable attention to us.”
Lopel approached him, draping his arms across Gaven’s shoulder. “Everyone who hears you speak is impressed by you, my love. If you draw any kind of negative attention to us for doing so, it is a matter of private jealousy on the parts of others for being so magnificent. Not to mention, right in your thoughts.”

The truth was, Lopel Ner had very little interest in the management of government. He was a man in love with the wilds of their world and the solitary and untamed aspects of the forests, waterways, and mountains around them. In all cases of actual policy, Lopel had looked to Gaven to research and draw logical conclusions about any given subject Lopel was asked to offer an opinion on. Many times they were true collaborators, while other times Lopel used Gaven’s independent thoughts and positions instead of his own. After several years together, this was a natural occurrence, so natural that Gaven rarely complained about it or differentiated between their individual contributions of thought. Gaven, like most of the best Bondservants, could easily anticipate his Bondmaster’s positions and thought processes on a given subject, recording them often without consultation to be used as Lopel saw fit. It was this aspect of their dynamic that went against standard Oum behavior between servant and master. It was not usual for a bondservant to speak out of turn at all nor try to influence their masters in any way. Bondservants were supposed to be extensions of their masters, and any argument of thought between them would have been viewed as inappropriate.

“Jessup has written to you again about breeding me with her Bondservant Esha. The proposal of compensation is...significant. I’ve never seen an offer so high or the accommodations so detailed.” Gaven remarked.

“No.” Lopel’s reply was low, serious, and entirely firm. “Throw that woman’s wretched proposal into the fire bin.”

Gaven felt his head swim and heat gather down through his core. An arousing effect within Gaven eas stoked every time Lopel rejected a breeding proposal.

“You are mine and mine alone, Gaven Ore-Oum. I will not share any part of you anymore.”

“Her offer is beyond reasonable, even for your high standards. If you keep refusing her, she may report it to the foundling guild. You may still have a license to deny her, but if they decide to harvest my genetics then neither of us can refuse, and there will be nothing for anyone but the guild to gain.”

“Is it really so easy for you to stud yourself out like that?” Lopel had pulled away from Gaven then and was staring at his love as if waiting for a macabre punchline.

“I am a bondservant, it’s my duty to contribute to the stability of the greater population if my genetics prove to be ideal.” Gaven reminded to him flatly and factually without any emotional inflection.

Gaven sensed his love’s building disapproval and braced himself for the inevitable argument they were about to have.

“What is enough? The guild could sire dozens of Ore-Oum offspring out of you and then what? I will see the best parts of you scattered across the affluent among us. Bits of you bought and sold. Bound endlessly to other Oum who can pay the fees.” Lopel fumed.

“I wish you wouldn’t do this. You put me up on a pedestal of worth that isn't real. Why must you always insist upon singling me out as an exception among our own? Why do you insist upon stripping me of my one pride? I know my place in our world. There is no shame in my positioning. No shame in being a servant instead of a master. I have always done everything you've asked of me,
but this is too much. My children…” Gaven suddenly paused.

My children. My child.

The phrase seemed somehow wrong. Somehow, foreign. Yet it seemed like the exact thing he wanted to say. The word “child” and the sense of ownership it invoked was not part of the Oum language or vernacular. And yet...It felt illogically correct as he rapidly fingered it in his mind.

Confused and distracted, Gaven tried to refocus on their conversation.

“What is it exactly that you want from me?” Gaven asked wearily, trying to rapidly change gears.

Lopel considered him.

“I would like us to be a family .” As Lopel said the last word, his voice changed abruptly to the echo like sound of someone else. As if the audio of Lopel’s voice was partially overwritten as he spoke.

“I just want you, Gaven Ore-Oum. That means exclusivity in your breeding contract. I don’t just want more bondservants, I want heirs to my legacy and yours.” Lopel said pointedly.

Gaven narrowed his eyes.” It's forbidden for me to do anything other than be a carrier for your offspring. You know that, and, even then, the process to qualify for carrier rights is long and complex. There would be no guarantee you would be granted breeding exclusivity unless you took me as a bonded mate.”

It was like throwing down a challenge between the men. Had they not been physically inseparable since that fated night in Gaven’s small room so many years ago? The night after Hadna’s death? Where they not as one already in all the ways that mattered? And yet for all their connection and togetherness, Lopel had been careful to observe a small sense of limitation on their often social improprieties. Namely, he had never entirely taken Gaven as his lover nor offered it as a potential option between them.

For Gaven’s part, while he was terribly smitten with Lopel, it was not in his programming to ask to be fully considered by him. Both knew that there were some things even for them that, once done, could never be undone between them.

Both men were silent for a long moment as Lopel considered him and Gaven averted his gaze into the grass.

“It would have to be your choice.” Lopel finally said at length, understanding that Gaven was waiting for some signal of permission to fully respond. “I hope I have made it clear all these years how much I love you.”

Mutual love had never been a problem between them. Gaven had loved Lopel long before he understood that he did. But this was something different. If he became a bonded mate, Lopel would indeed have possession of him complete. Why was a stake in Gaven's breeding rights so important to him? Surely Gaven couldn't recall Lopel ever caring about producing offspring before.

“You're proposition isn't exactly romantic, Lopel Ner.” Gaven muttered. “It's a mark of quality that Jessup is so interested in me for Esha. She's a fine bondservant. Our…progeny would certainly be sought after, and she is only asking for one genetic match. A female no doubt intended for her Sire'd Nugella.”

“Don't sidestep me, Gaven Ore-Oum.” Lopel said sternly.
“Then explain to me why you want this.” Gaven replied. “I know that you're up to something and while I believe you love me, I cannot fathom why you would feel so possessive over me. You and I have crossed hairs on many things in our lifetime. You never were much of a traditionalist, so tell me now what you're really aiming at, and then I'll give you my answer.”

Lopel's earnest face deflated for a second before blossoming into a look of jovial amusement laced with fond respect.

“You know me as well as I know myself, Gaven Ore-Oum. The truth is, I do see you as the exception in our world. I know we can't go against convention in all things. I know that our people are proud of their ways and most can't imagine anything else. But I can and do. When I look at you, I see the hope of progress. Our people have become complacent, Gaven Ore. We hide our true value as individuals and horde our knowledge away. We encourage limitation instead of liberation. In many ways, you are an ideal subject. Humble, respectful, sensitive...But I've seen you look up at the stars with longing Gaven Our-Oum. I've seen you lose yourself so entirely in the cultural emporium that I feel jealous of it. I know that in your heart of hearts you wish you could be more than what you've been assigned to be. I want to give you the chance to step outside of our prescribed roles.” Lopel mused.

Gaven frowned as he listened to this speech. “There are things that I wish were different. But the things I wish for have never been about my liberation.”

Gaven met Lopel's gaze finally. Painful love shone in his eyes as tears pooled but remained unshed. “Every day of your life you have suffered. It doesn't take our linking for me to know that about you. Every day I pour over your sensitive skin, trying to search out every festering mark that could in a breath take you from me. Every day as I massage away your achings I sense the strength in your body, how the muscles in your legs beg for constant kinetic release that the muscles will never know.”

Gaven began to quiver subtly, as he admitted his greatest pain.

“You are someone that we had the power to liberate. Yet our people refuse to correct your abnormalities. And to what end? Vanity? We Oum claim to honor all life, and yet we leave our people in disarray and call it honoring the natural order. We control and tailor our birth rates, we breed for specific abnormalities and genetic phenomenon, we augment our kind to accommodate a complex social order. We have the power to change the face of Oum, and yet we do nothing. What good has it done us?” Gaven lamented.

“It's given me you, Gaven Ore-Oum. You have made my life worth something. You represent the best of us as well as the best of me. I promise you that if you bond with me, things will be different for us. I will defy convention at every turn. I will turn this world upside down for us. For our offspring. I know you think me idle in my profession, but I have long cultivated channels of influence that share the same pains as you.” Lopel approached his beloved and pulled at his hot face in a typical act of comforting between them.

Gaven relaxed back into the grass feeling the swift and familiar rush of Lopel activating their biological linkage through their body contact. It never stopped taking his breath away, and his head swam with unparalleled love and longing. In all things, Gaven did not have the conviction for denying his love, especially when Lopel's will spoke to the secret want in Gaven's own heart. How he ached, the pain of longing twisted within him unforgivingly.

Gaven couldn't help but whimper and press his eyes shut.

The next thing he knew they were making love. Gaven registered this but little else as time and space
seemed to become inconsequential. Yet the throbbing pain persisted between them and gradually intensified slowly pushing out all other sensations.

Pulsing. Like a persistent, relentless drum beat.

Amongst this strange pulsing pain that began to overtake him causing his world to blur and shift into nothing but sensation, Gaven felt a soothing less familiar hand brush the hair from his eyes compassionately, and suddenly Gaven realized Lopel was dead and gone and yet he also understood that he wasn’t actually alone.

“Gaven.” An earnest aristocratic voice called him echoing through the inky pain. “Gaven, you need to wake up. Something is wrong. Can't you feel It?”

The phantom voice was calm but persistent as it sliced into his awareness.

“Julian.” Gaven breathed as context slowly came back to him. “Julian, I…”

Still in the other space of stasis Gaven opened his eyes as if he were looking into the sun. Everything was dark. Oum had disappeared as had Lopel. Yet he sensed he was being held. His mind had manifested the visage of Julian holding him in the purple-black hue within the darkness where he could make out the doctor in his medic blues cradling him.

“You've contracted an infection.” Julian said calmly. “It's causing your reproductive system to reject your augmented womb. You're internally hemorrhaging, but there's still time to save you.” The visage of Julian intimately dragged his thumb, pointer, and middle finger down his chest to just above his navel as if to soothe but also emphasized his warning.

“Julian, I need to…” Gaven whimpered.

“Not here and now. Tell me later. Tell me when it's real, Gaven. Right now I want you to WAKE UP.”

The voice and visage weren’t actually Julian. Instead, it was his mind projecting a warning that his consciousness would actually react to.

In the meantime, a computer sensor suddenly sounded in Gaven’s actual room where Julian was still sitting with him. Apparently, Dr. Fisk hadn’t been entirely short-sighted after all in allowing Gaven to convalesce at home. Seconds later before even Julian had time to react Cheval was back. The color in his face indicating that he’d likely run at high speed from wherever he had been, no doubt aware through their psychic connection that something was wrong before the computer had picked up the signs of distress.

Julian’s eyes shot open as he and Cheval locked on each other with matching dismay. Both realizing response time was critical.

Forgetting all his own troubles, Julian immediately shifted into his doctor mode. “Computer, medical emergency at my coordinates. Page all available senior medical personnel and get me a medevac now!”

He then shifted his commanding gaze to Cheval. “Can you pull him out of stasis?”

Cheval had already entered the room and was using his own abilities to assess the situation while Julian quickly tested his vitals.

“He is coming out of it on his own. He knows something is wrong, and the adrenaline is bringing him out. It must be something life-threatening. Your bag, doctor.” Anticipating the fact that Julian
couldn’t further triage the situation without his standard traveling medical equipment, Cheval in his wisdom had grabbed Gaven medical bag, as he’d come into the room and handed it over.

"Thanks.” Julian muttered as he jerked it open and fished out the medical tricorder. “His white count is off the charts, and his body temperature is rising. It has to be an infection somewhere. But how the Hell would no one have caught it until now?"

“Not the most important question, Doctor. Brace yourself, he is about to break into awareness...Now.” As if on cue Gaven’s deeply bloodshot eyes shot open and he instantly sat up with some force gasping for air. Both men caught him by the shoulders.

“Gaven? Gaven, relax! Don’t fight us. The medevac team is coming now. I need you to talk to me. Gaven!” Julian ordered as they both held him still while he came back into himself.

“Gaven where is the problem? I know you know what’s going on. Breathe and then tell me so we can help you. It’s all right. We have you, I promise. There..there good.”

Gaven wheezed as he tried to adjust and focus. Realizing he was awake and in unyielding pain. His chest was heaving with excursion as he attempted to formulate his words. “Blood infection. Fungal. Invasive.”

His words were wet and croaking, as blood appeared on his lips as it drained down the back of Gaven’s throat, not enough to completely choke him but enough to garble his words.

“Dr. Bashir. Has Dr. Ore been off station recently traveling anywhere?” Cheval asked suddenly.

“Gulba 4. It’s the only place he’s been since arriving...Good God, you don’t think? I know he was harvesting tissue samples from himself, but surely he was careful and did it safely.” Julian muttered.

“He’s been significantly depressed, are you sure about his actual collecting techniques?” Cheval sounded deeply skeptical.

"No. Damn. Gaven, I need to see your thigh where you pulled some of your tissue samples from. Help me, Jyruss. I want him on his side anyway before he aspirates on his own blood.” As they turned him over together, Julian scanned for what he was looking for. “There. What does that look like to you?”

Cheval looked using his own expertise in the sciences to his advantage. “That looks like a fungal skin infection to me. Probably a form of Gulbian Candidias. Ingested it’s harmless but if it were to get into an open wound…”

“Right. We have to get him to the infirmary now. Can you synthesize a treatment based on what you see here?”

“Yes. The fungal spores captured in the scabbing should be enough. But you will have to get his temperature down, or his body will kill anything I synthesize.” Cheval agreed.

“Leave that problem to me.” Julian muttered grimly.

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It was all hands on deck after that.

Jyyrus Cheval and Julian escorted the medevac team back to the infirmary while Dr. Fisk prepped an OR suite that was miraculously ready the moment they arrived. Even Zimmerman was called in to
assist, promptly interrupting his nauseatingly presumptuous conversation with Leeta over her possibly coming to work on the Jupiter station just so that Zimmerman could continue his salacious attempts to romance her once he went home.

In the meantime, Gaven was spitting up blood and doing his level best to stay conscious. Once he was in the infirmary and sequestered correctly in the private operating room, Cheval stepped over into the adjacent lab with the spore samples to begin to work his magic as a scientist and botanist while Julian and Jeremiah further assessed the situation as they struggled to stabilize Gaven.

The captain was notified of the situation but remained in his office, preferring to stay out of the doctors' ways until the situation was resolved.

The first order of business was to get Gaven’s blood pressure under control and his body temperature down.

“Shit!” Fisk barked as they worked swiftly. “He’s going into advanced hypovolemic shock. He’s got to be hemorrhaging internally somewhere. Probably along the GI tract. You gotta guide me here, boy. I don’t know his physiology like you do.”

“It’s his reproductive augmentation. The infection is causing it to reject. We need to run a bag of Nephecin. I have no idea if it’ll work on an Oum, but we have to try it. That should help stop the rejection process. Jyrrus! How far away are we?” Julian yelled.

“An estimated forty-five minutes, Doctor.” Jyyrus yelled back with typical Vulcan authority.

“I need it in less than thirty, or this may not work. We need to drain the trapped blood. It looks like some kind of sack lining. I think I can aspirate, but once it’s clear, you’ll have to introduce an emboli one vessel at a time until the bleeding either stops entirely or slows down enough to no longer be a threat. I’m personally not going to be able to do this myself, I…”

“Like hell, you can’t!” Jeremiah retorted sharply. “I haven’t performed this level of minute surgery in fifteen years, and I certainly don’t plan to start now when I’m elbows deep into an alien body I’ve never seen before. Now I don’t care what your recent hang-ups are, son. I need you to get with the program here, or we’re going to lose this patient.”

“This isn’t a debate, Remi. Look, I’m shaking like a leaf over here. My nerves can’t handle it. Someone else needs to take point in this.” Julian argued.

“Who exactly did you have in mind? Lewis? He isn’t even here yet. The schmuck. And last I checked he doesn’t exactly have clearance to work on Dr. Ore.” Jeremiah argued.

“What about the EMH program? Lewis installed one here on the station for his personal consultation while working on the LMH, didn’t he? I could upload Gaven’s private physiology files and…”

Speaking of the devil, just as Julian mentioned Zimmerman’s name the wormy man appeared having the nerve to look only passingly concerned with what could possibly be going on that the other doctors couldn’t handle. When he happened to take a look at who was on the OR table and what the man looked like in his current off color and mostly exposed state, Lewis looked like he might actually bolt out of the room.

“You! Stay and not a single word until one of us talks to you. What you’re seeing here is absolutely classified under the statute of don’t make me call your mother. Am I understood?” At that, Jeremiah looked back at Julian, clear disappointment on his face. “As for you my boy, under the circumstances, I can’t make you perform surgery you don’t think you’re up to. Load the damn EMH
program and let's pray it knows what it’s doing better than we do.”

With the help of a very confused and gravely white looking Zimmerman, the EMH program was activated and swiftly brought up to point.

During that time, Julian was able to assist Remi in draining Gaven’s blood filled uterine sack that usually would be absorbed back into his body in a few days. To his credit, Gaven stayed mostly conscious through the entire ordeal, if ominously silent. Jyyrus also pulled through for everyone in record time and was able to synthesize an antibiotic serum designed to isolate the fungal spores and kill them. Though, like Jeremiah, he was exceedingly unhappy to see the EMH program taking over Gaven’s care.

“Well isn’t this a fun party.” The EMH program muttered as it did its job, noting the tension all around it.

Suddenly an alarm went off on one of the sensors indicating a rapid drop in blood pressure.

“He’s destabilizing.” Jeremiah observed.

“Yes, hm. Well, gentleman, I’m afraid there simply isn’t going to be enough time to finish the embolization process. My recommendation is to surgically sever the uterine wall and cauterize it. Your friend here won’t be able to carry anymore, but at least he’ll be alive.” The EMH program muttered.

At that Gaven finally rallied, thanks in part to Cheval helping him along with his Vulcan mental fortitudes which he was currently sharing with Gaven now that his role in the operation was over.

“No.” Gaven breathed, his word barely audible. “Ju...Julian. You can’t le-let him do that. Please. You can finish the procedure. I know you can. Julian, I KNOW you can do it. It’s...it’s like you said. You...and I...Are more alike...Than different. We’re just two extraordinary people, remember? Prove it, Julian. For once, be the person you are. Not the person you think you have to be.”

He knows. Julian realized.

Gaven knew he was a human augment. Was it possible he’d known all the time? Most of what he’d said likely hadn’t been discernable by the others except for Cheval who had the benefit of Vulcan hearing.

“Alright, Gaven. I won’t let them take your reproductive abilities away from you, but you have to pay me back by surviving this. We have things to say to each other.” Julian remarked stoically as a strange clarity came over him. An acute sharpness of will and ability.

Julian looked at the EMH program. “If you would kindly step aside, doctor. I’ll take it from here.”

Julian’s tone was deadly serious, and even the EMH program had enough sense to back off of Gaven. “Doctor.”

“What the hell is he doing?” Zimmerman protested. “No human is as fast as the EMH program. You’re throwing away the best chance you have...What the hell kind of operation is this?”

“I am that fast.” Julian muttered, darkly as he took a deep breath and willed every bit of concentration he had into steadying his hands and initiated the embolization process.

“I can help you.” Cheval remarked suddenly coming forward to place one hand lightly on Julian’s shoulder as he clasped Gaven’s hand. “I can help you link with him. Gaven can help guide you from
“Do it.” Julian muttered ignoring everyone else. “We’re going to need all the help we can get.”

Fisk pulled back from the three men, his services no longer needed as he moved to stand next to Lewis.

What the hell am I seeing?” Zimmerman muttered.


What transpired next was only possible because of Julian’s hidden augment abilities, even without Gaven linking with him to help guide his hands to the right vessels, Julian worked with such speed and acute precision that it indeed surpassed the rate of the EMH. Every part if Julian was honed to the minute necessities of his task. Nothing could break his razor attention as he swiftly embolized more vessels than anyone could keep count of. His efforts coupled with the earlier efforts of Cheval showed immediate positive results.

“Amazing.” Jeremiah said in a misty fashion.

“And utterly impossible unless you're an Android or…” Zimmerman gasped audibly as a particular realization struck him that caused his mind to rapidly reel.

“So,” Zimmerman said in a scandalous breathy tone. “You’re an augment. That’s the only possible explanation.”

“Lewis. Not. Now.” Julian muttered dangerously. “Remi, get him out of here while I’m trying to work. Gaven’s not out of the woods yet, and I’ll go to Hell before I lose control of this situation now.”

“You. Out.” Jeremiah said, before grabbing a protesting Zimmerman and dragging him out of the room by the collar. “We’ll just be out here, gentlemen. Call me if you need me. Kay?”

Julian finished his work and had Cheval read him back the computer readings. Slowly everything started to stabilize, and an hour later, Julian finally peeled off his gloves.

Gaven was resting now. Alive and in one piece. He’d need a few days of follow up before he could leave the infirmary.

“Thank you, Doctor Bashir.” Cheval said at length. “I am sure there will be trouble for you now.”

Julian considered this remark and dismissed it. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters now...Except for the fact that I don’t regret it. Come what may when I step out of this OR, I don’t regret it at all. Watch over him, Cheval. He’s going to need someone when he wakes up.”
Chapter Notes

Chapter 16-20 covers the re imagined events of the DS9 Episode "Dr. Bashir, I Presume" and adjust for several timeline differences to Julian's character and characterizations.

“We have a serious problem on our hands here, and before I decide the best course of action, I want to make sure I hear all sides of the situation.” Benjamin remarked evenly to Jeremiah as they conferenced together.

“There’s been an accusation put forward by Dr. Zimmerman that Julian Bashir has been hiding the fact that he’s an augmented human and that he’s been illegally practicing medicine. Now I must admit, I might have dismissed the accusation as professional jealousy if I didn’t personally see the EMH recording of the incident. I need your professional opinion, Jeremiah. Is it possible that Dr. Bashir merely got lucky? Or is there something to the accusation?”

“Well, medicine really is more art than science. There are several factors to take into account here. While it’s true that Julian Bashir is something of a known prodigy in his field, that by no means is an indication of anything suspicious. His track record is exemplary but not perfect. We must also consider his proven state of mental and physical duress. Under normal circumstances he shouldn’t have been involved in the operation at all, but, then again, I was the senior medical officer on duty and do have the ability to, um, pull qualified personnel back in if I think it’s in the best interest of the patient. It’s also important to consider the roles of Jyyrus Cheval and Dr. Ore himself. Both exhibit advanced empathic and telepathic abilities and at the time of the surgery all three men were linked psychically...So, huh, who's really to say why or how Dr. Bashir was able to pull off what he pulled off?” Jeremiah said, with a significant shrug.

“I see. Zimmerman claims that Dr. Bashir admitted to being advanced.” Benjamin continued.

“Well now there again is a matter of perception. Zimmerman concluded on his own that Dr. Bashir must be in augment because he was able to work faster and with more precision than the EMH program could. But it should also be considered that Dr. Ore isn’t human and that not all aspects of his biology and medical needs were fully documented. The EMH program can, like any of us, only work with what it knows to be true as well as what becomes apparent at the moment. Julian, on the other hand, is intimately familiar with Dr. Ore’s biology and has acted in the capacity of his personal physician all this time. He knows Dr. Ore better than anyone else from a medical standpoint. It’s true that Dr. Bashir admitted to being faster than the EMH program but by Zimmerman’s own accounts through his extensive interviews on the station and by Dr. Bashir’s own service records of past performance we know he always has had...A somewhat elevated opinion of himself. In reality, he stated only the personal opinion that he was faster than the computer. It’s not, in my professional opinion, an admittance of guilt.”

“I see. It already sounds like we’re building his defense. Dr. Zimmerman has told me he plans to retract Dr. Bashir’s qualification to be a model for the LMH program. Naturally, if he does so a report for his reasonings will also be filed with Starfleet Medical. They’d be obligated to investigate the accusation, regardless of what you or I think about it. We do have to consider the possibility that
it’s true.” Benjamin remarked.

“The main issue, should things fall out that way, will be a question of if Julian knew about his augmented status before he was accepted into Starfleet Medical, and whether or not he knowingly misled Starfleet Medical about it. We’ve come a long way in recent centuries in handling cases of illegal human augmentation. I don’t think there’s been an official large scale case regarding it in nearly a hundred years. Though I’d wager that it’s likely more common an occurrence than most would suspect. Nobody cares about the little tweaks. But when you completely change someone and then put them in a position of power and authority…” Jeremiah whistled through his teeth long and sharp. “Everyone suddenly gets all up in arms, lickety-split.”

“How much of a difference would it make?” Benjamin asked.

“Well, it’s a question of accountability. Many of the known and active cases of illegal augmentation have been cases involving children. It’s not like kids can consent to have their noodles played with, and it’s usually the parents or guardians that call the shots. We in the medical ethics profession do have a certain semblance of compassion for such cases. In all cases involving minors, the child is considered the victim. If Julian Bashir is an Augment and that augmentation happened in childhood, then it’s likely his parents who would be held accountable for the crime and not Julian. Though I must say, if he is an augment then he is the nicest most stable well intended one I’ve ever met. Most young people that go through that come out of it irreparably damaged. Many of them end up in facilities unable to function in normal society. Julian is a clear exception if it’s true. But where it gets tricky is a question of awareness and intention. The rules about augments serving in specific capacities are clear. Augmented humans can’t be doctors. At least not in Starfleet. If he knew and lied about it, that could be grounds for dismissal at the least.” Jeremiah explained.

“I see. Julian’s parents are here on the station. Starfleet Medical, of course, alerted them as next of kin when it looked like Julian might not survive his attack.” Benjamin mused.

“It might be worth talking to them at some point. I tell you, Ben, this is a very sticky situation we have here. Besides Julian, I doubt you’re going to be able to keep Dr. Ore’s human facade up for very much longer. Even if Starfleet puts a gag order on Zimmerman, this was a close call, and he was transported publicly. People are going to have questions on the station. There aren’t many known diseases that turn a human that shade of blue.” Jeremiah warned.

“Maybe we shouldn’t try to conceal it anymore.” Benjamin wondered gravely. “I can’t say I believe it’s really been in Dr. Ore’s best interest to hide his identity. Maybe if he hadn’t been working so hard to try and conceal himself for Starfleet’s benefit this situation would have never escalated the way it did.”

“In my professional opinion, it’s been a travesty to that man’s mental health to expect him to hide who he is. I want to see the Dominion conflict come to a satisfactory end too, but I feel that Starfleet is playing a dangerous game here and at Dr. Ore’s expense. You know what he’s been through. Our people or someone posing as our people did that to him. We owe him something for that. A sense of identity, a sense of safety. Hell, an occasional cuddle if he lets someone. The man has done nothing but serve us, and he’s not even one of our people. Who's going to advocate for his rights as a living, intelligent free being if Starfleet doesn’t?” Fisk questioned.

Benjamin dipped his chin in consideration. “I will.”

“Good. I’ll help.” Jeremiah chirped flashing his horse like smile.

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The next person on Benjamin’s interview list was Julian.

For his part, Julian hadn’t known quite what to do with himself. He felt more than trapped, he felt like the hangman was tightening his noose. No matter how he cut it, he couldn’t imagine a scenario that didn’t spell imminent doom for him. For his career. For his life as he knew it.

Well, Julian might not be able to save himself now. But he had saved Gaven and momentarily overcome his mental hang-ups enough to prove to himself he wasn’t completely useless as a doctor. There was also his parents to consider. Julian needed to get them off the station now before the death blow happened. If Starfleet Medical did indeed launch a formal investigation, there was a surety that his parents would come under fire. Julian couldn’t allow that. Not after nearly three decades of going above and beyond to try and protect them.

He knew that the moment the crisis was over Zimmerman had hurried off to the Captain’s office to lay out his protests and accusations. Julian had to move quickly now.

“Stay with him. Until the Captain comes or Dr. Fisk returns. As of right now, this room is off limits to everyone else. Got it?” Julian muttered, his eyes falling onto Gaven’s resting form. His normal coloring was starting to return. Thank the Prophets. “I need to go. The captain will no doubt want me at some point. Please, take care of him.”

“Yes, Doctor.” Cheval promised knowingly.

At Cheval’s response, Julian tore his gaze off of Gaven and made a dash to his parents Quarters.

“Jules! Good news. It would seem Dr. Zimmerman has changed his mind about interviewing us. Everything is going to be alright now.” His mother Amsha reassured him.

“No. No mother, it’s not. You and father need to take your things and leave the station right now. I don’t care what excuse you use. Father’s an expert at them. Just so long as you go. Get as far away from here as possible.” Julian said nearly in a panic now that he had to look upon his mother’s face.

“What? What nonsense is this now? Why do we need to leave? What are you so hysterical about, boy?” His father demanded.

“Please!” Julian stomped his foot. “Look, something happened today in the infirmary that might have inadvertently exposed us. An accusation has been made by Dr. Zimmerman on suspicions of me being an Augment, and it’s only a matter of time before there’s an investigation.”

“Jules,” His mother dropped down into her chair in a near swoon as his father stomped around him to fan his wife and help support her as she spoke. “Of course. Of course, we will leave if that is what you think is best.”

“Jules, what did you do? You’ve been so careful all these years, and now you come here and tell me it’s you who has spilled the beans? Don’t you think you owe us a little more explanation?” His father demanded.

“Stop it, Richard. It doesn’t matter what happened. We knew this day could come.” Amsha tried to reason with her husband who was clearly gearing up for a meltdown.

“After all that nonsense the other day about your mother and me? What did you do?” Richard demanded again.

“I saved someone’s life! Damn it all! What would you have me do? Let him die? For us? For you?
What kind of man do you take me for? You know, I don’t even know why I bother. All of this is YOUR FAULT anyway. And believe it or not, I’m still trying to help you even though I shouldn’t. I should let Starfleet throw you to the wolves. But I can’t do that because in spite of everything I love you. I love you both, and I can’t stand the thought of either of you sitting in some prison somewhere because...because...I wasn’t a good enough son.” Julian finally said it.

The real sin of it all. The real thing that had made the genetic resequencing so painful to know about. “Why couldn’t you just love me the way I was? Why couldn’t you just leave me the way I was? I wasn’t hurting anyone.”

Ancient hurt overtook Julian for the first time in his life. The real thing he was angry with his parents about was now exposed for them all to see and face together.

“Listen to how ungrateful he is.” Richard Bashir muttered dispassionately. “We gave you the best life we could manage. You’ll never know what your mother and I sacrificed out of love and devotion to you. And now you shame us? Shame us for wanting our son to be the best he could be, not because you weren’t good enough; but because we knew and believed you could be more and you have become more. Look at how magnificent you are. That was our faults, too; but no matter what you say you can’t make me regret it. You want us to go, then we will go. To the other end of the universe never to come back, if it pleases you.” Richard muttered all of the passion that usually flanked his fights with his son was extinguishing now.

Julian had never seen his father look so dejected. Even his mother had gone quiet, and only her sniffling into her sleeve could be heard as the couple clung to each other in weak, heavy comfort.

“Mother, I…” Julian began.

Richard helped her to her feet as she hobbled like an old woman with Richard by her side supporting her towards her bedroom to pack. “No, Jules. No more of this. Your father and I have packing to do and things to arrange. It’s over.”

Julian watched his parents walk past him like deathly phantoms. Was it possible that he had finally gone too far?

As much as he wanted to try and approach his parents again, a call from the Captain interrupted him. It appeared the inquisition was about to begin.

Girding his loins, Julian reluctantly left his parent’s quarters and made for the Captain’s conference room. To his relief, the only people present were Benjamin and Dr. Fisk.

“Please, come in a sit-down Doctor.” Benjamin said gently.

“With, huh, all due respect to you Captain and Dr. Fisk over here I think I’d rather stand through this if you don’t mind, Sir. I’m not exactly feeling good about myself right now.” Julian admitted, a look of fruitless resolve on his face.

“As you like, Doctor. I just need to ask you some questions. But before I begin, I’m obligated to tell you that Doctor Zimmerman has lodged a formal complaint against you. He seems to be under the impression that in spite of your exemplary service record and undeniable talent as a young doctor and officer that the embolization procedure you were involved with earlier today should not have been possible. He has chosen to explain your medical success by accusing you of genetic augmentation. Now I want you to know that I’ve discussed the matter with Doctor Fisk and reviewed the medical tape of the procedure personally. Though I’m not a medical professional, I must admit that your achievement involving Dr. Ore’s care was nothing short of miraculous. Regardless of what the truth
may or may not be, I need you to know there could be a formal investigation. If there is Starfleet Medical will comb through every detail of your personal history looking for inconsistencies. I need to ask, is there anything I need to be worried about them finding?” Benjamin said at length as he stared at Julian stoically.

The moment Julian had always dreaded had finally arrived. For most of his life, he wondered what he would do and say when confronted with this question. Though Benjamin had worded it with more ambiguousness than Julian imagined, he knew what the Captain was really asking him. Was he an augmented human?

“Yes.” Julian said in a whisper.

Even as he spoke the admittance, Julian felt something in him break open like a flood gate finally releasing its load.

“Maybe you should sit down, my boy.” Fisk said coming to put a hand on Julian’s shoulder. Julian didn’t protest and almost immediately sank down into the chair Fisk had pulled out for him.

“In the summer of my fourteenth year, I was away in Brighton at a Tennis Tournament. I was competing with some of the best athletes in the world. My first international tournament. I’d been a national champion since I was ten and had only to keep going before I was the best of the best. Agatha Levouc was playing for the Americans. Impossibly tall. All the girls seemed tall that were my age. You know how it is. She was one of the most elegant players I ever saw. Not the best, but the most elegant. Watching her compete was like watching living art. She was magnificent, and I remember feeling jealous of her even though I knew I was technically better. I wasn’t due to compete until the last day. I remember feeling impatient about it. But Agatha was due to play first, and it was exciting to watch her. She fought beautifully during her match. Her opponent though caught a powerfully hard serve off her and before I knew it the most elegant player in the tournament, maybe to play in that entire year, was down. In a heartbeat, she’d absolutely shattered her knee cap. It wasn’t just a career ending injury, it also changed everything about her. I ran into her a year later while eating lunch near the sports academy. She was just as beautiful as ever, but her knee was in a permanent brace causing her to shuffle and struggle along. All, the elegance she’d enjoyed up until that point, the obvious thing that had made her so entirely special, was gone and I suddenly realized I didn’t want to be like her anymore. What I learned from that experience was that talent is fleeting. We all have to make the most of what we’re capable of while we can. I realized I didn’t want to be a Champion Tennis player anymore. I wanted to be something nobler. Something that even if I faltered someday would have an undeniable impact. So when I turned fifteen, I convinced my parents to let me take the early entrance exam for Starfleet Medical. My scores were in the top three percentile .” Julian explained.

Both Jeremiah and Benjamin exchanged glances but let Julian go on waiting for him to connect his thoughts back to the topic at hand.

“It seemed so obvious. I was going to become a doctor. Maybe even help people like Agatha find their grace again. There had been an earlier incident once when I was with my father where I watched a young girl needlessly die because there weren’t any people around with medical training. In that case, the plant capable of curing her had been growing a foot away on the cavern floor.” Julian scoffed.

“Naturally, Starfleet Medical was very interested in me. And of course, they asked for all the normal information. Family history, immunization records. Well, when I approached my parents to help me get some of my medical information for the academy, I found out my immunization records were incomplete. Something about a data server fire at the hospital I was born at. It wasn’t impossible to
get new copies, but my father needed to go through a few special channels. Everything between the

time I was two till the age of seven was missing. I didn’t think anything of it. These things do

happen. One day, huh, I was looking for something in my father’s office. I was never really allowed
to be in there when he was away from home. And that’s when I found them.” Julian leaned back in
his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

“My father had kept an encrypted file in his office drawer with a password code in place. I’ve always
been pretty good at puzzles, and I thought I’d just for the fun of it try and crack the undoubtedly
simple encryption. I was just going to leave it at that, but before I could reset the encryption and put it
away, I saw what was in the file. It was me. The real me. Pictures and records, tests, all indicating
my...Diminished capacity. When I confronted my parents about what I’d found they told me the
truth. That just before my seventh birthday they took their beautiful but painfully simple little boy
away to Adigeon Prime.” Anger was clearly laced into his tone now. Anger and self-depreciation.

“During my two-month stay there the Doctors subjected me to a series of therapies designed to
accelerate all critical neural pathway formations in the brain. The result is who you see before you
now. Nothing is original not even my charming good looks. I know. I’ve seen the pictures.
Everything was altered. My hand-eye coordination, reflexes, vision, stamina, and IQ. Even my
projected height and weight was reconfigured. I understand I was something of a cuddly child before
that.” Julian bounced his head. “But the real bitch of it all is that until that moment in my father’s
study, I never knew. Nor do I believe my parents would have ever told me. None the wiser and all
that. And of course, by the time I knew, I had already been accepted into Starfleet’s advanced junior
medical program. If I had tried to back out back then, it would have seemed suspicious, and so I
went on and haven’t told another soul about any of it till now. If all of that makes me a bad person, a
liar, a criminal; then fine. But I don’t regret any of it, and I’m tired of pretending like it isn’t apart of
who I am. Is that sufficient gentlemen?”

“Can I ask you something?” Doctor Fisk piped in suddenly. “What do you want to see come out of
this. Ideally, I mean?”

Julian raised his brow skeptically at the doctor sidelong. “Excuse me? I don’t think I understand your
meaning.”

“Well...Let me put it another way. How important is being a doctor to you?” Fisk put to him.

“I love being a Doctor. I can’t say it was my first ambition in life, but it’s been the most rewarding
thing I’ve ever done. I don’t know what I would do if I couldn’t practice anymore.” Julian admitted.

“So really what your saying is being a doctor is who you really are. You feel defined by that role.”
Jeremiah pressed.

“Yes. More than anything else.” Julian muttered meekly. “I know that sounds childish.”

“It sounds like an identity. Would you say your identity as a doctor is more important to you than
your identity as someone who has been augmented?”

“Yes.’ Julian said without hesitation. “My augmentations may give me an advantage compared to
some, but that doesn't mean I haven't worked for what I have. I've put the time in all these years. I
spent over a decade in the specialized medical and command programs so that I could live out my
ambition to heal people out on the frontier where experienced doctors are less plentiful. That is my
job, my purpose, and my life. First and foremost.”

“If my genetic resequencing bothers anyone then, I'm sorry but, they can go straight to Hell.” Julian
muttered knowing there was nothing left to lose now. “They can kick me out if necessary, detain and
jail me, but they can't keep me from being who I am. I'm a doctor.”

The last bit was spoken with such conviction and dignity that both Benjamin and Jeremiah nodded in approval.

“That's good enough for me, doctor.” Benjamin remarked compassionately. “Not to mention I'm mightily glad you feel that way. Dr. Ore might not be alive right now if your priorities were different. As far as I'm concerned nothing's changed. I'm only sorry that you've been put in such an unsavory position.”

“Thank you, Captain. I appreciate your kind words of compassion and support. I'm sorry that I've put you in such an awkward position with my predicament.” Julian sincerely apologized.

“If there aren't any further questions, Sir. I'd like to be dismissed until further action occurs. I want to spend some time on my own while I can still call Deep Space 9 my home.”

“Granted. You're dismissed, Doctor. Thank you for your honesty.”

Julian nodded curtly to them both and stood to turn and leave.

“Oh. Just a minute, Doctor.” Benjamin said suddenly just as Julian was about to open the door. “Don't start packing just yet. I don't plan to let you go anywhere.”

Julian paused and glanced back at Benjamin. “Yes. Thank you, captain. I hope you achieve your ambition.”

After that Julian turned back on his heels and left.

~@~

Eventually, Gaven woke up in the softly lit recovery room of the Infirmary. All in all, most of the terrible pain he’d been in had subsided, bringing with it blissful relief in the hazy fog of coming through.

Although it hurt to roll onto his side, Gaven did it anyway. Curling into a soft S shape as he listened to the beeps of the equipment around him. He’d spent so long in the infirmary over the last several weeks that he wasn’t surprised to find himself there. Obviously, something had happened to him, but Gaven let himself drift for a while without trying to remember the details of anything. For the first time in a long time, he felt safe. Comfortable. At peace.

As he let his mind naturally drift the vague memory of someone brushing the hair from his eyes floated across his mind. It was a pleasant, if obscure, feeling even if Gaven couldn’t for the moment place the context or the figure responsible for it. In his exhaustion, he merely focused on the good feeling until awareness slowly crept in and poured cold water on his warm and welcome peace of mind.

Julian wasn’t there.

The realization and sudden confusion over why Julian wasn’t in the room or nearby waiting for him to wake up suddenly caused Gaven to startle. His increased heart rate causing a bed sensor to go off.

Instantly a tight-lipped and worried Cheval appeared through the door of the private recovery room to Check on him.
Gaven half rolled back onto his back to peer at him. “What happened?”

“We are almost sure a fungal infection from your time on Gulba 4, got into your bloodstream through the wounds you gave yourself. As a result, you began to internally hemorrhage, and your reproductive organs began to reject and fail. Dr. Bashir managed to catch it in time and performed emergency surgery to save your life. You’ve been unconscious for the last three hours. The precarious nature of your physical state forced you out of stasis. How much do you remember?” Cheval asked.

Gaven cupped his face in his hands and rubbed slowly. “I remember putting myself into stasis. But after a while, I could tell there was something wrong. You and Julian were there with me when I first regained awareness and stayed with me while they brought me to the infirmary. Julian and Dr. Fisk argued, and...And that damn EMH program was activated.”

“Then…” Gaven suddenly started to struggle with the details. “Cheval, tell me they didn’t let that hologram perform surgery on me.”

Cheval heard the fear in Gaven’s tone and quickly moved to reassure him. “No. Dr. Bashir would not allow it. He did not agree with the EMH program’s assessment of the situation and chose to take matters into his own hands. He performed surgery to stop you from bleeding out and to preserve your reproductive system.” Cheval reminded him.

Gaven sighed and shook his head, slowly remembering more details. “Where’s the young genius now?”

“Possibly with the captain. There was a complication, and Dr. Bashir has been put in a compromising position.” Cheval admitted.


“Doctor Bashir has been accused of being a human augment. In the Federation, it is illegal for humans to be genetically tampered with. Augmented human individuals are often looked on as being untrustworthy, unstable, and unfit for roles of authority. If Dr. Bashir is an augment it may be grounds to remove him as a Starfleet doctor or other consequences might occur.” Cheval surmised.

“Yes, I remember reading up on the relationship between human genetic augmentation and earth's history. As you know, it’s relatively common practice on Oum, so it’s been interesting to learn of such open hostility about it elsewhere in the universe. Must be a human thing.” Gaven muttered.

“whose making the accusation if I may ask?”

“Dr. Zimmerman.” Cheval remarked cautiously, sensing that Gaven was gathering information for some reason.

“Really.” Gaven scoffed. “Of course it is. Since you were there, what is your opinion?”

“About Doctor Bashir?” Cheval considered quietly. “His ability to compute appears to be above standard human capabilities, and he was faster than the EMH program during the surgery showing advanced hand-eye coordination and concentration that certainly was well beyond gifted parameters. Based on this information, I would surmise that his abilities are beyond normal human capacity, but I cannot say for certain how he came to be that capable.”

I can. Gaven thought darkly.

Gaven had already noted enough minute inconsistencies in Julian’s early medical records to believe something had happened to him. Beyond that, Gaven had always suspected Julian’s advanced ability
and had caught him several times trying to hide a somewhat deeper persona than what he commonly preferred to present. But Gaven had never detected malicious decent or malice regarding any of it. Julian was ultimately a kind, caring person and if he used his abilities to his advantage, then he did so from a place of good intention and personal responsibility. The Federation would be fools to punish him now for something that had directly benefited them and countless others throughout Julian’s short but notable career.

Gaven also understood what Starfleet was so afraid of. He’d read up on the eugenics wars of Earth’s past and of the trials of certain genetically augmented humans of note. Most had become Machiavellian type criminals, amoralists, and elitists. But Julian, though he had the markings of a human ego like everyone else, had chosen to walk down a more altruistic and holistic path. Gaven understood this was because Julian’s base nature, the person he had always been before any tampering, was still there. It was still the driving force behind who he was. Gaven also suspected that the structure of Starfleet and the generally staunch and romanticized standards they observed on ethics had helped Julian anchor himself. If he ever lost that grip of taunt control, who was to say if he might be spurned to become the very thing they feared an augmented person like himself could be?

Julian loved being a doctor and also prided himself on being a Starfleet officer. How many times had he remarked to Gaven about the impact being on the Station had on him? If Julian lost his position, he would also lose his sense of home and family. It chilled Gaven to think Julian could have his sense of security threatened that way especially given what he’d recently experienced.

Gaven knew the pain of being an exile. It was a fate Julian Bashir didn’t deserve, and all of it was coming about because of Gaven. A streak of self-loathing flashed through him. Gaven realized he had to do something about this. It was his fault that Julian had been exposed.

Moving Gingerly to sit up Gaven began to pull the various sensors off his skin causing some of them to sound.

“What are you doing?” Cheval protested as he caught Gaven by the shoulder trying to discourage him.

“I need to get out of here.” Gaven muttered.

“I am sorry, doctor. I cannot allow you to do that. You are still recovering from major surgery, and you have not properly recouped your strength. Do not force me to summon Doctor Fisk.” Cheval said quickly and firmly.

“Someone has to help Julian. It’s not right that he has to go through this.” Gaven argued in frustration.

“I am sure the Captain and Doctor Fisk are formulating a plan. My impression is that no one wants Dr. Bashir to be professionally compromised.” Cheval said trying to reassure him.

“Yes, the damn Federation does like to hold onto it’s better assets.” Gaven muttered bitterly.

“Someone needs to talk to him, someone he trusts. I…”

Gaven was suddenly shushed by the sound of someone calling through the infirmary.

“Jules? Jules, my son, are you here?” It was Amsha looking for Julian.

Cheval and Gaven exchanged looks before Gaven started to stir again. For a few seconds, a silent negotiation was carried forth between them that ended with Gaven back in bed and an extra blanket being tucked around his shoulders to shroud and hide his abdominal slits. Once he was covered,
Cheval moved to the recovery room’s door and demurely stepped out into the infirmary.

“Excuse me, Madam. Who is it that you are looking for?” Cheval inquired gently.

“My son. Doctor Julian Bashir.” Amsha said hopefully. She was dressed in her traveling clothes with a headscarf draped about her face and shoulders.

“I am afraid the Doctor is not here. He assisted in an important surgery this morning, and it is possible that he is still debriefing the Captain about it. I am sure if you wait he will return.” Cheval proposed.

“Oh.” The woman said crestfallen. “No, I cannot wait for him here. My husband and I have been suddenly called away on important business back home. We’re leaving within the hour. Tell me though, if Jules is not here, is Doctor Gaven Ore available? You see he saved my son’s life and my husband and I, we were hoping to thank him.”

Cheval blinked once in rapt consideration. “Doctor Ore is here in the infirmary. As it happens, he was admitted for emergency surgery this morning and is presently recovering. Doctor Bashir is credited with the surgery’s success. If you wish, I am sure Doctor Ore would be pleased to have you visit with him. He is awake now, and I know he would enjoy making your formal acquaintance.”

Amsha’s eyes suddenly lit up at the opportunity, and she vigorously shook her head in agreement. “Yes. Please.”

“Very well. Come this way.” Cheval directed her to the recovery room and slipped back in keeping the door ajar. “Gaven, Mrs. Bashir is here and would like to visit with you.”

“Please, let her come in.” Gaven said calmly.

Cheval opened the door wider to admit Amsha in and promptly resecured the door behind them remaining outside of it for the sake of their privacy.

“Mrs. Bashir. It is a profound honor to finally meet you. Please excuse my appearance, I wish we might have met under better circumstances.” Gaven said quietly. “My name is Gaven Ore.”

Amsha approached him quietly and with profound dignity. “No. It is my honor to meet the man who saved my son. There is nothing our family can do to fully repay the debt we owe you.”

Gaven smiled kindly. “There is no debt between us, Mrs. Bashir, and even if there was, I think Julian has more then returned the favor. You see he not only saved my life today but preserved something that was very important to me. In this way, I believe we are both nearly even. Your son is an extraordinary man. You cannot imagine what he’s accomplished out here and how important he’s become to so many people. When I came to the station, Julian went above and beyond to befriend me. I admit I was difficult and reluctant at first. But, eventually, he wore me down. I’ve become a better person for it.”

Gaven’s gaze had dropped into his lap, and a fond reminiscent smile came over his somewhat haggard features.

Amsha observed Gaven with a mother’s eyes. “It must have been very lonely wherever you came from, Doctor Ore. I can see how deeply attached you are to your Jules and how important he is to you. Please, call me Amsha.”

“Amsha.” Gaven nodded. “He is very important to me. I’ve worked with your son very closely for a long time now. We’ve come to rely on each other personally as much as we have professionally.
Which is why I’m sorry. This situation you and your family find yourselves in is my fault. Julian was exposed while saving my life. I’ve known he was augmented since I saved his, though he doesn’t know I know and I’ve kept it to myself for his sake. For various personal reasons I want you to know that I’m not bothered by what Julian is even if he is bothered by it. I know that he could lose everything now and I don’t know how to make it right.”

Gaven confessed, looking genuinely remorseful.

Tears filled Amsha’s eyes. “You knew about my Jules?”

Gaven nodded slowly. “It’s been a terrible burden I’m sure for him to hide as he has. I’m also sure it’s been a terrible burden for you to be so alienated from your son. Why did you do it to him Amsha?”

It was Amsha’s turn for shame to come into her face.

“It was my fault that my husband and I could not conceive. Having children was never really very important to me because I always knew it was a statistical impossibility long before I met Richard Bashir. I was nearly forty when Richard married me. His love and devotion for me was flattering and infectious. He is a man of innocent passion and fertile imagination, you see. I know Jules doesn’t see his father as a very successful person, and to be sure there is an element of ridiculous abandon to my husband regarding his projects. But in his youth, he was a quite accomplished entrepreneur and visionary. Everyone liked him, and I had the good fortune to love him and to be loved by him in return. Richard was nearly fifteen years younger than me. I admit it often added spice to our union in surprising ways as well as hardship. Though he never pressured me about children, I could see how he longed privately to be a father. What was I to do?” Amsha revealed.

Gaven sighed, sensing where the conversation was leading and offered her his hand. “Sometimes I think Julian underestimates you and your husband, Amsha. I know he likes to think all his abilities come solely from is augmentations, but I somehow suspect that’s not completely true. The way you describe your husband, and from what I see in you I see much of Julian in you both. Tell me what happened? I would like to understand.”

Gaven extended his hand and Amsha took it in hers settling into a stool beside him.

“Jules isn’t the only member of the family to have enrolled in Starfleet. Both my grandmother and her sister were officers. Back in those days being in Starfleet really was fully about exploration. Jules comes from a long tradition of pioneering. As for my father, he wanted something more sedentary for his children, so he remained in civilian life and raised me in the traditions of our ancestors. Nevertheless, my family maintained its various connections.” Amsha eluded.

“Is that how you became connected with Adigeon Prime?” Gaven inquired.

“My grandmother helped establish an advanced medical depot there during her career with Starfleet. It’s still in operation today, I am proud to say. When my husband and I decided to try for Jules, my husband Richard used his family properties as collateral to afford the fertility augmentation that allowed me to conceive. It wasn’t considered illegal, but it cost Richard everything. I became pregnant a year later. It was our proudest moment second only to Jules birth. He was a fine baby. Richard, I remember, doted on him to no end. But when Jules started missing his infant milestones, we became concerned.” She lamented.

“Was there a medical reason for his developmental delays?” Gaven asked gently.

Amsha sighed. “Children are still a great mystery in the universe. We did nothing wrong beyond
perhaps me being so advanced in years. As far as we've come in the medical sciences, there are still many things we cannot know. At first, we thought perhaps he would simply be late to develop, but by the time Jules was two his disadvantages became clear. My husband wouldn't accept it. He nearly struck the specialist that confirmed the prognosis. It was a very difficult time for us as a family.”

“What made you both decide to take him back to Adegion Prime?” Gaven asked.

At this Amsha frowned even deeper. “Richard was always so much better with Jules than I was in those early years. But we had so little money, and it required him to be absent from home often trying to provide. For myself, I did the best I could, and we all got on. But when it was time for Jules to go to school we started experiencing problems. He didn't do well being separated from me, and it was difficult for the teachers to accommodate him. He was a very sweet and sensitive little boy. One day he came home from school with a black eye. One of his classmates had struck him and called him names. Another time, he nearly drowned on a family trip when he tried to save a duckling from falling into a creek. He didn't understand the duckling could swim. How do you think those incidents made me feel? With his father away it was my job to protect my son. The summer he nearly drowned my husband, and I made the impossible decision to go back to Gideon Prime. We never anticipated the results of that choice. A choice I insisted upon. I just wanted my little boy to be like everyone else. I didn't want him to get hurt or end up in an institution when we could no longer take care of him. Do you think all that makes me a bad mother?”

Amsha’s eyes were large and glimmered wide with unshed tears.

“I think anything done for love is not the hallmark of a bad person. I can't condone what you and your husband did, but I do understand what it's like to fear for someone you love so deeply that it makes you do seemingly impossible things. Right or wrong, Julian is who and what he is. There is no taking it back now. I know he doesn't always understand these things. Maybe because they have never been properly explained to him. I know he likely feels deeply conflicted by it all. I'm sure that he's torn between the consequences of who he is and the love he feels for the both of you. In your mutual sense of sacrifice, perhaps you are most alike. I believe Julian would sacrifice everything he's accomplished to protect the two of you. I believe he would give up everything out of love.” Gaven warned her.

“Perhaps we have been the ungrateful ones.” Amsha mused. “I don't want my Jules to lose the things that have given his life so much joy and meaning. I am not so selfish a mother as all that. Perhaps it's time for Richard and I to stop running from our mistakes. For Jules sake as much as our own. He asked us to flee from here.”

Gaven nodded knowingly. “What will you do?”

“Amsha, my love. What are you doing in here? We must hurry. The transport is docking as I speak.” Richard Bashir interrupted sticking his head through the door.

Amsha instantly stood up. “Richard, this is Dr. Gaven Ore. He is the one responsible for saving our Jules. Get in here right now and thank him.”

At her whim, Richard was let further into the room. Richard Bashir looked rushed but instantly shuffled forward to size Gaven up.

“Mr. Bashir, I…” before Gaven could finish his thought, Richard Bashir had rushed him and caught him in a tight embrace as his wife spoke to him reminding her husband that Gaven was unwell and likely didn't appreciate being manhandled just then.

Richard pulled away but gripped Gaven’s hand shaking it profusely. “Doctor, I have no words for
what you have done for our beloved son and for us. Please, if you ever need anything, you must let us know.”

“Richard, Doctor Ore says our Jules is in trouble. We must do something.” Amsha pressed him.

“Well that’s obvious, but Jules doesn't want us here. He…” Richard was promptly cut off by his wife who bore such a disapproving look that he instantly stopped talking.

“What can we do?” Richard said at length looking worried and unsure.

“You could take responsibility.” Gaven offered.

Richard shot Gaven a bewildered look before his wife calmly muttered, “He knows about Jules. He's known all this time and what he didn't know I have told him.”

“Don't worry, Mr. Bashir. I assure you that Julian knows a few secrets of his own about me. Enough to put targets on both our back. You have my complete confidence, I promise you.”

Richard sighed. “Amsha, we've been over this.”

“Richard, we've had a good life. You have been a good father and husband, but if we don't do something now, then we truly will be the villains of our son’s life. I'm tired of all of it. Aren't you?” Amsha implored him.

Richard gazed into his beloved wife's face as if searching for something. Eventually, he seemed to find it and nodded. “Alright, my love. Alright. No more lies, no more running. For Jules sake and for our own. We have had a good life, I would like our son to benefit from the same freedoms we have enjoyed all these many years.”

Gaven smiled softly. “I believe you will find Captain Sisko to be your ally in this. I would recommend you go to him first. He’s a capable man, and he'll know what to do.”
Eventually Doctor Fisk did return to the infirmary to check on Gaven and to give Cheval a chance to rest for awhile.

“Well? How are we doing? I heard you gave your watchman a little trouble earlier.” Fisk remarked checking Gaven’s vitals and the healing incision along his abdomen.

Gaven leveled a glare at Jeramiah. “I’m feeling better than I was, thank you.”

“Gooood. Want to talk about that death glare you’re giving me then?” Fisk chirped.

“You shouldn’t have let Zimmerman assist in the operation.” Gaven leveled the criticism at him.

“Hm. You’re probably right. I also shouldn’t have let Julian operate on you when he was supposed to be on medical leave. But then again, if I hadn’t let him you’d probably be in a sad state or dead my friend. I doubt any of us wanted that outcome either. As for Zimmerman, he is a qualified medical professional despite his alarmist character and I was a bit at a disadvantage with you. Now, you’re welcome to be mad at me all you want; but Julian knew what he was doing when he had Zimmerman activate the EMH program and it was his choice to intercede on your behalf when the EMH proved to be inadequate. Now, want to talk about what you’re really angry about?” Jeremiah said in his wisdom.

Gaven sighed, knowing Jeramiah was right. “I want to speak to Julian before he does something he’ll regret, but no one will let me leave and I doubt he’d be willing to come back to the infirmary right now. Jeremiah, you have to let me out of here. Please. Just for a few hours. I promise once I talk to Julian you can tie me to the bed if you want.”

“Hm, sounds like the last hospital Christmas party I attended. You’re really that worried about him, eh?” Jeremiah settled on the rolling stool and began pushing himself back and forth in it.

“Yes. I am. Are you going to let me out of here or not?” Gaven asked flatly.

Jeremiah looked over his spectacles at Gaven and wondered to himself. “It’s not your fault, you
know. Going to him now and trying to take the blame won’t really be helpful to him.”

“I just want to talk to him. Damn me for my idiocy. You know, I should have known something was wrong sooner. I should have been able to feel it.” Gaven argued.

“Well,” Jeremiah shrugged clapping his hands against his thighs. “You have been busy. Sometimes when we focus too much on taking care of others we forget to take care of ourselves. I’d like to talk with you sometime about how that infection came about. I’ve been to Gulba 4. Their science and medical facilities aren’t THAT bad.”

“Is talking to you in the future going to be a stipulation to me getting out of here today?” Gaven challenged lightly.

“No, but I still think you should visit with me in the future. It’s important to have support in your life.” Fisk said with compassion. “I do have one question for you though. Call it professional curiosity.”

“This, huh, thing with your reproductive system you go through. Is that new for you? Julian mentioned you’d been biologically augmented for reproductive purposes.” Jeremiah inquired.

“Mm. Yes. I should explain that due to the unique ways the Oum have adapted to the poly exposure we experience on our planet there is a great deal of genetic mosaicism present and most Oum are intersex. Many times augmentations can be made to help support reproductive initiatives if there is a deficiency.” Gaven explained factually.

“Faacinating. At the risk of being insensitive, may I ask what your exact reproductive layout is? I assume you still plan to perhaps have children someday since you seem to be so keen on protecting your reproductive abilities.” Fisk asked in the capacity of Gaven’s current physician.

Gaven smiled slightly. He was fully aware that alien reproduction was a fascinating study and that his seeming reproductive ambiguity generated both personal as well as professional interest.

“Theoretically, I am capable of both siring offspring and gestating them. Although the Oum visually present as a two gender binary, we’re really non-gendered. My carrier abilities were added later in my case. But plenty of Oum have one ability or the other, both or, neither. As long as base line fertility is present in one form or another, an Oum can petition for additional biological augmentation. The addition of my carrier ability creates unique hormonal phenomena as you have now seen. Normally it would be abated through the release of oxytocin and vasopressin especially if fertilization were to be achieved. My bodmate and I had only been through one reproductive cycle at the time of
his death. We unfortunately failed to conceive during that time.” Gaven explained.

“I’m very sorry for your profound loss on both fronts. The Oum seem pretty socially political as cultures go. Benjamin borrowed me the cliff notes to your cultural…novels. You do have a way with words, by the way. But I gotta say, I’m kind of surprised.” Jeremiah baited.

“How?” Gaven asked.

“Ah well from my understanding, and correct me if I’m wrong, bonded mates don’t procreate outside of their bond pairings. Now that you’ve lost your partner, I find it interesting that maintaining your reproductive abilities such as they are is so important to you. Have you thought about trying again? Maybe settling down again someday? Your not on Oum anymore, after all. And your still pretty young. I’m just saying, it might be something to think about. Someday.” Jeremiah had a way of making his point in such a manner where he encouraged a person without actually calling them out on their hang ups completely.

Jeremiah observed something soft flutter across Gaven’s feature. The look was telling enough despite that Gaven didn’t bother to offer a reply.

“As for Julian, I suppose…” Jeremiah hemmed, rubbing at his jaw. “I’ll give you half an hour to see him, make your arguments, and get your ass back into my infirmary. Alien or not, you young doctors are all the same. You all think you’re invincible. Well Sonny Jim, let me tell you. You’re not. Try to keep that in mind in the near future, please. And remember that I am an old man.”

“Agreed.” Gaven conceded.

Gaven and Jeremiah spent the next thirty minutes redressing Gaven’s surgical wound so it wouldn’t break open from his unscheduled trip and got him gingerly back into some clean clothes. Jeremiah was nice enough to provide Gaven with a jacket that had a hood on it to help him keep a low profile while he was out and gave him strict instructions that if he wasn't back in a timely manner, Fisk would sick Odo on him and have him escorted back. He also made Gaven swap out his single forearm crutch with a pair and, after seeing him walk a bit in them, agreed to extended the allotted time out to compensate for how long it would take Gaven to bumble his way to Julian’s quarters.

“Well, my boy. Godspeed and good luck.” Jeremiah said encouragingly as he finally let Gaven go. “Try to be gentle with him. He’s certainly not going to be gentle with himself.”
“I’ll do what I can.” Gaven promised.

“Mm. I hope you do. Julian doesn't know how lucky he is to have you looking out for him. Hopefully, the boy will learn. Anyway, you better get going before my better judgement kicks in. Remember, Cinderella. You get on hour and that includes commute time.”

“I know. Thank you for this.” Gaven said.

“Don’t mention it.” Fisk murmured.

Fisked watched Gaven go following him out into the edge of the infirmary and shook his head as Gaven disappeared. “If either of them had any sense at all they’d bypass conversing and get right down some good old fashioned canoodling. But then again, what do I know? I'm just a doctor.”

The whole last bit, Jeramiah said indulgently to himself once Gaven was out of earshot. Shaking his head at the idiocy of youth, he turned around and dawdled back into his office. There was much work to do.

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Julian was in his quarters numbly packing. It was a slow process mostly meant to give him something logical to focus on. Never in all his life did he feel so disconnected from anything that made sense.

When his door rang, Julian barely noticed it and bid who ever it was to enter without any thought to who it could have been.

“You…” Julian scolded deeply when Gaven appeared leaning heavily into his door frame.

“Hello, Julian. If you don’t mind I’d like to come in. You really live awfully far away from the infirmary for how much time you spend there.” Gaven muttered in a low tired tone.

“Computer, medical..” Julian was promptly cut off.
“Computer, delay that alert. Julian, Doctor Fisk gave me clearance to come here, but there’s not alot of time and I'm very tired.” Gaven muttered.

“He wouldn’t...That is the stupidest thing I’ve…” Julian protested.

Gaven rolled his eyes and held up a handwritten note in Jeremiah’s handwriting. The note read:

**TICK, TOCK.**

**[Hallpass]**

Julian groaned recognizing it as the same note Fisk used to make his students carry every time someone interrupted one of his lectures to go the bathroom.

“Get in here before you kill yourself and make my nightmare complete.” Julian muttered as he continued to scowl and backed up into the room to let Gaven in.

“I don't know what the Hell you’re thinking sometimes.” Julian began to reprimand him.

“Julian, I just wanted to talk to you.” Gaven said reproachfully leaning back against the closed entrance door.

“I don’t have anything I want to say. I just...Want to be left alone for awhile.” Julian muttered quietly.

“Are you really just going to take all of this like that?” Gaven challenged.

“Oh. I see. So you already know what’s going on. And now you’ve come to try and console me. Well don’t bother. I don’t want your pity.” Julian said in a slow dark tone.

“Julian, stop it.” Gaven said. “You need to talk about this. I need to talk about this.”

“You need? You? This isn’t happening to you. Why do you feel the need to insert yourself into
everything all the time? Why can’t you just stay out of it? Your not a human, you can’t understand the magnitude of the shit I’m in.” Julian insisted.

“I can’t understand? I can’t understand having to live in obscurity because something about me is unacceptable to everyone else? You think I don’t know what that’s like? What it’s like to have someone I love tell me constantly how special I am only to have the very things that make me special threaten everything I care about? Don’t you tell me I can’t understand it, Julian. I’ve given up everything I ever had to be true to what makes me who I am. And in spite of it all, I’m still here. I’m still me. I fought for me, and I won. You can win this too, but you have to try.” Gaven said passionately.

“No. I can’t fight this and soon it’s going to be all over. Even if by some miracle I don’t get myself courtmarshaled and booted out of Starfleet over this fiasco, the incident will become part of my official service record. Everyone will know the truth.” Julian spoke the final bit in a whisper that was filled with such intense loathing and emotional pain, that his fists balled at his sides and began to tremble.

“I know what happened today exposed you, and I also know you’re not the type of person to deny the truth. You admitted it, didn’t you.” Gaven asserted.

“If I had tried to lie it would have only made everything worse.” Julian muttered. “I do have some dignity, you know. I’m not a complete fraud.”

“You’re not a fraud, Julian.”

I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t talk about this. Julian pointed and then turned away from Gaven beginning to pace.

“Julian, don’t do this to yourself.” Gaven protested.

“You know what’s going to happen, don’t you?” Julian suddenly demanded manically. “Louis Zimmerman is going to file a report saying that, I, the illustrious Dr. Bashir, is unsuitable for computer modeling because of his suspected genetically enhanced background. Once it hits Starfleet Medical, that’s it. They’ll have no choice but to launch a formal investigation and dismiss me from service.”

“’You don’t know for sure that’s how it will play out. Your not friendless or completely to blame for what you are. You’re.. “ Julian cut him off.
“I’m what they call ‘Unnatural’ as in; Not Found In Nature. The court of public opinion however isn’t nearly so kind or scientifically correct. I’ll in essence be labeled a freak...A monster, even. A creature to be suppressed, not encouraged or supported. None of the good I’ve done will matter now, none of the good I could still do…” Finally Julian began to lose his composure as lost tears began to well in his eyes.

For someone who had just been through life threatening surgery and had only just woken up Gaven moved remarkably fast as we swiftly came at Julian and pulled him into the tightest hug he could manage without seriously hurting himself.

“I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry.” He consoled into Julian's ear twisting them rhythmically side to side.  “You’re not a monster, Julian. What happened to you wasn’t your fault and what’s happening to you now isn’t fair. The things you’ve accomplished do matter. They matter to me and to your friends and to the countless others you’ve helped, protected, and saved. It’s alright not to be strong, but it’s not alright for you to give up. Not on yourself.”

“I just want to pretend this isn’t happening.” Julian said gutterally, too vulnerable at the moment to pull out of Gaven’s grip.

“I know. We’re going to figure this out. I promise.” Being taller, Gaven cradled Julians face into his neck as they swayed letting the younger man freely weep.

Gaven smoothed down Julian’s disorganized hair, compartmentalizing his own fatigue and remorse to focus on soothing the other man. Gaven focused on their mutual breathing syncing his own with Julian’s in an effort to calm them both. When he felt Julian begin to settle and regain some control over himself, Gaven reluctantly loosened his grip.

“Julian, I’m sorry but I don’t have alot of time. Fisk threatened to set Odo on me if I didn’t return to the infirmary in a timely manner. I know you don’t want to talk about yourself right now but I am willing to listen and to give you as much time as I can.” Gaven eased Julian away from him now, knowing that if they were going to talk further Gaven needed to sit down.

Julian scoffed at his own insensitivity to the state of the other man’s health and helped him over to the sofa.

“Jeremiah would do it to. And I wouldn’t blame him. You do have one Hell of a constitution.” Julian remarked, rubbing the dampness from his face and eyes with the butt of his hand.
“What can I say, I’m an alien.” He shrugged.

“It’s ironic that this all happened. Here I was planning to confess to you earlier and instead you’re the one reassuring me about who I am. Did you always know or did our extensive time together after the attack tip you off?” Julian asked.

“I’ve had my suspicions for a long time. You a good actor Julian, but your not THAT good. Ultimately that’s all they were until you were attacked. You and I both know that the assault you experienced should have killed you and in short order. When I actually got you stabilized and started looking at your medical records it became more obvious.” Gaven admitted.

Julian nodded.

“What was that you said the day you left for Gulba 4?” Julian asked rhetorically. “About making it all look alot harder to pull off than it actually is for someone like you or I. I knew you suspected me back then.”

“Does it matter now?” Gaven asked gently.

“No. You’ve kept my secret all this time and I’m grateful to you.” Julian said quietly.

“I should probably tell you something.” Gaven said after a long pause. “Earlier today's your mother came looking for you in the infirmary and we happened to meet.”

Julian had been silently enjoying sitting there with Gaven, until the mentioning of his mother caused him to stiffen as new dread invaded his mind.

“Oh? And what exactly did the two of you have to say to each othe?.” Julian was afraid to hear the answer just then.

“Well, we mostly talked about you. Some of the important things you’d done and were still doing. How important you were to people here and how important you’ve become to me. I told her that I knew you’d been augmented and then...She proceeded to explain to me how it came about. The rationale that lead up to they’re decision to bring you to Adigeon Prime.” Gaven confessed.
“She what?” Julian’s voice caught in the back of his throat as it nearly closed on him as a painful expression slid over his features. “Why...Why would she tell you about that? She doesn’t even know you.”

“Sometimes all we want is for someone to listen to our side of the story. Right or wrong. Your mother is an intelligent, bright, and caring woman. Her love for you and your father is profound. I see much of you in her. You have all the better qualities of both your parents mixed in with your own. I think she realized she could open up to me and tell the truth without fear of judgement.” Gaven observed.

“Well maybe you’ve missed your calling then and don’t compare me to them like that, if you please. I’m sure she painted quite a convincing picture for you. All love and pity. How convenient of her as a mother. I suppose she left out how ashamed she and my father were to have...have a damaged child. A little boy who was supposed to carry on the honorable family name but who couldn’t read or spell it correctly. I’m sure she left out what a burden I was on the family to care for and educate and how it was my fault for being so stupid. You know when they took me away to Adigeon Prime they didn’t even tell me why? They took me there and left me. Swapping me out like a defective piece of equipment. It wasn’t exactly painless you know. As my IQ and cognitive abilities grew, I became more and more aware. It was the awareness that was the most painful of all and still is.” Julian vented venomously.

Gaven listened calmly knowing it was important for Julian to be able to get it all out. That this was the beginning of his healing process.

“They were never ashamed of you Julian, they were only ashamed of themselves. What they did was wrong and they know that. They know that they can never take what they did to you back and they know that in trying to liberate you for your own sake they lost you in the process. Who is to say who is more to blame in it all? It was misguided at best, criminal at worst. They understand the price you’ve had to pay. The price your still paying for their poor decisions.” Gaven mused gently.

“So they’ve won you over, have they? I suppose father wasn’t too far behind mother. They rarely go anywhere alone. Well, I’m glad they were able to unburden themselves before they left. At least some of us might enjoy a little peace of mind out of this despicable business.” Julian snorted lightly, it was almost as if Gaven was defending his parents subtly.

“I don’t know. They’re connected to you. A part of me can’t help but like them. I certainly wouldn’t call them bad people compared to many. I know you have a very complicated relationship with them Julian and I know from personal experience how it’s hard to love people who you also feel have betrayed you. One feeling doesn’t exactly cancel out the other. Your not a bad person either for still loving them in spite of their actions. And you haven’t been a bad person either to protect them all this
time. But Julian, at some point you have to let blame fall on the proper shoulders. You have to let people face their own consequences for the choices they’ve made. You can’t live for other people without forfeiting up your own life in the process. No matter what they’ve done and why, I can’t believe your parents want that for you.” Time was growing short, and Gaven wanted to hit his point home.

“Really? They’ve been complicit in the cover up of my augmentations for decades. They could have come forward any time but they didn’t they just expected me to go along covering for them. What they want for me is to help make them look better than they really are. But it doesn’t matter now. They’ve gone. I saw their names on the earlier transport manifest. Now all that’s left for me to do is face the music. If I want it done as cleanly as possible then the best thing I can do is simply resign. That would at least avoid a dramatic trial. Either way, this is the end of it. It ends here with me. I’m sure I’ll find a way to carry on. Somehow. You should leave. I really would like to be alone for awhile before I go to the captian with my resignation from Starfleet. It’s only a matter of time now and I’m not done packing.”

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Ultimately, Gaven had no choice but to leave. Both men knew Jeremiah wasn’t a man to be trifled with no matter how casual his threats and Gaven really did need to be in the infirmary at least for another day or two.

When he arrived back, both Jeremiah and Benjamin were waiting for him.

“Just the man I wanted to see.” Gaven muttered.

“Yeah, how about you see him lying down for now.” Fisk muttered grabbing Gaven under the shoulder just before his legs gave out. “Upsadaisy. Captain, if you’d be so kind.”

With Benjamin’s help Gaven was ushered back into his recovery room and put to right before Fisk would let him continue their conversation.

“Well Doctor, how did it go?” Benjamin asked seriously referring to Julian.

Gaven exhaled and shook his head. “He’s in bad shape. He’s got himself convinced his life in Starfleet is over. I don’t know if he’s even going to try and defend himself. Given everything that’s happened to him recently, I’m just not convinced he has the strength. Captain, is the probable
“I don’t know yet.” Benjamin said honestly. “Someone does need to be held accountable but it comes down to who should be accountable for what. There’s no evidence that I can find that Dr. Bashir knew about the augmentation before he was admitted into starfleet medical. That’s going to be sticking point number one and I don’t know that there’s any way to prove one way or another what the truth is.”

“The second sticking point is why he didn’t come forward once he did know. Age of consent in Starfleet is seventeen. But I think we could safely argue that being so young and knowing the larger consequence to both himself and his family, Julian’s state of duress was enough to make him believe he had to conceal the truth from the authorities and from everyone else around him.” Jeramiah offered.

“It helps matters that’s his service record has been so exemplary.” Benjamin added.

“And that this is considered a time of war. The bare truth is, Starfleet has directly and consistently benefited from Julian Bashir’s contributions both during his time at the academy and from his work and placement on Deep Space 9. This stations is strategically important to just about everyone involved in the Dominion Conflict. The necessity of his skills in the field and current environment may be enough to mandate that an exception be made.” Fisk theorized.

“Unbelievable.” Gaven scoffed. “So you're telling me that as long as it’s convenient and advantageous to Starfleet to keep Julian where he is doing what he’s doing, they’d just be willing to overlook all the rest?”

“That’s not an impossible outcome.” Benjamin confirmed.

Gaven pressed his lips. “You know, although I really like most of you as individuals. I have to admit, Starfleet continues to elude my complete sympathies. No offense and with all due respect.”

“None taken.” Both Ben and Jeremiah said in unison understanding what he meant by the remark.

Just then Dax broke in on the Com.

“Im sorry to disturb you captain but the Bashir’s are here demanding to speak with you and I’ve got
Rear Admiral Bennett, Judge Advocate General, long distance waiting to conference with you. Ben what’s going on around here?” Dax asked suspiciously.

“I’ll debrief everyone of the situation later. Tell them all I’m on my way.” At that Benjamin said his goodbyes and excused himself.

“Well,” Fisk observed. “Let the games begin. You wouldn’t happen to be responsible for the Bashir’s suddenly wanting to talk, would you?”

“Don’t look at me, I’m just a Doctor.” Gaven muttered, parroting back one of Fisk’s famous phrases which neither really confirmed or denied the level of his involvement.

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“Captain, really really must have a word with you. It’s about Jules.” Richard Bashir insisted dramatically when Benjamin approached them in the waiting area outside his conference room.

“Of course, both of you please come with me.” Benjamin ushered them all into his private conference room and shut the door. “First and foremost I must warn you both that I will be required to disclose anything you tell me from this point on to Starfleet. So I warn you to be mindful of what you decided to say. Now what can I do for you?”

Richard and his wife exchanged looks and quietly negotiated between each other before Richard step forward. “Whatever it is you’ve heard about our Jule...Our Julian, is true. Also, it is my fault. Julian shouldn’t be held accountable for something we made him do.”

“I’m afraid your going to have to be more specific about what your talking about, Mr. Bashir. For the record.” Benjamin replied quietly.

A look of frustration passed over Richard’s bashir’s features. “Look at this. I come in here to confess and the man acts like he doesn’t know what I’m talking about.”

“Richard, please.” Amasha coaxed. “Captain, we have spoken with our son as well as Dr. Ore about the incident that happened this morning. We know what our son is being accused of. We don’t want our child to suffer anymore than he already has because of us. Because of our weakness.”
“I see.” Benjamin replied. “I’ve taken the liberty of conducting my own investigation into the situation and I’ve contacted representatives of Starfleet to help us maneuver through this issue. Admiral Bennett is on the line now waiting to talk to me. With your consent I would like to include him in our conversation.”

Reluctantly the Bashir’s agreed.

A moment later a projection of Admiral Bennett appear in a cascade of blue light from the dimmed conference room.

“Admiral Bennett, May I introduce you to Mr. Richard Bashir and his wife Amsha Bashir. Doctor Julian Bashir’s parents. Richard, Amsha; this is Rear Admiral Bennett, Judge Advocate General.” Benjamin said making the introductions.

“Good evening. Let me first explain to everyone what my role is here. A report has been submitted to me preemptively by the captain here regarding an accusation that’s been put forth involving Doctor Julian Bashir and the possibility that he is an illegally and genetically augmented human who has been unlawfully practicing medicine in the capacity of a Starfleet medical officer. I’ve taken a statement from the accusing party and reviewed the circumstances in which the accusation was brought forward. At this point, it is my duty to continue to assess this case of which I have been empowered by the Judge Advocate Corps to make a formal judgement on. I am prepared at this time to hear additional statements all of which will be used to determine Doctor Bashir’s guilt or innocence.” The Admiral explained.

“We understand.” Amsha nodded along with her husband. “What do you need to know?”

“First and foremost, did you or someone's else associated with you knowingly and illegally have your child genetically altered?”

“Yes. We touched upon family connections we had on Adigeon Prime and just before Jules seventh birthday took him there for genetic treatments. It was our intention never to tell Julian about it. He seemed to have little to no memories associated with who he was before the accelerated critical neural pathway formation therapies were done. Although we had no way of knowing how successful the treatments would be, we admit we knew it was illegal and that we tried to hide what we had done after the fact.” Amsha confessed.

“It was my fault that Jules found out about it. I love my son, Admiral, and inspite of what everyone
probably thinks I was proud of him always. Not just after he came back from Adigeon prime but since the day he was born.” Richard said proudly and passionately.

“And yet you still allowed him to be augmented.” Benjamin pointed out.

“Yes. Yes we did. We had been to dozens of specialists over the years. I had to sit there from the time Julian was two years old and have these doctors tell me my son would never advance beyond a elementary remedial level. I was told I had to accept that he would always struggle, always be less than his peers. I admit I couldn’t accept that. That I wanted something better for my boy than that.” Richard said defensively.

“We knew the risks involved. We had heard the horror stories of children being damaged further by their genetic augmentations. But the Doctors on adigeon Prime were different. They explained to us why these other failed attempt were so common and showed us many examples of their own successes in the genetic augmentation sciences. All we wanted was a son who would have the benefit of a normal average life. We didn’t realize how far the Adigeon’s would go and by the time it became evident it was to late. After we brought him back home he was a different person and suddenly I wasn’t afraid for my son in the same way I had been before. Jules was always a happy child but after the augmentations I knew he was now able to experience and participate in the world in a way he never had been able to before. I can’t regret giving that to my son even if it meant losing him in the process. Please don’t punish him for what we turned him into.” Amsha pleaded.

“You want to know the truth? See it for yourself. It all here. Every test. Every examination report. Every significant personal moment from the time Jules was born until the we took him away.” Richard reached around his neck and removed a decorative necklace he wore under his clothes revealing it to be an encrypted data file. “I kept this with me after Jules found it and confronted me with it. I had planned to come home that day to celebrate my sons acceptance into Starfleet Medical, and instead I was confronted with an angry son keen on disowning me as a father. I love my son Admiral, even knowing how much he hates me, I love him. That is not a crime.”

Richard passed the data file over to Benjamin who, after Richard unlocked it, made a duplicate to be transmitted to the Admiral for review.

“In light of this additional evidence I need to take a few hours to review and assess its contents. But I would like to take this time to remark on some things first. We in the Federation are not in the habit of punishing children for the sins of their loved ones. If what you say is true, then it will be factored into my final judgment regarding this case. What is known at this time is that you and your wife knowing and criminally had your minor son genetically enhanced. You have admitted to this openly. Had you stayed on Adgieon Prime, a neutral planet outside of Federation jurisdiction, you may have been able to escape prosecution. As for, Doctor Julian Bashir, Starfleet does actively acknowledge his many positive contributions to the Federation both past and present and we are not unsympathetic to the difficult position he has found himself in all these years, however, the fact remains that at
current it is against Starfleet regulation for any augmented human to be a service member in any field; but particularly in field of medicine. As of now you are to be held in the care of Captain Benjamin Sisko until determination of consequence can be made. I appreciate your full and complete cooperation. I shall re-convene this meeting in exactly two hours time. Admiral Bennett, Out.” At that, the Admiral’s image faded and the light came up in the room.

“I knew it! Guh, we are sunk for sure. We come to you in good faith that coming forward will save our son and instead we just hand over the ammo necessary to shoot him with.” Richard bashir lamented grabbing at his ears and sinking further down unto the his chair.

“Captain what does this mean? Do you think they will decide to court martial my Julian? Isn’t there anything else we can do? Please. I beg you we can’t let this happen to him. I know Julian wouldn’t want us to drag this through the courts but there must be some way we can appeal to them?” Amsha pleaded.

“I admit it’s not looking good. I can’t promise either of you anything but I need you both to hold on. This isn’t over yet. Julian may not be capable of fighting for himself but luckily he may not have to.” Benjamin said cryptically.
This chapter concludes the "Augment" story arch present in season 5 and famously connected to the episode "Dr. Bashir, I presume." Enjoy. We're almost to the end of Act 1.

“What do you mean, Julian has been accused of being a genetically enhanced human?” Dax demanded her eyes going buggy as she sat with the senior staff in their emergency briefing.

“It’s that Zimmerman bloke, isn’t it? Everyone with eyes can see he’s been gunning for Julian since he got here.” Miles remarked, as he tried to process what they were being told.

“How did the situation come about, Captain and is it true?” Odo asked in his typical gravely and inquisitive tone.

“Of course it’s not true. Zimmerman’s just trying to make waves. He’s angry that Starfleet has taken over his cherished hologram project and that Julian was considered for the LMH program model and not him. He’s got to be one of the most petty wormy men I’ve ever met.” Miles emphasized with his arms crossed.

“I’m sorry to say, but there’s just no getting around it. The accusation is true. Dr. Bashir and his parents have confirmed it. Julian Bashir was exposed this morning when a medical emergency involving Dr. Ore arose and Julian intervened in order to perform emergency surgery to save his life.” Benjamin explained.

“What?” Kria asked. “Is Dr. Ore alright?”

“Yes. Dr. Bashir was able to use his advanced ability to succeed where even the EMH program would have failed.” Benjamin said.

“So for saving Gaven’s life Julian is being rewarded by having his career jeopardize. Well how do
“Genetic augmentation is illegal. I like Doctor Bashir, but if he knew and concealed it all this time then he has brought considerable dishonour onto himself.” Worf could feel his wife’s death glare from across the table but to his credit managed to ignore it.

“What are we talking here? I can’t say I’m very familiar with this aspect of Starfleet regulation.” Kira said wrinkling her nose.

“I’m sure most of you are familiar with the Eugenics Wars of the 20th century on earth.” Benjamin offered.

“If I remember correctly most all forms of Genetic Engineering were banned by the 22nd century. Even when it came to research that had the potential to cure major life threatening illnesses.” Dax provided.

“Well that sounds extreme.” Kira remarked. “Everything was banned?”

Dax nodded.

“The general fear during that era was that if we didn’t ban the technology we’d get more Khan’s as a result and our society would ultimately destabilize. There were well known critics of this philosophy, one of the most notable being the notorious geneticist doctor Erik Soong. His perspective was that it was Humanity’s inability to use the technology responsibly and not the fault of the technology itself.” Benjamin explained.

“The federation lightened up a bit in the 24th century and started allowing limited genetic augmentation in cases of certain genetic medical conditions. But by that time, the Federation drew a line when it came to augmented service members in Starfleet. Specifically in roles like medicine which required a higher level of moral and ethical faith and responsible authority. There were some notable exceptions but if memory serves most of those cases ended badly for everyone involved. Nowadays, the standard is still that medical personnel can only utilize genetic therapies in cases where the genetic defects present could seriously handicap or kill the individual. Most legal corrections are done in vitro these days.” Dax went on.

“What’s the worst case scenario here, Captain?” Odo asked.
“Simple. Julian Bashir will face a formal court martial and be dishonorably discharged from service. He’d also likely have his medical license revoked.” Benjamin warned.

“Do you really think that they’d go that far?” Kira asked, her tone full of alarm and confusion.

“It certainly is within their power.” Benjamin confirmed.

“If Julian ever got his medical license stripped it would destroy him. His whole life is built around being a Doctor. It’s not just his profession, it’s his identity.” Dax protested.

“What can we do if anything?” Worf asked.

“What if we leverage Julian’s work with Dr. Ore on the Dominion defense initiatives? No one can argue that it hasn’t been Julian’s pet project all this time and if the Federation is so worried about how brilliant he is then can they really afford to lose his contributions now?” Kira strategized.

“What’s Julian got to say about any of this? He should be here briefing with us. I don’t care if he’s still on medical leave or not. This is his life everyone is playing at.” Miles protested.

“I’ve already spoken to him and he seems...Resigned to the realities of his situation. He doesn’t want to fight with Starfleet about it. If he’s going to be dismissed he would rather go quietly and graciously and I can’t say I blame him.” Benjamin revealed.

“What you mean to say is that he’s bloody well committed to feeling sorry for himself and just letting this all happen to him. Like he deserves it or something. Well let me tell you all something, Julian Bashir is one of the most noble and forthright people I’ve ever known. To even suggest he’s at risk of being in the same category as someone like a tyrannical nut job dictator like Khan Noonien Singh is an insult and a joke. Besides being a little big for his britches sometimes and a little too charming for his own good, Julian doesn’t have it in him to abuse his abilities such as they may be. His personal and professional ethics are too strong and Starfleet should KNOW that about him by now. I don’t care what Starfleet regulations say, they’re wrong to do this to him.” Miles protested passionately.

“Kira’s right. Making a case that Julian is just too valuable to lose may be the only option we have. Even with all the work that’s already been done, I’m just not convinced we can finish out the ploy inoculation research without him.” Dax said sincerely.
“That’s a good point. We can’t complete the research without him.” A light suddenly came into Benjamin’s eyes as an idea struck him.

The briefing came to an abrupt end after that. Odo was charged with securing Julian’s parents under house arrest, while Kira and Dax were asked to get an official read on how far along the inoculation project really was. Everyone else was excused and given strict orders not to confront Julian about the situation until it was concluded.

After everyone had departed, Benjamin headed back to the infirmary to see Gaven.

Not surprisingly Gaven was asleep when Benjamin arrived and had been sleeping most of the last few hours. At this point it was the best thing for him, but when Benjamin stepped into the recovery room Gaven stirred.

“Hello again, Captain. What...What can I do for you?” Gaven asked in a groggy fashion.

“I’m sorry to have to disturb you, Doctor; but this couldn’t wait. You may be the best chance we have at saving Julian Bashir’s career.” Benjamin said, settling into a stool so he could go ever his idea.

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Precisely two hours after the initial conference with Admiral Bennett, Benjamin was back in his conference room with a wheelchair bound Gaven waiting with him when Bennett came back through the Channel.

“Welcome back, Admiral. Might I formally introduce to you Dr. Gaven Ore-Oum. As you know Dr. Ore has been working with us to help create new and secret defense initiatives against the Dominion and their forces.” Benjamin remarked.

“Yes. I am aware of who Dr. Ore is and the sensitive nature of his position on Deep Space 9.” Bennett replied evenly.

“The Captain has told me, Sir, that you are hearing statements regarding Julian Bashir’s case and given my unique working relationship with him I would like to take this opportunity to offer my contribution to his situation. Presently, Captain Sisko will send you a complete transcript of a conversation that occurred between myself and Amsha Bashir. As you probably know from my dossier, I have many skills one of which being a eidetic memory and perfect recall. I think you will
find that this conversation confirms other details that have come accessible and that are relevant to this case.” Gaven said patiently, allowing time for Bennett to skim through the transcript.

“I see.” Bennett said. “Was there something else you planned to say to me Dr. Ore.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. In the months I’ve been on this station I’ve had the benefit of seeing up close and personally how Starfleet tends to conduct itself. Being an alien not affiliated until recently with the Federations policies, procedures, and standards you might imagine that being here and working with Starfleet’s people has been something of an education. I’ve also had time to see first hand what it is the Federation and its many allies are up against when it comes to the Dominion. To summarize for you, Admiral. You need all the help you can get. A fact I know you are intimately aware of. The Federation is losing their fight against the Dominion, but they haven’t won yet. It’s directly because of dedicated officers like Dr. Bashir and Captain Sisko here that this station has managed to hold its ground as well as it has. I don’t mean to tell you how to do your job, Sir, but I guarantee you if you break up the team that’s developed here you’ll regret it the rest of your career if not the rest of your life. The Dominion is coming for you all and that is a fact.” Gaven said.

Admiral Bennett narrowed his eyes at Gaven and glanced at Sisko.

“Don’t look at me Admiral. You DID say you were taking relevant statements.” Benjamin remarked.

Bennett looked back at Gaven. “No person is above the law, Dr. Ore. I understand this is war time and I am sympathetic to how integral Dr. Bashir has been to the initiatives being formulated on Deep Space 9. The purpose of this investigation is not to criminalize Dr. Bashir for what has been done to him but to discern who is responsible for the circumstances around his genetic augmentation.” Bennett scolded.

“You have people willing to take that responsibility. The Bashir’s have confessed to what has been done and laid plain their reasons for doing so. They are prepared to be held accountable. So let them be accountable. Julian Bashir is not to blame and if anyone is responsible for him choosing to omit the truth of his genetic status, then I suggest Sir that you take a good long look in the mirror. I’ve seen Julian Bashir’s service record. Among other things he’s accomplished specifically against the Dominion, he was able to create a anti-viral treatment against the Blight that has possibly saved an entire species from gradually being obliterated by a Dominion crafted disease. He's worked with the Jem’Hadar trying to break them of their dependence on Ketracel-White. More recently he’s helped save numerous lives on this station including my own on a few different occasions and in spite of the horrific attack perpetrated against him by a changeling interloper he has continued to maintain his ethical and professional objectivity. Julian Bashir has repeatedly gone above and beyond to protect Starfleet interests, and now your telling me that you might possibly let fear get in the way of protecting him?” Gaven argued.
“Allow me to make my position clear.” Gaven said at length, forcing himself out of the wheelchair. Dr. Fisk had insisted he remain in to stand before the visage of the admiral and slam his point home. “If Starfleet doesn’t show an appropriate level of leniency and circumstantial consideration in this case then I will have no choice but to retract my own cooperation regarding Federation interests. Bottom line, Doctor Julian Bashir and I are a package deal. I won’t continue to develop my research without him.”

A long silence filled the space as the Admiral and Gaven stared each other down. At length, Bennet finally sighed. “I need to conference with some people before I can make it official but if Mr. and Mrs. Bashir are willing to accept responsibility for their role in the augmentation of Dr. Bashir then I think that will prove to be sufficient. Provided of course that Dr. Ore is also willing to resume his intellectual contributions as a guest of contributing expert on Deep Space 9.”

“I agree.” Gaven remarked.

“I’ve been given license to speak for the Bashir’s as well. They are also willing to agree to your terms.” Benjamin supplied.

“Very well, gentleman. Then we will reconvene in the morning with my final judgement. Admiral Bennett, Out.”

Once the Admiral was gone, Benjamin helped Gaven ease back down into his wheelchair.

“That was a very brave thing you just did.” Benjamin remarked. “You don’t get much higher then Bennett when it comes to Starfleet Command.”

“Do you think we did it? Will he hold to his own conditions?” Gaven asked, wincing as he adjusted himself.

“Bennett is a straightlaced type. He knows the current laws overseeing the stipulations about human augments is outdated and as you so correctly pointed out this is a time of war. Frankly, in the grander picture of human events I don’t think anyone will really care about Julian Bashir’s genetic status as long as we win against the Dominion and frankly I’m glad to have an excuse to keep you both with us and on our side. If he says how it’s going to be done, then that’s the way it’ll be.” Benjamin reassured him.

“Good. Captain, I need to ask a favor of you.” Gaven said after a moment of consideration.
“What is it Doctor?” Benjamin asked.

“I don’t want Julian to know my role in this. Let him think it was all Bennett’s idea. I’ve meddled enough in his life recently. This is something he doesn’t need to know about.” Gaven request.

“As you like, Doctor. You have my word.” Benjamin agreed.

~@~

Early the next morning Julian awoke feeling more miserable then he’d felt since the attack on his life. Now that his packing was done and his parents were safely off the station, Julian prepared himself for what he was about to do. He was going to march it Benjamin Sisko’s office and humbly resign his commission from Starfleet. While it was one of the most depressing thoughts of his life, Julian knew he had to do it. For his own sense of dignity.

Dressed in monochrome gray that matched his mood, Julian eventually took a deep breath and headed for the Captain’s office. To his mild surprise though when he arrived he was promptly redirected to the officers conference room where Benjamin was actively speaking to someone.

Upon his approach he was immediately encouraged to join Benjamin and the other assembled figures.

“Please com in, Doctor. We were just talking about you.” Benjamin said hastily.

As Julian turned to see who else was in the room his breath caught when he saw both is parents standing a a foot or two in front of Benjamin.

“Mother…Father. What, what are you both still doing here on the station? Captain? What the Hell is going on here?” Julian muttered in disbelief.

“Jules, please. Stay calm. It’s all right.” His mother interjected. “The Captain will explain.”
“Admiral, allow me to introduce Dr. Julian Bashir. Doctor, this is Rear Admiral Bennett, Judge Advocate General.” Benjamin said making swift introduction.

Julian felt his mouth go dry as his head began to spin but to his credit he held it together. “Admiral.”

“Doctor.” The distinguished projected man said nodding to him.

“I’m sorry, you’ll have to excuse me, but really, what the Hell is going on here?” Julian asked nervously.

“Steady, Doctor.” Benjamin encouraged him, stepping closer. “Your parents came to see me yesterday. They explained the situation about your genetic background. I have since contacted Admiral Bennett to relay their information.”

“We’ve just confirmed an agreement which will allow you to retain both your commission and your medical practice.” The Admiral said satisfactorily.

“But...How?” Julian muttered, in a haunted voice.

At the sound of his distress both Amsha and Richard half turned to peer at their son.

“I’m going to prison.” Richard said bluntly with a shrug.

“What!?!?” Julian proclaimed clearly gobsmacked at this announcement. “Father, no…”

“Ten years. With good behavior Admiral Bennet thinks I’ll have a good chance at getting my sentence significantly reduced after the first two years. It’s a minimum security penal colony in New Zealand. It’ll practically be like going into early retirement.”

“No. You can’t do this!” Julian protested looking from his father to Admiral Bennett.

“It was your father’s suggestion, Doctor. And, frankly it’s more than lenient. I can guarantee he won’t serve more than five years in the grand scheme of things.” Bennett reasoned. “He pleads guilty to illegal genetic engineering and, in exchange, your mother will be given immunity and you’ll be
“Absolutely not. How dare you leverage my parents against each other like that. I…” Julian was cut off by the tired voice of his father.

“Please Jules, let me do this for you and for your mother. Julian,” His father emphasized his son’s preferred name, catching his rapt attention. “Nobody coerced us into this. This was my decision and your mother agrees. I’m the one who put up my land holding to be able to send you to Adigeon Prime. I knowingly took you there and allowed the Doctors to change you. I see now that it’s time I and your mother take responsibility for our actions and since the money trail starts and ends with me, its right and good that I take on the bigger burden between us.”

“Julian, please. Let your father do this for you. Let him make this final sacrifice, for love.” Amsha implored him placing her hands on both her husband and her son’s back linking them all together in a symbolic manner that they hadn’t enjoyed since Julian was a small child.

“But...A minimum of five years? Ten respectively? I’m sorry, but isn’t that a bit harsh even for what they’ve done?” Julian appealed moving toward Bennett.

“I don’t think so.” Bennett maintained firmly. “Two-hundred years ago we tried to improve the species through DNA resequencing. And what did we get for our trouble? The Eugenics Wars. For every Julian Bashir that can be created there is a Kahn Singh waiting in the wings—a superhuman—whose ambition and thirst for power have been enhanced along with his intellect. The law against genetic engineering is meant to provide a firewall against such men, and it’s my job to keep that firewall intaked. With that said, I am willing to concede the limitation of the current mandates. Mandates that are not designed to accommodate for a threat such as the Dominion. The bottom line is that I can concede that right here, right now, you are needed Doctor. We can’t afford to lose those like yourself who have shown such exemplary dedication to the greater good. Mark me when I say, that if things were different, I don’t know that this opportunity would be afforded to you or your father. But nevertheless, I’ve made my offer.”

At that Bennett looked back at Richard. “Do you accept?”

Looking from his son and wife to to Bennett, Rashard Bashir cleared his throat and squared his shoulders. “Yes.”

A gleam of professional satisfaction once again came over Bennett’s features. “Then report to my office at Starfleet Headquarters once you arrive on earth.”
At that, Richard Bashir nodded at Bennett and they all watched him disappear.

Julian instantly pressed his hands to his face inhaling deeply in an effort to suppress his emotions as he felt Benjamin swiftly come up behind him as he headed for the exit.

“Take your time.” Benjamin said softly before he left the tro to grieve and process what had just transpired.

“I can’t believe this is happening.” Julian said, sniffling as both his parents came to heavily embrace him.

“Julian, my love. It’s for the best.” His mother reassured him pressing her lips to his temple.

“You take this now boy, and you keep it safe.” Richard pressed the data file he’d been carrying around since their falling out and pressed it into his palm. “It’s your now. Your truth.”

“Now, Julian. We need you to be strong. No more tears for your father and I. This is not the end. This is just the beginning. Whatever happens now you no longer need to fear being who and what you are. That person is and always was there. Here inside you. Underneath everything else.” His mother said laughing through her tears as she patted him affectionately on the chest.

“We love you, Son and we promise to do right by you. Now you go and do right by us. Your life is what you make of it now. Go on. The captain has arranged for us to leave on the evening transport. We hope you will be there to see us off.” His father muttered, trying hard to contain his own emotions.

It was in this moment that Julian saw what Gaven had seen in his parents. The undeniable link that existed between him and them. It was a link that had always been there and could never be removed or destroyed.

“I see now, Gaven. I see them, in me.” He whispered to himself hugging them close once more and feeling a sense of connection and gratitude he never imagined was possible.

~@~

A handful of hours later, Julian found himself escorting his parents to the docking bay. For the first
time since Julian had been a teenager the threesome sat and had dinner in peace. Casually sharing amusing family stories and gentle easy banter. It was as if they’d all been transported back to a more innocent time, before the weight of the truth had fragmented their family life. None of them talked about or eluded to what had transpired until it was time to separate and go their separate ways.

“Good-bye, Julian.” Amsha said serenely as she embraced her son for a final time in the docking bay.

“Good-bye, Mother.” Julian replied peacefully as he gripped her arms before he let her go.

“Well…” Richard interjected from the higher platform. “I guess I’ll see you in a couple of years.”

Julian smiled softly and stepped up onto the platform to join his father, equalizing them once more. “Oh, I’m sure they have, huh...Visiting hours at your facility. Maybe I could, um…”

Richard cut his son off by compassionately taking him by the upper arms and squeezing in a comforting gesture.

“That would be most welcome.” He said pulling his son into a only slightly awkward hug as he pecked him on the check and offered his open arm to his beloved wife, pulling her up gently with him on the platform so the could walk arm in arm.

“Father,” Julian called after him suddenly, composed tears visible in his eyes. “Thank you.”

Smiling at his son and in typical Richard fashion, Julian’s father replied with a pithy joke though it lacked all of the arrogance and pretense it would have had in the past. “Here, just think--I may usher in a new renaissance in landscape architecture. I’ll certainly have time to work on my designs.”

Julian smiled at his father’s cheekiness. In reality it had always been one of Julian’s favorite traits of the many more likeable ones his father possessed.

At that, Julian’s parents turned away from him and boarded the transport; holding hands like childhood lovers as Julian left them to head home.
Just as he was departing, Leeta and Doctor Zimmerman were just arriving. Both had unhappy looks on their faces and had clearly been arguing all the way there. “Louis Zimmerman, if you send that report about Julian that you keep going on about I swear on the prophets I’ll never speak to you again. Julian is my friend and one of the best people I know. I can’t believe you accused him like that without any evidence!”

“But honeybunch you don’t understand, I was there. There was no doubt that he’s an augment.” Zimmerman protested.

“Guh, for someone who’s supposed to be so smart your pretty darn stupid.” Leeta fumed stepping out of the lift. “After this, I don’t know if I like you anymore.”

Leeta crossed her arms and began to pout as Zimmerman began to try to justify his position once more. The would be couple however was distracted suddenly by a strange sound coming toward them they couldn’t immediately identify.

“So you hear something?” Zimmerman asked, after a few beats.

“What is that?” Leeta wondered, trying to place the sound.

Zimmerman looked around. “It’s getting closer.”

As it turned out the sound was in fact, Rom. Yelling at them to wait from several yards down the hall.

“Rom!” Leeta proclaimed breathlessly when he appeared before them.

“Wait.” Rom repeated again, this time to her face.

“We heard you the first time.” Zimmerman muttered rolling his eyes in annoyance.

“Leeta...Don’t. Go.” Rom insisted.

“Oh, Rom. Why, not?” Leet asked stepping down from the platform to peer at him with her large doe like eyes.
“I love you.” Rom finally confessed gently. “And I want you to stay.”

Leeta’s mouth dropped slowly open as her eyes got big as saucers and glimmered with unspeakable joy. “Oh, I love you too, Rom.”

Utterly ignoring Zimmerman now the unorthodox couple melted into each others waiting embrace to kiss.

“Hey,” Zimmerman protested. “I’m RIGHT HERE.”

“Oh, that’s right. Excuse me for a minute Rom.” Leeta side stepped her love to peer up at Zimmerman. “Yes? And what do you have to say for yourself? Are you going to rip up that report or not?”


“Oh.” Leeta scowled stopping her foot at him.

“Leeta, please. Come with me and lets forget all of...THIS. I can’t believe your picking THAT over me.”

“Well, your just going to have to get over it you CREEP.” Leeta muttered.

“Huh oh.” Rom stepped aside just in time to avoid getting caught in the middle as Leeta proceeded to sucker punch Louis Zimmerman right in the face. Effectively breaking his nose.

“Nobody tells me who I can and can’t date. You’re a real piece of work Louis, I think you need to go back to the Jupiter station and examine your life choices. Nobody plays with my heart and disrespect my friends. Come on Rom. Let’s get out of here. Hmph.” At that Leeta threaded her arm through Rom’s and led him away.
“I just may do that.” Zimmerman muttered as he cupped his bleeding nose and steadied himself. I’ve got to get the Hell off this damn station. These people are insane.”

A little later while Rom and Leeta celebrated their new profession of love, Julian was sulking alone near the dart board sipping at his drink and trying to keep a low profile.

“Mind if I join you?” A familiar voice muttered a few feet away. “Miles. That might not be any fun. I’m not exactly in a sporting mood and now you know it probably wouldn’t be a fair match anyway.”

“Well, anyway I thought you might be here and that you might like some company. I hope you know Julian that none of the stuff that’s going around about you matters to me. I don’t give a golly-gee-damn if you’re an augment. You’re still one of the most decent people I know. All of this, it’ll blow over in a week or so. Old news.” Miles said.

“Well chief, I really appreciate the sentiment but I don’t think I can quite believe everyone is just going to live and let live.” Julian muttered.

“And why not. You honestly think you being an Augment is the strangest thing to go on around here right now. Have you seen what’s going on down at the Dabo table? Apparently Rom and Leeta are a thing. It’s all anyone in Quark’s can seem to talk about.” Miles quipped.

“I see your point.” Julian conceded. “It really doesn’t bother you, eh?”

“No.” Miles confirmed. “If anything I’m more hurt by the fact that I’ve known you for as long as I have now and you still felt like you couldn’t tell me.”

“Miles, I...I don’t know what to say other than, I’m sorry.” Julian said sincerely.

“Yeah well, you owe me a dart game for my pain and suffering. And, if you’re really so worried about it being unfair, we can probably rope Gaven and Dax in for a game of doubles. Once he’s out of the infirmary, that is. It’s gotten around that he’s not all together human you know. So far the reactions seem to be mixed. Personally though, I’m glad it’s out in the open now.” Miles admitted.

“It going to be a hard road moving forward for him now that it is.” Julian considered, darkly. “Gavn isn’t the type to enjoy much attention.”
“Well then I guess it’s a good thing he has us to look out for him. Come on. How about just one game? Maybe that coma of yours you were in knocked you off your game.” Miles baited.

“Unlikely, but I suppose there’s only one way to find out.” Julian conceded putting down his drink and taking up a few darts to pass to Miles. “Tell you what, if I still win then I’ll let you start me off with a proper handicap next time.”

“Your on, big mouth. Let’s get to it then.” Miles agreed.
So this chapter's a little short but in light of the emotional roller-coaster of the last few chapters I thought we all deserved a little break and emotional repair. I can't believe we're nearing the finish line of the first Act. Yes folks, this is intended as a three act story, so expect alot more to come as we watch Gaven continue to follow the adventure of our DS9 friends and have a few of his own.

A fun fact about the last chapter.

In the original outline of chapter 22, Gaven was supposed to be the one to hit Zimmerman. Unfortunately, the necessity of concluding the Arc about Gaven's reproductive troubles and the issue of how to believably expose Julian as an augment forced me to change my plans. Personally, I like that Leeta was the one to stick it to Zimmerman. It was funnier and a better alternative ending to Zimmerman's departure off of DS9.

For at least a few days on the station everything seemed to calm down. In an interesting turn of events, an official report by Louis Zimmerman against Julian Bashir never seemed to fully manifest and instead word came down the grape vine that the entire LMH project was temporarily being shelved for further review and that, as a result, Julian’s image would no longer be needed for modeling. It seemed people in high places were not particularly happy that Zimmerman’s reactionary actions had exposed one of their assets, namely Gaven, and that one of their best field doctors and scientists had been brought under scrutiny during such a delicate time in the Dominion conflict.

For the time being it seemed like everyone was trying to keep a low profile. Julian in particular felt particularly paranoid that his genetic status would have a negative impact on people's impression of him. But for the most part while some people who cared about such details did seem to watch him more closely and occasionally point and whisper when he was out in public places, almost no one seemed keen on confronting him directly. On one hand Julian was grateful, but on the other hand; it quietly perturbed him to think people were talking about him and not engaging him more about it.

On the upside, Julian’s many friends tried to show support for him in their own ways. Indicating that none of them thought any less of him for his newly aired status. Then again, Julian tried to remind himself that most of his direct co-workers weren’t human and didn’t understand the stigma of being an Augment the way the other human officers and civilians did. For the hundredth time Julian found himself thanking his lucky stars that he was a frontier doctor and not stuck back on earth where the prejudice would have been far more pronounced. After, meeting a few times with Fisk to talk about his mental state in light of everything that had happened it was determined and recommended by Jeremiah that Julian be allowed to come back to work on an extremely limited basis. He was essentially to avoid rounds in the infirmary, but was allowed back into his uniform so that he could continue his research and development projects. Being back in uniform, Jeremiah had concluded with Julian, helped him stay grounded and in control of himself. Plus it served as a reminder that he
was still apart of starfleet.

For Julian’s part he couldn’t help but feel secretly skeptical, at least to a small degree. While he had evaded a court martial, he was still technically an Augment working in a field he should have been barred from. He was well aware that the only reason his commission hadn’t been stripped from him was because of the Dominion threat. Assuming they all made it through, Julian couldn’t help but wonder what his future prospects would really be. The law was still the law. Bennett hadn’t exactly guaranteed him that his genetic status would always be tolerated just because he happened to escape his current predicament surrounding it. But Fisk had warned him about dwelling on things he could not know. Saying that it was counterproductive to his wellness to hyper focus on problems that were not problems in the moment.

For the next few days since his parents departure, Julian had bounced between unpacking everything at home, spending time with the O’Brien’s who insisted he have dinner with them all week and just try to relax, and a few other light social engagements with his other friends. Julian had also tried to check in on Gaven a few times in the infirmary but found him asleep everytime. When he finally swung by one time too many, Jeremiah put his foot down.

“Julian, he needs to rest. Go home and don’t come back till next week. Once he’s released you can hover over him all you want on your own time.” Jeremiah had said shooing Julian back out onto the promenade.

“Well Doctor, facing meeting you here. I was just thinking about inviting you to lunch.” Garek’s melodic voice cut through the space like sudden music. “Back in uniform, I see. Do tell me you have some time?”

“Hello, Garek. I do have time. Quite alot of it actually.” Julian agreed.

“Splendid. Allow me to drop these back at the shop and say meet in Quarks in fifteen minutes?” Garek offered.

Julian agreed and the men parted to reconvene at their favorite table.

A about fifteen minutes into there impromptu lunch date the conversation between them had run uncharacteristically dry as a look of queer self consciousness settled onto Julian's face.

“So something wrong?” Garek asked.
“What? Oh, no. I just...Those people over at that table...call me paranoid, but I swear they've been staring at me.” Julian confessed. “I think I treated the women awhile back before my, uh, accident. Maybe, I'm just being silly.”

“Oh no. They are most certainly staring at you.” Garak made a tisking sound at the couples rudeness.

Julian groaned lightly. “Garek, do they look just idly curious or upset?”

Garek who was a master spy in his own right, managed to observe the couple without drawing attention to the fact that he was observing them.

“Oh nevermind. Now she's staring at him and He's staring at you. I think, Doctor you better prepare yourself.” Garek warned him as he sensed the man was preparing to get up and approach them.

“No, no, no. Not what I need right now. Please be just wanting some free and friendly medical advice.” Julian pleaded under his breath.

Julian could see the man begin to approach. He was human and not anyone Julian recognized. Likely a transient stranger. Julian quickly ruffled through his nearly perfect recall to place what the woman had been seen for and recalled that the lady had suspected she was pregnant and wanted confirmation. Great. That was spectacular. Why couldn't have been a common cold?

“Well hi there folks. I'd like a word with the man in blue.” the meaty looking blockhead muttered in surly politeness.

“I'm sorry, but I'm off the clock. If it's a medical emergency, I recommend stopping by the infirmary just down the promenade.” Julian rattled off smoothly.

“Oh there just might be an emergency. Since when do they let people like you treat the general populous? You don't have any business wearing that uniform.”

“Why thank you, Garak. All fashion sense aside. I've had quite a few people tell me what I am and am not fit for lately so I'm afraid your going to have to get in line. To be fair, I do regret that you disapprove of my job description. Luckily for you, there are two other qualified doctors to pick from that I'm sure can accommodate your future medical needs.” Julian muttered, secretly preparing himself for the possible physical altercation which he had no intention of indulging.

“You just shut your mouth. You damn Augments are all the same. You all think your so damn smart.” the stranger muttered.

“Oh? Have you really met that many?” Garek asked, with feigned interest glancing at Julian who had likewise caught his expression. They were both thinking the same thing.

“You just keep your hands to yourself. Got that?” The stranger fumed. “An argument and a cardassian, betcha your just plotting to take over the whole damn place.”

Julian and Garak looked at each other before they both broke out into misty laughter. “Oooh, Garak. He’s caught us now.”

“Oh yes Doctor, whatever will we do?” Garak quipped.

“I know. Maybe we should have him summon the constable. He’s really foiled a master plot you know? In fact, I think that’s exactly what he should do.” Julian said theatrically.

People were starting to look now and the woman behind them who had started the whole thing was bright red with embarrassment.

“I could do that, or we could just settle this right here.” The man muttered, forming his hand into a fist.

Julian rolled his eyes and shrugged, beginning to tire of the situation. “Well, if you insist.”

By now Quark had long caught onto the deal as well and had already discreetly summoned security.

“Julian.” Garak warned melodically.
“No, no. Now the man has a bone to pick. Let us allow him his satisfaction.” Julian muttered, before slipping out of the chair. “He wants to pummel me for taking medical care of his good lady, then so be it. I’m an augment remember? I’m a danger to society. Just remember what the alternative is.” Julian positioned himself away from the table and just within striking distance of the larger man. “You just go ahead and hit me if it makes you..”

Before Julian could finish his sentence the man in front of him tried to sock him in the jaw. Julian mostly deflected the blow since he was still healing from having that part of his jaw shattered and in a defensive manner caught the other man right in the bread box effectively forcing all of the air out of his lungs. The hit to his face was still enough for Julian to cut his lip one of his teeth as a small ribbon of blood coated his tongue. With the man momentarily stunned Julian caught him by the shoulder to steady him and spit a glob of blood into his own free hand.

“Do you see that? Look at it.” Julian hissed. “I’m flesh and blood just like you. I can be hurt, I can be maimed, I can be killed. I’m just one man and yes; I’m an Augment. But I’m a man who would give my life to protect the life you’ve made with that woman there simply because it’s the good and right thing and because she deserves that from her doctor. Yet she doesn’t need me. She and the child growing inside her? They need you. I’m the expendable one here. Not you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I would like to sit and have a meal with my friend in peace. Peace is something of a novelty for me these days it seems. Oh, and congratulations. To the both of you. I was planning to wait until your follow up appointment, but under the circumstances since you won’t likely be needing me as your doctor anymore, I don’t mind telling you now. It’s a boy.”

At that Julian passed the man off to the security officers that had closed in on them and stepped away, plucking up a napkin from the table to wipe at his hand and at the corner of the bad side of mouth. When he looked up Odo was staring at him with his arms crossed and an appraising look on his face.

“Good evening, constable. Is there going to be a problem here?” Julian asked lightly not really caring if he was in trouble or not.

“Not anymore, doctor. You should ask Quark for some ice for that lip of yours. I don’t suppose you want to press charges?” Odo asked, sardonically.

“No.” Julian shook his head. “I just want to sit enjoy my meal.”

“Very good. Then I’ll leave you both to it.” Odo turned to the lady who was helping along her lover. “If the two of you would kindly come with me.”
Odo led the other party away with his security staff in tow, while Julian slipped back down into his chair and pushed his food away. It was useless to try and eat now. Instead he folded over the clean part of his napkin, dipped it into his ice water and pressed it against his aching jaw.

It was Garak’s turn to Gawk at him. Where Julian would have expected to see a look of utter delight on the Cardassian’s face at having seen a side of him that should have enamored Garak, he instead saw a look if masked discernment on the Cardassian’s face.

“What?” Julian muttered.

“Nothing, it’s just...I always took you for something of a pacifist. Clearly I’ve been mistaken all this time. You know doctor, I don’t mind telling you this now because I know you won’t take offense...But I think that charming boyish naivety of yours I used to know and love is gone.” There was just the slightest tinge of regret in Garak’s tone, as if he really saw it as a kind of personal loss.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Garak. But the truth is, I never really was THAT naive.” Julian said, implying that the part of his personality Garak was referring to had been the part of him he put up for other people’s benefit and to hide the true depth of his intellect.

“You’ll never be a disappointment to me, my friend. Really, I’m delighted to see this darker more mature side to you though I don’t know that I’d agree fully with your self assessment. I feel sorry that you’ve been robbed so prematurely of your innocence. But then again, there are many kinds of innocence. Where you’ve gained experience and judgement one place, you’ve also exposed yourself to new possibilities that you can’t begin to imagine or prepare for in another place.” Garak grunted and eventually waved his hand to signal a waitress. “I think this calls for a drink.”

A few minutes later they were sipping cocktails. The food having been whisked away as Garak confronted him once more. “Now, indulge me, please. I know you could have easily dodged the strike that brute got off of you earlier. Instead, you let him hit you. Why?”

“If I had dodged, he would have lost face and it would have been just further ammo for him and others to use against me. Luckily there are a Hell of alot more aliens on this station then there are humans.” Julian muttered.

“Is the discrimination against your Augment status really that pronounced among other humans?” Garak asked with genuine curiosity.
“Yes. I have no doubt if this had been a bar on Earth, I would have been the one thrown out, but not before I took a beating for my trouble. Human people like to fear what they don’t understand. It’s not just about self preservation it’s also on a level about the entertainment of standing up to something superior to you and being able to triumph over it.” Julian explained. “It’s part of the reason I choose this commission. I thought if it ever came out into the open what I was, I could just fade away and start a new life somewhere out there. On Bajor maybe or somewhere else.

“Mm. You truly are remarkable. Well you won’t hear any complaints from me. I’ve known you too long to believe that this new version of you is really that much different than the old version. Frankly, I’m glad you can be yourself now. In the full. You’ll never know how lucky you are to have the opportunity.” Garak said patting Julian on the arm.

The remark made Julian think of Gaven.

Now that they were both exposed, he wondered if the man would be different. Comparatively, Gaven’s situation was far more dramatic than his was. People at least understood to some degree what an augment was. Once word got round that Gaven was part of a practically unknown alien race, he imagined there would be more than just idle curiosity about who he was, what he was doing on the station, how he’d come to be there, and where he’d come from. Gaven was such a private introverted person. He wasn’t the type to like drawing attention and yet he naturally drew the interest of others anyways. Julian realized it was because of the kind of person he was. Gaven was an inner light kind of person. No amount of suppression or oppression could completely hid it. It was Julian’s favorite thing about him.

Garak observed, a unusual look come over Julian’s face. It was a soft look. A look of someone besotted who didn’t know they were besotted with someone. Well, well. Garak mused. Perhaps not all of that boyish naivety is gone after all, my beloved Doctor. Who are you thinking about, I wonder? Garak internally mused. While he of course had a perfectly good guess, he found it fascinating to think that Julian Bashir was that obtuse about being in love. Certainly, his deep friendship with Garak and the way Julian tolerated Garak’s own suggestive overtures towards him proved there to be be some untapped potential there.

The anticipation to properly meet the mysterious Dr. Ore suddenly intensified to a frenzied pitch in Garak’s chest and mind. He simply had to meet the man that had so completely ensnared his beloved Doctor’s attention.

~@~

Gaven was keeping an even lower profile than Julian was and had remained in seclusion in the infirmary for the remainder of his brief convalescence. In light of the things that had transpired since the arrival of Louis Zimmerman, Gaven found himself in a completely different position then he had
originally planned to be. Instead of distancing himself from the Federation and the people on Deep Space 9, he now found himself being intertwined more completely to both. It was going to be a surprise to everyone except the Captain and Dr. Fisk who were more aware of the circumstances involved than everyone else was.

On the day he was to be released, Jeremiah found that it was a slow enough day that he could afford to hover a bit and indulge himself in probing Gaven about his recent choices.

“You know, Julian’s going to wonder why you’ve suddenly had a change of heart about contributing to the inoculation research. Do you really think it’s necessary to keep the truth from him?” Jeremiah asked as he watched Gaven fold up some of his clothes.

Gaven shrugged. “I don’t actually know that my declaration made an impact whatsoever on Julian’s situation. For all I know, Admiral Bennett planned all along to pardon Julian from any culpability and allow him to keep his commision here and remain in Starfleet. It does please me to think though that I’ve at least afforded him a little insurance in the business. The best deeds in life, I’ve heard are done anonymously.”

“Mmmm. You don’t know and yet you’ve given up your anonymity and your freedom for him. That seems a little extreme for just wanting to help him out of a bind. But then again, I’m not really complaining. Either of you by yourselves gives me a strong dose of hope that we might actually stand a fighting chance in this war. Having you two working together...Well now that just makes me giddy. But Julian aside, how do you really feel about it all?” Jeremiah asked gently.

Gaven considered his question seriously for a moment. “I feel hopeful, Doctor. I’ve never liked keeping secrets. It decays the soul in my experience. I admit, I don’t know what to expect now. I had planned to ultimately slip away and find a quiet little hole away from the the universe’s problems where I could live out the remainder of my days in peace and obscurity. But I think in the end I’ve realized that’s just a little too close to being dead and if I wanted to die and be forgotten about then I should have just remained in orbit around Oum where I was intended to be. I realize now that I like being alive and that I’d prefer to make some small difference while I’m doing so. I know I’ve come off resistant in the past, but I can’t deny that my time on this station has made me feel like I could be apart of something again.”

“Besides…” Gaven smiled thinly. “Between your advanced age and Julian’s somewhat unreliable self confidence right now, someone needs to reliably be able to Doctor around here.”

The dig was warranted given that both Fisk and Julian had tried to back out of the complex procedure that ultimately saved Gaven’s life.
“Oh planning to come back full bird? Well isn’t that lucky for everyone involved.” Fisk said approvingly.

“Let us say I’m available as a triage specialist during emergencies, I don’t think people on the station are going to accept the fact that I’ve been undercover all this time.” Gaven mused.

“Mm. When lives are at stake you’d be amazed how little people give a damn about your pedigree. But nevertheless, how about we just wait and see how everything shakes out and go from there. Technically all anyone knows about you is that you’re not human and if anyone gives you any guff about it you can remind them that you never lied about who you were. If they failed to ask, then that’s their problem. By now, your good reputation greatly proceeds you.” Jeremiah stressed.

“Well have to see.” Gaven agreed. “I certainly plan to take my time for now. As much as I enjoy being helpful on the station, I do have some limited interests outside of it.”

“Hmm. Those interests wouldn’t have to do with a certain young Vulcan fellow, would it?” Jeremiah probed transparently.

“I know Jyyrus Cheval hovers over me and I won’t deny he and I have a unique connection between us, but it’s not what you think. There’s a debt between us that has yet to be paid. Once it is, I imagine he’ll move right along with his life almost as if I was never there.” Gaven revealed.

“If by a unique connection you mean to say that young fella is in love you, then fine.” Jeremiah muttered. “You really think it’s going to be that easy to just extract yourself from his feelings?”

“I don’t know.” Gaven admitted. “But what I do know is that what’s happened between Jyyrus Cheval and I is not the same as real love. It was an accident. A symptom and byproduct of a complex neuro bonding that I inadvertently hijacked through our repeated psychic contact. Once we find a way to rectify the situation, an outcome we would both prefer, than the original neuro bond that existed will take full and complete presence again.”

Jeremiah wasn’t all together convinced that the two men shared the same preferences, but he let the detail go figuring the Vulcan was perfectly capable of advocating for his own potential feelings.

“I suppose I’ll just have to take your word for that. Thought for the record, all love is more or less an accident. Be careful, boy. Not everyone has the emotional constitution that you have. But just out of curiosity, if that Vulcan wasn’t previously attached. Would you be more apt to consider him as a real
romantic prospect?” Jeremiah asked.

“No.” Gaven said quietly. “All cultural expectations aside, Doctor. I couldn’t in good faith seriously consider Jyyrus Cheval as a...mate. He’s a sensitive, gentle, and deceptively strong man. A truly seductive prospect if I was free in that way...But given how the circumstances of our bond came about, I don’t know if I could ever say for certain if what would develop between us was real. It would look real, feel real, but deep down I would always wonder and it would slowly eat me up inside. I can’t and won’t do that to him. He deserves the life he was meant to have long before I came along. That’s where he belongs and who he really belongs to. Do you understand now, Doctor?”

“Mostly.” Jeremiah muttered. “Most of the rest, I don’t really need to understand to appreciate. I expect you’ll be taking a trip to Vulcan soon to, huh, work out your differences.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. I’m hoping to leave in a few weeks for a short trip.” Gaven admitted.

“Good. Best to get it all resolved, I suppose.” Jeremiah hemmed.

Gaven sensed Jeremiah had more to say on the subject of his love life or lack thereof. “Do you object to something?”

“Me? No, no. I mean what do I really know about any of it. Humans don’t typically have the benefits of psychic and telepathic bonding in their relationship to each other. Not like some culture do anyway. I think it’s right and good that your correcting your psychic entanglement.” Jeremiah said supportively.

“But,” Gaven said.

“Well...I just think you should consider being open to certain kinds of new connections. If not with Cheval then maybe someone else. It’s not like the urge has magically gone away for you just because you’ve lost your bondmate. Now I’m sure there’s not alot of precedence for this in your culture especially among the endentured of your kind since well...You folks have a death pack with each other and all. But seeing as you’ve already broken with tradition by staying alive all this time, I just think you could maybe open yourself up more to new experiences. If nothing else for the sake of your health. Love and sex are more important to most people's mental health and personal development then you’d think and you’re still pretty young for an Oum. Hell, at sixty odd years you’re just coming off of life’s training wheels. Are you honestly telling me you plan to go on another sixty years alone?” Jeremiah argued.
Gaven considered his argument objectively. “I see what you’re saying, doctor. I admit as well that, until recently, I never anticipated the possibility of a particularly long or enduring life. It’s something to think about.” Gaven conceded.

“Good. Thinking about it is a healthy place to start. I wish you all due luck, boy. No matter how you turn it your not in for an easy or familiar road going forward. If you ever need a friendly ear. Let me know.” Jeremiah encouraged him.

“Thank you, Doctor. I will.” Gaven promised as he gathered up his things.
In the Family Way

Chapter Summary

This chapter is part one of the reimagining of the DS9, season 5, episode "A simple Investigation." Some lines where taken directly from the episode for continuity purposes.

“Ah see now there?” Odo said triumphantly as he showed Dax, Kira, and Miles a recording of his changeling ward as it shifted rapidly into numerous complex, but still as of yet translucent, shapes that were easily the size of tall boy kitchen stool. “Watch now. We’ve been working on a more discernable humanoid shape. Kajel can practically mic my facial contours. Do you have any idea how long it took me to be able to achieve that? Easily two years or so.”

“Amazing Odo. You must be so proud.” Dax encouraged him warmly, she loved looking at baby pictures and movies. Having been a parent many times over in her many lifetimes she understood the value of it.

“Are you still keeping Kajel in a containment field?” Miles asked idly.

At this question both Dax and Kira looked disapprovingly at him.

“What? Don’t look at me like that? I didn’t mean anything by it. We kept Molly in her playpen till she started walking. We had too. She was such a good climber Keiko and I were worried she’d pull something down on herself if we didn’t.” Miles muttered defensively.

“Actually, yes. Call me overprotective but I’m just not confident Kajel is ready to be able to freely roam. I’d like to wait until we can get verbal communication going. I’m almost certain Kajel understands everything I say, a feat that I admit was hard for me to achieve with Dr. Mora. Mostly because I was being zapped every time I tried to formulate something I wanted to try and say back. But Kajel doesn’t seem to mind too much so far. Too much to play with and look at.” Odo reflected.

“How does Kajel do when you leave?” Kira asked.
“Admittedly, Kajel is usually resting in their bucket when I depart. I make a point to tire them out before I need to leave so it hasn’t been a problem yet.” Odo admitted.

“Oie, I’ve been meaning to ask you something and I don’t mean to come of ignorant or insensitive but is Kajel a boy or a girl?” Miles asked. “I mean I know not all species have gender or use gender identifiers but, I dunno. I always assumed…”

“You assumed that because I’ve chosen to take a decidedly masculine form and use masculine pronouns that we changelings must have a gender. Don’t worry, it’s a fair enough question. The truth is changeling are genderless. If we as individuals choose to favor one form or another that’s just a matter of personal aesthetics. Of course if Kajel were to decide to commit to a form that traditionally has a specific gender connotation, I would respect their sense of expression but at the moment it’s a mute point.” Odo explained.

“Fascinating. Sorry I asked.” Miles muttered sheepishly.

“What about socialization. Have you thought about introducing Kajel to other lifeforms?” Dax asked. “Children tend to do better with early socialization.”

“Well I have brought Kajel secretly to the habitation zoological museum. They seem to enjoy that. Lots of interesting shapes to mimic. We’ve been experimenting with color matching lately as well. Blues and greens seem to be easier than say red or yellow. But again until their verbal skills develop I’ve been trying to use color coding for certain impulses. I don’t particularly need it to discern Kajel’s mood but it might be helpful, again, for the sake of others.” Odo remarked.

Just then Julian arrived.

“You’re late.” Odo grumbled.

“Is that the new Holosuite program?” Jadzia asked brightly.

“That it is.” Julian said triumphantly displaying the gold colored holo rod. “It called Queen’s Gambit. It came this morning.”

A deliciously excited look came over Julian’s features as he slid into the nearest chair to join them.
“About time--That friend of yours promised to send it two months ago.” Miles revealed, showing that he’d been quietly anticipating the holo-novel’s arrival as much as the others.

“Well according to Felix it’s worth the wait. He said it’s the most elaborate program that he’s ever designed.” Julian insisted.

“Oh good. What parts do we get to play?” Dax asked excitedly.

Julian went on to describe the different roles to everyone only to be interrupted when an impatient Miles realized he was playing Falcon again. The villain. Despite his protests, Dax smoothed things over by reminding him that he was only being cast as the villain because he was so damn good at it. The compliment was just true enough that Miles couldn’t help but smiles and let it pass.

“So. Is everyone alright for Saturday?” Julian inquired excitedly.

Dax and Miles gave their approval easily but when Julian looked to Odo he seemed uncharacteristically hesitant. “Huh...I can’t on Saturday. I have plans with Kajel...Huh, what was it you wanted me to do again?”

“It’s not going to take that long. If your worried, get a sitter.” Dax Recommended. “We need you to save the Queen.”

“Not only that but you’ll get to drive around in fancy automobiles and go to posh parties. Not to mention you get to steal her away from Falcon.” At that Julian flashed a picture of an icy blonde beauty. “I’m sure Gaven would b delighted to babysit if you ask him.”

“Wait a minute. He steals my girl?” Miles protested.

“Um...Maybe you’d better get another Nigal Dunlap. I don’t know if I’m ready...to leave Kajel yet, I mean.” Odo covered quickly. “Perhaps Dr. Ore could join you instead. I um...I’m sorry. Perhaps this was a mistake. I should never have agreed to be part of this in the first place. I’m a parent now and as such I have certain responsibilities...and I uh...Sorry.” At that Odo practically backed out of his chair and away from the table before he finally apologized for himself, turned, and walked away leaving his stunned and confused friends to wonder at his sudden departure.
“What was that about?” Dax wondered.

“I dunno but I suppose I could see if Gaven was interested. I know for a fact that he’s free on saturday.” Julian mused.

“Toss, Gaven. I’ll do it.” Miles insisted to no avail.

“Don’t be greedy.” Julian teased. “I don’t think Gaven’s ever been in a holosuite before. Might be a interesting novelty for him. I know he enjoys reading and writing and I’m sure he could get the jist of the subject matter in record time.”

“Has anyone talked to him at all since he, you know...Came out?” Miles asked.

“I haven’t Julian admitted, though Jeremiah as told me he’s back on the inoculation research. I haven’t had time to ask, but I’m glad he hasn’t completely followed through on his disappearing act.” Julian said.

“Well that’s a bit a good news anyways.” Miles remarked. “Glad to see things are starting to get back to normal around here.”

“Indeed.” Julian agreed.

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As Julian and the other continued to talk together, Odo was trying to weave his way through the dense crowd. It was a busy night in Quarks and although Odo could have easily just changed forms and slipped through the masses unnoticed, he was too flustered to bother. His annoyance at his own discomfort steadily grew until Odo’s rapt attention to detail gave him a target to project his tension at. As he came briskly down a set of spiral stairs he was just in time to be confronted with the sight of Quark trying to horang a no nonsense looking blonde woman at the bar.

“Why don’t you leave her alone, Quark? Can’t you see she’s not interest?” He observed sternly.

“How do I know she’s not interested...unless I ask?” Quark replied smoothly.
“Maybe you should spend less time bothering your customers and spend more time keeping an eye on your business?” The woman suggested evenly.

Quark took the obscene opportunity to inhale a finger load of cream off his pinky finger before replying. “Don’t worry. I can keep my eyes on more than one thing at a time.”

“Really?” The woman said, deciding to test his claims as she drew their attention to an alien figure up on the catwalk. “What about him? He’s got a graviton emmitter hidden in his ring. He’s manipulating the table for his friend over there.”

The observation was enough to instantly send the formerly amorous Quark off to go deal with the situation leaving a impressed Odo behind.

“You very observant.” He noted with his arms crossed in piqued approval.

“Thanks.” The woman muttered sighing in relief as her dark blue eyes looked past Odo impatiently.

“Are you waiting for someone?” Odo inquired.

Not missing a beat the woman refocused her attention onto Odo.

“You. Where have you been all my life?” She asked in a wistful manner.

“Pardon me?” Odo asked both intrigued and confused by her response.

“Isn’t that what you were hoping I would say?” She asked shrewdly, her blue eyes going expectantly wide.

“No.” Odo protested. “It just that you keep glancing at the door.”

“I’m waiting for someone.” She parroted.
Odo shook his head. “That’s all I meant.”

“Sorry.” The stranger apologized. “I thought you had other things on your mind. Must be those bedroom eyes of yours.”

At this strange remark Odo tilted his head to the side, not remotely used to anyone saying such a thing to him.

“Bedroom eyes?” He asked, not fully grasping her meaning.

“You probably get that all the time.” She suggested.

“Not really.” Odo remarked honestly before shaking his head. “If anyone bothers you again...Let me know.”

Odo’s tone was sincere. As he took a moment to introduce himself and indicate where the stranger could find him.

“I’ll be alright.” She replied calmly as she watch Odo slowly back away from her.

“Well...I have to go...To work....In my office.” He muttered before nearly walking into the edge of the bulkhead before he turned tail and left.

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The next day Kira was due to meet Odo in the shipping bay while they went over the lastest station deliveries.

“What are you doing?” Kira asked suddenly when she caught Odo trying to examine himself in some of the reflective crate sides.

“Huh...Nothing.” He said dismissively.
“Come on. What are you looking at?” Kira pressed in a confused manner.

“Well I...Actually, I’m...Nevermind.” He muttered, met immediately by her protests. “Ah...It’s embarrassing.”

“Would you just tell me.” Kira encouraged, enjoying his awkward discomfort.

“Well, last night a woman in Quarks...Told me I have...Bedroom eyes. I’m trying to see if it’s true.” Odo explained.

Kira’s tone suddenly sobered as she processed this information. “Tell me about this woman.”

“She thought I was trying to seduce her. It was all just a misunderstanding.” Odo remarked dismissively.

“If you say so.” Kira muttered reproachfully. “You going to see her again?”

Surprised by both her tone and her question Odo who had his back turned now spun around. His arms crossed over his chest. “I have no idea. Why?”

“Obviously she’s very perceptive.” Kira remarked.

Odo could hear the strange almost vulnerable tone in her voice which he didn’t fully understand. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning…” Kira clarified, as she carefully and painstakingly made a point to encourage him. “You should see her again.”

Odo was so taken back by this statement that he didn’t have time to respond before Kira promptly turned and swiftly walked away disappearing from his sight.
Later that day, Odo was back in his quarters spending time with Kajel. The changeling was presently pooled in Odo’s lap like a cat and occasionally tried to get his distracted attention by changing colors from clear to a aqua blue. When it eventually turned yellow and morphed into a prickled shape Odo finally focused his attention.

“Oh, I’m sorry Kajel. I know I’m distracted and I’m sorry I’m not playing today. Your father is being foolish. To think some woman would have any interest...to think I’d even have the time...Well you’re too young to understand these things anyway. I’ll...try to explain it sometime when your older.” Odo promised.

“Need a sympathetic ear? Knock knock. I believe we had a check up scheduled for today.” Gaven remarked.

“Oh yes, come in Doctor Ore. I’m sorry but I completely forgot. Look who's here to see you, Kajel.” Odo smiled fondly as the changeling noticed Gaven and immediately moved towards him.

Gaven swiftly let down the forcefield and knelt down the best he could with his bad leg as the blob engulfed his torso supportively and began to twist around him like a snake pulling him the rest of the way to the floor and dragging him further into the room.

Gaven chuckled in pure delight, not perturbed at all by the changelings probing and pulling of him.

“Active today. That’s good.” Gaven remarked affectionately. “And strong.”

“Somebody likes you an awful lot. You really do have remarkable way with them.” Odo observed.

“Well there’s no accounting for individual taste. I’m glad Kajel trusts me. You really should consider letting them interact with others though. Part of this behavior is a sign of boredom. No child wants to only hang out with it’s parent all day.” Gaven offered.

“I don’t know.” Odo admitted skeptically.

“What about the O’briens. You know them. Molly is old enough to understand that this is just a baby. You could introduce them and see how it goes.” Gaven recommended.
“I’ll...consider it.” Odo offered.

After taking a few minutes to do some basic scans and take some measurements, Odo proceeded to encourage Kajel to demonstrate what they were practicing. Much to Gaven’s delight and applause.

“Excellent. Kajel’s progress is amazing.” Gaven commented.

“Yes. They’re already leaps and bounds ahead of where I was at that age. It’s been fascinating to watch.” Odo agreed.

For several minutes both men were quiet as they watched Kajel move about the space and play.

“What are you, huh, feeling better doctor?” Odo eventually inquired.

“Yes.” Gaven said nodding. “Maybe the best I’ve felt in a long time, Mr. Odo.”

“There are rumors going around about you. Nothing alarming but please let me know if you have any negative experiences. Doctor Bashir already had an unsavory run in the other day with an objectionable trouble maker.” Odo remarked.

“Well, I suppose it would be too much to expect absolute acceptance. But since Julian hasn’t ended up in the infirmary or the brig I assume he handled the situation.” Gaven muttered leaning back onto his elbows as he reclined on the floor.

“Are you doing alright?” Gaven asked suddenly.

“Yes. Why?” Odo inquired sharply.

“Raising offspring can be stressful. It takes up a great deal of your time and emotional energy especially when your doing it alone. That and I couldn’t help but overhear what you were saying when I arrived.” Gaven admitted.

“I see. Let me ask you your personal opinion. Do you think I have bedroom eyes?” Odo asked
wiggling his brows experimentally.

Gaven tilted his head. “I’m afraid I’m not quite familiar with the term. You do have a kind of intensity about you though and your eyes are one of your better features, I admit. They never change. You must work awfully hard to maintain it.”

“Mm. Somebody remarked on the very same thing. I take it then that you also find me attractive.” Odo observed.

“Yes.” Gaven conceded, nodding his head from the floor. “I do happen think you're very attractive, fascinating, and pleasurable to converse with.”

“though, in fairness, I am a bit biased on the subject you’ll always hold a certain level of fascination for me.” Gaven admitted quietly, finding this line of questioning both sobering and amusing.

“Mm. Yes. But, I mean...Nevermind. I don’t know what I mean anymore.” Odo huffed growing embarrassed and frustrated with himself suddenly.

“I know what you mean,” Gaven said gently. “And, please. Allow me to reassure you that, yes, you are a very desirable person. I feel that anyone would be lucky to enjoy your emotional and sexual affections and overtures, Mr. Odo.”

“Well...Thank you. I appreciate your perspective.” Odo muttered.

It was fascinating how Gaven managed to be so disarmingly honest and how little he was ashamed of his own feelings. Odo wondered at this tendency in the other man. How he used honesty as a kind of protective shield. As if, by being honest about himself he was removing anyone’s ability to accuse him deceit. It was a rare quality, indeed. Perhaps Odo’s favorite quality of Gaven’s. The effect allowed Odo to relax. At least as much as he ever allowed himself to relax when conversing with another person.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” Gaven asked after a few long beats.

“It would seem only fair, go ahead.” Odo muttered.
“You’ve been among the solids a long time. Have you ever actually been physically intimate with any of them?” Gaven asked frankly.

“Huh well...Not, huh, in the solid sense of the idea. Why?” Odo inquired.

“Well, it seems then that you lack the confidence that comes with practice. As far as I can see, that is your only real problem and it’s a common one. You seem to think it’s unbecoming to be attracted to people and to hunger for deeper intimacy with them. You seem to fear the vulnerability that comes with sharing yourself fully with someone else. You shouldn’t let that stop you from pursuing the experiences that you want.” Gaven encouraged him.

“I see. Thank you for your frankness, Doctor.” Odo remarked. “I’ll..Try to keep that in mind.”

“Of course.” Gaven nodded.

“You know, Dr. Ore. Since we’re being so honest with each other, I might remark that you’re not an unattractive prospect either. I’m sure many people here on the station would be interested in you romantically and such if you were open to their interest. You’ve got that dark and brooding air to you that’s so common in gothic novels. I think most would find you quite romantic in a classical sense.” Odo observed.

“Mm. I think you better help be up, Mr. Odo. I see now what they mean by bedroom eyes and while I have a great deal of personal restraint in me when it comes to certain kinds of interplay between myself and the people I admire, you might just push me over the limits of my rationality and self control and I don’t think I’m your intended target in that department.” Gaven remarked in a wispy deadpan manner, coloring ever so slightly as a curling smile of deeply gratified amusement threatened at the corner of his mouth.

Odo merely chuckled and straighten to come over and help Gaven off the floor. Somehow it was comforting to talk this way with the alien doctor even if neither of them were actually serious about their innuendo.

“Well, now that I’ve had my thrill for the day, I think I better go home and lie down. You’re not the only one with intimacy conundrums. If you need anything else, call me at home.” Gaven encouraged him. “I am at your complete disposal.”

“I just my do that, Doctor. Thank you.” Odo agreed.
“My pleasure.” At that Gaven said his goodbye as departed.

As it turned out, Odo ended up calling in a favor with Gaven sooner then he expected when an unexpected call from security came through requesting his presence. Odo had no choice but to secure a sitter so that he could attend to the situation and for the moment Gaven was the only one he trusted with the job.

When he finally did return to his office he discovered the woman from Quark’s bar being quietly detained. It seemed the woman had been caught trying to break into the stations computer system. As he questioned her trying to get a read on her intentions Odo noticed the woman fidgeting with a data port embedded in her neck.

“Data port bothering you?” Odo asked nonchalantly.

The woman gave him a knowing look. “The security protocols protecting your computer generated some nasty feedback.”

“I know.” Odo nodded calmly. “I designed them that way.”

Odo and the woman known as Arissa exchanged some light discourse in which Arissa’s expressions seemed to suggest that she found Odo’s attention to detail in his security measures to be impressive.

“Tell me Arissa…”Odo said at length. “What’s a nice woman like you doing with a dataport?”

“They’re not illegal.” Arissa remarked evasively.

“They ought to be.” Odo countered sharply. “People tend to use them to access information other people don’t want them to access. This Idanian you were waiting for in Quarks--Tauvid Rem--What were you meeting him about?”

Odo had at this point settled into his office chair.
“A personal matter.” Arrisa replied.

Odo absorbed her response, noting her intentional vagueness. “Well I suppose I could just go to his quarters and ask him.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.” Arissa remarked hastily. “It’s a delicate situation.”

Odo tilted his head and like a compassionate parent settled back into his chair. “I’m listening.”

Arrisa gently launched into an explanation. In it she explained that Tauvid had a certain knack for finding people and that she was engaging him to help locate the daughter she’d given up fifteen years prior. Odo encouraged her to go on, at first failing to see the connection.

“I’ve been looking for her for a long time. Please, let me talk to him.” Arrissa implored him.

After giving it a moment of thought Odo agreed. “Alright. I’ll take you to him. We’ll sort out the rest later.”

A little while later Odo and Arissa made their way to Tauvid’s quarters. But despite the computer system confirming he had entered the dwelling, the couple, on first inspection found no one to be at home. A quick search of the rooms however caused Odo to keenly pick up on marks in the carpet that strongly suggested someone had been unceremoniously vaporized with a phase weapon. Odo suspected that the person vaporized had been Tauvid, a fact that would be later confirmed when the residue was testing for DNA evidence. Naturally as the plot thickened, Odo became more suspicious.

“The residue found contained Idanian DNA.” Odo confirmed after reconvening in his office to question Arissa once more. Do you have any idea why someone would want to kill him?”

“No. But considering what he did for a living he probably had dealings with all sorts of marginal characters.” Arissa remarked.

“Maybe it was a robbery? I didn’t see any personal belongings in his quarters. Did your deputies find anything?” Arissa inquired.

“No.” Odo replied watching her features carefully.
“Well, whatever happened, I doubt it had anything to do with me or my daughter.” Arissa remarked coolly.

“Now, that depends.” Odo interjected. “It’s possible someone doesn’t want you to find your daughter.”

Arissa shook her head to the negative. “Taulvid didn’t give me any indication of that when we spoke.”

“When was that?” Odo asked.

“About three days ago.” She confirmed.

Rising out of her chair suddenly Arissa turned away from odo to express her frustration for now having to start all over again in her apparent quest. When she looked back at Odo it was with pleading eyes. “That is, if you let me.”

Odo watched her cautiously. “If?”

At that point Arissa reminded him of the charges she was facing for having tried to break into the stations computer systems.

Odo considered this and began to walk towards her. “Considering that you weren’t able to access any secured information...I’ve decided to drop those charges.”

Arrissa’s large cobalt blue eyes widened. “I appreciate that very much.”

Odo own grey eyes observed her with a soft kind of stoic compassion. “You’re free to go.”

Arissa thanked hi. “You’re a very kind man.”

And as she turned to leave through the door, she stopped and turned back to look at him as if she wanted to say something else. But something held her back and in a meek fashion she fled from his
While gaven spent most of the day in Odo’s quarters with the changeling, eventually his own work necessities called him away. With Julian still regulated to limited time in the infirmary and Fisk having to take on the general management of the infirmary, Gaven was on call for the smaller things that Fisk didn’t have time to attend to. In this case it was the O’briens.

Unwilling to leave Jajel alone. Gaven made an agreement with the Changeling. “Now, listen. If I take you with me on my rounds I expect you to behave yourself. Your father would be seriously upset if you wandered off or got yourself into trouble. I’m trusting you to use good judgement, and mind your manners around other life forms. If you can do that, then I’ll try to convince Odo to let me take you on other outings in the future. Do we have a deal little one?”

To his satisfaction the changing rippled gently before turning a soft baby blue. Gaven knew it was agreeing to his terms.

“Good. In you go.” Gaven opened the large sling he’d fashioned and the changeling obediently pooled inside it.

Several minutes later, he was in the infirmary. Today it was just Keiko with Molly and a very fussy Kirayoshi in tow.

“I think it’s an ear infection but he won’t let me get near him with any home remedies.” Keiko said in tired exasperation.

“It’s alright, Keiko. Let me take a look at him.” Gaven set his his sling down on a nearby table and activated the containment field before he moved back to gently lift Kirayoshi up onto the examine table.

“Well, hello my little man.” Gaven said, wiggling his fingers in front of the small child to distract him.

As he observed Kirayoshi he noticed the babe tug irritably at his ears as he fused and cried. I can see why you though it might be an ear infection. But...Mmmhm. Take a look there.”
Gaven gently tilted the babe’s head up so that Kieko could better see what he had noticed. Sure enough she suddenly spotted the anomaly. It was the hint of a baby tooth pushing up through the gums.

“He’s teething?” Kieko said in mild surprise. “But...He’s so young.”

“True, though there’s many accounts of babies with developed hair and teeth, sometimes while still in the womb. Looks to me like you have an early bloomer. As you probably know, human babes can get pain in their ear canals during teething. I’ll of course check him to rule out a possible ear infection as well, but let’s focus on getting his pain levels down before I commit a full examination. He’s likely mostly reacting to that tooth coming in. A rod of flavored ice should help numb out the pain and bring down his elevated temperature. Why don’t we start there, wait about twenty minutes, and then see if he’ll let me look at his ears.” Gaven proposed.

While Gaven and Keiko came to consensus about their plan, Molly was quietly looking around. Eventually her eyes settled on the sling Gaven had set down where Kajel was still hiding. But as molly neared the containment field to her young delight Kajel stirred and tentatively slipped out of the sling to near the edge of the containment field stopping just short of touching it’s boundaries.

“Hi.” Molly said shyly, recognizing that the moving pool was a lifeform. She’d seen Odo shapeshift before and recognized what she was looking at.

To the child’s delight the changeling seemed to respond to this attention doubling up on it self like a thick worm. Twisting its form as if to look sideways at her. Kajel suddenly began to shift slowly into different shades of blue like a mood ring. Aqua, to sky blue, to a near periwinkle and back again. For her part Molly seemed impressed by this, smiling wide.

Encouraged by her expressions, Kajel rippled pleasantly before it began to shift into various simple shapes for Molly’s benefit. Molly clapped lightly and giggled.

“Molly, what are you doing over there?” Keiko asked distractedly.

“Mommy, look. It’s like Odo.” She said innocently.

Keiko glanced from Molly to Gaven and back. “Sweetie, it’s not polite or correct to call a life form an IT.”
Since they were still waiting for Kirayoshi to finish his replicated cherry ice stick, Gaven let Keiko hold her now calming son as he came around the examine table to kneel down next to molly carefully.

“Allow me to make proper introductions. Molly, this is Kajel Odo. Kajel, this is Molly O’brien.” He said patiently.

“Is it a baby changeling?” Molly asked.

“Yes. Sort of like your little brother Kirayoshi.” Gaven explained.

“She’s pretty.” Molly commented innocently, apparently deciding the changeling must be a girl like her.

“I agree that Kajel is very pretty. But you know? I’m not sure if Kajel feels like a girl, so for now it’s better to use neutral pronouns like ‘they’ or ‘them’. Or you can just use Kajel’s name.” Gaven explained gently to Keiko’s approval.

“Oh.” Molly said kurtly. “I’m sorry, Kajel. You don’t have to be a girl or a boy if you don’t want to. I’m a girl though so if you ever want to be like me I can answer any questions you have.”

Gaven smiled fondly at this perfect remark.

Kajel seemed to respond positively as well as brightly flared itself up in a twisty spin causing Molly to clap and giggle.

At the this sound the Changling stopped abruptly and came to hover close to Molly’s face again as if to study her. As moly turned her face to mimic the blobs movements. Kajel attempted to copy her features. Just a translucent silhouette really of molly’s face and throat.

Then something utterly unexpected happened.
Kajal tried to giggle.

At first it came out as a muffled echo but after a few seconds of adjustment Kajal managed to mimic Molly’s giggle.

“Gaven?” Keiko said slightly alarmed.

“Well I’ll be damned. Look at that. Baby’s first laugh. ODo is going to kill me for missing it.

A mildly concerned look suddenly crossed Keiko’s features.

Gaven caught the expression and pressed his lips. “Mimicry is how changelings learn about things. It’s really no different than any child copying the influences around them.”

“Right.” Keiko agreed, shaking off her former expression. “Right. All children do it.”

Gaven wondered, when she agreed the second time who she was trying to reassure. It was disappointing to Gaven that Kieko might actually feel afraid of the changeling in some way. As if the act of simply mimicking her daughter’s laughter was an ominous indication of certain untapped potentials.

“I think Kirayoshi is ready for me to look at his ears now, Mrs. Obrien. Shall we?” Gaven said, encouraging them to get on with the exam.
Chapter Summary

Suggestive romantic and sexual situations ahead.

Chapter Notes

This is the conclusion of the season 5 episode "A simple Investigation." In the original outline of this fic, I never intended to touch on this episode. But in revisions I realized that with the addition of the changeling baby I almost had to do some kind of nod to it. It was an important episode for the Odo character even if aspects of it, in my opinion, where poorly written and executed. In terms of the bigger picture, It was important for me to establish the introduction of Kajel to Molly O'brien. That scene WAS in the original outline and the necessity of it will become apparent at a later time. I admit that there's alot of rehashing of what was actually in the episode but sometimes having existing events novelized brings about its own rewards. I admit, I'm glad I got to take a closer look at the feelings from this episode. It made me appreciate their significance more.

One major flaw I would like to point out in the executing of this episode was the scene where Odo interrupts Bashir in the Holosuite. While the lines from that scene were some of the funniest in the episode, I chose to cut it out and go right into the cute scene because I realized it didn't make sense to keep it. In an earlier part of the episode, it's remarked that Miles and Dax were tasked with figuring out how to access the data crystal and yet the next scene contradicts this since Miles and, presumably, Dax where with Julian playing out his spy novel. No it's possible that they had briefly been called away to work on the crystal, but it's a stretch even for me to justify. So there you go.

I hope everyone enjoys this romantic chapter. Who knows? Maybe some of that romance will spill over into the next chapter? You'll have to stay tuned. As always, thanks to everyone for their support and readership. It means alot to me.

While Gaven was babysitting, Odo spent his time on reconnaissance with unexpected results.

Thinking she wasn’t being observed Arissa broke into the stations assay office and nearly made off with a data crystal being stored there, until Odo caught her in the act. Not to his surprise he was later able to expose her lie of a story she’d told him about having a daughter, though something about her back up story was just compelling enough for Odo to decide to take her into temporary protective custody instead of turn her over to the authorities much to the surprise of Arrisa. But her temporary asylum was conditionary on whether or not Odo’s people could successfully analyzed the crystal’s contents and on what those contents turned out to be.
Generally, Odo didn’t take kindly to people trying to murder each other on his watch and turf. He also really didn’t appreciate the Orion Syndicate dragging the station into their private games. Ultimately, Arissa seemed confused by Odo’s willingness to protect her even temporarily. But the reality was she simply didn’t know him well enough to understand.

While under protection and while his team worked on her crystal, Odo charged Arissa with the task of looking over the security footage of the stations coming and goings. While he didn’t anticipate anything to come of it, it was worth the long shot of trying.

It was going to take awhile, Odo knew. All the more reason to go home while he could.

To Odo’s shock, when he arrived back at his quarters he found neither Gaven or Kajel there. A quick computer inquiry solved the first question Odo thought to ask. The next several however could only be answered when he got to the infirmary and had a word with Dr. Ore.

“What did you think you were doing taking Kajel with you without asking me first?” Odo fumed.

Odo had caught Gaven in the lab analysing tissue samples for the inoculation project and for once his stoic restraint was not a factor as he immediately laid into the doctor on sight.

“I’m sorry.” Gaven immediately apologized. “I did tell you before I agreed to watch Kajel that I was on call today and that I could be pulled away. What would you have had me do, leave them at home?”

“You should have called me.” Odo said in a deeply annoyed manner as if he was surprised by the other man’s lack of sense.

“Fair enough. Really I’m very sorry. I did call but I suppose I wasn’t as persistent as I could have been. When your staff mentioned you were unavailable I simply made the decision to bring them along instead. Frankly, I admit I don’t regret it. The infirmary is a familiar and safe space for Kajel and it does have other advantages.” Gaven admitted.

“Such as?” Odo muttered.

“Socialization for one.” Gaven offered.
“We’ve been over this before, Doctor…” Odo drolled.

“Yes. You’ve been hesitant to make a decision about it. But today is an example of why it’s so important. There’s going to always be times when you can’t avoid Kajel having to interact with others. Right now you have a choice to help guide them through those interactions. If you avoid it, in an effort to shield and protect them, then you may not have control later over the results.”

“Yes. I’ve thought about those things. Many times. I’m aware that it is important.” Odo muttered.

“I’m glad. You always struck me as a very thorough kind of person. Are you also aware that people are afraid of Kajel?” Gaven asked seriously.

“What do you mean? Was there a problem today?” Odo asked as a trickle of fear suddenly dropped through him.

Gaven shrugged.

“Keiko was here today with her children. It was why I was initially called away. While I was examining Kirayoshi, Molly noticed Kajel and began to interact with them. It was very innocent and very sweet and although Mrs. O’brien was very tolerant of the interaction I saw how she really felt. I saw it the moment Kajel attempted to mimic her daughter.” Gavn explained calmly.

“What?” Odo said sharply as if he hadn’t heard Gaven right.

“It was Molly’s laughter. Kajel liked the sound and tried to mimic it which required them to try for a more complex humanoid form.” Gaven explained.

For a moment Odo managed to put aside his anger and concern long enough to wonder at this news. “And? How did it go?”

Gaven smiled slightly, pleased by the very parental interest of Odo. It struck him as fascinating how other humanoid life forms formed such strong familial attachments, affections, and interests in the progress of their offspring. It doubly surprised him how those feelings could manifest even among individuals who were not genetically linked. Such sentiment was almost foreign to him. He’d never seen an exception to this outside of Lopel Ner, who he now believed would have looked on their offspring as these other humanoids did.
“Kajel succeeded.” Gaven said simply.

“And, Keiko? How did she react?” Odo asked.

“Though she tried to cover it I could tell it perturbed her to have her daughter copied even if it was only a rudimentary attempt. I think we both know why.” Gaven remarked evenly.

Odo sighed. His anger beginning to dissipate now that most of the shock was over. “I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised. The O’briens are good people, but they took it poorly when Dr. Bashir was attacked. I’m sure on a level there might be some residual prejudice involved because of that negative experience.”

“Yes.” Gaven agreed, remembering how violently Miles had exploded when Gaven had come out of emergency surgery to update everyone on Julian’s condition. “To a certain extent some biased and prejudice is to be expected especially of the Dominion conflict escalates. I don’t envy your position Mr. Odo. But I do believe that it doesn’t have to be so bad. Socialization isn’t just going to be good for Kajel, it’ll be good for others on the station. As people get to know them the fact that Kajel is a changeling may become less of an issue in the same way you being a changeling isn’t an issue for most people on the station. It takes time to build understanding and trust.”

“I see.” Odo said nodding as he thought the whole thing through and saw the point Gaven was trying to make. “Did Kajel seem to enjoy interacting with Molly O’Brien.”

Yes. I think they did. Molly enjoyed it too. You know, despite her internal reservations, I think Keiko would be open to further interaction between Kajel and her daughter if you approached her about it.” Gaven advised.

“Mm. I would like Kajel to have friends. Friendship was something I personally didn’t get to experience at an early period. It’s not something I want to deny them the benefit of.” Odo admitted.

“I’m glad to hear it. Well, if you not too angry with me. I am still available to babysit if you had other things to do tonight. I heard Julian acquired some kind of new something or other that he and some of the others are planning to enjoy later.” Gaven said.

“Yes. It’s a holo-suite novel. Dr. Bashir frequently likes to act out certain spy fantasies. He tried to rope me into it but I ultimately declined.” Odo explained.
“Not your kind of hobby?” Gaven inquired, genuinely curious.

“Actually I am rather fond of mysteries and playing them out in the Holo-suites can be quite stimulating, but huh, elements of the role I was intended to play seemed...A bit beyond my depths.” Odo admitted cryptically.

“Hm. I find that hard to believe.” Gaven remarked.


“Because your a shapeshifter. Isn’t every day kind of like playing at a role? I would think you’d be one of the most capable actors on the station.” Gaven mused with just a hint of comedy.

A thin smile appeared on the changelings face. “I’m very capable, indeed. It’s not really the character I object to, but there are certain things so far outside my frame of reference that...It was just better I turn the Doctor down this time.”

“Ah well, I can certainly understand that.” Gaven replied, nodding. “This frame of reference you lack wouldn’t have anything to do with that thing we were discussing earlier, would it?”

Odo didn’t reply and just pressed his lips stoically at him.

“Right. None of my business.” Gaven back stepped.

“Dr. Bashir didn’t happen to approach you about taking my place did he?” Odo asked suddenly.

“He did as a matter of fact. Not directly, but he sent me a invite. Obviously, I had other plans today and even if I didn’t I don’t know that I would enjoy participating in one of Julian’s fantasies. His reputation with beautiful women proceeds him and anyway I’ve already seen what some of his fantasies entail. The last time I got tangled up in one of them I ended up in a somewhat uncomfortable position that I don’t care to repeat.” Gaven mused thinking back in his mind’s eye to the night Julian had shown up at his quarters, gotten drunk and delusional, and ended up in Gaven’s bed.
“Mm. You should give the holo-suite a try sometime. On your own terms that is. It does have its enjoyable elements. As for babysitting I’m afraid I do need someone to watch Kajel for a little longer. I’ve got a security situation I’m attending to and I don’t know how long it’s going to take to sort out.”

“I can do that. You don’t mind if we stay here for awhile longer?” Gaven asked.

“No, Though Jakel is used to sleeping in their bucket. So I would prefer if you bring them back home at a reasonable time.”

Of course.” Gaven agree.

“Oh, before you go. Mr. Odo. Might I say that I think you should give whatever experience your being tempted by a chance. On your own terms, of course. Even if it doesn’t work out, it might be worth the trouble of the experience.” Gaven advised.

“I...I hope you’re right, Doctor.” Odo agreed.

After taking some time to check on Kajel personally, Odo eventually went back to check on his teams progress. His people seemed confident they could get into the crystal but noted it would likely take several more hours. This necessitates Odo to try and find a place to put Arissa in the meantime since he didn’t think it appropriate to keep her detained in a cell. Now that he was keeping KAJel his own quarters were also out of the question as were Arissa's own quarters since her stalkers were likely keeping an eye on her whereabouts. Eventually though, Odo found a comfortable enough room for her and eventually had he and Arissa Transported from her quarters to the new ones so as to avoid her stalkers realizing she was not in her own.

“There.” Odo said with satisfaction after they transported to the new secure space. “Now if anyone was watching, they’ll think that your still in the other quarters.”

“That’s a good trick. I hope it works.” Arissa remarked. “I, huh, wanted to say thank you for not holding me in one of your detention cells. I must admit never expected this kind of comforted when you said protective custody.”

“You’re welcome.” Odo said. “It’s not really my habit to treat potential victims like criminals. I hope you’ll find these accommodations comfortable.”
“I’m sure I will.” Arissa agreed.

“Well...If you need anything. Just let me know. I anticipate that my people will be able to access the contents of the data crystal by morning. Goodnight.” At that, Odo prepared to have security transport him back to the other quarters.

“Do you really need to go?” Arrisa suddenly said, a touch of fear laced in her tone.

“No. Did you want me to stay for awhile?” Odo asked, surprised that she might want more of his company.

“Well yes. I mean if you wouldn’t mind. The truth is, I’m a little scared and you’ve been remarkably kind to me. I admit I feel safer with your here than not.” Arissa confessed.

“Mm. I admit the thought of sticking around to watch over you had crossed my mind.” Odo admitted turning back towards her. I could probably stay through to morning, if you wanted. But I’d have to make a call.”

“That...Would be nice. Please.” Arissa encouraged him.

“Fine.” Odo agreed still mildly surprised that she wished him to remain.

Odo made a quick call to Gaven, whom was more than willing to babysit through the night.

“So,” Arissa asked gently when he was done. “Whose Kajel?”

“My child. Well, I’m their guardian at least.” Odo explained.

“You’re a parent.” Arissa observed.

“Yes. A rather sudden development in my life but a happy one. You...Seem surprised.” Odo observed.
“No. Just impressed. It takes a certain kind of person to raise children. Especially one that isn’t yours. I can tell you find it very rewarding and I think that’s very beautiful.” Arissa explained sincerely.

“Thank you.” Odo remarked. “There’s a bedroom through there if you’re tired.”

“I see, and where were you planning to sleep?” She asked.

“I don’t need a bed. I regenerate by reverting to a gelatinous form.” Odo remarked preparing for her reaction.

“That’s right you’re a changeling. I should have known. It sounds very relaxing.” She replied not looking perturbed at all by the idea.

“Yes. It is actually.” Odo agreed smiling a little at the easy of their conversation. Though outwardly cold and a bit haughty, Odo detected a soft, intelligent, and compassionate undertone to the woman that he found...peaceful.

As Arissa turned away to look out into the stars, Odo realized only then that he’d been staring at her and forced himself to rip his gaze away turning as well in the opposite direction.

“I understand you haven’t been able to identify anyone from the security recordings.” He remarked tuning towards her again, they were now standing about as far apart from each other as possible.

“No.” Arissa confirmed turning as well, her arm crossed somewhat protectively.

“I haven’t had much luck identifying Tauvid, either. It’s not his real name. He took three different transports to get to the station--used a different identity each time. I’ve transmitted a picture of him to the Idanian authorities. I’m not sure we’ll get a reply. As you’ve said before, they’re a very secretive race.” Odo explained, to their mutual frustration.

“What about the crystal?” Arissa asked stepping towards him again.
“Dax and Chief O’Brien are still trying to get past the encryption lockouts.” Odo explained.

“Maybe I could try to interface with it.” Arissa offered, stepping eagerly closer.

“No. That’s not a good idea.” Odo protested, protectively. “The first time they attempted to access it the feedback shorted out the computer. I’d hate to see what that could do to your dataport.”

“Guh.” Arissa groaned as she rolled her eyes and turned away suddenly. “I can’t believe what I’ve gotten myself into--Walking out on Draim to meet someone I don’t even know. I must have been out of my mind.”

“You said you were desperate. “Odo reminded her.

“Why do you think I got involved with Draim in the first place?” Arissa scoffed, defensively.

“I know life on Finnea isn’t easy but you must have had other options.” Odo observed nearing her now.

Hearing the suggestive accusation in his remark, Arissa turned on the balls of her feet to glare at him. “Have you ever been there?”

“No.” Odo admitted.

“It’s not like a Federation world where everything is handed to you.” She muttered. “You know how I ended up with this? Hm?”

Arissa pulled back her hair turning her neck to the side to display the data port that looked almost too big to be comfortable the way it was installed behind her left ear.

“I was a net-girl.” She said it with as much dignity as she could muster. “I told myself I wasn’t selling my body since there was no actual physical contact...But I was. I let men into my mind for money. Draim was one of them. That’s how we first met and before I knew it I was working for him. He paid me more than I’d ever seen before. I was so far removed from the consequences of what I was doing it was easy to pretend that I wasn’t hurting anyone. I’d hear things now and then. A
Businessman Draim had me investigate would disappear. I tried to convince myself that it had nothing to do with me but after awhile, I couldn’t pretend anymore. I wanted out. Well, I guess I’m finally going to get my wish. Only problem now is that I’ll be dead.”

The confession was an emotional one but to her credit she managed to fend off her temptation to cry for the hopelessness she felt, sinking down into the sofa to wonder at the mess that was her life.

“I don’t want to cry.” She muttered quietly more to herself than Odo. “The dead don’t cry.”

Odo knew the pain and sincerity in her confession and was deeply moved by it.

“Arissa...” He said nearing her again kneeling down so that he could look into her down turned face.. “I’m not going to let anyone harm you. You have to trust me.”

“Arissa met his gaze with sad compassion. “I do trust you. But you can’t protect me forever. Sooner or later Draim will get to me.”

Much to odo’s disappointment Arissa stood again moving away from him. It was almost like a rejection, as she fearfully refocused on the crystal and the necessity to gain access to it.

Odo stood and tried to reason with her. “I don’t think you can count on whatever is on that crystal to get you out of this.”

Arissa recognized this as a loaded remark and rolled her eyes. “If that’s true then I don’t have a chance.”

To this Odo saw an opportunity to instill a renewed sense of hope in her.

“Yes you do, if you testified against Draim you could put him in prison for the rest of his life. You could get immunity for any past crimes you may have committed. You could start a new life. I will take personal responsibility for your safety. I don’t care how long it takes. If I have to take a leave of absence, I will.” Odo explained with enthusiasm.

“You’d do that for me?” Arissa asked, gentle light coming into her features. “But...Why?”
Odo caught himself then and straightened. In amy ways they were alike he realized. “I’ve done things in my life I’m not proud of too. You worked for Draim. I worked for the cardassians. I certainly never had the courage to walk away. But you did. I admire that.”

“You admire me? You admire me for something other than the way I look. That’s a new one.” Arissa admitted as she tried to process it.

“Most people can’t see past the surface—Especially when they find what they see so beautiful.” Odo had admitted his opinion without thinking and immediately backed off when it occurred to him how what he said might have sounded. “I’m sorry...I merely mean’t…”

“No it’s alright, don’t apologize.” Arissa swiftly reassured him, here eyes wide and her expression disarmed.

“Well, I should probably see how they’re getting on with that crystal. If you feel like you’ll be alright, I’ll check on you later.” Odo said, before he swiftly headed for the door.

“Odo.” Arissa said sharply. “Would you come back here please. I would really rather you not run away from me just now. Not after you just called me beautiful. I guarantee you I’m never going to be able to sleep now and I’m sure the others will call you when they’re through.”

Odo froze just before he reached the panel to summon the transport. “Arissa, I...Do like you. I just don’t want you to think that I…”

Before he could go on, he was interrupted by then gentle feel of Arissa’s hand on his shoulder. “Odo, please. Turn around.”

To hs amazement she’d crossed the room and a soft expression had come into her face as she lead in and kissed him.

“I like you too.” she breathed after breaking the kiss long enough to further reassure him.

That was all it took, Odo felt something in his stern stoicism give and he allowed himself to kiss Arissa back. After awhile she pulled away, took his hand and lead him into the bedroom.
“You’re where?” Julian questioned when he noticed Gaven wasn’t in the infirmary the following morning only to receive a call from him soon after.

“I’m still at Odo’s watching Kajel. It seems the constable is a bit...tangled up in his work and hasn’t come home yet.” Gaven muttered.

“We are talking about Odo, aren't we? I don’t think I’ve ever seen him renege on his responsibilities ever.” Julian muttered.

“Mn. There’s a first time for everything.” Gaven muttered. “I’m calling because I wanted to let you know I finished analyzing those tissue samples you started the other day. They seem responsive. We can probably start testing phase one of the inoculation process.”

“My my you have been busy. No wonder I haven’t seen you in ages.” Julian muttered.

There was a elongated pause on the other line before, Gaven spoke again. “Julian, I noticed Quark has quite an extensive collection of wilderness themed programs. I was thinking about it earlier and I was wondering if you’d like to come rock climbing with me sometime.”

It was Julian’s turn to let the line go silent. He was genuinely taken back. In the many months they’d known each other Gaven had never once invited Julian to do anything with him. When they had ended up in personal social situations together it was usually because Julian had forced the interaction on Gaven or because they had been mutually invited by someone else.

“Julian, you are familiar with the activity. Aren’t you? I mean if it’s not something you like I’m sure I can find som…” Gaven was eventually cut off.

“No. I mean...I like rock climbing. I’d love to take on a rock face with you.” Julian agreed. “When were you thinking?”

“Tomorrow if you’re free. Maybe in the afternoon.” Gaven proposed.
“That should be fine. Send me the details and I’ll see you later.” Julian replied before ending the call.

“Rock climbing.” Julian muttered to himself shaking his head in wonder.

~@~

True to her predictions, Arissa didn’t in fact sleep in the night. Nor did Odo for that matter. Their lovemaking had been to demanding on their attention, too all encompassing to dilute with such trivial concept as sleep.

“I could swear that when we first meet your nose had a little cuve right here.” Arissa said as the basked in their post coital glow of the early morning.

“Mm. Oh, I tend to look a little different every day.” He muttered in an almost sing song manner as he rested in perfect tranquility beside her lightly stroking at her elbow.

“Yet you always manage to make these the same.” She remarked, a she lightly traced along his brow line.

“Well, I pay special attention to my scowl.” Odo muttered in a low lazy poetic fashion. “An air of stern suspicion is very important in my line of work.”

At that Odo practically growled like a cat and kiss her once more. After a moment they adjusted themselves, odo turning so that he could study her beautiful face.

“What?” She inquired softly. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“I’m...Just trying to figure something out.” Odo admitted shyly.

“Tell me. Maybe I can help.” She implored him in a whisper that was so soft it was barely audible.

At this request, Odo held his breath for a tick and looked away. Vulnerability was difficult for him
but when it came to Arissa he felt the need to be absolutely truthful. “You’re the first woman I’ve ever been...close with. I’ve never been able to let down my guard. I was just wondering...what makes you different.”

It took a full thirty seconds for Arissa to realize what he was trying to tell her and the information, given what they’d been doing for the last several hours, was a genuine surprise to her.

“Wait a minute. Have you never been with anyone else before?” It was truly amazing to her to think Odo so virginal.

“Not with a humanoid.” He admitted quietly still not bringing himself to look directly at her. “Well, once...On my homeworld I...Had an experience you might consider...Sexual.”

By now he had finally mustered up the dignity to look at her again. Somehow he looked younger than when they had first began and she knew it was another expression of his romantic innocence.

“But never with a woman before.” It was a delightful notion, for Arissa’s part the idea suddenly made her feel young and new again too.

“Could you tell?” Odo asked, as the slightest trace of worry creased his features.

“No.” Arissa said honestly, beaming at him.

“Good.” Odo replied boyishly before he took possession of her mouth once more easing her once more into the depths of pure bliss.

Odo sighed. “I don’t ever want to leave this room. Can we stay here forever?”

“Oh, I wish we could.”

Indeed she hadn’t been able to tell. Their love making had been slow, and remarkably involved for both of them. It wasn’t just his competence and attention to detail physically and mentally but the depth of his emotional responsiveness. Odo had noticed everything, never once had his attentions deterred from her. In return he had let everything she was and had been go until who they were and
where they were hadn’t mattered anymore.

But of course none of that, no matter how powerful the feeling, was true. None of it erased the truth between them, so while Odo seemed content to linger in the fantasy of their passion, for Ariisa reality began to crudely creep into her awareness spoiling the perfection of the mood. Odo couldn’t sense it like she could. Not now, and he proved it in his attempts to reassure her.

“Arissa? Everything...Is going to work out.” He said.

“I want to believe that.” Arrisa admitted meekly. “But I know what the Orion Syndicate does to people who turn against them. I don't want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder.”

At that moment she knew she had broken the spell for him too and truly wished she could have spared him the effects.

“I’m sorry.” She apologized pulling him close to her again. I shouldn’t have brought it up. Lets just be together.”

It was her turn to reassure him and Odo accept this boon even if he knew deep down what the realities really were between them.

“Alright.” He agreed.

Arisa kissed him and a mischievous smile came over her features.

“Tell me more about this encounter you had on your homeworld. Hmm?” Her smile was radiant and deeply playful.

“It was with another changeling. Our bodies became....Intermingled…” Odo explained slowly.

“Mmm. Sounds nice.” Arissa mused as their bodies began to mold together once more.
“Mmm.” Odo agree.

“Too bad I’m not a changeling.” She quipped seductively.

“Oh, we shouldn’t let that stop us.” Odo remarked slyly.

As if to prove his point, Odo used his shape shifting ability to give her a more complete taste of just what he was uniquely capable of which successfully plunged her almost immediately back into sensual ecstasy.

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Another few hours later the rumor mill, at least among the higher officers, was churning. As usual, Dax was in the forefront of the gossip.

“I’m telling you, I heard it from Julian who heard it in not so many words from Gaven. Odo still hasn’t come home yet.” Dax insisted.

“Yeah but...I mean, he has her under protective custody. Of course somebody has to watch her. You don’t know that there’s anything going on between them.” Kira protested.

“Oh come on, Nyres. You were the one who told me he was interested in her and it’s not like he had to be the one to keep an eye on her. Plus, you know how devoted he’s been as a parent. There’s no way in Hell, Odo of all people, would blow off those kinds of responsibilities if it wasn’t over something epic. And I highly doubt they’ve simply gotten caught up in a rousing game of chess.” Dax pressed.

“Well, you know how Odo gets with his work. He’d rather do something himself if he can. He’s thorough like that and this is a serious situation.” Kira said trying to reason the situation away from the direction Dax was barrelling down.

“Oh it’s a serious situation alright. A smoking ho…” Jadzia insisted.

“Commander.” Worf interrupted them, successfully cutting his wife off from saying something
indecent, but to little less than no further effect.

“What makes you say that?” Kira demanded defensively.

“Instinct.” Jadzia insisted.

“Jadzia.” Worf tried again to interject.

“What?” Both of them said turning to look up at him clearly feeling as if he was interrupting there heated discussion.

“You asked to be told when the sensor array became available.” Though Worf’s mouth was saying one thing his stance and eyes were saying another. Namely, shut up and stay out of other people’s business.

“Thank you.” Jadzia remarked before briskly turning back to face Kira as she more quietly tried to continue their conversation. “Odo and a woman--I mean...It was bound to happen sooner or later, right?”

Worf continued to stare at his wife, growing more uncomfortable as they went on and trying to will her to stop, to no avail.

“I suppose.” Kira conceded.

While Worf noticed and recognized the disgruntled look on Kira’s face that made her appears as if she was choking back every work, Jadzia was completely oblivious to the other woman's lame protests.

Annoyed at his wife for being so insensitive, work interrupted them again. “You can begin your experiment at any time.”

This effectively distracted Dax long enough for Kira to hastily turn away and try and douse her failing composure.
“I’m talking to, Kira.” Jadzia remarked through a clenched jaw at her husband. Which was her way of effectively telling him to butt out.

“You’re not talking. You’re gossiping.” He said sternly. “And besides, Odo is quite capable of taking care of himself.”

At this show of male support both woman smiled knowingly back at him. Much to the Klingon’s dismay.

“Don’t shout across the room.” Jadzia said disarmingly. “If you want to,… Gossip with us, than come down here.”

Just then the captain mossied into the space looking for Odo who was late for a long distance conference with Starfleet Intelligence.

“I guess he’s running late.” Kira mumbled.

“Odo is never late.” Benjamin remarked, smelling a story as he looked at Dax whom he knew perfectly well was the best source for all juicy information.

“True but he’s never spent the night with a woman before either.” Dax offered, this time it was in Kazon’s manner more than anyone else.

“A woman. How nice.” The captain remarked as he exchanged knowing looks with Dax, before seeing the look of Kira’s face. “Isn’t it ?”

Kira turned red like a slighted school girl until everyone was interrupted by the appearance of the man in question.

Literally everyone in the space turned their eyes on him expectantly.

“Good morning?” Odo remarked as he noticed everyone suddenly avert their eyes trying to act casual as the Captain reminded him of their appointment.
Odo didn’t bother to dignify their looks with further commentary, it was clear the old gossip mill was in grand form that morning and for once Odo didn’t care a wit if people were talking about him. He was a man on a mission.

From then on out it was business as usual. Odo sent an apology to Gaven who simply told him to carry on and that everything was fine on the home front. Although the Arissa business was in the forefront of his mind there was still everyday work to be done. Reports to review, cases to close, etc. and with Arissa secured for the time being Odo knew there wasn’t anything he could do just then but stay the course. He’d spent the morning briefing Starfleet intelligence about the activities of the Orion Syndicate and was awaiting further instructions from them. All in all, Odo did what Odo did best and remained a consummate professional through and through.

Near the middle of his day Odo suddenly found himself being visited by a representative of the Idanian government. Knowing how secretive and careful they were, it was an unexpected and worrisome surprise. The man known as Thran was looking for Arissa and swiftly explained to Odo the truth of her identity and how she was actually a Idanian Government operative that had been tasked with infiltrating the Orion Syndicate to especially target Driam and his illegal activities. The catch was Arissa had no memory of her real identity or life. The Idanians had wipe her memory, placing her actual identity and memories within the crystal she had been seeking.

Odo took all of this information in stride, at first struggling to believe it. And yet, how could he risk Arissa’s safety if it was true. It was imperative that Odo corporate the the Idanian. Even if he didn’t fully understand the depth of what was going on. But first it was important Odo secure the crystal, and so that was the first place they went.

When they arrived they discovered chief O’brian on the floor. He’d been incapacitating while studying the crystal, by none other than Arissa herself. Unbeknownst to anyone while Odo had been away, Arissa had contacted Draim intending to strike a deal with him. The data crystal for her freedom. With Thran’s help they were able to trace the crystals frequency to Arissa’s rendezvous point with her would be assasins. Predictably they had no intention of letting Arissa leave the cargo hold alive. Luckily Odo arrived at the last minute to dispatch her assalents. Heroically leaping down from a steel beam to fight and disarm them with Thran as back up. Even Arrisa got in a good hit or two in an effort to help avoid Odo being shot and to help secure that data crystal.

“Are you all right?” Odo asked bluntly after he finally punched out the final assassin.

“Yes.” Arissa said breathlessly as she held the precious data crystal between her fingers. “I just wish I knew what this is all about.”

Later, once the thugs had been taken into custody; the Captain, Odo, and Thran gathering in the infirmary while Julian assisted in the memory transfer operation to bring back the real woman who
had until then been known only as Arissa to everyone else.

“The data transfer should only take a few minutes now.” Julian said gently as he finished placing the crystal into the data port before stepping away.

“How long was she under cover?” Benjamin asked compassionately as Odo stared on, looking miserable behind them all in the archway.

“She volunteer for the operation two years ago.” Thran answered. He then went on to explain the situation. How her memories had been wiped to bypass the risk of suspicion when Driam used his telepaths to probe her. He spoke about her mission with refined passion as if everything had gone exactly to plan in the minds of the Idanian Government. This was met by criticism from both Benjamin and Odo. Benjamin because he didn’t appreciate the Idanian government using his space station as a backdrop for their real life spy game and Odo because he was incensed by Thran’s attitude regarding Arissa’s safety during their end game.

To all of it, Thran simply shrugged. Remarking that Arissa knew the risks when she’d signed up for the mission and that because of their efforts they would be able to now take Driam’s organization completely apart and possible end the corruption of the Orion Syndicate all together.

“The transfer is complete.” Julian interjected quietly. “I’m going to take her to Dr. Fisk in surgery now. It should be a relatively simple procedure.”

It was nearly evening before Odo saw her again. The woman formerly known as Arissa. Now She appeared to him as the Idanian Clarissa. Her real appearance having been restored. Odo hadn’t expected her to come looking for him back in the room they had briefly occupied together as they’d fallen into innocent love. Seeing her now, in her real form which was no less as beautiful as ever, Odo knew a new pain he had never imagined possible. This was the end. This was goodbye between them.

At first, Odo forgot himself and called out to her by her former name before the stabbing realization hit his that it was no longer who she was. Who she had ever really been. Even her eyes were different now. The deep cobalt blue replaced by a much paler perrywinkle.

“There’s something you need to know.” The woman now known as Clarissa said bravely as she stepped towards him. Her own real identity was still fresh upon her. Mingled now with her old
memories that she understood where part of her undercover identity. Now when she spoke she spoke from a place of simple facts. Free of self judgement. “I’m married. I have a husband.”

Odo took this blow in stride. Quietly forcing himself to accept the information free of blame or judgement. If he could have cried he would have been weeping as he spoke.

“I’m so sorry.” Clarissa said in a hushed fashion as she watched him torturously process his sense of loss.

“Don’t be.” Odo replied, there was just a hint of that boyish innocence in his tone as he defended her.

“You didn’t know. It’s not your fault.” He finished more strongly sounding more like his normal self as his resolve kicked in, strengthening him. “I feel in love with a woman who never really existed.”

Clarissa could see how painful it was for him to say it, and it prompted her to move closer to reassure him the only way she knew how.

“She did exist.” Clarissa corrected him as the tears he wasn’t capable of shedding fell for them both from her eyes. “And she loved you. In a way...She still does.”

It was the very thing they both knew Odo needed to hear to make peace between them and when he embraced her it was in acceptance and compassion of their mutual loss.

“Will I ever see you again?” He dared to ask her as they held each other, both looking off into the distance within their own minds.

Clarissa pulled back to look at him now.

“I...don’t know.” She admitted. “I’ll never forget you, Odo. Never.”

Her last words came out like a whisper on a brittle breeze and on that same breeze she gently turned away and left him. Odo could only watch helplessly as she departed, before he simply turned away and gazed out into the stars.
Much later, maybe when he knew that Clarissa was well and truly gone from the station and his life, did he finally go home.

Gaven had been sleeping, propped up half against a beam in Odo’s apartment. His finger dangling into Kajel’s puckett where the young changeling slept completely oblivious to Odo’s return.

Gaven stirred of course, when Odo appeared in the space. Unlike everyone else he had only the vaguest notion of what had transpired in the last twenty four hours. Yet when he saw the forlorn look at Odo’s face. A look that had once so resembled his own, Gaven knew without having to ask what the other man was feeling. Gently pulling his hand out of Kajel’s bucket, Gaven fought carefully to stand before he approached Odo who had stopped numbly in the center of the room.

“Come on, my friend.” Gaven said gently as he neared Odo and used his free arms to hug around his shoulders side long. “The bucket can wait for awhile longer. For once why don’t you try the bedroom.”

Odo allowed Gaven to lead him into the adjacent room, where Gaven promptly shut the door behind them to effectively mute that which was assuredly coming, from disturbing Kajel. It was the fruitless abject sounds of complete and profound suffering, the likes only others who had been through it as well were prepared to bravely weather coupled with the thudy sounds of a room that was being torn apart before a deafening kind of silence took hold and the nearly inaudible sound of Gaven’s empathetic words allowed Odo's pain to flow cleanly if not easily through him.
The Man Who Always Lies

Chapter Summary

In which Gaven and Garak finally become properly acquainted.

Chapter Notes

I know. We all want to see Gaven and Julian rock climbing. It's coming. Garak first, though. I admit, it took awhile to work out a circumstance for these two to have a reason to meet. But I do love watching them prode at each other and it's important. Promise.

Not surprisingly, Gaven didn’t show up in the infirmary all that day. Instead he spent most of the late morning with Odo quietly listening to a explanation of the Arissa/Clarissa case and the intimate details of Odo’s personal entanglement in the situation. Odo had to tell someone about it, someone who didn’t have a personal stake in the business and who wouldn’t feel the need to gossip about his experience or the feelings that had been stirred up in the usually so controlled man.

This of course came after Odo had utterly wrecked up the bedroom.

The very sight of the large bed he’d once slept in as a solid had momentarily driven him mad with what it symbolized for him now. All the while Gaven had weathered the situation without remark or reaction to his uncharacteristic outburst, merely side stepping on occasion to avoid getting hit with debris. To Odo’s deepest gratitude Gaven hadn’t tried to stop him or reason with him about his actions. Only when it was all over and they could sit in the aftermath, did they have their long discussion. Gaven had mostly listened during this. but eventually Odo had wanted and needed his reassurance. The simple reassurance of not being the only one that had ever loved and lost.

Since being on the station, Gaven had never talked about his now dead bondmate. With the exception of a series of discussions he’d had with Benjamin Sisko on the subject as they’d privately gotten to know each other. Benjamin was his handler for Sarfleet and had the advantage of being a widower in his own right. Technically, Gaven had also told Julian several stories about his life with Lopel while he was comatose but, as of yet, the Doctor showed no signs that he had any tangible recollection of anything Gaven had said to him on the subject.

When they were finally through, the Oum and the Changeling felt like they understood each other enough for a deeper more real respect to grow between them.
It was true that their situations were vastly different, of course.

Gaven had been with Lopel for what some species would have considered the lesser half of a lifetime, whereas, Odo had only just met the object of his first taste of love. Gaven cautioned him against minimizing his feelings on the subject. “First love” was a special kind of rite of passage no matter how brief. This had greatly comforted Odo. To have someone tell him it was alright to think the experience had been special and to experience the loss for the loss it had been. For Odo’s part, he now understood Gaven in a way that had just been conjecture before. He understood now why Gaven’s grief was so pronounced and why, as an Oum capable of emotionally and mentally healing in a way that would have made many envious of his abilities, he had refrained from softening his torments.

“To lose the bad, would be to also lose all that was good about who and what we were.” Gaven had said simply.

Eventually when neither of them had anything left they wanted to say, Odo thanked him for the favor he had done him which far surpassed simple babysitting and encouraged him to go home.

“What are you going to do with this space now?” Gaven had asked as odo walked him to the door.

“I...Was thinking it would be a good play room and private space for Kajel.” Odo had muttered. “For the future.”

“I think that is a good idea. In the meantime, try to get some rest Mr. Odo. Doctor’s Orders. Maybe take a day off. If anyone protests, you can always send them my way. I’ve returned to my medical duties for the time being as you probably know.” Gaven explained.

“Yes. I thought you might...Come up with a creative reason to stay. Welcome back, Doctor. I hope you plan to take a day yourself. For your health.” Odo remarked in his knowing way.

“I think I will, Mr. Odo. I think I will.” Gaven had agreed.

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“Your going rock climbing with Gaven tomorrow?” Dax repeated while she and Julian took lunch together at Dax’s favorite Klingon restaurant.

“Mhmm. It’s a leveled program designed for free solo climbers. Basically, roughing it without ropes and the likes.” Julian explained. “The upper levels are remarkably challenging but it’s considered a introductory program.”

“So he’s an outdoorsy type. Well that certainly is nice to know. I’ll have to tell Worf about it. He’s always looking for a training partners and for new programs to try. The two would probably get along.” Dax remarked. “Why are you making that face?”

“Hm?” Julian had been frowning slightly as if he was thinking briefly about something unpleasant, but as soon as Dax interrupted the thought his expression relaxed again. “Oh. No it’s nothing, I’m just a bit surprised is all.”

“About his choice in hobbies? Why? Dr. Ore is a pretty athletic man. Granted we don’t have any comparison but he seems to keep himself pretty well conditioned and I’m sure it’s more through personal discipline than anything else. Very well conditioned, in fact.” Dax emphasised, briefly referencing Gaven’s attractive and somewhat impressive physique despite his often haggard looks in the past.

Julian resisted the urge to roll his eyes at her. While he often got accused of being a superficial rake about people, Dax could put him to utter shame when she wanted to with her wandering eye and overly experienced appreciations for others aesthetic qualities.

“You can roll your tongue up off the table any time, you know.” Julian remarked.

“Oh stop it. You don’t think he’s the slightest bit impressive?” Dax teased. “Face it Julian, Dr. Ore is the complete package. He’s handsome in that brooding haunted serious kind of way, tall, incredibly open minded, intelligent but understated, emotionally complex, highly capable, utterly considerate and he’s just so, so...Genuine. Everything else aside to his credit, it’s my favorite quality about him. This could be a golden opportunity for you. You’ve always complain how you’ve never quite managed to become friends.”

“Gaven doesn’t make friends.” Julian pointed out. “He collects admirers.”

Dax gave Julian a quizzical look as if she didn’t understand something in his tone. “Are you alright,
Julian? What’s going on with you today?”


Dax just looked at him, clearly unconvinced.

Her expression forced him to have to take a quick emotional inventory. It was a technique he’d been going over with Dr. Fisk in therapy when he found he either couldn’t identify what he was feeling or couldn’t pinpoint why. In practicing this behavior Julian realized something he hadn’t realized he was feeling.

“I guess, I’m nervous. I like Dr. Ore but despite the things we’ve experienced together and the working relationship we have there’s always been something in the way of us really becoming friends. I’ve always gotten the mild impression he disapproves of me somehow. Not...In full, but just in little ways. And then out of the blue he extends this olive branch and...I know I should be happy. Excited. I am excited. I just...Everytime we try to do something together I bumble it somehow or it turns into a crisis.” He confided.

“Maybe you like him more than you think.” Dax observed seriously and non-judgmentally. “And maybe you should talk to him about how you feel in general. Dr. Ore cares about you, Julian. I mean...He spends more time with you than he does anyone else on the station, collectively. When you got hurt, he was like a man possessed. The pressure to bring you back to us was unreal and I sort of feel bad that most of us didn’t do more to support him during his efforts and after them. He got so sick. And...If you want my personal opinion, I think of any of us he’s always looked out for you in particular it seems. Maybe there’s something more to that, maybe not. Don’t you think it would be interesting to find out?”

Julian took his time absorbing all of this. There was alot to unpack in what Dax had said. More to unpack than their lunch time could accommodate. Naturally though, Dax’s probing required some kind of response from him and it was easiest to latch on to the first and primary point to her speech.

“I’m not interested in Gaven like that.” Julian muttered quietly as he poked at his food.

“I never implied that you were.” Dax replied. “Have you ever considered the possibility that Gaven might, on some tiny little level, have feelings for you? It could be why you two struggle so much on a personal level. I’m just putting it out there.”
“That’s...Unlikely.” Julian said slowly.

“That’s...Unlikely.” Julian said slowly.

“If you say so.” Dax shrugged. “In any case, I certainly am convinced now that he prefers the company of men over women in general. Besides, whatever the truth really is, he’s clearly not over his lost love. So one way or another your probably safe to go on dancing around each other for a good long while.”

“Lost love?” Julian perked up at this new information.

“Quiet, I shouldn’t even be mentioning it since it’s not my information to tell. Benjamin told me about it. Not the details, just that Gaven was partnered before and that his….Life mate, died.”

Julian was both surprised and yet not surprised by this information.

Gaven had never talked about his relationships on Oum to anyone on the station. At least it had mostly seemed that way. Very little personal information had ever been revealed and what was known information among the higher officers had been limited at best. There were several implications that were outlined in the data books Gaven had created for them about his culture, but no one had ever asked him about his exact status on Oum, how he had lived, and so on with the possible exception of the captain.

Julian never really thought until now about how little they all actually knew about Gaven on a personal level. Yet it was startling to realize how much he had absorbed about them. How much he had become apart of all of their personal lives. To one degree or another they’d all just let him remain present but removed from them. So unobtrusive was his presence most of the time. Yet his contributions to their lives so far were significant. He’d saved Julian’s life, been there for Kira during the birth of the O’Brien’s son. He’d saved Kajel and was responsible for Odo’s chance to be a father. He’d thoughtfully sent presents and well wishes whenever someone was celebrating a personal achievement or special event...And yet Julian realized he wasn’t even sure how old Gaven was exactly or what any of his personal interests were outside of his obvious talents and projects. He doubted that most everyone else could say much better.

For all of this, Julian felt quietly ashamed.

How could they all so easily take Gaven for granted like that? Gaven deserved better from them all. Don’t dwell. Focus on what you have immediate control over. Julian reminded himself, after which he took a deep breath and silenced his spiraling thoughts to refocus on their conversation.
“Now that it’s not a big secret anymore that he’s an alien working with Starfleet, we’d all do well to do better by him.” Julian remarked. “For my part, that means rock climbing for now.”

Dax seemed satisfied with this response and ultimately she had to go back to work anyway so their conversation came to a close for the time being with the promise she’d follow up with Julian the next day and that she expected full details.

Julian remained behind not quite done with his lunch. Really he had hardly eaten any of it. Klingon food wasn’t exactly his favorite to begin with and their in depth conversation had completely caused him to talk more than eat. Now his food was all but forgettable as he continued to ponder what Dax had said.

“I and Gaven, attracted to each other.” Julian scoffed dismissively as he quietly muttered under his breath and forced himself to eat the rest of his now cold meal.

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Upon returning home from Odo’s, Gaven slept for the remainder of the day and into the very early morning of the next day. It was the first completely peaceful sleep he’d had since being on the station. In many ways some of the psychological processing that going into stasis had force on him was admittedly a welcome respite. For once, all of his personal troubles and painful feelings seemed far away. Though still intellectually aware of all of them, the point of the Oum ability was to temporarily anesthetize their stronger emotions and traumas in order to create a sense of distance and to assist in the process of removing judgement from a given experience and to accept it as a simple fact about one's life.

Until now Gaven had resisted the discipline.

He hadn’t wanted to distance himself from some of his experiences and feelings, no matter how disabling they were. Sometimes though, there wasn’t the option of choice. Under certain circumstances, the Oum mind could spontaneously bring about a waking purge like the one he’d started to slip into when Cheval had found him nearly out of himself when his reproductive cycle had first kicked back in. Likewise, being in stasis also forced the processing of some lingering experiences, though, depending on how long he remained in the state, what he actually processed was randomized.

The effect on Gaven was the manifestation and more true representation of his core personality. He, in essence, came off far more relaxed, quietly playful, and far more forbearing than he usually displayed. Most importantly he actually got to enjoy his moment to moment experiences without
being bombarded with his heavier memories, feelings, and circumstances. Just existing and being permitted the chance to enjoy it fully was something Gaven hadn’t experienced fully since long before he left Oum.

Gaven’s sleep had been blissfully devoid of dreams. He had slept and then made himself a close duplicate to one of his favorite home meals. A hearty bread cake sweetened with a lavender-like honey-based glaze. Gaven paired this with a dark decaffeinated coffee blend he’d gotten into the habit of drinking since being on the station and read for an hour while he ate. After his breakfast Gaven sifted through his wardrobe with mild dissatisfaction. Almost everything he owned was dull and gray and certainly none of it was in the style of his people. For the longest time Gaven had been living like the exiled refugee that he was. He didn’t really have anything of his own. The only momento that had come with him off of Oum had been his meditation crystals and light box that housed a digital projection of he and Lopel.

Up until now all of it had served his incognito necessities and his depression, but now that he was exposed as a mysterious alien working with the Federation instead of a mysterious human doctor no one had ever heard of working for Starfleet, Gaven thought it was perhaps wise to let a little of his old individuality back into his expression. Clothing was an easy and good place to start and Starfleet had been nice enough to afford him a humble stipend for his work with them that he’d hardly touched. For now a few new pieces would do. At some point he thought he might talk to Julian or Fisk about reversing the cosmetic alterations he’d undergone to appear human. Then again...He might not. He’d gotten used to his human features and there wasn’t a great deal of difference between his original appearance and the one he had now.

Gaven was wise enough not to jump too quickly into the deep end. His current state of mind was only temporary and unless he kept up with his purging meditations, it would be impossible to sustain his present state long term. It was something to think about.

A few new pairs of clothes wouldn’t hurt though. Something for special occasions and to wear around the house at least. Gaven had avoided going out over much since he’d been exposed but for once he felt like it wouldn’t be so bad. A little stroll down the promenade. Some window shopping perhaps. He was due to meet Julian in a few hours. Not that meeting up with him in his current mood had anything to do with his sudden preoccupation with his appearance.

When he was ready, Gaven grabbed the hooded Jacket Fisk had given him, his smaller medical bag which he’d gotten in the habit of carrying with him always, and his forearm crutch. He was back to just one for now and headed towards the promenade. To Gaven’s satisfaction practically everyone paid him no mind either because he was unobtrusive enough to go largely unnoticed or hopefully because people had enough good sense to avoid picking a fight with him. Naturally, Gaven was heading to Garak’s shop. His reputation for being the best tailor on the station well preceded him.

Garak was putting the final touches on the hem of a stunning gold-lame’ gown accented with a hand
crafted emerald beaded collar. Under anyone else's craftsmanship the sweeping gown would have seemed bawdy, but under Garak's creative mastery and delicate skill it was boudoir worthy piece fit for someone with the regality and cunning sex appeal of Cleopatra. It was a masterpiece.

All of Garak’s projects were. It was the beauty of his depraved genius.

Gaven was still outside the shop when Garak’s hawk-like attention caught sight of him through the window display as he studied one of the display pieces on the other side.

His delight at having Gaven so unexpectedly appear at his doorstep when it was otherwise going to be a dreary day of fine tuning, proved so delicious to the Cardassian that he very nearly missed a stitch with the pleasure of thinking about it.

“You’re welcome.” Garak said after he’d hurriedly come to the front and opened his door for him, encouraging Gaven to come inside.

“Hello. I’m sorry to disturb you. I see you’ve closed your shop for the day.” Gaven remarked.

“Only technically. For you, Doctor? My door is always open. What do I owe to this unexpected visitation?” True to his nature among those he greatly liked or was fascinated by Garak immediately took Gaven’s free arm very personally and ushered him further into his shop.

Gaven permitted this gesture, he knew Garak had a certain reputation for pageantry and the Cardassian did not disappoint him.

“I was thinking of engaging you in a commission. Nothing extravagant, I just…” Gaven began.

“Mm. Your finally ready to emerge like a butterfly from your cocoon of intrigue and mystery. How delightful. I’m pleased to see it. How may I assist in your endeavors? I know. A new suit. Or maybe something more understated but with a pop.” Garak said theatrically.

“I’d prefer to keep it simple for now. I don’t require much and I can’t say I’m familiar with your rates. I did bring a few references along. Picking colors is a little tricky. Please excuse my ignorance. Gaven pulled a folded paper from his breast pocket and set the small wooden box he’d bought while out down along with his medical bag.
Garak instantly offered him a seat before eagerly taking the paper from him with a few designs on them.

“I am open to suggestions but if you think you could recreate something along those lines I’d be most grateful.” Gaven said after settling.

“Simple and yet elegant. It would be a very easy project. Have you a color in mind?” Garak asked as he immediately went to his table and quickly sketched a more detailed outline of what Gaven had given him.

“I don’t know what it’s called here but I was thinking something like this.” Gaven opened the wooden box and presented its contents to Garak who took the box from him with deep interest.

“Mulberry. An inspired choice. I’m glad to know you have such refined taste, Doctor. Mulberry is a superb color choice for those captivating green eyes of yours. You must allow me to do a suit for you as well, as a personal gift from me to you. The others I can have completed for you the day after tomorrow if that would please you.” Gaven nodded and Garak briefly negotiated the price of the commission which he deeply underquoted simply because he could and it pleased him to do so in this instance.

“Now, let us forget about business. It just so happens that I’m done with my work for the day.” Garak lied. “And would love to take this opportunity to get to know you. That is, if you have time for a chat?”

“I do, as a matter of fact, and I’m glad we finally have the chance to become acquainted. I’m sure you’re actually very busy right now.” Gaven remarked, suspecting that the shop was closed to allow Garak time to finish what was probably a large and complex commission. It was pretty early yet and Gaven figured the man had been actually planning to work for several more hours.

Caught in his simple lie, Garak knew then and there how it would be between them.

Gaven was deliciously perceptive and so blatantly honest that it was cutting to the senses. He had no need or desire to hide his capabilities which Garak could tell on instinct were vast, not unlike himself. And so, the man who always lied and the man who always told the truth were now to face off.

“Have you been enjoying your time on the station, Doctor?” Garak asked pulling up another chair to sit near him.
“No. But some of the people have been very nice.” Gaven remarked honestly with just a tinge of irony.

“Mm. In between a rock and a hard place now, I would imagine. It must have been torturous for you to lie about yourself all this time. Not that I’m complaining. Things have been far more interesting around here, since your arrival.” Garak couldn’t help but to start pushing buttons, if only for the sake of seeing which if any triggered any interesting reactions.

Gaven smiles slowly and slightly feeling the psychological prode. He’d heard rumors about Garak. Mostly that he was a exiled spy and a pathological liar. Certainly, Garak was a liar. But Gaven might have hesitated to call it a pathological affliction. He doubted Garak habitually lied just for the sake of lying. He was too intelligent and self serving for that.

Gaven shrugged, ignoring Garak’s bait.

“Starfleet likes to protect what they feel belongs to them. I’m sure that they were afraid that if my origins and identity was openly known it might attract other unwanted players to the playground. There is something to be said, Mr. Garak, about playing the hand one is dealt. Regardless, of whether it’s a good hand or not.” Gaven muttered before plucking up a mulberry and popping it into his mouth.

“Oh, indeed. I know just what you mean.” Garak said with fine edged sincerity. “You certainly seem to have a knack for keeping people on their toes. What a pity that Starfleet has felt the need to keep you all to themselves.”

“’’Better that people stay on their toes than end up laid out on their backs.” Gaven muttered.

“Mm. Yes. Though I suppose it rather depends, now doesn’t it.” The double entendre was not lost for a moment on Garak who loved to make even the most innocent of things sound and seem torrid and visa versa.

“You know, I never got to thank you properly for the things you’ve done? I consider Julian Bashir to be a close personal friend of mine and I have it on good authority that you saved his life. I can’t begin to tell you how thankful I am to you.” Garak was observing him very acutely now without coming off like he was.
Gaven could feel his attentions though, as surely as he had felt it once when Garak had caught his gaze awhile back will passing by the infirmary during Julian’s recovery. While he knew Garak and Julian were good friends and like many on the station Garak was probably relieved that Julian had made it through, thanking him now for it was not the real purpose of bringing Julian up in this instance.

“Julian saved himself, I just kept him together long enough for him to commit to living. Given how close the two of you are, I’m sure you know how strong he is.” Gaven remarked.

“Yes. He does have his moments and he certainly thinks highly enough of himself. But he’s also young and like most young people there’s a certain belief in one's own invincibility that, at times, is hazardous to his health. You and I, were much older and wiser about these things.” Garak patted Gaven’s hand.

“Older, yes. Wiser? Mmm. I’m sure we’d both like to flatter ourselves. Let us call it, a sharper appreciation for self preservation rather than wisdom.” Gaven proposed.

“Indeed. I like that.” Garak remarked, silently noting the steel in Gaven’s choice of words. He was hinting at a core personal motivation. Survival. That’s what it was all about. Garak reasoned. It was something concrete they had in common. Like Gaven, Garak was also a survivor and someone willing to go to exceedingly extreme lengths to do so.

“I must tell you, I’m rather surprised that you live here on the station.” Gaven admitted.

“Really? Why is that.” Garak had his suspicions but was curious to see what Gaven intended to reveal.

Gaven could have remarked that Garak was a Cardassian and the complexities of living somewhere where so many people had a personal reason to resent at hate him. He was the only Cardassian that seemed permanently fixed to the station since before Starfleet had come into possession of it. But Gaven didn’t point any of that out. Instead he wanted to comment on something that had come to his attention the last time Dukat had been there. Gaven had treated Dukat for minor injuries attributed to a little space scuffle he’d claimed to have been in. The men had gotten off to a snarky start thanks greatly to the fact that Gaven had come to Garak’s defense in Quarks when Dukat had assaulted him and threatened to tip him off the balcony for his involvement with Dukat’s daughter. After that, Dukat had taken a testy and suspicious attitude towards Gaven and later had done nothing but pointedly complained about his doctoring even if, deep down, like everyone else Gaven helped, he found himself impressed by the Doctor’s abilities and manner.
“When Dukat was here, he complained a great deal about the environmental controls in the
infirmary. Since I am interested in the personal comfort of my patients I decided to look into the
matter. Mostly into Cardassia’s general climate. It would seem your natural climate is far more arid
and hot than anything here and the dust in the upper atmosphere limits the amount of sunlight
saturation. I would think, it’s terrible for you to be here on the station by comparison since the
general environmental settings are more likened to temperate parts of Earth or Bajor.” Gaven
observed.

It was the last thing Garak would have expected him to say.

“Ah well I admit, I do greatly miss my homeworld for various nostalgic reasons, and, you're quite
right. The current settings here on the station are by no means ideal. But, one does find ways to get
used to things outside of one's control and I’ve managed to make due with my situation. Rest
assured.” Garak rattled off in a breezy manner that by no means reflected how he actually felt about
the subject.”

“Yes. One does find ways to live.” Gaven echoed.

“Despite the stations many inadequacies for someone like myself, I happen to make a comfortable
enough living here and I do enjoy my friends. Although I won’t bother to indulge myself by asking
where it is you specifically hail from, Doctor, am I under the correct impression that you never intend
to go back to wherever it is your from?” Garak of course had eventually weaseled the truth out of
Quark about what he knew of the doctor, the rest was easy enough to figure out.

Gaven had to have been expelled from his planet which made him far more interesting than for any
other detail mostly because Gaven came off as as such a nice kind of person. Honest. Ethical.
Contained. Gaven was so delectably contained. Impenetrable. For a moment Garak allowed himself
the indulgence of imagining what it might take to break someone like him. No doubt, some had
already tried.

It was Gaven’s turn to study the man. All the Cardassians he’d met so far seemed a mixture of slyness
and dignity. With the exception of Ziyal who's Bajoran blood and upbringing softened her
considerably. Garak in particular was beyond sly. He was a master at manipulation, misdirection, and
subterfuge. It was no wonder that Julian Bashir found the Cardassian so appealing.

Garak was a certifiable crocodile, Gaven observed. A disturbingly charming one. He also was the
kind of person, Gaven suspected, who remembered his debts and the favors that were owed him.

“No. Mr. Garak. I have no intention of ever going home again.” He confirmed evenly.
The way Gaven said it spoke volumes. Garak realized he must have lost everything he had. Maybe long before he’d ever left his homeworld. It was why going back had absolutely no appeal for him. The most dangerous man in the world, was a man that had nothing left to lose but his literal life. Garak wondered again at how such a person was to be leveraged and worked on. He wondered what a man like Gaven might come to care about and the kind of person capable of touching him. The doctor was terribly appealing. Not unlike Julian was to Garak, though for different reasons. Garak had always admired the younger doctor’s boyish appearance and charms. His hungry inquisitiveness. His eager heart. His foolishness. He imagined it must have been quite comical to have Julian thrown together with Gaven who, for the most part, was quite different from him. Where’s Garak was furiously protective of Julian and would have taken tremendous care with him if he ever had the opportunity, Gaven was someone Garak felt compelled to test and try. There was something about him. Garak couldn’t quite put his finger on it just then. He just knew that he very much wanted to see more of the man.

“Well, that’s a shame. I suspect you’re homeworld has no idea what they’ve given up. Well their loss is our gain. You must come have a drink with me sometime, Doctor. From one exile to another.”

“I’d like that, Mr. Garak. Thank you.” Gaven had decided by now he liked the man. He liked anyone intimately connected with Julian and besides, he understood that Garak wanted to study him and that it was safer to allow him his satisfaction.

Garak was not a person to be taken lightly. By many accounts he was a rogue and a dangerous criminal. Gaven supposed his relationships to people where likely highly individualized and it occurred to Gaven, based on these impressions, that as extravagant as Garak’s favor could be, he could also be viciously and deviously cruel. It was a duality that Gaven had come to understand and trust in.
“It'll be fine. You look fine. Just show up, let him do the talking, relax, and enjoy. That's all there is to it.” Julian coached himself as he prepared to meet Gaven.

For once he wanted things to go right between them. Julian glanced into the wall mirror one more time as he prepared to leave. Gaven had instructed him to dress for hiking and to pack a light dinner. Julian kept his look casual. Tan organic cotton and black running shorts. Gaven had estimated that their activity would take about four hours. That included the climb and a hour break to eat. Plenty of opportunity to take their time. Though Julian had been a star athlete in his adolescence and had kept up with some conditioning as an adult, rock climbing was not a sport he was deeply familiar with. Gaven had been nice enough to send him the full specs of the program ahead of time as well as some reference articles promising they wouldn’t be doing anything too challenging but only jumping in could fully prepared him. A ten or fifteen foot climb meant for beginner skill levels? Julian wondered just how experienced Gave was.

After looking over everything a second time it all seemed easy enough.

Julian arrived promptly at the agreed upon time at their holosuite. Not surprisingly Gaven was already there waiting for him in a leaning position up against the outside. His hands were loosely fiste in the pockets of his linen slacks and the sleeves of his matching linen shirt were rolled to the bicep. Julian noted he was barefoot and that his knee and thigh had been carefully wrapped to allow for support without hindering flexibility. A canvas backpack was resting near his feet. Julian exhaled. He’d never seen Gaven look so relaxed and casual before. His dark curls were still too long, Julian noted and he was still on the thin side. But none of that took away from his natural beauty. Infact, the gauntness caused by his recent ordeal only seemed to enhance it. Julian noticed because he hadn’t actually seen Gaven face to face in awhile. As was usual between them, the second something happened to bring them intimately close they suddenly found it hard to mesh their schedules after. Julian wanted to tell himself it was unintentional between them but he knew better than that.

This time, Julian felt uncertain how to approach the waiting man.

In the past he might have tried for a bouncy kind of exuberance, sweeping friendliness, a bit of witiness, or possibly even a direct cerebral approach but suddenly in the light of this moment all of those options seemed contrived and false. Julian certainly didn’t feel any of those things. Instead he felt shy and self conscious and so he approached slowly and quietly watching for cues within Gaven’s own expressions as to the tone of their little holo adventure.

“Hello Julian.” Gaven said peacefully. “Shall we?”
Gaven stepped aside for Julian, who was more familiar with the mechanics of the Holosuites.


Gaven didn’t answer in words. Instead he smiled lightly and nodded.

“Good.” Julian muttered before cuing up the program for them and initiating it.

A second later the doors opened to admit them.

The scene inside was a simple natural setting. They appeared to be in a small canyon similar to a location like southeast Utah on Earth. Though the canyon was nondescript enough to have been fashioned after any sandstone canyon from any standard planet. The details were pretty and Julian could easily tell that this level was made for beginners. There were many easy handholds, flat areas to sit or stand on, and since it was a holosuite program the fifteen foot height was an illusion. At best they’d be climbing only five or six feet off the ground at any given time.

“So have you ever been in one of these before?” Julian asked in a casual attempt to break the ice and because he really was curious.

“No. The entire concept is a complete novelty. My people don’t use holographic technology in any form.” Gaven replied.

“No much for escapism?” Julian said offhandedly as he set his things down and took some time to study the canyon face.

“As you’ve seen, altered states are something we do anyway. The rest of the time the Oum prefer to stay as present as possible.” Gaven said speaking in generalities as he fished a bag of climbing powder out of his backpack.

“What about you personally? What sort of things do you enjoy?” Julian wanted to steer them away from talking about Gaven’s people and more towards Gaven talking about himself.

“I’m fond of the natural world. Mostly quiet open places. It’s funny because I didn’t like being out of
doors when I was young. I was something of a nervous child. Shy. I didn’t enjoy being unkept or uncomfortable. The summers on Oum could be quite humid at times where we were and long. I prefer the dryer heat. But since Lopel was rarely in the house when we were young, Gulvere, his sire, insisted I be out of the house as much as possible as well at first.” Gaven remarked passing over the powder.

Julian felt like he should know who these people were and something on the edge of his mind vibrated with some distant and unfocused familiarity that he failed to pull up in his recall. “Were they your family?”

Gaven smiled and nodded. “In a fashion, yes. I suppose you could say that Gulvere and Lopel were father and son. There was also Gluvere’s mate Verda and her bondservant Hadna. Lopel was just a few years older than I, when I was taken into their household. I remember the business was a bit rushed. Verdna had been resistant.”

“Why?” Julian felt confused.

“It’s hard to say. Until recently I admit I’ve never tried to pinpoint her exact distaste for me. But perhaps, and I have no proof of this by any span, perhaps I was an undesirable reminder of the fact that she couldn’t have offspring of her own.” Gaven speculated.

“Was she not... A biological contributor to Lopel?” Julian asked, trying to follow along. The genetic and social politics of the Oum people seemed confusing and complex to him.

“I don’t know. It's not uncommon for Oum gentry to apply for surrogate carriers when reproducing. She could have carried him and later lost the ability to carry again which is common. Or she may have been sterile all along. Also common. In any case she never took to me. We had a somewhat non-existent dynamic where she mostly ignored me all together.” Gaven shrugged, clearly he was not overly disturbed by their lack of a relationship.

“What about Gulvere?” Julian asked.

“Our relationship was not warm but he did care for Lopel and appreciate how seriously I took my purpose for being in his household. He assured that I was thoroughly educated in all the subjects that Lopel was naturally resistant to. I spent a good decade under his personal tutelage when I wasn’t attending to Lopel. Later we disliked each other more strongly. Mostly because he frequently fought with Lopel in his later years... Commonly regarding me.” This time Gaven did frown mildly but he just as quickly shook it off. “Well, ready for this?”
“Looks like fun.” Julian agreed.

Gaven and Julian took some time formulating a plan and to go over the finer points of free climbing. Gaven explained how technique was generally more important than body strength and that finger strength was an advantage as well. Gaven seemed to like to climb barefoot so that he could more clearly feel the stone and also probably because it was a lifelong habit. Gaven went up the five or six feet first to give Julian an idea of what he was doing and how his personal style would be different from Julian’s who was shorter and lighter than he was. Then it was Julian’s turn to follow. Gaven let him more or less experiment as he liked, only intervening when Julian occasionally paused longer than was reasonable. They took their time playing about and experimenting with different routes before both settled on the first alcove to rest.

Gaven rooted around in his pack eventually handing over a container of water to Julian.

“Thank you.” Julian said his hand trembled slightly as he took the container from Gaven.

This was not lost on Gaven.

“Hands bothering you?” Gaven asked gently.

“I bit, but I’ll manage. This really isn’t a bad practice for them. It’s just fatigue.” Julian reassured him.

“That’s a relief. I would hate to think I make you nervous.” Gaven remarked only half joking.

“Only when your on my OR table.” Julian quipped.

“Fair enough.” Gaven conceded.

“Can I ask you something?” Julian said suddenly as he watched Gaven sidelong.

Gaven nodded before taking back the container and drinking from it. Even if he hadn’t seen Julian sip from it, he would have known that he had. He could practically taste Julian’s life force on the rim
of the container, his energy subtly swirling now in the water. Gaven sighed at the tingling sensation of his lips and waited cuping the container between his knees.

“When you were in surgery you said something to me. You repeat something, actually, that I had said to you earlier while you were in stasis.” Julian refrained from forming an actual question right away.

Gaven took his gaze from the top of the container and slowly settled it on Julian considering him as he did so.

“You said we were more alike than different...That we were just two extraordinary people. You knew I would be able to save you as long as I dropped all my other pretenses. You knew I was an augment, didn’t you? You’ve know for awhile and yet you never said anything. Why?” Julian inquired.

“I didn’t want to invade your privacy, Julian. And anyway, I didn’t know for sure until you were attacked. We both know you should have never survived as long as you did. Any other human would have died within hours. You made it days. There was only one conclusion I could come to and when I looked into it more, the inconsistencies in your medical records, subtle and well masked as they were along with the subtle scaring I found told it’s own story. I haven’t said anything because I didn’t want to make you feel uncomfortable. You obviously went to great lengths to hide it. I’m sorry I managed to expose you anyway.” Gaven said sincerely.

“Don’t be sorry. I don’t regret it and, frankly, I’m glad it happened this way.” Julian reassured him quietly.

They were silent together for a little while. Taking in the simulated breeze. After awhile Gaven glanced at him again.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Gaven asked.

“About what?” Julian inquired.

“About whatever it is that’s bothering you right now, Julian. I can see it in your face.” Gaven encouraged him.
Julian sighed. “Oh, Hell. Gaven. I don’t know. It’s silly. Juvenile really...It’s just...Sometimes I feel like you bring me so close into your confidence and yet...I’ve never felt like you consider me your friend. It's silly, I know.”

Gaven observed him for a beat. “I'm sorry I've hurt your feelings, Julian. Especially when we first met. I have no excuse for my behavior other than admitting I was in pain and I didn't want to get close to anyone. Least of all someone interested in getting closer to me.”

Julian felt has face and neck flush a little. As always Gaven had nailed his thoughts right on their head. It had hurt his feelings whenever Gaven had avoided him or turned down his invitations to socialize.

“It's alright, Gaven. I'm sorry I pushed so much in the beginning. I didn't realize what you were going through and I didn't try to ask you. Maybe we can start over. Clean slate.” Julian swept his hand in front of them for emphasis.

“I'd like that.” Gaven agreed.

Julian smiled thinly in peaceful satisfaction as he settled back against the rock face. After a moment or two he slowly leaned towards Gaven.

“I feel like I was really annoying at first--”

“Oh you were so annoying.” Gaven immediately remarked.

“Right, right. Of course.” Julian agreed.

“But then again I was reclusive and difficult. You've seen alot of me at my worst.” Gaven remarked.

Julian knew what he was referring to. The incident when he'd made a fool of himself and later caught Gaven as he struggled in the web of his private suffering. Julian had reacted and responded to his emotional needs on instinct even though he hadn't understood the source of his pain. He still didn't understand it really and he knew whatever it was, was still clinging to Gaven and hurting him.
He wasn't ready just yet to ask Gaven about it. He certainly didn't want to spoil there pleasant experience together.

“Well, you're not really that unlikable at your worst. Come on. Let's conquer this molehill of a mountain.” He quipped warmly, ready to start again.

After they went back to climbing Julian's mind began to dwell on the matter of Gaven's difficult feelings mostly because he wanted to ask something specific but didn't want to let on that Jadzia had told him something in confidence. In spite of this, the next hour passed happily enough. Gaven even raced him once or twice. Eventually, though it was time to eat and rest. Julian's fatigue was getting the best of him. Their rock climbing excursion being the first aggressive exercise he'd gotten since before his attack.

As Julian began to tire Gaven helped him along during the final climb to the top catching him by the arm as he struggled to hoist himself over the final edge. Julian appreciated his strength, it made him feel safe as they briefly forgot they were just in the holosuite.

“Gods, I'm out of shape.” Julian huffed as he stayed on the ground, pulled his back off, and flopped onto his back.

“Drink some more water and then we'll eat. And you sure are out of shape. Comas and near death experiences tend to do that to a person.” Gaven muttered handing him the second water container from his pack before finishing off the first.

“Yes, yes, doctor.” Julian teased.

After that they made camp and set up their mini buffet. Julian had brought cold deboned roast chicken, potato salad, soft rolls, and some jasmine tea while Gaven produced savory mini pastries stuffed with meat and spices, a box of mulberries, some cut raw vegetables, and some hard English style biscuits which he thought Julian might enjoy. They happened to pair very well with the tea.

“I had a nice conversation with your Mr. Garak today.” Gaven remarked conversationally. “I understand he's a good friend of yours.”

“Garak.” Julian was slightly surprised. “How did that encounter go?”
“Fine. We seemed to enjoy ourselves. He's perhaps one of the more interesting personalities I've encountered here on the station. Is it true he was a Cardassian agent at one time?” Gaven inquired.

“You mean to ask if he's a spy. I have no reason to doubt it. He's also a very accomplished tailor. Though I should warn you. Take what he says with a large spoonful of salt. I don't know that Garak is actually capable of telling the truth without twisting it about first.” Julian warned.

“So I've heard.” Gaven nodded. “And yet…”

“We're the best of friends. I know. It confuses people. I wouldn't really call Garak a good kind of person. But I also wouldn't call him a bad one either.” Julian said simply.

“I can tell he favors you a great deal. You have a powerful protector in him, I think.” Gaven observed.

“Yes, not unlike your friendship with Jyyrus Cheval.” Julian pointed out, drawing the comparison out in that cerebral way he was capable of that showed he'd been analyzing Gaven’s relationship with the Vulcan with some interest and attention.

“Yes.” Gaven agreed, somewhat interested by the fact that Julian had noticed this.

“I was surprised to find him taking care of you at home before and deeply grateful he was there later. I know my abilities greatly contributed to the success of the surgery, but if he hadn’t helped the way he did I don’t know if we would have intervened in time to stop the infection. When he acted as a middle man for us later...I must admit I’ve never experienced anything quite like it. It was like...I can’t describe it. Is that what it’s like for you all the time when you link with someone biologically?” Julian asked.

Gaven nodded slowly.

“It's how your able to be so accurate. isn't it? How you can just link and map, in intimate detail, the minute functions of the body your linked with. But it isn’t telepathic. You can’t read thoughts. Just biological impulses and interactions. Your ability is amazing. I’ve never seen or heard of anything quite like it before.” Julian’s thoughts also drifted back to the time when Gaven had linked with him in the carpet shop.
That experience had been more intense and in some ways more intimate because, likely in his haste, Gaven had opened the link between them in such a way were Julian had caught a glimpse of who Gaven really was. It had been an empathic kind of sharing. As if Gaven had poured part of himself into Julian to help strengthen and preserve him. Thinking on this again filled Julian with a kind of buzzy warmth that the intellectual part of his mind suddenly pushed away as he tried to focus back in on the conversation.

“There’s so many of the Oum who need advanced care to maintain their lives. Generally speaking we try to avoid medical intervention unless it is absolutely necessary to preserve the life of the Oum. Since many Oum can’t tell their caregivers how they feel or what’s causing a disturbance, it’s just one way we’ve developed to communicate with each other. The ability varies, some Oum do have limited telepathic abilities as well that are cultivated for service. Oum like myself who exhibit no adverse reactions to the poly radiation on our planet tend to have the strongest empathic and telepathic abilities. It’s part of the reason we are trained and servant bonded.” Gaven explained.

“That’s something I’m afraid I’ll never understand about your species.” Julian remarked. “I don’t understand this fixation your culture has about poly mutation. I’m shocked by the notion your culture would prefer their people live lives of disability and deformity and that they...Enslave those who don’t meet their standards. If the Oum wanted to they could slowly over generations breed out the variant genetics that cause the Oum to be negatively affected by the radiation their exposed to. I’m sorry to be culturally insensitive, but I find that to be madness.” Julian confessed, knowing he was ebbing into dangerous territory all of a sudden.

Gaven didn’t respond for a long time and after awhile Julian began to fear he’d put his foot in it again.

“Gaven, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to criticize your culture. It’s judgemental of me, I shouldn’t have said anything about it at all.” Julian backtracked.

“I won’t defend what I equally think and feel is wrong.” Gaven finally said at length quietly. “I could make excuses for my people, but I won’t. Ultimately, I made my alternative beliefs clear and my people responded in kind by my expulsion. Everyone got what they wanted in the end. My silence and my absence.” Gaven’s tone was distant, his feeling muted. The topic had been one of the things Gaven had been processing while in stasis.

Julian relaxed somewhat, realizing that Gaven hadn’t taken offense but that he also wasn’t quite himself either. The implications of what Gaven must have been through during his final days or months on his homeworld made Julian bleed for him without fully knowing why or what had exactly happened. Of course Gaven saw the flaws within the framework. He was too compassionate a person to approve of anything that caused needless suffering for others. It had been stupid of him to point out that Gaven had been a part of a flawed system. One that Julian didn’t understand and thus couldn't appreciate.
Not really knowing anything else to do to repair the conversation Julian scooted closer to Gaven and slipped his arm around his waist squeezing in a side hug.

“I’m glad your here, instead of there.” Julian said simply.

Gaven sighed in a cleansing manner. Relaxing partially into the rock wall behind them and partially into Julian. “Me too.”

The contact between them was natural and comforting for both of them and after a little while Julian was rewarded further when Gaven slipped his own arm around Julian’s waist as well. The mutual gesture made Julian feel accepted and proved that they really did trust each other now. In light of all the pain and turmoil Julian had been through lately, he felt like he could let alot of it go around Gaven. He realized, when he was with Gaven he could be himself. Fully and completely. Even among his other close friends, he’d never been able to experience the luxury. It was nice to spend time with someone he could abandon all pretense with.

“You know, I was very nervous about coming out with you today. To be honest. We don’t exactly have the best track record socializing and I admit I felt a little paranoid something might go wrong.” Julian muttered, in a self deprecating manner.

“I know.” Gaven confirmed. “I invited you because I wanted to show you that things could be alright between us. You’ve become important to me Julian. You and your friends. I’ve never had friends before. Back on Oum my purpose was clear and there wasn’t the opportunity to cultivate other close relationships outside of the household I was bound to. Until I left my world I never knew it could be any other way.”

“No personal family, no friends...Just service. Service to people you didn't even much like.” Julian scowled at the thought of such a limited existence. “What a terrible waste.”

Gaven tilted his head as he watched Julian sideline long in amused consideration. “Lopel Ner said something to the same effect more than once. I used to find it belittling but now I see what he meant by it.”

“Lopel Ner. That was the name of your...Bonded mate. Yes?” Julian inquired.

“Yes. It was.” Gaven confirmed softly.
Julian could feel Gaven's arm around his waist stiffen subtly and he knew then that he had to tread very carefully around the subject to avoid Gaven recoiling and shutting him out.

“What happened to Lopel Ner, Gaven?” Julian tightened his own grip around his waist protectively.

“He died. A freak climbing accident in the mountains near our home. I was there with him when it happened. It seemed...impossible. Lopel was one of the best climbers I ever saw. But it was as if the hand holds he was using simply disappeared. I watched him fall to his death from about twenty feet off the ground. Head injury. He died on impact. There was nothing I could do. I, huh, I climbed down to where he was, lashed him to me, and climbed back out. Then I carried him home.” Even though he kept his composure this time, the grief he felt was still evident in his expression and tone.

Julian pressed his lips as Gaven looked him in the face. It was one of the consistent oddities about him. How Gaven always looked a person in the face when he was exposing something that made him particularly vulnerable. Anyone else would have looked away.

“Lopel Ner is literally the reason I exist. His end should have been my end as well.” Gaven remarked, waiting for Julian to show that he understood him.

It didn't take any great computation. The realization connected in Julian's mind almost automatically. “That's why you were expelled from Oum. You refused to observe the Oum death rites of bonded suicide. You defied one of the most fundamental practices of your people and so they made an example of you.”

Gaven nodded. “Having them jettison me into space to die seemed an extreme but reasonable compromise at the time.”

“A reasonable compromise? How in the hell is that a reasonable compromise?” Julian muttered incredulously.

“Lopel Ner was a notable figure in the Oum Republica. It would have been reasonable given his social importance for my ritual death to be more extravagant and to take longer than the traditionally prescribed time to execute. I outlined and agreed to the plan to allow me to expire in orbit around the planet. Oum saw no choice but to approve my request. Since our laws prohibit ending life by force a compromise had to be struck to preserve the cultural status quo. In the beginning I did intend to go against Lopel’s wishes and keep with my peoples traditions. I...I...” Gaven began to struggle. While he had understood Lopel’s position on the subject he had loved his bondmate enough to find it
difficult to live on without him.

“Hey. Hey.” Julian repeated himself trying to draw Gaven’s focus. Julian could tell Gaven was starting to distance himself from reality just then. Maybe in an effort to keep his feelings in check. Julian didn’t like seeing him disappear into himself like that maybe because Julian worried it was a place he wouldn’t be able to reach him. “Come back to me, Gaven. Please. It’s OK. You don’t have to say anymore. I understand.”

Julian’s tone was firm and calm as he pivoted onto his knees to better look Gaven in the face. Cupping his cheek with one palm and rubbing at it to further comfort him. Slowly Gaven’s eyes refocused indicating he was fully present again.

“I suppose in retrospect this is an odd place and time to bare my soul to you.” There was just a taste of reproach in his tone.

“Why? Because your sharing the worst thing that's ever happened to you during an activity that is vaguely reminiscent to your experience? Tosh.” Julian said dismissively, causing Gaven to smile slightly at his successful attempt to lighten the mood.

Julian matched his gentle smile and reluctantly pulled his hand away from Gaven's face. He realized he liked being close to him and it had felt indulgent to see Gaven respond to his verbal requests. Julian also noted how different Gaven seemed. His energy felt brighter and less dense and though his emotionality was just as complex as it ever was Julian saw an ease to him that he hadn't seen before. Julian realized that for the first time Gaven felt accessible to him and that he had intentionally invited Julian out with him to prove it. Julian felt himself flush with relief. It hadn't occurred to him how badly he had wanted the other man's approval and acceptance until he finally had it.

Now that they seemed to be back on better footing Julian settled back down beside him again. “You know, you should travel more. I know we’re living in precarious times, but you could still take some time off. Bajor is just a shuttle away and you seem pretty comfortable on Vulcan.”

“I am planning a trip back to Vulcan soon. Cheval has asked me to return with him when he departs from the station in a few weeks.” Gaven remarked.

“Oh. Planning to be gone for long?” Julian kept his tone casual but in reality a sliver of nervous anxiety began to wiggle under his skin at the mentioning of Cheval.
Gaven turned his face slightly towards Julian. “Hopefully not long. Cheval wants my help with some personal business of his and under the circumstances I might be the only one who can help him sort it out.”

“You two seem rather close.” Julian observed. “Is there a, ro-man-tic element going on there?”

Julian was trying to make it seem like he was teasing but it didn’t come off quite as well as he wanted.

Gaven tilted his head at the anxious undertone he heard and sensed in the other man’s question.

“In a manner of speaking, yes. But a complication has arose and…” Gaven began to explain.

“Oh you two shouldn’t let something like that stop you. Romance is for the bold. If you have feelings for each other you should seize the day and just let it happen. Even if it doesn’t work out. You’ll never regret it. I think Cheval is a very good kind of person and I can tell that he...he...cares a great deal about you.” Julian’s manic outburst began to lose most of its steam. Somehow he felt dispirited by the idea of Cheval and Gaven running away to sort out a love affair.

“Julian.” Gaven said firmly. “What are you talking about? I’m not running away with Jyyrus Cheval and I’m not...I don’t...feel about him the way your implying. Cheval has asked me to come to Vulcan with him to sort out some trouble with his betrothed. If everything goes well I hope to be a witness of their nuptials. The romantic element in this case is between Jyyrus and his fiance, not between he and I.”

“Ah, yes. I see. My mistake.” Without warning Julian pulled farther away from Gaven and got to his feet making a show of looking about the space between them like he’d only just now remembered where they were and what they were doing.

To Gaven, Julian looked suddenly lost. He also looked like he wanted to escape. Something had gone wrong between them suddenly. So suddenly that Gaven knew he had to do something about whatever had upturned the proverbial apple cart. Pressing up against the rock with his back, Gaven awkwardly used it as support to get him back onto his own feet. By now Julian had put a few feet between them and was looking about like he had lost something.

“Julian, stop. Sit down and tell me what’s wrong. I feel like I’ve done something to upset you and we were having such a good time.” Gaven said approaching him very cautiously.
“What?” Julian put his hands on his hips and glanced back at Gaven. “He sounded winded. Like he had quietly started to hyperventilate. “Everything's fine. It’s just...I feel, embarrassed. I don’t know what I was thinking just there. It must have sounded so presumptuous. Really, I’m sorry.”

Gaven watched Julian swing to face him even as he took another nervous step backwards. His arms moved in unison as he pressed his palms together as if to pray and sliced them in a bobbing motion between them as if to meekly gather his quickly fraying thoughts.

“Julian your having a panic attack. It’s all right. You didn’t say anything wrong. It was a simple mistake and it doesn’t upset me. I can see how you or anyone might think there was something going on between Jarryus and I and I’ll admit that perhaps there’s some complex emotional tension there, but that’s what we’re going back to Vulcan to repair. So that Jyrrus can move on with his life free of my emotional influence.” Gaven grew more alarmed has he watched Julian hovered close to the edge of the rock lip completely unaware of how close to the edge he was.

“You’re right. I know you're right. I’m sorry. Since the attack I get panicky sometimes and I can’t control it. Maybe I should go...Yes, I should go. I..” The intensity of his rushing thoughts grew stronger and more disorientating mentally and physically and as he tried in vain to get a grip on himself the heels of his feet grazed the edge of the alcove. Julian clearly wasn’t prepared for it and started to falter.

Within seconds, Gaven caught him by the wrist and jerked him back towards him so hard and fast that Julian lost his balance and went slamming into him knocking them both to the ground. Gaven didn’t let go however and instead simply pulled Julian tighter to him as they rolled a full rotation back towards the wall they’d been leaning against a few minutes earlier ending with Gaven on top of him. Gaven had him by both wrists now and it was only then that Julian realized he was being pinned down. Gaven was breathing hard as he tried to force his own terror quickly into a box within his psyche.

“Not a word until we both calm down. Do you have any idea how close you were to going over the edge?” Gaven groaned.

Julian had enough sense in this moment to realize now was probably not the time to remind Gaven that they were in the Holosuite and that he wouldn’t have really fallen any significant distance or possibly at all because of the programs safety protocols. Everything around them was a illusion.

“OK.” Julian breathed, simply allowing Gaven to remain sprawled over him.

The compression of their bodies created a warm safe heaviness between them as Gaven pressed his
forehead into the rock just above his shoulder. Julian could feel Gaven’s hot breath against his neck and as he laid there underneath him he found himself wish Gaven’s face was angled just a little more so that he could feel the man’s lips press against his throat instead of straight into the rock like it was now. Julian’s mind skipped back to a similar time when he’d been caught up so protectively in Gaven’s arms. He remembered how he had almost expected Gaven to press his lips reassuringly to his temple or forehead. He had been practically convinced Gaven had wanted to but had held back and settled for cradling Julian’s face in his neck. Julian shut his eyes pushing away the thought as he focused on their breathing and worked to bring his own in sync.

While doing this he noted that Gaven’s personal scent was vaguely floral like roses and Juniper berries. Julian slowly let his body relax under Gaven’s so that he could feel and track his form. The feeling of his body pressing into Julian threw him back to a time at the academy. Although Julian had a well known reputation for being a ladies man, few knew of the rather long relationship he’d carried out at the Academy with one of his male peers. Despite his many butterfly affairs over the years, it had been the only real and lasting romantic relationship he’d ever maintained long term. Of course none of that had any bearing on his current situation. But when Julian thought about the last time he had a man pressing into him like Gaven was, his mind drifted back to how he had once felt. The nostalgia was very potent and suddenly Julian snapped his eyes open.

“Gaven you need to let me up right now. Really. I’m alright.” Julian insisted hastily urging Gaven to release his wrists and move off him.

At this command, Gaven instantly let go of Julian’s wrists and pushed himself up and over turning onto his side as he watched Julian quickly roll over onto his stomach before he turned his head in Gaven’s direction and pressed his lips at him.

“What?” Gaven breathed the question trying to read Julian’s expression and thankfully failing.

The look on his own face revealed that Gaven hadn’t noticed Julian’s developing erection. With any luck he wasn’t familiar enough with the human sexual response to realize what it meant even if he had.

“Nothing.” Julian said convincingly. “Look, Gaven. What do you say we call it a day. Everything’s been going so well, I sort of don’t want to risk spoiling it. I’m really pleased you asked me to do this with you. Really, I am.”

“Auh. Of course.” Gaven said in a breathy manner. “I’m glad you’ve enjoyed it. I...I better go clean up our meal. You just, relax there awhile. I’ll take care of it.”
Julian was grateful for the time and distraction as he took the opportunity to will his body to behave itself. Luckily it did and by the time Gaven was almost done packing up their lunch Julian was back on his feet helping him. There was no tension during this. Gaven seemed relaxed once more and content and this in turn reassured Julian and helped him to relax as well even if he now had a whole new slew of things to process and privately sort out. A short time later Julian ended the program for them.

“Thanks again for inviting me out with you.” Julian said, as the both balanced their packs to lean in for one armed hug. “Next time I’ll pick the program and take you on one of my adventures.”

“More spy cappers, fast cars, and faster women?” Gaven quipped as they walked to the door together, Gaven leading them with his hand on the small of Julian’s back guiding him along.

“Not quite. What I will say, is I think it’s a fine thing that Garak is making you a suit. Might as well give you an opportunity to wear it.” Julian teased.

“I look forward to having my horizons broadened. See you tomorrow in the infirmary?” There was a tinge of hopefulness in Gaven’s tone.

“Indeed.” Julian agreed.

At that the doors opened and Julian and Gaven lingered a bit longer together before going their separate ways for the evening.
As Julian walked back to his quarters alone his mind poured over the events of the last few hours. On one hand everything had gone well, so far as things usually went between he and Gaven. But on the other hand they’d also taken a bizarre turn and Julian was struggling just then to swiftly put the details of the situation into a logical frame so that he could try to understand what had happened and what he should do about it.

Luckily he was due to meet up with Miles soon for a late drink and a dart game. Julian got to his quarters and put away his things but before he started to peel off his clothes, he stopped for a moment and reflected once more on what had happened.

While Julian hadn’t seen it coming, his reaction to Gaven wasn’t particularly disturbing and a moment Julian allowed himself to smile reminiscently at what he’d felt. What he’d felt with Gaven had been a nice feeling. Different then the kind of feelings he’d pursued in his final years at the academy and during the last few years on the Station.

The main question now was what the hell was he going to do with it? Was it real? Or was it all coming about because he’d had some traumas happen very close together? Julian hadn’t pursued anyone since Leeta had broken up with him. There hadn’t been time to seek out anyone new. But that was neither here nor there. Julian was capable of being single. While he preferred companionship when it could be had he certainly didn’t need it.

Julian shifted back to Gaven again. How would he feel about Julian harboring an emotional and physical attraction to him? It boggled Julian to think that Gaven was so obtuse that he didn’t notice it. Then again, he was an Oum. However that might or might not play into it, Julian didn’t know.

What he did know was that the situation had come to a head because Gaven’s close relationship to Jyrysus Cheval had made Julian feel insecure. Maybe even a bit jealous. Julian shook his head at his own stupidity and changed out of his clothes to take a shower before he headed over to meet Miles.

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“Well don’t you look all bright eyed and bushy tailed.” Miles muttered, when Julian appeared in there usual spot dressed in dark slacks and a dark blue sweater. His hair was rumpled from not being fully dry yet.
“Believe it or not Miles I feel pretty good. A little off kilter, but good. I hope your up for more than one game tonight.” Julian muttered, sweeping up his darts and testing them a bit between his fingers.

“Might as well get as much in as I can. Keiko’s being called away to Bajor to help them with a blight that causing a problem. She’s leaving in a few days and I’m absolutely terrified that little Kirayoshi is going to throw a unholy fit over her being away from him for the first time.” Miles lamented.

“Oh I’m sure it won’t be so bad, Chief. They say the second one’s supposed to be easier.” Julian teased.

“Yes well whatever idiot said that obviously wasn’t a father. Mark my words. It’s going to be Hell in a handbasket, but, then again, I suppose that’s what I get for leaving Keiko to do most of the parenting. She’s just too good at it. And the children? They know she is. Anyway, you know it’s going to be bad when your own wife actually sends you to Quark’s to have a good time before the boom drops.”

“May the prophets bless her for it.” Julian muttered toasting Miles with the drink he’d picked up on the way in.

Miles observed Julian closely for the moment. “Oie. What’s going on with you today? How was your outing with the good doctor?”

“Fine. Just fine.” Julian muttered, before he tossed the first dart from a respectably handicapped distance.

“It was fine. So...No one got maimed, you didn’t put your foot in it again or anything...” Miles wasn't quite convinced that Julian had played things off as well as he was presenting.

Julian didn't immediately reply.

“Miles have I ever mentioned my early escapades at the academy?” The question was rhetorical since both men knew that he hadn't.

“No. Though your reputation somewhat proceeds you. That candy bar you invented is still all the rage. Better than the standard Starfeet rations by a long shot which of course is one of your claims to fame, as I understand. You’ve mentioned your athletic prowess as well.” Miles reminded him.
“I never told you about some of my relationships, did I?” Julian continued to lead on, taking his final shot before he moved to the side to watch Miles take his.

“You’ve mentioned that Delon woman. The one you broke up with before you took your commission here. What was her occupation again? A performer of some kind?” Miles asked trying to recall.

“She was a Ballerina. A magnificent one. One of the best in Paris.” Julian reminded him.

“Yes well you always did have ambitious tastes.” Miles muttered, referring to Julian’s tendency to be attracted to exceptional people. Some of whom were well out of his league. “Why was it you two called it quits again? Surely it wasn’t over your commission alone.”

“We wanted different things. Palis knew that. Our affair was quaint and it pleased her father which allowed Palis to do what she liked without further sensor. For my part it allowed me the time I needed to get someone else out of my system without alot of pressure. We were very good friends but we both knew that if I had stayed there would have eventually been greater expectations of us as a couple. Since Palis wasn’t exactly the marrying type when I was offered my choice of commissions I took the one I wanted without hesitation.” Julian explained.

“How long were you with her?” Miles inquired.

“Five years.” Julian confirmed.

“And your telling me that you got together because she wanted cover and you were trying to get over someone.” Miles reiterated.

“Unfortunately I was very attached.” Julian admitted.

“It took five years? Who was this other woman?” Miles demanded. He knew Julian tended to become very immersed in his partners. But five years of recovery seemed excessive even for him.

Julian swallowed the rest of his drink and suddenly wished he’d had the sense to bring a second one along.

“Conrad Wittle Junior.” Julian finally said.
The name drop was so unexpected that it caused Miles to falter half way through his release and miss the board completely.

“What? You...You and Conrad Wittle were an item? Really? For how bloody long?” Miles stopped what he was doing to turn and stare at Julian in disbelief.

“Oh. Awhile.” Julian felt the heat rise in his face as he rocked back on his heels.

“Want to give me a ballpark estimation here?” Miles inquired.

“Six...Seven years. Although I really only count the middle few years officially. We meet three years into my time at the academy. He was the Captain of the Embassy Racquetball Team for awhile. Frankly it’s rather embarrassing to admit, so kindly keep your voice down.” Julian muttered.

“You were in a relationship with Conrad Wittle. The sociopath.” Miles repeated in a hushed tone.

“It wasn’t always obvious he was a sociopath, but yes. Everyone has that one relationship they regret. Conrad is mine. I was young. Naive. Lonely. I was the perfect target for his kind of antics and actually he wasn’t that bad of a sort to be involved with when one was in his good graces. I was quiet happy for three or four years with our arraignment. Conrad was always very charming, and could be quite magnanimous when it benefited him. It’s why in spite of his less noble reputation he’s still such a good negotiator for whoever decides to hire him at any given time.” Julian remarked.

“Yeah well he’s also an alleged criminal and con artist. Conrad Wittle.” Miles repeated.

Miles was familiar with the name mostly because of the scandal that had broken open featuring the man a few years prior. The Wittle family were apart of a long line of experts in the field of communications. Many of the Wittle’s throughout history had served in ambasador occupations either for the Federation or for parties looking to get into bed with the Federation. Conrad Wittle Jr. had been no exception and had quickly established himself as a key Embassy player on Earth and abroad.

He was charming, handsome, intelligent; but completely immoral as Starfleet had discovered when Conrad had gotten caught up in a complex information leak that had compromised some of Starfleet’s interests and caused a few important ones to be materially damaged.
Although there had been many rumors of Conrad’s involvement in these dealings, Starfleet had found it challenging to bring official ethics charges against him and even if they had, it became quickly apparent that several worlds within the Federation were sympathetic to Conrad and would have likely harbored him if criminal charges had been brought forward. In the end there simply hadn’t been enough non-circumstantial evidence to convict him and Conrad had walked free. Now it was rumored that he was roaming about the galaxy working as a freelancer and living like a prince among men.

Finally, Miles got over his surprise and threw his darts. “What makes you bring him up all of a sudden anyway? Something on your mind regarding him or is it something else?”

Miles never ceased to amaze Julian with his capacity to accept things that were presented to him about people. Here Julian was coming out to him again and he hardly seemed to react.

“More like it's someone else.” Julian said delicately.

This time Miles stopped what he was doing to stare at him. “It's not me, is it? Don't get me wrong, Julian. I love you to bits and Keiko and the children adore you, but I think she might draw the line at her husband running off with a younger man.”

Julian's mouth twitched at the temptation to smile in pleasure at the perfect quip. This was why he loved Miles and considered him his best friend. Both understood how thin the line between romantic love and friendship really was.

“Consider yourself safe, chief. I wouldn't want to break up the family. It's, huh, Gaven actually.” Julian mumbled.

At this confession Miles instantly rolled his eyes and leveled a stare at his friend. “What did the two of you do, play patty fingers while you were rock climbing?”

“No such luck, I figured it out on accident.” Julian muttered, sweeping up the darts and throwing them. “We had a minor misunderstanding and I panicked and said something stupid and then one thing lead to another and I...huh, had a unexpected reaction.”

“And?” Miles inquired.
“And...Nothing. I made an excuse and got the Hell out of there.” Julian admitted with a sigh before throwing his last dart.

“Why’d you do a silly thing like that?” Miles inquired. “Why not, you know, tell him? Does Gaven know yet?”

“I don’t think so...and, wait just minute. Are you encouraging me to pursue this?” Julian questioned.

Miles shrugged. “Well, I don't know. You've just always been so adamant about chasing after people you like. So I'm a bit surprised your being all hesitant now. Doctor Ore is a good caring kinda man. I can see that he cares for you. Favors you even. In any case, I certainly like the idea of you and him over you and Garak.”

Julian gave Miles a quizzical look.

“Don't look at me like that. That cardassian flirts with you relentlessly and when you started having regular lunches together...Well I wondered sometimes.” Miles admitted.

Julian had to concede Miles’s point regarding his friendship with Garak. He knew perfectly well that Garak commonly came onto him and had tried to coax him more than once into getting more deeply involved in the Cardassian’s personal affairs. Julian had understood those moments to be subtle invitations and he was convinced that if he'd shown even the slightest sign of taking them seriously Garak would have advanced upon him.

For Julian's part he'd always harbored some deeper attraction to the man, but had the good sense not pursue it. Garak was still a cardassian spy and an accomplished criminal and Julian was a Starfleet Doctor. It just wouldn't have been wise to get into bed together and they both knew it. Though Julian probably cared far more about the issue than Garak did. As it stood, their close friendship was enough for them and was as close as they would likely ever get.

“Point taken.” Julian conceded.

“So what are you going to do then about the good Doctor?” Miles asked delicately.
“I don’t know.” Julian admitted.

“Well...Would you be open to a relationship with him if he were willing?” Miles was trying to understand what the big fuss was all about. If Julian and Gaven were attracted to each other and wanted to try for a relationship he saw no obvious obstacle in the way outside of the ones they created for themselves and each other.

“I haven’t pursued or even considered a relationship with another man since Conrad. What happened between he and I hurt me enough that I never felt comfortable trying again.” Julian admitted.

“So what about all these women. Has being with any a them really been that much easier?” Miles questioned, before snagging a few drinks from the roaming waitress and nodded for her to put them on his tab.

“In...some ways, yes.” Julian implied thoughtfully.

“Mm. I see. Women are easier because you know what’s expected of you there. Seems kinda interesting to me that you managed...What was it? Five, six years, respectively with Conrad Wittle - his character aside- but, not counting your rebound antics with Palis, you’ve averaged about six to eight months with all your other girlfriends since?” Miles asked.

“My average is closer to a year, but yes...So? What are you implying?” Julian was trying to follow where Miles was going but failed to see the point he was getting ready to make.

“Your afraid of commitment. No, I take that back. You handle commitment just fine. It’s being in a real relationship that scares you to pieces.”

“That’s ridiculous. And not true by the way.” Julian muttered.

“Isn’t it?” Miles challenged. “Julian, real romances, I mean the kind that last, are hard. Once you get past the pleasantries and the bed play, partnerships require real work, effort, and maintenance. You don’t get to be selfish anymore at least not without considering the impacts doing so may have. Look at Keiko and I. I love my wife, can’t imagine what my life would be like without her. But we’re both working professionals with demanding and sometime dangerous careers. When we met on the Enterprise-D it was easy to get caught up in each other because we could be together all the time. Well that didn’t last. There’s been times when Keiko’s assignments or mine took us away from each other for months. Though I love my wife, sometimes I’m not sure I like her as much as others and
that’s all part of the life we’ve built together. What you need to ask yourself is what kind of life do you want to live? It’s not a trick question and there’s no wrong answers.”

“I know. Your right. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. Just because I’ve discovered a passing attraction to Gaven doesn’t mean I want to or should pursue him.” Julian remarked.

“All I’m saying is that every love match starts somewhere.” Miles immediately replied. “If you really don’t want to pursue it, then don’t. But try not to lie to yourself either. If you hadn’t thought about it just a little bit you wouldn’t have brought it up. Now. I’ve got an open tab and permission to be out all night. If I’m going to get stuck analyzing your love life for the entirety of the evening then I would prefer to be considerably more drunk while I’m doing it. Thank you very much.” Miles tipped his beer in Julian’s direction and took a swig for emphasis.

For most of the rest of the night Julian and Miles ended up talking about everything other than Julian's feelings for Gaven, even though the subject matter lingered in Julian's mind. When it was time to leave Julian ushered his inebriated friend home to a grateful Keiko and then went on home himself. Julian had to work in the morning so he’d held off on too much indulgence. Now though while going home he wished he'd taken a little more care with his disclosures. While Julian wasn't worried Miles would gossip about him outside of telling Keiko, Julian understood that in talking about his attraction openly he'd made it more tangible and less simple to dismiss.

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The next morning Gaven and Julian were due to start their live inoculation trials. It was exciting to have come so far with the project.

When Julian woke up that morning he winced at the slight headache he'd developed. As much as he wanted to blame it on drinking with Miles he knew that he was simply over tired from tossing and turning in the night as he thought about the various possibilities the new day could bring. Gaven had been apart of those thoughts and as Julian had lied awake in the early morning he allowed himself the indulgence of wondered what it could be like between them.

In truth Julian found it difficult to imagine what being involved with Gaven would look like. Gaven was so introverted, self contained, and emotionally complex that it was clear getting involved with someone like him would be no light ordeal. It would take real commitment right from the start and Julian knew he wouldn't be able to emotionally skirt by as he had done in many of his other relationships. What bothered him the most about the idea was that Julian wasn't sure he was mature enough to appeal to Gaven. Then again, Jarryus Cheval was young by vulcan standards and had an air of uncertainty that made him seem uncharacteristically awkward for a vulcan. Gaven had admitted to deeper feelings for Cheval and Julian had observed for himself they're connection. The mental argument ensued through his sleeping time until he finally became determined to stop
obsessing about it. There was a possibility he was getting himself worked up into a froth for nothing and, regardless of the case, Julian had to face Gaven that morning.

Julian arrived in the infirmary on time and immediately took something for his headache once he got into his office. He wasn't really looking forward to spending the day in the lab under the bright lights and in such close proximity to Gaven but the situation couldn't be helped. They needed the inoculation experiments to work. Julian took a deep breath and sipped at his glass of water as he mentally prepared to put his doctoring face on.

Hovering near his office door while he mentally prepared himself, Julian caught sight of Gaven working with one of the patients.

It was a little girl about the age of six who was getting a tetanus shot for a mishap at home. She was clearly upset and afraid to be treated. Julian watched Gaven tend to her. When she refused to sit on the exam table Gaven got down on the floor with her at her level despite the maneuver being awkward for him. Julian couldn't hear what Gaven was saying but he watched the little girl’s face slowly transition from stubborn distrust to shy curiosity as he showed her the hypo-needle and let her use it on him first. After awhile she even giggled and shyly showed him her hurt hand explaining what had happened. Gaven listened to her patiently and attentively then gently explained why it was important to protect her with the shot. Finally about twenty minutes in, the little girl let him give her the shot without further fuss and shortly after went on her way with her grateful father.

Julian lingered in his office watching Gaven as he remained on the floor. There was a tranquil look on his features with flickers of something else. Longing maybe or regret for what might have been. Slipping out of his office then Julian approached Gaven and extending his arm to help him up off the floor. Gaven took it and allowed Julian to hoist him up into a standing position.

“Thank you and good morning.” Gaven said softly.

“Anytime. And good morning to you. Your very good you know. With children, I mean. If you ever decide to pursue medicine as a real profession, I might encourage you to consider pediatrics.” Julian advised.

“Coming from someone who chose to specialize in pediatrics, that’s a high compliment. I’ll keep the recommendation in mind. You look tired today, Julian. Are you well?” Gaven inquired.

“Just a mild headache. I had a late night. It’s nothing a little coffee won’t fix.” Julian muttered. “You know, you should let me look at your leg sometime. We might be able to repair the muscle damage so you don’t have to keep using that forearm crutch.”
“I’m sure you could correct it and quite easily.” Gaven conceded. “The technology used here on the station to heal people never ceases to amaze me. You’ll have to excuse my hesitance. Old habits die hard, as the saying goes. If I were still on Oum…”

“If you were still on Oum they wouldn’t treat it. They’d let you go on limping about in discomfort.” Julian remarked without judgement. “Well the choice is yours. If your not interested I of course won’t pursue it further. I just…” Julian began.

“I know.” Gaven nodded, indicating he knew that it bothered Julian to see him in pain or disadvantaged by something that could be remedied. “I’m mostly just a little stiff from our climbing adventures. Come on. Lets get some coffee in you and we can go over the agenda for today.”

Julian and Gaven spent the rest of the morning in conference discussing and outlining the parameters of their stage one inoculation experiments. It was slow going at first because Gaven had to be caught up on the scientific approach Julian intended to use to carry out the early experiments. Sometimes it was hard to remember that Gaven was an alien with completely different technological references and that he had almost no experience with certain scientific concepts.

Ultimately though, they were able to flesh out the next stage of their plan for Fisk to look over and for the captain to sign off on. It was satisfying to work with Gaven. He was careful, methodical, and curious with plenty to contribute.

When it was time for them to stop and take a break, Gaven uncharacteristically asked Julian to eat with him again.

“What about you? Don't you normally take lunch with Jyrrus on tuesdays?” Julian had asked conversationally.

“I do. He isn't on the station however. Jarryus is away on Bajor and will be there for a few days. Keiko O'Brien asked him to come along and help her as a fellow botanist. He in turn offered to go on ahead and set up their work site.” Gaven observed something slightly deflate in Julian's features after he revealed this information.

“Ah. That makes sense. Miles mentioned keiko was leaving soon.” He said nodding.

“what about you? Don't you normally take lunch with Garak?” Gaven inquired.
“Sometimes. When he's not busy.” Julian replied.

A pregnant silence ensued between them as they mulled around together.

“So, conference room in say five minutes?” Gaven finally pressed.

“Yep. Sounds good.” Julian chirped before he pushed off the table he'd been leaning against and headed back to his office.

Gaven watched him go and sighed. He had meant his invitation genuinely and yet he suspected that Julian had somehow read the request unfavorably. After the incident in the holosuite Gaven had put together that Julian somehow felt like he was in competition with Jyrrus Cheval or at least that he was merely a replacement companion for when the vulcan wasn't available. Sometimes Gaven didn't understand why it was so hard to convey his intentions with Julian. Everyone else seemed to follow pretty easily when he interacted with them.

Gaven pondered their outing once more. He had really thought Julian might fall. The fact that they were in the holosuite together had been forgotten. His fear for Julian's life had been all too real. Real enough that it had triggered a fresh series of nightmares featuring the moments he'd spent watching Lopel fall to his death.

Gaven pushed his invasive memories away. The effects of the psychic purging that had occurred while he was in stasis was starting to weaken. Soon some of the emotional ease he'd been enjoying recently would fade. He wanted to enjoy his stability while he had it even if he wasn't willing to sustain it long term.

Eventually, Gaven went to the replicator and ordered it to produce a random meal using a simple nutritional parameter. While the replicator always announced what it produced and a list of ingredients in the recipe Gaven usually had to research what the ingredients were. This time the replicator produced something called a citrus cos salad. Gaven paired this with a herbal tea and joined Julian in the conference room.

For Julian's part he was sticking to dry toast and coffee.

“Still not feeling well?” Gaven inquired settling down to Julian's left with the table corner between them.
“Mm.” Julian muttered to the affirmative. “It's not getting worse, but it's not getting better.”

Gaven nodded at him and looked down at his salad. It was pretty enough with the fruits set against the crisp greens. Gathering up as much of a variety of the ingredient as possible Gaven hesitated briefly before he brought the fork to his mouth and took an experimental chew. Almost immediately Gaven suddenly made a pinched expression and murmured in surprise as he quickly spit his fork full into his napkin and made a face.

Julian watched this display and couldn’t help but chuckle at the rare expression of acute surprise that had come over Gaven's features and he quickly reached over to pat him between his shoulders to ensure he didn't choke.

“Tart.” Gaven muttered as he recovered himself and sucked at his lips.

At this remark Julian chuckled even more. Why yes. Grapefruit and limes typically are. What were you expecting?”

“I assumed they would be sweet.” Gaven remarked glaring at him though not managing to avoid smiling at his own folly.”

“Were you not familiar with what you replicated?” Julian asked.

“Not at all. I've been having the replicator pick my meals at random. You know, for the experience of it. Normally I spend my meal times looking everything up.” Gaven admitted.

It suddenly occurred to Julian why Gaven almost always carried a data pad with him. Up until now he'd assumed he was using it to record his thoughts and file reports. It never occurred to him that Gaven probably spent a great deal of his down time trying to make sense of everything he was being exposed to.

The realization sobered him a little.

Gaven returned to his salad, fairing better with it once he knew what to fully expect in among the layers of bright and refreshing flavors.
“what sort of things did you eat on Oum?” Julian asked with genuine curiosity.

“Animal protein is somewhat scarce on the planet with the exception of insects and sea life. The poly radiation tends to affect everything for better or worse and so animal life is limited. Most vegetation has adapted and so we do have a wide variety of edible plants, fruits, vegetables, nuts and such. I suppose you could say the culture is mostly vegetarian as it's costly to ship aquatic animals for consumption if the community is far inland.” Gaven explained. “I was always fond of sweet breads, dried meral which is a type of fatty deep sea fish, and I'm rather fond of roast coach spider. Hadna used to make a very fine stew from them.”

“Where you and this Hadna person close?” Julian asked.

Gaven nodded slowly. “Yes. I suppose she was the equivalent to a mother figure to me. Hadna was Verda’s bondservant. We were equals despite our age difference and were commonly together when our duties didn't have us occupied. I often only saw her in the early morning and night when we settled in our shared room together. She liked to sing and she was quite talented at making natural medicines. She had a way with plants and the natural world.”

“She sounds wonderful.” Julian remarked.

“She was.” Gaven agreed. “Her departure was deeply felt within the household by all of us. Perhaps more so than the departure of her Bondmistress.”

Julian was tempted to ask more but held back. Gaven's stories about his life on oum always seemed to be stained with sadness even when he was speaking favorably about his experiences. Instead he filed his thoughts away and went back to eating his toast which seemed less and less appealing. Julian's head throbbed just enough to be constantly distracting and after awhile he pushed his plate away from him and frowned.

Gaven observed him through his lashes as he worked though half of his lunch.

“I take it eating isn't helping. You know, if you want I could take a look at you.” Gaven offered wiggling his fingers at Julian.

Julian felt a tickle along his spine at the suggestion. He understood that Gaven was offering to link with him to diagnose what kind of headache it was and the best course of action to take. Julian had
linked with him a few times already. Once in the carpet shop and once with Cheval acting as a grounder. Both had involved emergent situations and Julian hadn't really had the time to study the linking process. Something held him back from the experiment. Perhaps it was fear.

“Hm. When you link with someone how extensive is the range? Can you map the entire body or is it more like a search and find?” Julian asked.

“It’s more like a search in find. I have the ability to look for certain things if I’m already familiar with the anatomy, but I can’t know everything nor would I want to.” Gaven explained.

“Why is that?” Julian wondered aloud.

Gaven shrugged. “It can feel overwhelming. And too personal. If there’s pain, it’s shared.”

Julian found this information disquieting. It made him think about what he’d experienced when Gaven had linked with him in the carpet shop to root out where he was injured and to what extent. Had Gaven experienced Julian’s physical pain as if it had been his own? Despite that his abilities weren’t telepathic, Julian remembered the strength of Gaven’s feelings pouring into him. Willing his body to endure and for his mind to hold on. He wondered now if Gaven knew what he’d shared in his haste.

Ultimately he decided to dig a little deeper.

“Can I ask you something? I notice you seem different lately. Less stressed, happier even. While I’m mighty glad to see you like that…” Julian trailed off not sure how to further phrase his question.

Gaven smiled lightly, pushing his empty plate away to fold his hands on the table. “I know what you’re trying to ask. As you know the Oum are empaths and are telepathically capable under certain circumstances. You might imagine that being an Oum can feel very overwhelming. The disfigurement and disability caused by the poly radiation can have negative emotional impacts. Many Oum experience chronic pain, regular discomfort, etc. Bonded Oum who do not experience these burdens are trained to bear the load when necessary for those that do. Our refined empathic abilities allow us to bring forward comfort, healing, and grounding. In this capacity even the bonded can become overwhelmed by the burden. Likewise our general sensitivities make other emotional experiences more potent. In order to protect the mind from prolonged trauma the Oum developed a psychic purging ability. Using a deep meditative state we can compartmentalize trauma, process it, and over time distance ourselves from the experiences. Most Oum do this regularly in order to remain emotionally and psychologically balanced and healthy. Bonded Oum may utilize the technique more often because we tend to carry more than just our own emotional load. We essentially have the
ability to heal our own minds and strip our memories and experiences. In doing so many of us live happy contented lives despite our individual disparities.” Gaven explained.

“All this time on the station and you’ve suffered so much. Why if you could purge your experiences like that?” Julian wondered truly shocked by the implications.

“Regular purging essentially makes certain experiences meaningless. As an Oum distances themselves, they distance themselves from the entirety of the experience and while they may remember it factually, over time it may lose all emotional context. The good and the bad. As much bad as I’ve experienced Julian I haven’t been willing to give up the good mingled in with it. I admit it’s not ideal, but it’s how I choose to live.” Gaven explained.

“What about recently? You’ve clearly been doing some processing.” Julian observed leaning in slightly. His own meal mostly finished.

“Involuntarily. Stasis forces the purging process and unlike guided purging which allows one to be selective about what they purge, the stasis condition purges at random. It’s why the Vulcans encouraged me to enter stasis when they rescued me. I was so disturbed that they understood it was the best thing to do in order to become functional again and not cause a problem for their people. I admit the last few days have been...a relief. I’m sure it’s been something to see.” Gaven teased.

Julian chuckled. “Yes. It has been nice to see you happier and more at peace. I know you’d rather not purge much of what you’ve experienced Gaven, but I must admit knowing you could revert back the troubled states I’ve seen you in previously is something that’s hard to swallow.”

Gaven smiles compassionately at this show of support. “You know...The Oum sensitivity works both ways. We feel happiness and joy just as acutely as anything else. I think the easiest way to meet in the middle is to aim for more good and happy times then bad.”

“Mmhm. I couldn’t agree more.” Julian said as he wondered to himself about the kind of experiences that could be strong enough to override grief and pale even the worst suffering. Maybe it wasn’t really about big experiences but rather the millions of little ones a person could experience.

“Right. Speaking of important experiences. Do the Oum observe special significance to the birth of their offspring?” julian asked.

Gaven narrowed his eyes at Julian suspiciously. “Is that your way of trying to work out my
approximate age, Doctor?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact it is.” Julian mused in a conspiratorial tone.

Gaven chuckled dryly enjoying the apparent test of wills he'd stumbled into.

“Mm. We don't actually. Not with any great significance. And if you really must know I'm likely old enough to be your father. Perhaps even a very young grandfather.” Gaven replied without really answering the intended question.

“I'll keep that in mind. That would make you what? Fifty, sixty years old? If you don't tell me I'm just going to pick a suitable number and spread it around.” Julian threatened.

Gaven scoffed, believing Julian was capable of making good on his threat. Tilting his head away from Julian but looking back with his gaze, Gaven rolled his tongue from one side of his cheek to the other as he hugged himself and leaned back in the chair.

At last, he slowly looked back upon Julian in full. “I'm approximately sixty-three.”

A smug boyish look came over Julian's features as he realized Gaven had conceded defeat.

“If you tell Dax I swear Julian that I'll drug your coffee.” Gaven warned him as he reached over and prodded him in the shoulder lightly.

“I should think you two would love to chat about your experiences. Her symbiote is older than both of us combined.” Julian grinned at the prod.

It occurred to him that Gaven had started to make subtle physical gestures. Mostly gestures of comfort. Funny how he just noticed it now. It caused Julian to shuffle back through his recall as he picked out all the times they'd come into more intimate contact usually while trying to comfort or reassure each other. Julian realized such repeated contact was more or less unique between them. Again, Julian wondered how intentional it all was.

If it wasn't a conscious impulse on Gaven's part, Julian speculated what it unconsciously meant. He
also had to admit to himself that he liked their subtle contact and that he hoped it continued to evolve.

Easing up out of his chair Julian caught Gaven by his right upper arm and squeezed it as he simultaneously patted Gaven on the back with his other.

“Come on, Doctor. Let’s tackle the Hell out of these inoculation trials. I suddenly feel right as rain.” Julian said boldly though with a quiet intensity.

Gaven glanced from Julian’s grip on his upper arm to his confident face and he felt something give a little in his resolve spreading a slow moving warmth across his abdomen.

“Yes. Let’s get down to work.” He agreed, before gripping onto Julian's arm as he let him pull him up out of his chair.

Once they were both standing they found each other intimately close. Nearly as close as they'd been in the holosuite when they'd tumbled to the ground. They held that position for a fraction of a minute longer than was needed before they both slowly let go of each other.

“Age before beauty.” Julian said, not quite, able to avoid a huskiness to his voice.

“Mm. It’s sweet that you think I’m beautiful.” Gaven quipped before he gently moved away from Julian, turned, and limped to the door not bothering to catch his expression.

Obviously the proper interpretation of the old phrase was completely lost on Gaven, yet his rebuttal was so interesting it hardly mattered.

Gaven stopped at the door and finally looked back. The look on Julian’s face was deeply satisfying to him for some reason.

“Coming?” Gaven asked.

“Yes.” Julian said, swallowing and shaking himself back to his senses. He was coming alright. Coming and going in fact. Damn Julian if Gaven hadn’t just sent his radar wirling.
Julian felt like he was tentatively being invited into something. He just wasn’t sure what that something was yet or if Gaven really knew he was ushering in something complicated between them. Whatever the truth among the fantasy was, there was still important work to be done and Julian knew now wasn’t the time to dive deeper down rabbit hole.
**Peaceful Slumber**

That afternoon with Jeremiah at the helm managing the infirmary’s regular operations, Gaven and Julian were in the lab setting up their first round of live experiments. The idea of the poly radiation inoculation trials was to create a short term inoculation that would shield the humanoid cellular structure from the effects of poly radiation exposure. Longer term protections could be utilized through shielding and containment fields.

Once their protocols had been reviewed and approved Gaven and Julian got to work and remained completely engrossed together in their experiment for the next forty eight hours. During that time Julian and Gaven worked cooperatively as scientists collecting data. The full length of the trial would take a minimum of eight to twelve weeks but the early findings would be the most critical. Both men worked tirelessly. Barely aware of the passing of time as Julian led and Gaven supported.

They spoke little about anything other than the direct task at hand and both might have continued on longer, caught up in the pure intellect of their project, if Jeramiah hadn't finally intervened.

“Guess what boys? Playtime is over. I'm kicking you out.” Fisk proclaimed at the forty eight hour mark effectively interrupting Gaven and Julian while they had been taking turns examining cellular samples.

Julian and Gaven slowly looked up from their relentless work both seeing the fatherly no nonsense look on Jeremiah's face.

“I suppose we do have to stop eventually.” Gaven muttered in a strained fashion.

“I guess.” Julian agreed with a groan, rubbing at his tired face after reluctantly pulling himself away from the microscope he'd been using.

“You both are on strict R and R for the next twenty-four hours.” Jeremiah warned.

“Cant let you guys have all the fun.” Dax muttered brightly after appearing in the doorway and shaking her head at the state they were in.

“By the way it smells like a locker room in here. Go home. Bath.” Jadzia scolded them humorously. “I'll look over the data and send you guys my opinion.”
“I think we're being kicked out, Doctor.” Gaven muttered smiling sidelong in a hazy fashion.

“Yes, Doctor. I think you're right.” Julian muttered not skipping a beat. “Well up and onward I guess. There's not alot more we can do now but wait and see how our test subjects fair.”

Julian got up, stretched and then took Gaven by the arm then helped pull him to his feet. It was becoming a habit between them and one both simply accepted.

“Come on, old man. I'll walk you home.” Julian muttered clapping Gaven on the back.

He could feel Jadzia staring at him from behind him and ignored her. They were both tired and only in retrospect did Julian wish he'd made Gaven go home much sooner. The wish was fleeting since Julian was perfectly aware that Gaven's stamina was quite robust and that both of them had chosen to remain on their own accord.

It took several minutes of brisk walking for Gaven to limber up and in the meantime Julian pulled back his pace and walked in very close stride with him. Both of them were largely running off of adrenaline at this point from having been mutually engrossed in their experiment and neither was quite ready to simply tuck things in. For once even Gaven's waning emotional distance didn't rob him of his sense of accomplishment over the work that had been done.

While he still had reservations about how their research would be used, Gaven could appreciate that he was being permitted to play scientist because of it. It was a role that had not been afforded him on Oum and he found himself pleased that he was so well suited for it and that he had the benefit of observing and assisting someone like Julian who had a long standing reputation for scientific discovery and research.

“Well, Doctor. Thank you for walking me home.” Gaven muttered as he stopped in front of his quarters.

“My pleasure.” Julian nodded. A part of him wished they could have walked longer. It was too late to go to Quark's and Julian didn't feel like going home.

When Julian didn't immediately say his farewells and leave, Gaven tentatively ventured an alternative for him. “Would you like to come in for awhile?”
Julian considered his invitation quietly weighing out the significance of it. Though his body was tired, Julian's mind was still in top form and the invitation to remain in the alien's orbit just then was entirely too tempting an opportunity to pass up. It was a large step for Gaven to invite him in at such an odd hour. Especially because Julian knew the man was deeply fatigued. Maybe though, like Julian, Gaven didn't want to be on his own that night.

The idea quickly drowned out any other possibilities and made a flower of intimate compassion blossom in his chest and radiate outward.

“Yes. I would. But I'll only come in if you agree let me fetch and carry for you for the rest of the night.” Julian muttered seriously as he rested his back against the wall panel on one side of the entry.

Gaven paused in front of his door tilting his head slightly at Julian’s phrasing before he slowly nodded approvingly and then let them in.

“You remember where everything is, I'm sure.” Gaven muttered, letting Julian step in first.

“Yes. Come sit down. I'll replicate you some hot tea and we can think about some dinner.” A subtle husky tone had slipped into Julian’s tone in spite of his better intentions that was fed by Gaven’s willingness to allow Julian to take care of him. There was a kind of seduction in it that Julian couldn't keep himself from quietly enjoying.

“Any requests?” Julian asked over his shoulder.

As he looked back he caught sight of Gaven heavily limp over to his sofa struggling briefly to settle into his favorite spot. Julian frowned at his clear discomfort momentarily studying his gait and then mentally calculating where the problem most likely was and the possible ways it could be treated, if Gaven ever let him.

“Surprise me.” Gaven muttered predictably as he pulled his legs up onto the sofa to lounge.

Julian eventually turned his full attention back to their meal as he fixed them both some herbal tea and set the small dining table. He planned to introduce Gaven to a childhood curry dish but for the moment he was eager to simply sit with him and talk awhile. Taking up the steaming mugs Julian came into the living room and handed one off before he settled on the floor near him with his own.
“Does it hurt?” Julian asked softly as they sat quietly together winding down.

“Sometimes.” Gaven admitted. “Mostly like now it just gets stiff and strained.”

Julian nodded knowingly as he gripped his cup and stared into its depths to avoid the urge to look up sidelong into Gaven’s face. “Well...I know that you’d rather leave it, but I would still suggest you at least consider some therapeutic massage. It might ease the muscle strain at the very least.”

A few seconds later Julian felt Gaven nudge him in the shoulder encouraging him to look at him. When he did he was rewarded with the sight of a tired but amused smile splayed across Gaven’s features.

“It really bothers you, doesn’t it?” Gaven asked rhetorically.

“Yes.” Julian admitted before taking a large sip of his slightly too hot tea.

“Alright. I concede that your request is reasonable. How about we talk about it again when I’m properly rested and able to resist you a little better.” Gaven quipped.

“Hm. Fatigue makes you more susceptible to my whims, does it?” Julian couldn’t resist the subtle suggestiveness in his question. He could still feel Gaven’s knees pressing into his shoulder and made no attempt to relieve himself of the intimacy he was enjoying.

“Can I ask you something?” Julian inquired, as he adjusted his position so that he could rest his arm along the edge of the sofa and look at Gaven properly. “What are you going to do when this is all over. The conflict with the Dominion, I mean.” Julian had asked at random, but now that it was out of his mouth he realized he was trying to get a better feel for Gaven’s long term plans.

“I don’t know.” Gaven replied honestly. “I suppose...I would look for somewhere new to lay down roots. Then try to start my entire life over.”

“What does starting over look like for you?” Julian went on trying to imagine Gaven as just a regular free citizen somewhere.
“I suppose I would look for ways to be useful. I'm a fair good administrator. Managing things for others is something I'm particularly gifted in, as you know.” Gaven mused.

“Do you not plan to continue in medicine?” Often times Julian forgot that Gaven wasn't really a licensed doctor.

“If there was need for my abilities, perhaps.” Gaven conceded slowly.

“What about other things? Have you ever thought about, oh, settling down again and having children of your own?” Julian went on.

“Maybe someday.” Gaven said, more quietly then he’d said the rest.

Julian took a good look at his features just then and was relieved to see Gaven's soft and tranquil expression. Apart of him had worried he'd been too personal again with his line of questioning.

“What about you?” Gaven asked at length, turning the subject matter back onto Julian.

“Ah, well I'll always be a doctor. I may not always be out here on the frontier or even in Starfleet, but...doctoring is what I’m best at. As for the rest, I never really thought of myself as the family type. I suppose that I’ve always felt it would be unfair because of my family secrets.” Julian mused, not mentioning that he also had ample command training and could have just as easily aspired to be a captain someday if he wanted to be assuming the Federation didn’t suddenly take issue with his status again.

“And now that It's all out in the open?” Gaven asked.

“Now? Oh I don't know. Anything is possible I suppose if the right person came along. Personally, it's never been a sticking point with me.” Julian shrugged.

“Do you want to eat something now?” Julian asked at length effectively changing the subject as he slipped back into his caregiver mode and got up off the floor.
Gaven nodded and watched Julian as he walked away to fiddle with the replicator. He took this time to note the healthy weight and muscle mass he'd put back on in recent weeks and how his hair had nearly grown long enough to hide the surgical scar that had drawn so much acclaim. Gaven was relieved to see these marks of progress in him, even the hand tremors seemed to have improved. One thing Gaven enjoyed in moments of observation like this was how graceful Julian naturally was. Everything Julian did had a kind of dignity to it. It was a dignity that was especially potent when he was caring for someone.

Caring. Caring for him. Julian had explicitly made a point to take care of them tonight. As much as Julian was doing it for Gaven, he was also doing it for himself. He had wanted to spend more time with him, that much Gaven understood. There time together lately had taken on a intimate feel, more intimate than the time Gaven spent with Cheval and certainly more intimate than his time with anyone else on the station.

For once, as Gaven tentatively allowed himself to explore his growing attachment, he realized that, perhaps for the first time, when he looked into himself his vision was not obstructed by the visage of his former bond-mate reminding him of the worn out expectations of the past. As many had pointed out in recent weeks, now that Gaven was out on the frontier there was nothing barring him anymore from sharing himself with others if he wanted to and yet he knew he wasn’t ready to make that leap yet.

At first Julian planned to have them eat at the table, but now that the initial buzz of excitement had worn off he grunted and instead carried the bowls of curried vegetables back to the sofa. Seeing him approach Gaven made room for him to sit down beside him.

“What is this? It's very good.” Gaven complemented with genuine regard.

“Curried potato. The replicators do a fair job at it. But my mother's version is the best. This was a comfort food when I was a child.” Julian remarked. “I'm glad you like it so much.”

The two of them ate in silence for a few moments.

“Tell me something, if you would.” Julian said after awhile. “Tell me about a happy memory from your home-world.”

Gaven considered his request for a moment. “Have I really done nothing but present a poor
depiction?"

“Yes. But I know rationally that isn't all Oum is.” Julian reassured him. “Tell me anyway though.”

Gaven huffed sheepishly.

“I remember the first time Gulvere took me with him to the capitol. I was the equivalent of about fourteen. Up until that point, I'd never been outside our country providence with the exception of when I'd been brought to the Ner house. You must remember I was intended as Gulvere's protege. Lopel didn't formally inherit me as his own until much later. Anyway, on that trip it was just Gulvere and I. I admit throughout the entire journey there, I was sick with fear. I was very...conscientious in my youth. Deeply introverted. For some reason I had it in my mind that Gulvere was displeased with me and the trip was a kind of punishment.” Gaven explained.

Julian sensed the bitter tinge in Gaven's inflections and wondered about it. He recalled how Gaven had once said his relationships had been strained, but Julian had yet to be clued onto the how and why's of the dynamic in full.

“Warmth was...not his strong point. But I remember, that when he would take my shoulder and steady himself upon arriving anywhere or leaving, his grip...There was always gratitude in it. A silent appreciation that he found so impossible to express in words. By the second to last day, my nerves had been pushed to their limits. I was sick from not eating properly and, as it was damp and cold that time of year, I'd developed a touch of mild influenza. That final night Gulvere hired a servant for the evening and through the next day to wait on us instead of me doing it. I'd been struck by a fever early in the evening and had to be carried to bed. It was a terrible night. But once I was settled Gulvere tended to me personally through the night and into the next day. At one point in an effort to sooth me, he began to hum and pet my hair and I just remember how wonderful to felt in my misery to be carried for by him.” A fond reminiscent smile was set upon his features.

“We were there three months in the capital city of Else. Gulvere was a linguistics expert. A very specialized field given that communication on Oum is both verbal and non-verbal, practical and psychic. It was the one area of his life where his passion and compassion were absolutely clear. As a linguistics expert and specialist Gulvere had almost unlimited access in the Republica. Every Oum is entitled to the right of communication. During this time I once saw him working with a young Oum who was deaf and mute. The child had begun to retreat into himself. A locked in kind of phenomena where, starved of the ability to communicate and impress on the world, the Oum retreats into their psyche and eventually dies. I watched him work diligently with the child for days until he finally reached him. During that trip I was permitted to attend him absolutely acting as his personal aide. I learned much about the Republica at that time. The intricacies of government. The majesty of what the Oum culture had built. We are a very proud people. I think Gulvere wanted me to understand how big my world could really be as well as how important my role was in it. I realized later it was his way of saying he was proud of me. Proud that I was connected to him and his household.
“Well? How was that for a happy story?” Gaven inquired, nudging Julian with his shoulder before finishing off his bowl.

“Just what the doctor ordered.” Julian quipped before he took Gaven's bowl and put it with his own along the side of the sofa. “Can I ask you something else? You mentioned once that Lopel and Gulvere fought over you in his later years. What was it about?”

Gaven sighed, he was starting to tire now that they'd eaten and had been sitting awhile.

“Gulvere disapproved of the nature of Lopel and my relationship. Though Lopel didn't take me on as a bonded mate for some time into our dynamic, there were certain liberties with me that he took early on that Gulvere deeply disapproved of. I think he understood that Lopel planned to take me as a mate later and he knew that if Lopel did that it would get in the way of other expectation Gulvere had of us.” Gaven explained.

“It sounds all very mysterious and complicated.” Julian remarked.

“We Oum are a secretive bunch. Our feelings run very deep for others even though we don't always express the depths of our regard.” Gaven mused as he rested his eyes.

“I'll keep that in mind.” Julian muttered watching Gaven in his repose and wondering at his choice of disclosures.

Julian knew he should leave and let Gaven rest but he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. It felt strangely natural and intimate to be with him in his personal space and Julian suddenly found the comforts of his own empty quarters to feel dreary and unappealing.

“Gaven…” Julian said at length, not even fully certain of what he wanted to say.

“Hm?” Gaven opened his eyes slowly and rolled his head to look at him.
“Gaven it's getting awfully early. I should probably leave soon and let you sleep. I…” Julian was going to go on but Gaven cut him off.

“It is early and you're just as tired as I am. Why not just sleep here? If you'd wanted to go home you would have by now.” Gaven said quietly. “You and I are at a point in our friendship where I would hope that you wouldn't worry about trespassing on my hospitality.”

“Still, I know that you prefer your privacy.” Julian remarked, still trying to process the fact that Gaven was inviting him to stay.

Gaven who had gone back to resting his eyes, opened them once more to look at him. “You don't have to stay of course, but I can promise my nightmares aren't as poignant as they used to be. It's alright, Julian. If you want to stay then you're welcome.”

Julian peered down at his lap. Trying to not think about what he really wanted. Again Julian wondered whether Gaven realized how attracted Julian was to him. He wondered what it might take for Gaven to see that friendship wasn't the only thing on Julian's mind these days.

“Well…” He said at length. “where shall I camp out?”

A smile of satisfaction slid across Gaven's face. “The bed is big enough for both of us if your not shy. You've certainly slept there before.”

“Yes well, I'd still like to know why you weathered that night so easily. That mead didn't seem to have any effect.” Julian remarked.

“I looked into that actually. The blue hue is caused by type of root that apparently my metabolism greatly enjoys. As a result I was able to neutralize the components and thus in that case…”

“Not embarrass the hell out of yourself.” Julian inserted for him with chuckle.

“indeed.” Gaven agreed. “Come on. I’ll loan you something to sleep in.”

For the last time Julian hoisted Gaven off the sofa and they both padded into the bedroom where
Gaven promptly threw a change of clothes at him. In reality fatigue was finally taking over now that they were properly fed and talked out. If Julian was worried it might be awkward for him, it became quickly evident that they were both too tired to care about any real or imagined impropriety. When Gaven settled into his preferred spot he seemed genuinely relaxed and almost immediately sighed and settled onto his side facing the wall. Julian climbed in next to him once he was dressed and curled the other way.

“Sleep well, Gaven.” Julian murmured though he sensed Gaven had already drifted into sleep.

Both men slept long and deep occasionally shifting their positions. True to his word, Gaven seemed to make it through their slumber without incident stirring significantly only once when Julian’s murmurs woke him up. Laying on his stomach at the time Gaven turned his head towards Julian to listen, now ever attuned to any sign of distress coming from the doctor. But Julian’s words were mostly intelligible as he muttered something along the lines of... “You’ve made a mess, Kukalaka. We’ll need to restitch your leg.” Gaven wasn’t sure who or what a Kukalaka was, but he eventually dismissed it and shut his eyes again, opening them briefly once more when he felt Julian shift towards him and curl his arm around his waist like a child clinging to his stuffed toy. Checking on him once more to ensure he was right and truly at peace, Gaven sighed deeply into his mattress.

Julian could be so boyish sometimes. His spirit would be forever young all the days of his life, Gaven was sure. By contrast Gaven felt old and worn. He was a leathery battered book filled with histories that no longer held any context in the void of space. In some ways they had become an unlikely pair of friends with the core of their dynamic centered around a need for understanding and comfort. If there was something more to it for him, Gaven couldn’t bring himself to allow the the truth to frame itself in his mind. He didn’t dare consider deeper possibilities. Possibilities that explained why Julian had followed him home and why Gaven had encouraged him to stay. Gaven understood that the closeness of their repeated contact was unorthodox. Less unorthodox for Gaven and his kind than for many of the other species of people he’d met since being off Oum, but notable enough.

Gaven wasn't ready to examine his feelings such as they might be about Julian. He just knew the man was slowly becoming an essential figure in his day to day life. Although he was well acquainted with many people on the station by now, he felt that when it was time to move on that he'd be able to part from them seamlessly. Julian was a somewhat different matter, and Gaven wasn't sure if the difference was due to his own emotional attachments or if it was because he knew that Julian would take his leaving harder than the others.

Gaven allowed himself to briefly focus on the weight and warmth of Julian's arm curled around him innocently. For a moment Gaven considered shifting his position to face Julian instinctively knowing that Julian would probably sidle in closer to him if he did. The thought of holding him through the rest of the night felt deeply tempting mostly because he knew Julian wouldn't object and that they both would benefit from the act. But he realized that under the circumstances such a gesture would be perceived as being too intimate and he didn't want to risk leading Julian on. Instead, shaking his head at himself, Gaven stirred and slowly turned the other way moving back onto his side to face the
Not unexpectedly, Julian stirred as well muttering intelligibly as he pulled the gap between them closed and continued his steady repose with his face buried between the mattress and the middle of Gaven's back.

Satisfied with this compromise Gaven let out a long cleaning breath and settled deeper into his blanket as he let his own arm and hand rest over Julian's curled grasp. With nowhere to be and nothing pressing to do Gaven and Julian went on resting together. Surrounded in a heavy kind of peace neither could generate on their own.
It was nearly three in the afternoon when Julian finally woke up almost completely unaware of what time it was or where exactly he was. All he knew was that it felt like he’d slept forever. Or maybe it just felt like he’d actually slept at all. In either case, it felt wonderfully indulgent. Blinking a few times against the mattress he was still face planted in, Julian realized part of his face was also pressed partially into warm firm skin. Breathing in deeply, Julian immediately understood on scent alone it was Gaven and the realization made his head swim. The whole bed smelled of him really. Roses and juniper. It was an intriguing mixture of floral and woody smells mixed with salt. Julian could tell he was partially nuzzled into the middle of Gaven’s back because he could feel where Gaven’s open night shirt had ridden up and he could hear his steady breathing and feel his chest expand and collapse.

Regardless, it felt impossibly safe and comforting so Julian couldn’t resist remaining as he was for a long time. Though technically awake he allowed himself to soak the experience in knowing that sooner or later he’d have to move from him. Murmuring, Julian did eventually adjust his position for Gaven’s benefit figuring it might not be exactly comfortable to have Julian face smooshed into his back like it was. Instead, he slow pulled away just enough to uncurl himself and resettle more completely against him without having to move his arm away. Julian knew Gaven wouldn’t have wanted him to startle and pull away just because they’d ended up in a more intimate position together. It was about trust between them.

For a little while Julian actually settled back into a light doze, waking only when he felt Gaven wake as well and stretch in place.

“Well, hello.” Gaven muttered in a hazy manner. “Did you sleep alright?”

“Yes.” Julian breathed. “Did you?”

“I did.” Gaven assured him. “I, huh, suppose we have to get up eventually.”

“Eventually, yes.” Julian agreed. He felt no such desire to get up. Not when the alternative was feeling the way he presently did.
Julian searched for tension in Gaven without actually letting on that he was, but he felt and sensed none. It made him wonder things but he wasn’t ready to ask about them yet.

“Did you want some coffee?” Gaven asked with a sigh.

“I think I can handle coffee. What time do you think it is?” Julian asked nonchalantly.

“About three in the afternoon.” Gaven replied. “I’ll get it. You stay put. Your time to fetch and carry for me, Doctor, is up.”

Finally Gaven began to move, sitting up and gently releasing Julian’s wrist before he rubbed at his face and padded carefully out of the room.

When he was out of sight Julian groaned softly and rolled over onto his stomach again to hide his face in the mattress.

“What the Hell am I doing?” He mumbled to himself.

A short time later Gaven returned to pass him his mug as he settled into the chair beside the bed.

“What are you going to do today?” Gaven asked, knowing they were still expected to be off duty.

“I’ll probably pop in on Dax in the lab and then see if Miles wants to meet up later. Keiko, as you know, is away now and Miles isn’t used to watching the baby by himself for this long. He’s convinced that he’s going to fuss. What about you?” Julian asked before taking a very long sip of his coffee for courage.

“I need to pick up some things from Mr. Garak and then I wanted to stop by and speak to Mr. Worf. I have a favor to ask him.” Gaven remarked.

“Oh? That’s cryptic. What kind of favor could you need from Worf of all people?” Julian inquired lightly as he rubbed his free hand through his mussed hair.
“I’m interested in some self defense training and wanted to ask his advice.” Gaven explained. “On Oum I never had much call for it. Our species is generally pacifistic in nature. But now, it might come in handy.”

“I suppose you’re not wrong. Though I recommend if your going to be learning technique with Worf that you let me fix that leg of yours first. Do you not know how to fight at all?” Julian found this information interesting especially since Garak had told him in theatrical detail about the time Gaven had threatened to dispatch Dukat when he’d attacked Garak in Quark’s awhile back.

“I have my defenses.” Gaven said ambiguous. “But they won’t work if I’m caught by surprise or with an overly aggressive assailant. I suppose you're right about the leg.”

“By the Prophet’s, someone hold my coffee. You’re not hinting that you're actually going to let me fix it are you because if you are we should get dressed right now.” Julian muttered, unable to cover the air of excitement over the idea.

Gaven couldn’t help but smile lightly in spite of the fact that he would have rather not bothered. Still, Julian’s advice on the subject was sound. Gaven didn’t really have a good excuse not to correct the issue and had he not treated himself with masochistic barbarity on Gulba 4, he wouldn’t have injured himself to begin with. There was a part of Gaven that didn’t want Julian to think he’d hurt himself on purpose, but the rest of him felt no real shame in it. The Oum understood that some kinds of healing required discipline of the self.

“I did promise we would talk about it again.” Gaven conceded.

“Yees, preferably when you could be more resistant about it, as I recall.” Julian reminded him.

Gaven looked up at him with squinted eyes. “I prefer not to resist you when you’re right. Though we’ll have to put it off for a day or two if you don’t mind.”

Julian watched him a moment unmoving and then took a smaller sip of his coffee. “I don’t mind. You tell me when you want it done and we’ll take care of it.”

Gaven nodded once in quiet agreement and they went on idly talking for a half hour more before Julian finally pulled the plug at his third cup of coffee. Gaven left him then to dress while he cleaned up after them.
“Well well. I guess this is goodbye for now, Doctor.” Julian muttered.

Julian was back in uniform since it was all he’d worn there, it wasn’t exactly clean but it would have to do until he got home. When it was time to go Gaven walked him to the door.

“Perhaps I'll see you later, thank you for dinner.” Gaven said.

“I'll be at Quarks one way or another tonight so don't feel like you can't come out. Thank you for letting me sleep over.” By now Julian had started to realize that touch was likely an important aspect of the Oum social norms and so on instinct he leaned in to give Gaven a farewell hug as he took hold of his left forearm and tugged him into a warm brisk embrace giving has back a thud or two.

When he pulled back he briefly caught a glimpse of surprise upon Gaven's face that was quickly covered with placidity.

“I think about it. Say hello to Jadzia for me.” He replied in a airy fashion.

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True to his word Julian went directly home, took a long much needed shower, got dressed and headed back out. He was due to meet Miles but the poor man, by all accounts around the station, was having a rough time finding childcare and it was unclear when Julian would actually see him appear. His first priority before heading over to Quark’s though was to stop into the Lab. While he knew Jadzia wouldn’t let him get away with horning in on her time with their experiment, he also knew she would likely enjoy a short break from her duties.

“Well there you are.” Jadzia remarked, when she caught sight of Julian hovering in the lab’s doorway bearing gifts of a cold ham sandwich and coleslaw for her to enjoy.

“Hello Dax. Hungry?” He said shaking the small paper bag at her.

“Starved. Hold on I’ll come out.” Jadzia put down her data pad she’d be using to compare information and came around the work table to meet him in the other room.
“Well? How is everything going?” Julian inquired trying not to sound too eager.

“Really well. This might actually work, Julian. The data is already looking very promising. I’ll have a full report written up for you to review in the morning.” They moved into the conference room together as Dax snatched her dinner from him.

“You know, I came by your quarters earlier today on my lunch break hoping to catch you but, interestingly, you weren’t home. “ Her tone implied she was keenly interested to know where he had been all day if he wasn’t passed out in his quarters.

“No. I was over at Gaven’s taking coffee.” Julian said evenly not bothering to give any indication of when he’d gone over and how long he had been there.

“Oh. That's very interesting. Seems like you two are becoming very well acquainted.” Dax muttered daintily.

“Yes. We've become very good friends in recent months.” Julian agreed nonchalantly sensing Dax feeling out something.

“Well it’s nice to see that he’s decided to let you in. Must be a dream come true. I remember how upset you were when he seemed reluctant to be friends. “ Dax remarked.

In reality she was only half right. Gaven had let him in, up to a point. But now just as they were becoming solid friends, friendship wasn't the limit of what Julian felt and wanted from him. Maybe, true to her original suggestion, it never had been what he wanted.

“So I take it then that your rock climbing outing was successful?” Jadzia went on.

“‘‘Yes, it was.” Julian agreed.

“Julian, would you stop that! Why are you answering all of my questions with yes no answers?” Jadzia narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously before they burst open. “ Julian. Is something going on between you and Gaven?”
The question was said in an excited though muted hiss.

Julian hadn’t planned on telling anyone of his recent experiences but then again he sensed that confiding in someone would bring him a certain amount of relief and Jadzia had always been perceptive enough about antics that it was rarely easy to hide much from her.

“Yes and no. I...I don’t know.” He admitted quietly. Confusion was evident in his tone.

“Julian, you two didn’t...” Jadzia began keeping her voice low.

“No. It's been nothing like that.” He replied knowing what she was asking. “It's just been little things. A touch here a word there. A intimate feeling that wasn't there before. It's hard to know what to make of it. He is an Oum after all. Whether or not that has any bearing on things, I don't think I'm imagining his growing affections.”

Jadzia found his cautious air fascinating. She’d never seen Julian so concerned over a potential love interest.

“Well...How do you feel about him?” She asked.

“Gaven is...A very special man. I know some people might think he’s austere, but really he’s just very complex I certainly would like to be with him, but I can sense that he holds himself back and so as close as we’ve become I just can’t seem to close the final gap between us.”

“Hm.” Jadzia nodded, understanding the situation now. “Have you told him any of this?”

The look on Julian’s face said that he hadn’t.

“You should. I mean...It sounds like he has some inkling. Gaven’s a pretty fair and perceptive person. I’m sure if you just sat down and talked about it with him he would take the conversation in stride.” Jadzia advised him.
“I know. You’re probably right. But...I feel like it just isn’t the right time.” Julian confided with a sigh.

“If you say so. If I were you though, Julian? I wouldn’t wait too long. Dr. Ore may not always be here on the station and I don’t necessarily think you’re the only one who realizes what a wonderful person he is.” Jadzia cautioned him.

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Gaven lingered in his quarters longer than Julian had lingered in his own. After showering he’d allowed himself a short session of meditation and cleansing, just enough to keep his moods even before he dressed and headed out to the promenade. As was his habit now, more out of superstition than anything else, Gaven wore the hoodie that fisk had given him and traveled as unobtrusively as possible.

“Ah Doctor, your right on time for your final fitting.” Garak remarked when he saw Gaven enter the shop.

“I have everything ready for you. I must say your peoples common contours say some fascinating things about them.” Garak said in a mildly baiting fashion that he knew Gaven would immediately pick up on.

“You are the expert, Mr. Garak. I’ll be sure to take your word for it. Fashion was never an area of interest of mine.” Gaven remarked.

“Mm however true that may be your designs were rather good. You’re obviously a man of many latent talents. Now, lets get you into these. I want to check the length on them. A quarter of an inch too long or too short can destroy the proper effect of a garment.” Garak as was his practice with Gaven, because he liked the man so much took him by the arm and ushered him into the changing area in the back of the shop. It was a large space big enough to allow Garak to make adjustments on the spot if necessary.

Gaven dutifully went to the back and after the curtain was drawn for their privacy he began to strip down hesitating only for the briefest of seconds at the knowledge he was about to expose himself to someone new. Gaven wasn’t usually the self conscious kind but his time off planet had trained him towards caution. Now though it was common knowledge that he wasn’t human so the existence of biological anomalies should not have surprised anyone.
Oum fashion was as, Garak had surmised, largely about function.

With such a wide range of physical abilities the Oum generally preferred unisex garments, without sizing, that could be adjusted to the needs of the wearer. In Gaven’s case though there was some room for more form because of the kind of Oum that he was. Nevertheless, his requests of Garak were still characteristically Oum. Garak had made him four sets of regular garments.

The first was a reflective gray zippered jacket with a high collar. A short blue-green cloak was meant to be paired with it. The second was a long skirted garment close fitting in the chest, shoulders, and sleeves done in a green. Two pieces, it was remarkably similar to the actual color of Gaven’s eyes before they had been cosmetically muted. This was the one Garak was likely most keen on fitting to him and Gaven breath caught slightly at the exquisite quality. His own sketches had not done the end result justice and yet Garak had captured it in a manner that was breathtakingly reminiscent of his people only of much richer quality than he would have been used to seeing.

The third was something less Oum-like but no less flattering. It consisted of burnt orange trousers, a slightly reflective coal button down with a high collar, a well fitted and hooded navy jacket and cognac fingerless gloves. Gaven understood this was Garak’s attempt to give him something that married Gaven’s style with that of those on the station.

Finally, there was the last garment and this time Gaven did make an audible gasp as he lifted it up for inspection. It was a rich and reflective tomato red sizeless high collared jacket that flowed nearly to the shin. Black ties were meant to be crossed along the chest pressing the fabric to the body and the sleeves were long and open meant when down to conceal one’s hands. The fabric was lightweight but durable. Gaven suspected it was also waterproof, a touch he hadn’t asked for but that was appropriate to Oum function.

Garak watched the display of behavior with fascination. Modesty, he noted was not a factor with Gaven. He carried no shame for his physical form like many other people did and he was both unconsciously graceful and meticulously deliberate in his movements. Garak noticed he took some time examining the various garments as if he was imprinting every aspect of them upon his psyche. Of the lot of the four, Garak was most proud of the last one which he’d largely guessed on. It was the most detailed of the sketches Gaven had left with him. The color pallet was also of Garak’s own devising with the exception of the suit he’d made which was not included among present offerings.

Along with his fascinating behavior, Garak was sure not to miss Gaven’s physical display as he stood nearly completely naked in the center of the room. Garak was retired off to the side careful to give an air of respect while also affording him an ample full body view. Gaven was tall and broad but not over developed. He had the kind of form that told Garak the man wasn’t unused to physical labor. The abdominal slits were a surprise but only if one forgot that Gaven wasn’t human. Garak was not the type to forget details that had been revealed to him and he had known some of the truth long before everyone else had caught on. Now and then, Garak caught Gaven in profile and in these
moments a significant lack of definition was clear. If there was any other indication that he was not a human man it was this lack of definition that made it most obvious.

The observation begged all kinds of interesting and rique questions. What a pity, Garak thought, that the good Doctor kept so little personal company. How was one to work on such a man?

Garak’s rapt attention was quickly sidelined when he heard Gaven gasp.

The sound sent a fibrant thrill up the cardassian’s spine and Garak couldn’t help it as a cheshire grin curled upon his sly features while his depraved imagination worked overtime to conjure up a dozen other ways he might have coaxed the gasp from Gaven’s lips. It wasn’t so much that Garak wanted Gaven for himself. The thought, in fact, never crossed his mind. The middle aged cardassian spy simply liked to keep his best skills ever present in his mind as his languid time on the station gave him so few opportunities to demonstrate his better talents.

“This....This is nearly perfect. The structure of it is just as it should be.” Gaven remarked, as he set the other sets aside neatly to unfold the final piece. Gaven limped backwards and when he had enough space he shook the garment out once with a snap and in one fluid motion threw it about himself. Due to it’s sizeless design it fit immaculately as he wrapped it expertly around himself and secured the ties.

“Nearly perfect? How might it be improved?” Garak asked coming to stand behind him as asisted by adjusted the hood and smoothing the slightly twisted straps from behind delicately.

“See here and here?” Gaven lifted the inside of the robe like jacket and displayed them for Garak. “There should be pockets along here and here. Other than that...It’s utter perfection. Thank you.” Gaven said earnestly.

“Mm. What do you think of the color? Not too ostentatious?” There was just a hint of feigned concern over the detail edging Garak’s tone. Whether he actually cared or not was one of the true mysteries about Garak who sometimes laced his lies with larger truths.

Gaven turned then, a soft smile sweeping onto his face.

Garak had instinctively backed off so that he could watch the garment move and listen to it rustle lightly. Against Gaven’s dark hair and large eyes, the color infused a vibrancy into him that until now had felt dull and beaten down. What a gentle innocent sort he must have been in his youth. Garak could see hints of the youthful young man Gaven had likely been. The wiff was beautifully alluring and it was the shared quality that attracted Garak to all his loves. Ziyal, as well as Julian. It
occurred to him that Gaven had no real notion how beautiful he actually was especially in his happiness.

“It’s something of a virginal color on my homeworld, put perhaps that’s appropriate now.” Gaven remarked coloring ever so slightly from his delight.

“Oh, doctor? That’s an interesting cultural detail. Have you not found any romance since being on the station?” Garak asked briskly. Since Gaven had created an opening for the subject it gave Garak an excuse to be deliciously forward.

“I certainly have a sense that I’m admired. But I’m afraid I’m just not ready for…” Gaven found himself quickly interrupted.

“There’s your problem. Love and romance isn’t about what your ready for, Doctor. I should think you know better than that. Now if you’re afraid, that’s another matter. Given what I suspect you’re history is, I can’t say I’m very surprised. But at some point, my good man, you just have to throw caution to the wind. People are like that garment your wearing. They need to move and breath. You certainly have been in love before. I can see it in your face. The steps don’t change.” Garak reminded him.

“No. I suppose they don’t.” Gaven agreed.

“Right. Not to mention there are alternatives to love. Perhaps you should consider taking a lover instead.” Garak recommended. “That young Vulcan of yours, perhaps.”

Gaven scoffed, slipping out of the garment to hand it back to Garak so that he could make adjustments.

“I believe Jyyrus Cheval is spoken for.” Gaven said decidedly.

“Hm. Are you quite sure about that?” Garak didn’t seem remotely convinced.

“I am. May I ask you something? What is it with most of the humanoids here? I’ve had quite a few people remark on the nature of my personal relationships lately.” Gaven inquired.
“Um...Hm. Let me ask you this. Of the people who have brought up your romantic status in recent months, how many of them were in relationships of their own?” Garak posed to him.

Gaven thought about it for a moment. “None. Why?”

“Oh it’s just a theory I have. You see people who are nosy about other people's sex lives and romances tend, I find, to not be happily preoccupied in their own lives. Such people seem to fall into one of two camps. The curious romantic who wants to live vicariously through their friends and colleagues intrigues and the lonely hearts who are secretly trying to investigate the landscape before they proclaim their own amorous intentions. I have never seen it fail.” Garak explained.

“I see. And um, which camp do you fall into, Sir?” Gaven asked bluntly.

“Oh doctor!” Garak proclaimed coyly. “I do confess I am a terrible romantic who loves to roll about in other peoples intrigues. I find it helps keep an otherwise banal life interesting. As of late I’m a trifle preoccupied with my own personal affairs, but, make no mistake I am well aware just how exceptional you are and If I thought for one moment that I was your only resort...Well, I must say, engaging you would be a mighty temptation indeed. Though as things stand, I do believe I would need to get in line .”

Gaven furrowed his brows at Garak’s speech. Even when the man was being honest he spun his truths in such a way that it made one feel dizzy and displaced. Gaven understood the underlying message though. It said; If I wanted you for myself, Doctor, I would have you. But there are others just a little too eager to have a chance with you first.

The subject ended at that point and Gaven went on to try on the other garments. Most of them only needed minor tweaks which Garak was equipped to do on the spot or in short order. The suit he’d been preparing needed further tuning based on the adjustments of the other garments and Garak promised to deliver the end result himself once it was ready. The rest Gaven was allowed to take with him at the end of their session.

For his final errand, Gaven caught Worf at home.

As always, Gaven had given Worf ample notice that he wanted to meet with him and Worf had agreed to set up a time just after dinner.

“Dr. Ore. Please come in.” Worf said upon greeting him at the door.” As usual Worf was stoic but as
with his friends and those he liked, he projected a warm, if stern, energy.

“Thank you, Mr. Worf.” Gaven nodded.

“Do make yourself...comfortable. What can I do for you?” Worf inquired.

“As my written communications indicated, I’m looking for some help with an appropriate self defense program.” Gaven began knowing this was covered territory.

“There are many options available to you. You mentioned you’re interest but not your motivations in seeking them. Would you care to elaborate on them now so that I can better direct you.” Worf encouraged.

Gaven sighed and settled into one of the sofas.

“The training isn’t actually for me, although I’m sure I would benefit from it as well. You are aware that Jyruss Cheval, one of the young Vulcan ambassadors, has been staying here on the station. You’re also no doubt aware that he is a close personal friend of mine and as you might imagine as his friend I take a keen personal interest in his well being. Awhile ago, Cheval came to me and informed me he was due to return to Vulcan at some point in the near future. He is to be married however it seems that a potential complication has surfaced. It’s possible his intended may try to break their betrothal and enact the challenge of Koon-ut-kal-fee.” Gaven explained.

“Mm. I see. I am familiar with the ritual.” Worf remarked, hemming in his klingon way.

“Privately, I am of course against the idea but I would not dishonor Cheval by trying to dissuade him from it. I understand the cultural importance of such rituals. We Oum, as you know, have our own death rites and honorable practices regarding our interpersonal commitments. I want to be clear that it is not my intention to stop him...I would just like to help him confront this experience with honor.” Gaven explained with his signature sincerity and frankness.

“How inexperienced is Jyruss with close combat?” Worf inquired.

“Like most Vulcan's he has been acquainted with the disciplines of standard Vulcan self defense, but he lacks real proficiency and confidence in his capabilities.” Gaven sighed again rubbed at his temples. “Whatever happens, I would like him to have some semblance of a chance and if he is to
fall I would like to see that it wasn't without effort to bring him down.”

“I understand, Doctor. It would not be desirable to see him slaughtered. Perhaps with further help he might even achieve victory.” Worf proposed.

It was clear that Gaven was disturbed by the whole business. Worf respected how hard he was working in this present moment to be tolerant of the situation.

“How long does he have?” Worf asked, already mentally planning.

“How long will it take?” Gaven countered resting his hands on his knees.

Worf growled in thought. Normally he might have indignantly remarked that time was inconsequential in the mastery of close combat, but in Cheval's case time really was limited and so he refrained.

“Eighteen weeks would be ideal to grasp the fundamentals if the commitment is there.” Worf estimated.

“I know Jyruss. He will commit. And so will I. I'll not let him do it alone and in any case he has requested that I return to Vulcan with him for support. If I can find another way to stabilize this situation I will do it. If it comes down to fighting for his life, then I will bear witness for him.” Gaven promised.

“If I may ask, what exactly does his betrothed object to?” though worf usually liked to avoid gossip, he felt the detail was pertinent to the situation.

“She objects to me, Mr. Worf. She objects to me.” Gaven repeated, the second time there was a resigned sound in the words. “I can't say I really blame her. You see Jyruss was the reason I was pulled out of space. For whatever reason the psychic distress signal I was projecting was caught by him and he implored the freighter crew he was traveling with to investigate. Later, when our minds melded for the first time something happened and now an echo of each others psyches remain. Ever apart, yet ever together.”

“I see.” Worf muttered.
“It is my hope that if I go with him back to Vulcan and manage to sort out our psychic entanglement we can perhaps avoid further conflict all together. Jyruss loves T’Yell. He is determined to be bound to her if she will allow it. This mistrust regarding his commitment to her is my fault and one way or another I must correct it. Though if T’Yell still insists upon initiating the rite of Koon-ut-kal-fee, I fear my efforts may be in vain even if I manage to break our disruptive bond. So here I am asking for your help and guidance.”

“It is a noble and worthy thing. If Jyruss Is truly in agreement with your plan then I will help prepare you.” Worf agreed.
Chapter Notes

Chapter 31 takes place during Season 5, Episode 18 "Business As Usual. Personally I thought the gag about Kirayoshi constantly crying was one of the funniest in the season.

Gaven spent some time setting up future plans with Worf. The real meat of their plans would have to wait till Cheval returned but by the end of their discussion both men were satisfied and in good spirits. Soon Gaven wrapped up his discussion and made plans to follow up at a later date. Worf then showed him out and wished him well.

Gaven soon returned home to rest awhile before he possibly went out again. Setting his new clothes neatly atop a dresser like alcove in his bedroom, Gaven sighed and settled down atop his bed to reflect on his day.

His thoughts of course naturally fluttered in Julian's direction. In retrospect, Gaven realized the events of the last twenty-four hours marked a kind of turning point. One that required Gaven to have to examine himself. At any other time since being on the station Gaven would never have entertained the notion of inviting someone into his quarters the way he had with Julian.

Why had he done it?

The simple answer was that he hadn't wanted to be alone. The more complex answer was that he hadn't wanted to be without Julian. The admittance of this truth within his own mind caused Gaven to audibly groan and drape his hand over his face.

It occurred to him that that he didn't know what to do now. He was not so foolish to think that Julian had simply gone along with it all out of platonic friendship. The growing intimacy between them was palatable. Gaven reminded himself that Julian was the type to wear his feelings plainly, especially now that he no longer had to hide who and what he was.

Gaven wanted, in turn, to be as transparent and honest with Julian as possible but before he could properly confront the situation Gaven understood that he had to come to terms with being honest with himself first.
For the immediate moment the next question was whether or not he planned to go out that night.

Julian had left his invitation open ended giving Gaven the privilege of staying in without guilt if he wanted to or joining him and Miles while they played darts. The debate over how to handle the situation was real. On one hand it wasn't uncommon for Gaven to sit quietly by himself at Quark's and he'd socialized with Cheval there enough that most people were no longer surprised by it. On the other hand this time he wasn't just sitting about taking a quiet meal. This situation wasn't like meeting up casually with Cheval, This was Julian. If he showed up, then Julian would know that it was only because he had asked that Gaven be there. It was a simple distinction that wouldn't have mattered to him if they were assuredly just trying to be friends.

Feeling stressed, Gaven sat up in bed and set his legs down along the side as he rested his elbows on his knees and, leaning forward, he cupped his face in his hands. His deep sense of conflict over his feelings confused and frustrated him. He was confused because he sensed that Julian expected something from him and he didn’t fully understand what that something was or if he was capable of delivering it. He felt frustrated because the other pressures of his life were demanding more time and attention from him than his situation with Julian was. His work with the Federation which Julian was a strong partner in, his commitment to helping Cheval, and his focus on trying to quietly re-frame and rebuild his life were all much larger focal points that needed to be fully addressed before he was free to do as he wanted.

“I want you, Julian. But I have to make a place for myself first. Please forgive me my discretion.” Gaven muttered to himself, almost like a prayer.

Sighing, he pulled his hands slowly away from his face and glanced randomly up. The clothes Garak had made for him caught his glance just then.

Narrowing his eyes at them, Gaven made his decision. Julian’s invitation notwithstanding, perhaps it was time to do something purely for himself.

~@~

Eventually, Julian was able to catch up with Miles. It had taken a little time. Miles had failed to find any help with Kirayoshi for the night, so he'd simply brought the infant along with him to Quarks for lack of a better option.

Being fond of babies, Julian didn't mind. They met at their usual spot and went into rousing first game together. Julian was nice enough to increase his usual handicap with an extra couple of drinks, since Miles was stuck having to throw his darts with Kirayoshi cradled in his free arm. It seemed
“Go ahead. Beat that, Chief.” Julian encouraged briskly when he still managed a excellent hit even with extra distance and pleasant buzz on board.

“Come on, Yoshi. It may not seem fair to force the good doctor to throw from farther away, but…he is genetically engineered.” Miles muttered conversationally to his son as he swept up his darts and took position.

Julian chuckled at his insult, but then interfered when he saw that Miles was still holding Yoshi in his arm while he intended to throw.

“Uh...Chief. Don't you think you should put the baby down?” He gently inquired.

Miles only snorted at him. “I haven't put Yoshi down for a week. If I can carry him at work I can carry him here.”

“Yes but there must be some babysitter on the station that can pacify him.” Julian argued innocently.

“You want to bet?” Miles challenged.

“But...You can't hold him forever. You've already got one bad shoulder.” Julian pressed with less confidence.

“Okay.” Miles muttered in a tone that said he was in the mood to school Julian about something. “You want me to put the baby down? Fine. I'll put the baby down.”

Mile moved over to a nearby table and gently eased Kirayoshi down onto his back in its center. The moment Miles was no longer in direct contact with him anymore the baby began to fuss in protest and then loudly cry.

“Happy?” Miles chirped.
“It’s amazing.” Julian muttered in charmed disbelief at the turn around.

“No, no. This is amazing.” Miles corrected him.

The second Miles settled Yoshi back in the crook of his arm, the baby settled again and began cooing much to the continued astonishment of Julian who had never seen an infant react so swiftly and on cue.

“Yes. Ha, now if you’ll excuse me? It's my turn to throw.” Miles said with fatherly triumph as he picked up his darts again and moved back into position.

After he was through Julian encouraged him to put Yoshi down again so that he could try and soothe him for Miles. But sure enough even when Julian tried to hold him the baby fussed and cried until Miles took him back.

“What did I tell you before.” He muttered.

“Yes well it defies medical understanding. There's certainly nothing wrong with him that I can see, I guess you were right.” Julian conceded.

“Mmhm. Fathers know these things.” Miles muttered knowingly. “So, have you talked with Gaven yet about.. you know?”

“All in good time. I'd rather not rock the boat just yet.” Julian mused.

“What's there to be rocked? Your not interested in marrying the man. You just want to take things deeper than you currently are. What's the worst that could happen?” Miles inquired.

“You mean, besides abject rejection? Oh, you know, the usual. Damage to our friendship, damage to our professional relationship. The annoyance of idle gossip...” Julian went on lightly in a subtly manic tone.

“Stop that now. Your being utterly ridiculous. Gaven is not the kind of fellow to let a potential disagreement derail his entire relationship with someone. He’s also not a stupid man and considering
the level of canoodling the two of you have been up to in the last twenty-four hours, as far as I'm concerned, you're behaving like a right settled couple. The both of you are just too afraid to say anything about it to the other.” Miles asserted.

Naturally Julian had brought Miles up to date on what had happened after he'd walked Gaven home.

“I'm not afraid to talk to him about it. I'm just not sure when I should say something or how.” Julian said defensively.

“Sure. Whatever you say. Let me ask you this. If Gaven were a woman how would you handle it?” Miles inquired. “I mean, generally speaking.”

“Frankly, I've never had to handle it. Most of the women I've dated all perused me, not the other way around.” Julian confessed. “Palis simply told me we were dating one day and when it was time to end it we both agreed. Melora and I sort of mutually came to it and when she decided to not go through with her surgery and move onto another assignment I let her go. Leeta faked a cold and then asked me out...You know how that one went. Breaking up was her idea as well. So you see I don't have alot of experience...Taking the lead.”

“Huh. I Guess I never realized. You know Julian, I don't think I've really appreciated until now how sensitive you actually are about love and romance. I guess I just assumed that because you perused Dax so aggressively…” Miles mused.

“Dax was a different matter. For one she isn't just a woman and for another I think we all know I never stood a chance in Hell of winning her over and so it was easy to throw myself at her. I had nothing to lose.” Julian explained with a shrug. “And that’s game. I win. Want to go again?”

Miles groaned. “You weren't even properly looking that time and you still hit your mark. Guh, I think I'll just sit down for a minute. Why don't you go...Get us a few drinks or something.”

Julian chuckled at Miles bad humor. Despite being clearly tired he knew Miles would be up for at least another game or two before he became absolutely disgusted and went home for the night.

While Julian went down to the Bar to set up their tab, Gaven was in the process of getting ready to leave.

It had taken a little while to get a hold of the extra things he'd needed, a trip to one of the promenade shops and stop over in the infirmary to pick up a leg brace that would reduce his need for the forearm
crutch as long as he was well rested.

Among the offerings that Garak had made for him, Gaven selected the form fitting green assemble. It was indeed beautiful and Gaven allowed himself to reflect on its grandeur. The Ner household on Oum had, in Gaven's youth, been considered affluent though decidedly conservative. Opulence had never been encouraged and everyone in the Ner household had been content to live by that standard.

As a bonded Oum, Gaven had always gone along with the expectation of his house and life station. The bonded were meant to be ever unobtrusive and as invisible as possible. That was all fine and good, Gaven respected what he was and who he had been. But it was now time to accept that he wasn't a bonded Oum anymore. Gaven was a free person and it was time to start embracing that without shame because out on the frontier no one cared whether or not he choose to live up to his people's traditions.

While Gaven had no intention of going out and doing something crazy, he was at least willing now to bend in simpler ways like the way he dressed and carried himself.

Gaven slipped into the green ensemble.

It was very comfortable and accentuated his height and the straight lines of his body. Gaven was a mixture of lean, broad, strength and a kind of innocent beauty. Standing in his bedroom before the vanity he subtly trimmed his glossy mess of dark curls. Though his skin and eye pigment remained altered and suppressed, Gaven carefully mixed the cosmetics he'd bought to bring out his Oum coloring more. A pale shimmer was applied to his lips and the large shape of his eyes was darkened and accentuated. By the time he was done Gaven looked like a imposing beautiful dark fairy. The effort had freshened him and brought forward much of his natural beauty of which he was mostly oblivious to.

Satisfied with the end result, Gaven sighed and stepped back to examine himself more fully. All in all it occurred to him that he finally looked like a proper Oum again since leaving his homeworld.

It was almost startling.

Gaven sighed again and reminded himself once more what the point of going out like this was. It was time to stop hiding so much. It was time to live his life.

~@~
Julian had been waiting at the bar when Gaven arrived. Quarks was busy that night and due to some entanglement with a well known arms dealer Quark was on the outs with several of his Starfleet regulars and, because he was so preoccupied with maintaining all the balls he was juggling, was not as present in his establishment as he usually was.

Julian initially had his back turned to Gaven when had appeared at the mouth of the main entrance. By now, the regulars on the station knew him, but absolutely no one had seen the mysterious alien doctor as he currently was.

Although it would have been an overstatement to say the room stopped, Gaven's entrance drew enough attention that several conversation came to an abrupt halt only to be followed up by remarks of uncertainty and surprise.

“Is that Dr. Ore?” One patron hissed.

Though he didn't see Leeta Julian heard her somewhere in the crowd hastily apologize after bumping headlong into a patron with her full drink tray, no doubt because she'd been suddenly distracted by something and had stopped watching where she was going.

Confused by what everyone was making a fuss over and suddenly concerned when he heard someone drop Gaven's name, Julian took the two beer bottles the bartender had prepped for him and idly glanced over his shoulder as he took a quick swig.

What he saw caused Julian to instantly swallow wrong as he sprayed half a mouthful of beer in front of himself nearly dropping the other bottle to the floor. Coughing a few times, Julian waited a moment wiping his face with his sleeve and turned back around.

It was indeed Gaven people were whispering about. Even the band seemed to miss a few of their marks.

Gaven stood in the main entryway.

His face, not surprisingly, had an even, watchful, and placid expression as if he had no understanding of the magnitude of the impression he was making. Dressed in what Julian could only really compute as a nearly skin tight long sleeved, high necked and nearly floor length emerald green gown. The fabric looked slightly stiff yet also soft and showed no sign of wrinkling. It was undoubtedly Garak's flawless work, but what was most striking more than his modest yet utterly
attention grabbing outfit was his face. Gaven looked damn near like something out of a fantasy.

Even with them muted, Gaven's eyes were even more green than usual and so large that it made him look like a fairy king out of a Shakespearean play. Julian could see a slight translucent shimmer upon his cheeks and lips and he was pale but not sickly looking by any means. He was so strikingly beautiful it was almost difficult to look at him and Julian, having turned bright red, indeed had to look away and recede further back into the crowd until he'd recovered enough to manage intelligible speech and rational thought once more.

Gaven seemed to keep his cool, perfectly aware he was shocking people even if he didn't fully appreciate why. At the moment he was somewhat stuck where he was as there weren't many obvious paths leading into and through the space.

As always any time Quark felt his profits coming to a grinding halt he instantly appeared out of the back, took one swift assessment of the room and rolled his eyes as he marched right up to Gaven standing in front of him to address the crowd.

“Hey! What's wrong with you people, haven't any of you ever seen a pretty face before? Mind your manners and, as for the rest of you...Get back to work! This is a bar, not a floor show. Next person that gawks is fired. As for you,” Quark turned around to eye Gaven. “You look very nice. Now come on.” The last part was said quietly and politely as Quark hooked Gaven by the arm and ushered him quickly to the edge of the bar before he swiftly disappeared behind the counter.

“Boy do you know how to class up a place.” Quark muttered as he maniacally began to clean beer mugs, glancing up at Gaven now and again only to speed his task up a little more every time he looked.

“Too much?” Gaven asked with genuine innocence.

“Well...That depends. Where you trying to cause every person in the room to question their sexuality and preference in species or is it just your birthday?” Quark muttered evenly. “You’re lucky Garak isn't here to see the full effect of one of his masterpieces. His head might have actually exploded over the triumph.”

Gaven covered his face partially smiling into his hand. “I guess I did over do it a bit.”

“No, no. It's just enough. Trust me. Have a drink. On the house.” Quark reassured him before
pouring a cocktail into a martini glass and passing it to him before he simply muttered something under his breath, turned to the side to put away the mugs, muttered something else and then promptly turned around and disappeared again into the back again.

Gaven scoffed at himself with good humor and took a sip of the cocktail. It was a dark pink concoction. Sweet and bold. Gaven reminded himself to ask Quark what it was called later.

Glancing subtly around the room, Gaven was scanning for Julian whom he thought he had glimpsed when he first arrived before Quark had ushered him seamlessly to the bar. Gaven did intend to meet up with Julian and Miles, but he wasn't in a rush to run off to a secluded corner just yet. He realized when he had got up the nerve to walk through the promenade that evening, it was the first time he had ventured anywhere fully as himself. Or rather, perhaps as the version of himself that had risen up out of the husk of a man he had been since leaving his homeworld.

Finishing his drink Gaven carefully stood. The leg brace he was wearing looked seamless under his clothes and allowed him some reinforcement for his bad leg, but Gaven was still unused to walking with it and he knew he had to avoid fatigue and alot of sudden movement. The restriction only made him seem more elegant and unhurried as he began to step through the crowd to explore and keep an eye out for Julian or Miles.

Once the initial impact had worn off Quark's went back to its bustling activity of drinking, gambling, and gastronomics. There had been an increase in aliens in Quark's and less Starfleet personnel recently, so the main floor was more active than usual. The darts boards were up on the second floor in a more enclosed nook. Gaven figured he'd likely find his party there but as he expertly picked his way through the room he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Gaven occasionally scanned the room for lingering eyes but most people only glanced at him or were simply admiring his general appearance.

Sure enough though, Gaven was being watched and tailed with quite alot of interest by not one but a few people.

“What are you doing?” Leeta asked when she caught Quark looking through one of his hidey-holes that allowed him to keep an eye on the bar without having to be on the floor.

“None of your business, sugar lips. Why aren't you out there earning me my latinum?” Quark muttered pulling away to cross his arms and glare at his soon to be sister-in-law.

“Hmph. I'm on break.” Leeta declared, reminding him that he'd set her on break personally. Leeta was about ready to spin around and huff away when Quark stopped her.
“Just hold on a second. You’re a woman, let me ask you something. Do you think Dr. Ore’s got any talents besides doctoring?” Quark asked uncharacteristically.

“How should I know. Dr. Ore and I aren’t acquainted. Why?” Leeta asked.

“He certainly cleans up in an interesting way. I was just wondering if he might be interested in a second job. Look at him maneuver through that crowd. What a thing of grace and beauty. By the way, You owe me three slivers of latinum out of your pay. That guy you dumped drinks on earlier thinks he’s going to stick me with his dry cleaning bill.” Quark muttered indignantly as he tugged at his Ferengi styled waistcoat.

Leeta simply rolled her eyes and walked away. One of these days soon she was going to tell Quark exactly what she really thought of him, but she didn't dare do it until she and Rom were officially wed and Leeta could focus on being in love instead of kowtowing to Quark’s whims as his best Dabo girl.

One of the other people watching Gaven’s every move in Quark’s that night was Odo. It wasn’t uncommon for Odo to masquerade as inanimate objects or piece of architecture in order to study the life forms around him and to keep tabs on the goings on of the station. It was one of the ways he’d developed his reputation as a sly constable who always seemed to know more about what was going on than anyone else did sooner or later. Since Gaven had first approached him months ago in his office and related his personal feelings about Odo and his people, Odo had tried to keep close tabs on him whenever he came across him and, though he often eavesdropped on Gaven’s conversations in and around the public areas of the promenade, he almost always tried to stay within the lines of general propriety and respect Gaven’s privacy. With that being said, he occasionally went as far as to see that the doctor was looked out for by discreetly tailing him home or following up on information he overheard elsewhere on the station about him.

Part of his initial interest in Gaven had been centered around Odo’s classic distrust of convenient strangers appearing on the station just when things seemed most dire. But as he’d gotten to know the man Odo had grown increasingly fascinated by his manners and motivations. In a way, they were moved by similar things. A commitment to duty and to their individual origins, their mutual interest and curiosity for the diverse people around them, and a defiant hunger to simply live by their own standards. To be sure, Gaven was one of the more emotionally and psychological intricate people he’d ever observed and, perhaps in part because Gaven had done a great many things in support of Odo, he felt a kind of mutual and private investment in his happiness and well being.

Due to the somewhat covert observations of Gaven over a long period of time Odo had slowly watched various changes come over the man. By now, thanks in part to his sources and his own powers of deduction, Odo knew about Gaven’s increasingly personal dynamics with both Doctor
Bashir and Joryus Cheval. He also saw that Gaven was moving away from many of the emotional things that had originally weighed heavily enough upon to prevent him from rebuilding his life. But this evening marked a particularly curious turn of events that had indeed piqued Odo’s personal interest. It had been utterly intriguing to see people react so strongly to Gaven’s powerful entrance. Odo recognized Gaven’s metamorphosis for what it was. An expression of the man’s real self and all the things that went into being who and what he was. The sight of him had been deeply satisfying to see for Odo but had been a clear shock to others with more interesting stakes present in the room.

Odo had observed, for example, the rather comical reaction of Dr. Julian Bashir who after nearly spewing his drink all over himself upon Gaven was now in the process of simultaneously trying to hide from him and follow his movements through the main floor of Quirk’s. Odo recognized the mixture of anxiety and poorly covered arousal on Julian’s face. So, Odo thought. That was how it was between them. Odo couldn’t say he was surprised that Julian and Gaven were engaging in a amorous and possibly romantic relationship. Had Odo not recently survived his own acute foray into love, sex, and romance he may not have so easily recognized or understood what was playing out between the men, albeit quietly and still perhaps only theoretically.

Odo made a mental note to invite Gaven over in the near future and have a chat. He was curious to know how aware Gaven actually was of of his effect on people as well as how aware he was of the effect he had on Julian specifically.

Gaven eventually made his way to where he thought his friends were when he spotted Miles with young Kirayoshi bundled up in his arms. Really it was getting late and the baby really didn’t belong in Quark’s that time of night. But then again, Gaven wasn’t Kirayoshi’s parents so he simply smiled thinly and gave a wave.

“Hello.” Miles said nodding gently in Gaven’s direction so that he could refrain from speaking for as long as possible.. “Sorry, but Yoshi just went to sleep. You didn’t happen to see Julian down there did you? He’s been gone for bloody ever.”

“Only briefly. I'm sure he just got lost in the crowd. Everything alright?” Gaven asked nodding to Yoshi.

“For the moment. It's been right impossible the last few days with the wife away.” Miles muttered. “The other one is with Keiko.”

“What's the trouble?” Gaven inquired.

“He cries almost constantly if I'm not right there.” Miles explained. “I finally just committed to
bringing him everywhere with me. “

“I can't imagine that's very ideal.” Gaven observed sympathetically. He could tell Miles was exhausted from the constant effort. “Hm. May I try?”

For a second Miles looked fearful that handing him over would cause Yoshi to stir and start crying again. But the truth was his shoulder ached beyond belief by now.

“Well, alright. But if he fusses drinks are on you next time.” Miles muttered.

“Agreed. And if he doesn't then I get to babysit until Keiko comes back.” Gaven insisted.

“Deal.” Miles agreed, before he approached and let Gaven transfer Yoshi into his arms.

Gaven adjusted him a little which encouraged a yawn, but to Miles absolute astonishment, Yoshi didn't even wake up. He simply went on sleeping in Gaven's arm.

Miles stepped away and scratched behind his ear. “I don't understand it, but I'll take it. Are you sure babysitting isn't going to interfere with your work schedule?” Miles asked eagerly.

“Keiko is due back in two days. I think I can spare the time. Cheval wrote me today telling me when they were planning to return.” Gaven explained, a look of utter tranquility was plastered across his face.

Miles thought he looked like some dark angel just then but didn't remarking the thought. The idea of getting some reliable relief almost brought him to tears.

“You should stop into the infirmary tomorrow and let Julian give you something for your aches and pains.” Gaven remarked.

“That obvious, huh? I'll do that to be sure.” Miles agreed. “Here, Here. Why don't you sit down. Rude of me to make you stand with Kirayoshi all this time.”
Miles pulled out a chair for Gaven and then proceeded to glance over the balcony to see where Julian was. Miles didn't know Gaven very well and Julian had been the one to invite Gaven to come meet him. Knowing what he knew it was hard to not feel like a third wheel.

“Spot him yet?” Gaven inquired.

“Yeah. Looks like Leeta’s got him pinned down for the moment. Well, it may be another minute or two before he escapes. How about a game of darts? Just you and I?”

Gaven smiled.

Miles was a nice even fellow. His understated manner, and everlasting effort to be outwardly non-judgemental were endearing. Against Julian’s often grandiose and vibrant personality Gaven saw that the men were mirror opposites which he imagined contributed to the two being the best of friends. Gaven appreciate the man and was happy to engage him.

“Let’s do it. One round.” Gaven said.

“Lovely. Your on.” Miles agreed.

~@~

Julian had indeed been avoiding Gaven while on the main floor mostly because he was struggling to get a grip on himself. He simply could fully grasp what he was seeing. The intensity of the man’s presence...It wasn’t just about Gaven’s surprising appearance. If it had been something as superficial as all that, Julian might have been duly impressed but it would have by no means unhinged him as it was presently doing. The question of why, was what Julian was stalling for time to understand as as his mind worked at razor speed to analyze his reactions before he actually had to face Gaven one on one.

What he concluded was that Julian was actually seeing Gaven for the first time and what he was seeing was a far cry from the man they had all met months ago. The memory of Gaven once mentioning how Lopel Ner had often bowed out of important speaking engagements and forced Gaven to speak in his place, suddenly made absolute sense even if Julian couldn’t remember the exact conversation or if the conversation had actually happened at all. He could understand now how captivating it would have been to see Gaven stand in the center of a crowd and deliver an undoubtedly well conceived and well planned speech or argument looking like the proper Oum that
he was. He could see in Gaven how capable of command he was, an aspect that Gaven himself had always observed staunch forbearance about, and then Julian’s mind drifted off to more private thoughts about Gaven’s abilities that had him trying to tamp down a disorientating blow of desire that grabbed him right through his solar plexus and to the base of his spin. Dizzy and feeling impossibly oppressed by the crowd around him Julian’s had struggled his way to the edge of the room and into a dark mostly abandoned spot along the far wall where he could hopefully hide and catch his breath.

Julian hid for a good long while, nearly twenty minutes from the time Gaven had arrived. No doubt by now he’d found Miles and both of them were likely wondering where Julian had gone. Eventually though he knew he needed to get back to them. He doubted Gaven had seen him in the crowd but if he had it was possible Julian was making a bad impression. Moving carefully out of the shadows Julian was about to make his way to one of the stairs when Leeta of all people tapped him on the shoulder.

“Well hi, Julian. Are you OK? You look strange somehow.” Leeta inquired as she slung her empty try under one arm and popped her hip.

“Nonsense, I’m fine. Thanks for your concern. I’m sorry Leeta I can’t really talk right now. I’ve got to get back to Miles and…” Julian was promptly cut off.

“Oh you can spare a second. I’ve been meaning to give you something.” Leeta chirped.

“Leeta unless you can produce my teddy bear which you have YET to give back to me, then I can’t…” Julian was cut off again. This time by an envelop being fluttered in his face. “Rom and I are having an engagement party in a few weeks and, I mean I know things didn’t work out between us, but...you’re still my friend and it would mean the world to me if you’d be there. Pleeease, Julian? If more of my friends don’t come Quark’s libal to junk up the event with his acquaintances and I want this to be about Rom and I.” Leeta pleaded throwing in an exaggerated pout for good measure that Julian regretted was finding endearing.

“Fine. Of course. I’ll be there. Now really I need to…” Julian braced himself as he was cut off one final time by an overjoyed squeal from Leeta as she pounced upon him excitedly pulling him into an exuberant hug that he couldn’t have squirmed out of if his life had depended on it.

“Thanks, Julian! You really are the best.” Leeta proclaimed giving him a theatrical kiss on both cheeks before she promptly released him and fluttered away so that Quark wouldn’t yell at her for slacking on her work responsibilities.

When she was gone Julian audibly groaned and wiped vigorously at his face before he snagged a few beers from another waitress and bounded up the stairs determined to return to the relative safety of the darts area and his closer friends before anything else happened to him.
When he finally returned he found the unexpected sight of Miles, and Gaven hovering close to the board as Miles raptly stood explaining the finer points of the game of Darts to Gaven. At the moment they were talking specifically about technique and it looked as if they’d already played through a quick experimental round. Most notable though was that Miles was no longer holding Kirayoshi. Instead, Gaven had the infant resting in the crook of his neck completely relaxed and silent as Gaven gently swayed with him unconsciously and rubbed his back. It was a completely unexpected scene and it took a full minute before either Miles or Gaven noticed Julian had arrived.

“Julian! Welcome back.” Miles said in a somewhat muted tone that indicated he’d been having a grand old time playing instructor but he hadn’t forgotten that Kirayoshi was with them. “What happened to you?”

“Leeta happened.” Julian half lied, implying that the waitress and Dabo Girl had been the sole reason he had been so late on his return.

“For nearly thirty minutes? That’s longer than all her breaks combined. I hope Quark didn’t catch up to her for it. Just what was so important anyway?” Miles inquired.

“She and Rom are apparently putting on an engagement party and she wanted to invite me to the festivities.” Julian muttered as he set down the new bottles. “Drinks.”

“Engagement party?” Gaven asked, unfamiliar with the concept.

“It’s a party that is usually put on prior to a couple being married. The practice varies from culture to culture and species to species.” Julian explained.

“Well considering Rom’s a Ferengi and Leeta’s Bajoran it could be anything from an elegant black tie affair to…” Miles began.

“A bloody circus.” Julian said, finishing his thought for him.

“Here. Why don’t you give him back to me for awhile.” Miles said softly, gesturing to Gaven so he could free him up.

“Alright, my Toro’ki. Back to father.” Gaven nodded and carefully switched Kirayoshi back into his father’s arms.
In spite of all the stress, Miles really did enjoy holding his son especially when he was calm and peaceful like now.

“Toro’ki?” Julian inquired, briefly changing the subject.

“Yes. It’s an Oum title. Roughly translated it means ‘Little King’. A term of endearment for very young children. You see in Oum culture very young children tend to be the most demanding and the caretakers take devout care of them until they’re old enough to either enter their households or be sent to the foundling houses. We Oum are delighted by life at all its magnificent phases. Your son, Sir, I think will grow up to be a very strong sort and also very kind.” Gaven predicted.

“Well, I certainly hope so.” Miles muttered. “Well I think I should get this little one home while the getting is good. Gaven? I send over my work schedule when I get back. You’re a real lifesaver. Sorry to peter out on you Julian, but…”

Miles shrugged apologetically.

“Yes of course, Chief. A father’s work is never done. I’ll see you later.” As Miles moved along to pick up his baby bag which he’d set off in the corner, he passed very close to Julian and in a low tone muttered, “Get a grip and talk to him.”

“Right. Well, goodnight everyone. Gaven? I’ll see you tomorrow.” Miles finished his goodbyes and headed out.

This left Gaven and Julian alone.

Gaven, a vision of green, his large dark accented eyes and curly black hair in the soft light of the dart room made him look entirely exotic and mysterious. Julian was wearing his favorite royal blue sweater and with his boyish features and fresh look the two looked like they were almost facing off on opposite sides of the space. Gaven a dark forest elf and Julian a bright eyes page royal.

“Well...I’m glad you came out after all. You look...Huh, wonderful.” Julian complimented, trying to drum up some small talk to break the growing intensity in the room.
“Thank you. I thought it was time to come out of my shell a bit. Mr. Garak was nice enough to do up some clothes for me that are more in alignment with my culture. But, I must admit, he did take some liberties with the palate. Tell me, have I really looked like a unapproachable unrefined mess all this time?” Gaven asked with an edge of self-deprecating humor.

“Well considering you came here a utterly miserable refugee with almost nothing to your name but the uniforms Starfleet borrowed you, I must admit this new presentation of yours is a bit of a shock to most of us.” Julian admitted.

When he noticed Gaven’s mouth drop ever so slightly into a frown, Julian quickly tried to recover the observation. “You look beautiful, Gaven. You look like...Yourself. And it’s wonderful. I hope Garak made you more options. I’d hate to see you go backwards now.”

Gaven grunted but ultimately accepted the encouragement. “Thank you.”

The two went silent again both lost in their own internal dialogues. Eventually though Gaven picked their conversation back up. “Did you still want to play? It’s not really my kind of game but...”

“No actually. Now that you mention it I feel a bit, restless. What do you say about getting away from the noise and crowds? If your game I might have the perfect place.” Julian offered.

Gaven sighed in relief. All the attention he’d garnered was starting to weigh on his nerves and he was starting to tense up from the strain of everyone becoming acutely aware of him at once.

“Please.” Gaven agreed.
Twenty minutes later Julian escorted Gaven into a holosuite with one of his favorite private programs cued up.

“Welcome to Vic’s Las Vegas Lounge.” Julian announced once they’d both entered the space fully so that the exit suddenly disappeared creating a flawless illusion.

Gaven looked around.

Vic’s was a intimate space. To one wall was a small stage just big enough for a basic band and one performer to comfortably entertain upon. In front of the stage was a dancing floor rimmed with small two person circular tables with clean white linen tablecloths over them and little tea lamps in their centers. The space was actually rather well lit without being stark. Royal blue curtains hung along the walls and were an accent color along the rim of the oblong bar. The walls and stage were a tanned yellow. The ambiance of the entire space was warm and calming and though Gaven generally didn’t approve of holograms, he had to admit he liked this space.

“My friend Felix designed the program. His work is impeccable. This program is meant to simulate a early 20th century lounge set in a particular city on Earth. It’s one of my favorite places to drum up when I want a little peace.” Julian explained as he walked with Gaven around the space.

“I must admit, it **is** charming.” Gaven complimented.

“Come on. Let’s sit down awhile.” Now that the initial shock had worn off Julian felt a deeply comforting sense of safety and fluttering attraction seep into him and it made him glad he’d thought to bring Gaven to Vic’s.

Gaven obliged him and, as was common when they were alone together and comfortable the communication between them began to flow more easily and naturally and after a while both men slipped into a intimate and lively pattern of conversation.

Leaning in with his elbows on the table Gaven smiled into his hand as he listened to Julian talk adamantly about some of the places he’d lived and recount some of the more humorous moments he’d experienced at the Academy. Having not been to other worlds beyond his time on Vulcan and Gulba 4, Gaven relished hearing about so many places and when it came to storytelling Julian was actually very good at keeping his audience engaged.

As the night wore on though their conversation sobered and ventured into more personal topics. Julian had taken the initiative to order them more drinks, but seeing as he’d had enough liqueur earlier in the night and the stuff was pointless with Gaven, Julian ordered them a lovely tea setting of a very rich hot chocolate with just a hint of chile powder.

“Can I ask you something? I know Lopel Ner was your bondmate and you were together quite along time. Was there ever anyone else? I mean to say, did you ever wonder or feel tempted?” Julian asked gently.

Gaven knitted his fingers around his warm cup as he thought about the question.

“It’s different for my people than it is for many other humanoids out there, I think. When I was on Oum I rarely had long term contact with members of other households. Other bondservants in public
forums occasionally had cause to meet socially and privately but as living extensions of the masters of our households, most of us remained isolated. There were a few exceptions to this. For example, Gulwere did enjoy a wide circle of influence and once he began my formal education and began to regularly take me with him to the capitol to mingle among other representative members of the Republica, I became well acquainted with a few of the bond servants of dome of his closest friends. Obviously I became as well known as Gulwere was and once I was introduced into higher Oum society, Gulwere began to receive solicitations for my genetics.” A almost pridelful look came over Gaven’s features but it was edged with regret as well.

“Gulwere didn’t have many vices, but he was an acute observe of Oum nature and I think he enjoyed watching the elite among his circles restrain their envy and interest in me. I think there was a proud kind of vanity in it for him since I was genetically part of him. In particular, Gulwere liked when he was in the capitol and free of his business, to mingle socially with certain Households. His favorite was the Vos household. While he was there I would often spend time with the other bonded servants of the house. Jessup was very affluent and prided herself as a breeding hobbyist and cultural Matchmaker. Never have I seen someone who knew as many households as she did and who understood the social intrigues of the Republica so well. As a result, she was very wealthy and had numerous bondservants. Nearly a dozen. All carriers. Her favorite of the lot was Chezra. We spent...A great deal of time together. Gulvere’s social business could sometimes occupy him for weeks at a time and in the Vos household there was little need to be anything else but completely idle. Chezra was close to my age. She was lively, bright, and brazen. Quite unusual in a bondservant, but then again Jessup was very liberal and open handed with her proteges. I liked her very much and at one point I thought...I often thought Jessup and Gulwere threw us together on purpose in preparation for some distant intent they had planned. Had we been allowed to breed, I think we would have produced dynamic offspring.” Gaven smiled self indufgently, clear nostalgic pleasure coming into his features.

“So? What happened?” Julian was mesmerized by this story as it had a utterly different tone than any Gaven had yet related.

“Whatever their intended plans, they never came to fruitions. Eventually, Gulwere died and my bond was passed on to Lopel. Lopel and I had differing feelings on the subject of breeding solicitations. Jessup did send several proposals all of which Lopel vehemently rejected and, of course, when he took me on as a bonded mate the issue of breeding rights become a mute point.” Gaven mused.

“So what you're saying is that you would have been open to breeding solicitations but Lopel wasn’t and he went out of his way to keep you to himself.” Even Julian could see what a shame that was from an Oum perspective.

Gaven tilted his head at Julian, interested in his seeming ability to understand his culture’s perspective. “Do you have an opinion on the subject?”

Julian hesitated but since Gaven seemed acutely interested he went on. “It just seems wrong that he went out of his way like that. Knowing what I know about your culture and the fact that your genetics were so sought after...From the Oum perspective, I’m sure it seemed like a terrible waste. You could have influenced hundreds by sharing your genetics to a wide pool. It just seems like an important aspect of how the Oum maintain their genetic lines and keep their species strong. It’s not an unusual concept. Lots of species operate like that. It just seems...Selfish. Especially considering you clearly would have been very happy to contribute to your people like that. I think...I feel, however he may have deeply loved you, he used his power over you to his personal advantage.”

Julian knew it was a risky opinion to have but Gaven had asked for his perspective on the subject.
Gaven seemed to accept this perspective and simply nodded his head. “I loved Lopel, but he was by no means a perfect person. Though he played at the dream of equality between us, we were not equals and nothing was ever going to change that. As subversive as his ideas often were he was still in many respects a typical member of the Republica and a beneficiary of the dominant social order.”

Julian sighed, Gaven was always fair about things.

He was always willing to acknowledge the most probable truth of any situation. Julian knew that if he had wanted to breach the subject of his own looming questions about what they were to each other or what they could be, Gaven would indeed be willing to at least hear him out. But a deep rooted fear kept him from initiating the conversation he so badly wanted to have with Gaven.

“My turn.” Gaven said suddenly, resettling himself in his chair. “What’s the story between you and Leeta?”

“Huh...She was a former romantic partner of mine. We were together for about a year and a half before she asked to end things with me.” Julian admitted as casually as possible.

“Was it more serious for you than it was for her?” Gaven inquired, for him the idea of people having numerous love interests that they carried on with for varying lengths of time sometimes bonding themselves to and sometimes not was nearly foreign to him, yet it seemed the prevalent practice among most of the humanoids he’d encountered.

“Honestly? I thought we were doing fine. I thought she was happy. But, clearly, I was mistaken. I know Leeta seems like just pretty face but she’s so much more than that. Any Bajoran who was born during the Cardassian Occupation of Bajor didn’t survive that experience without a Hell of alot of strength and perseverance. Sometimes I thought it was a waste for her to limit herself by working for Quark. I always thought she was capable of so much more. I did believe I was in love with her but seeing as it’s not been a year and she’s already engaged to someone else I suppose our attraction simply wasn’t meant to go anywhere.” Julian explained.

Gaven could tell it bothered Julian that Leeta had so easily ended their affair and moved on to someone else. It was a insightful vulnerability of Julian’s that Gaven reminded himself to be wary of.

Gaven felt a distant but aggressive argument begin at the back of his conscience. There could be no mistaking that Gaven and Julian were becoming deeply invested in each other. Gaven supposed for the first time that he may have even misstepped in some of his behavior towards Julian by perhaps indulging to much in his presence and when he stepped outside his own perspective and tried to see things from a different side, he saw that he had perhaps inanaverdantly initiated something deeper between them than what he was prepared to pursue.

Or was he?

The argument grew a little louder in Gaven’s mind. While many of the courtship customs of these space dwelling humanoids differed vastly from Gaven’s own cultural experiences and practices, he did share with them the capacity to love and to gravitate towards companionship. Of anyone on the station, he and Julian had found themselves thrown together time and again. They’d saved each other's lives on more than one occasion, worked side by side, comforted and supported each other...The subtle sentiments between them wasn’t lost on Gaven and he’s let them go on even though he knew better. If he wanted to share his higher esteem for Julian there was nothing stopping him. With the exception of one thing.

I’m not truly free. He reminded himself. If I engage him now, it’ll be just like it’s always been. I must finish this business with Starfleet and settle things with Cheval. It’s the only way.
While his reasoning was sound, Gaven wondered how fair it was of him to keep his wants and fears from Julian. If Julian felt anything for him as well, surely it was wrong to not tell him why he was afraid to invite him in.

As Julian talked he watched a distant expression come into Gaven’s features and his mouth turn down ever so slightly. By now Julian recognized many of his subtle expressions and a trickle of worry dripped down to pool in his chest. Reaching out Julian wiggled him by the wrist gently hoping to bring him back into himself.

“Gaven, come back to me. Is something wro-” Julian began to ask until he felt Gaven gently turn his wrist open to curl his fingers around Julian’s wrist equally. It was an intentionally intimate gesture and at the same time Gaven did it his eyes focus to peer at him with what Julian could not mistake as a kind of sad longing.

“Julian, I’ve wanted to tell you something for some time, but…” Before Gaven could finish his thought, something beeped and Dax’s voice came through the com.

“Dax to Doctor Ore and Doctor Bashir. Sorry to interrupt you guys on your off time, but I think you’re going to want to see this. I’ll meet you in the lab. Dax out.” The com beeped once more ending the communication.

The professional urgency in Dax’s voice and choice of words was enough to send both Gaven and Julian into high alert. It seemed there personal affairs were going to have to wait.

Realizing this was an important moment between them Julian let go and reluctantly pulled his arm out of Gaven’s grasp.

“We have to go.” Julian’s voice had taken on a quiet huskiness that he didn’t even try to conceal.

“Yes.” Gaven’s tone was deeply resigned.

Already doubt was setting in about his near disaster of a confession. Gaven knew there was going to be Hell to pay when Julian finally decided to confront him about their delayed conversation.

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Fifteen minutes later, Julian and Gaven were reconvening in the med lab where Dax was waiting for them. Her manner was all professionalism even if she might have wanted to remark on their interesting appearance together not dressed in jewel tones almost as if they’d coordinated it that way.

“Hey guys. Remember how we estimated a six week window reaction time for the live trials? Take a look at this.” Dax went to the computer screen and pulled up the tracking data.

As they studied it from across the table, Julian squinted and came around to look closer so that he could be sure he wasn't mistaking himself. “Unbelievable. It works.”

Julian turned to peer at Gaven. Who was staring at him with a look of steady knowing.

“Let me see the subject values.” Julian muttered walking to a different panel where he quickly began scrolling through it faster then the average human should have been able to read.

“Have you double checked these?” Julian asked in quiet wonder.

“Yes. I've checked them numerous times and so has Jeremiah. It's not an exaggeration.” Dax
confirmed. “The inoculation isn't just reinforcing their cells, it's regenerating damaged ones. So far it's not to any extreme degree. But it is noticeable. Remember how we noted that about a quarter of the test subjects had cancerous tumors present somewhere in the body? Well the statistics have dropped by almost a half and all tested positive for some regeneration of tissue. I have to say I've never seen anything quite like this before. Guys were not just talking about the ability to shield subjects from the effects of poly radiation...I think what we’re broaching here is a new breakthrough in cellular regeneration. “ Dax explained, her measured awe was clear.

At that point both of them turned to look at Gaven who had yet to comment on any of what they’d found.

“Did you know about the potential of this?” Julian asked him.

Gaven shrugged slightly. “It is how the cellular science works in my case. As I told you all in the beginning of this, in radiation resistant Oum like myself poly exposure enhances cellular development. While the inoculation we’re developing focus on the cellular deflection of poly radiation it was conceivable that there could be additional disadvantages and benefits. I hoped the reality would be the latter and I’m very happy to see that I’m possibly getting my wish.”

“Is it wrong that I’m more excited about the regeneration element of this than I am anything else?” Dax remarked.

“No. After all, healing people is far more rewarding for some than trying to hurt them is.” Gaven pointed out. There was a hint of poignancy in his tone. “Have you alerted the Captain about this?”

“Yes. Benjamin’s calling a progress meeting in an hour. We still have to follow protocol and see the experiment through but this…this is still stunning. Can you two watch the lab for awhile? I want to run home and freshen up before we all reconvene.” Dax requested.

“Of course.”

“Sure.”

Gaven and Julian said in unison.

When Dax was gone, Julian leaned back into the wall so that he could watch Gaven.

“You planned for this outcome, didn't you.” Julian asserted.

“Yes.” Gaven replied evenly.

“Explain.” Julian challenged him.

Gaven considered for a moment how much of an explanation he was really required to give.

“ When I was on Gulba 4, I tried to clarify what might happen if my tissues were used for other medical purposes outside of resisting and treating poly radiation exposure. At the time I thought I was dying and when I reflected on how my life might be measured by the tombs of galactic history I decided that if I was to leave an impression, I wanted that impression to be centered around my dedication to preserving life and not harming it. It’s true that if all goes right the inoculation project should achieve what it was designed to do. But now we know that the science behind it is also capable of more. This is part of my legacy. Maybe only one I may ever have outside of Oum. Do you understand now?” Gaven asked.

Julian nodded, accepting his explanation for what it was.
“That's what you meant when you said the trip to Gulba 4 was about doing something solely for yourself. You'd already been developing the inoculation concept, but centered it around It's potential to protect and repair a body.” Julian reiterated.

Gaven nodded slowly.

“The inoculation will still have to be tailored to each species and then be more strictly tested to ensure safety, but I'm confident Starfleet has enough now to take over the project. Once this preliminary testing is done I plan to wash my hands of it.” Gaven confessed.

“I see. It bothers you that this may be used to hurt the changelings, but you figure If we invent the gun and you only invent the bullet the outcome of its use, should we decide to use it, will be on our heads instead of yours.” Julian observed.

“That was my general thought. Yes.” Gaven agreed.

“Why do it at all then?” Julian proposed.

“Mm. The changelings, at least these changelings, are aggressive and hostile. I'm not ignorant about what the Dominion has already done. From that perspective I'm comfortable helping others develop the means to protect themselves and their planetary autonomy. I, after all, know what it's like not to have any.” Gaven observed.

“These changelings?” Julian inquired.

“Yes. These changelings. Julian my people in their history have not experienced the current and popular characterization of the changeling species. Though the Dominion is large and likes to imply that they represent the feelings of the entirety of their kind. We know there are clear and present exceptions. Odo for one and Kajel. Neither was found anywhere near known Dominion territory and they’re differing experience of interactions with other life forms keeps them here with all of you where they have chosen to oppose the dominant order of their kind. Though I do believe all changelings come from a common universal source tracing back to who knows when...I don’t believe that these changelings are the only possible pocket of changelings out there. These changelings feel they must control everything in their path. They cite ancient pains that have driven them to become what they presently are. It disturbs me to think this will be the only perspective that goes down in everyone else’s histories as they contend with them. So yes it does bother me and I wish there was a better way.” Gaven admitted.

Gaven’s endless compassion really did amaze Julian sometimes as did his deep rooted conviction. It occurred to Julian that while Gaven was almost always forthcoming if he was asked questions about what he thought and felt, it was rare that he gave away information on his own. Julian felt a sweep of longing flash through him. He wondered what it would be like to go away with Gaven somewhere away from all the distractions of their regular lives and take the time to really absorb each other. The memory of Gaven taking hold of his wrist in the in the holosuite caused a subtle warm coiling in his solar plexus and he wondered now with nagging concern what Gaven had been planning to tell him. Right now though was not the time to find out.

As much as Julian would have liked to continue intimately talking to Gaven, the doctors instead spent the rest of the hour before their meeting catching up on Dax and Jeremiah's reports. The task proved to be more than engrossing and despite their personal intrigues, as had become usual for the men they easily slipped into a mutually pensive state together. Both deeply enjoyed such times of work and everywhere they could simply exist together with the comfort of the other’s steady presence settled snugly around them.
When it was time to go, Dax reapered and they all left together. All were tired but in good spirits.

“Hello everyone.” Benjamin said once everyone had settled into his conference room a short time later. “I’m going to try to keep this brief since I know some of you haven't been to bed yet. Let's start with our shield calibrations. Where are we?”

“Everything's so ready to go. Dax and I have calibrated the shielding on both the Defiant and the Rio Grande. Although I can't imagine we'll come across alot of need for it unless you plan to launch a mission to the Oumni system.” Miles remarked.

“Good and the stations shields?” Benjamin inquired.

“That's proving to be a bit trickier. So far we've been able set up shielding in larger spaces but we haven't been able to cover all the smaller areas. It's not impossible, it's just going to take more time.” Dax explained.

“Keep at it then.” Benjamin encouraged.

“How about our inoculation experiment?” Benjamin had been keeping up with the reports and already had a good idea of the progress that had been made but he spoke now for the benefit of everyone at the table.

“the first few bits of data coming in are already very promising. We've already seen a positive response in the live trials and in some cases we've even seen cases we're cells were not only protected but damaged cells were also being repaired.” Julian said.

“Repaired? What do you mean repaired?’ Kira asked with keen interest. “How?”

“The formula for the inoculation testing was crafted directly from my own poly resistant DNA.” Gaven supplied. “In my case, my immune system has been enhanced by my planets constant poly exposure. The result includes numerous advantages. Aging for example is much slower in Oum like me an the rate of healing and immune- response is much higher and more aggressive. The formula allows a person with short exposure to likewise benefit as the inoculation shields the bloodstream and prevents absorption of the poly radiation through the skin. There is significant evidence that the inoculation could also be used to heighten a bodies natural ability to regenerate itself.” Gaven explain.

“Furthermore when the formula is exposed to damaged cells it has the ability to mimic healthy ones and essentially can either shut down the cells reproduction abilities or enhance the speed of growth for new healthy cells to flood the area.” Dax said excited. “Bottom line based on the preliminary research is that the poly radiation shielding is really just a bonus. The real magic is in the regeneration aspects.”

Dax was clearly excited by this news.

“What this may also mean is that the inoculation is programmable. Meaning for now we can program it to shield and also neutralize short term poly radiation exposure, but later we could program it to do any number of other things.” Julian explained.

“Although the Federation has a long way to go before they can actually test the inoculation on a person, I have every confidence this is going to work.” Gaven assured them.

“As do I.” Julian agreed not because he had any definitive proof it would work, but because he had more than enough faith in Gaven’s knowledge of the science involved to back him on the sentiment.
“Very good. Keep me informed on your progress.” The final half hour of the meeting was devoted to Worf, Odo, and Kira going over additional security and operations measures most of which Gaven and Julian remained quiet through as they both occasionally stole glances at each other at opposite intervals.

When the captain finally dismissed them Julian pulled Gaven aside gently.

“Hey. I know we have to do another round in the lab and eventually sleep today, but what would you say about coming over to my place tonight or tomorrow for dinner.” Julian inquired.

Gaven paused in consideration looking like he might actually accept Julian's invitation, but at the last second Gaven sighed and shook his head to the negative.

“I can't tonight. I promised Chief O'brien I'd watch Kirayoshi while he completed his night shift. Plus I have important business with Cheval when he returns tomorrow.” Gaven said, his own disappointment at the missed opportunity easily evident in his tone. “I'm sorry.”

Gaven meet Julian's gaze directly when he apologized and Julian swore he saw a soft aching in the man's eyes that he didn't fully understand.

“I see, I see.” Julian nodded. “Maybe we can raincheck it then for a few days.”

Julian moved closer to Gaven to get out of the flow of traffic near Benjamin's office. As they came close into each other's spheres both inaudibly sighed over the potent relief of their nearness.

“As soon as I'm sure I can make the proper time for us, I will come over. You have my word.” Gaven muttered quietly in a low tone and his fingertips brushed the small of Julian's back.

It was in this subtle gesture that Julian realized Gaven was attempting to reassure him. As if he was afraid Julian might think he was trying to avoid him as he so often had in the past.

“Yes. I know. It's alright. We'll find the time soon.” He agreed showing he understood him.

In spite of both of their private wishes, there was indeed much legitimate work to be done and both men knew for the moment their work together had to be their primary focus.

Sucking in a deep cleansing breathe and letting it go, Julian glanced sidelong up at the other man.”We'll, Doctor? Shall we?”

Smiling slightly at his theatrics, Gaven nodded in agreement and let Julian move away so that he could follow down to corridors a pace or two behind him.

Unbeknownst the the Doctors, the tension of their conversation and the intimate nature of their body language hadn't gone completely unnoticed. While they'd been talking Odo, Benjamin, and Kira had been watching them from the vantage point of Benjamin's office door.

“What do you think that was all about?” Kita asked slyly leaning towards the other two.

“Mm. You've noticed it now too. They've been carrying on like this for quite some time now.” Odo revealed in his gravely introspective tone as he stood in the doorway with his arms crossed.

“We'll, wonders never cease.” Benjamin muttered.

“Wait...Should we be concerned about this?” Kira asked still clearly stunned.

“Only if it doesn't work out.” Benjamin observed with a dispassionate shrug.
“Let's just error on the side of...Hoping for the best for now.” Odo proposed to everyone's quiet agreement.
CHAPTER 33

The next few days were a busy whirlwind of activity all over the station. But the vibe became doubly tense when things escalated out of control with the arms dealers Quark had gotten into bed with forcing Benjamin to ban all Starfleet personnel from setting foot in Quark’s business until the situation could be satisfactorily resolved.

Most of the Starfleet officers choose to take down time in stride. Taking on extra shifts and meeting in their personal spaces rather then out in public.

True to his word when Gaven wasn’t taking shifts in the infirmary and working on the inoculation project he was away babysitting for the O’Brien’s or communicating with Cheval via transmission as he calmly awaiting his return.

When it was time to meet Cheval at his transport, Gaven was there waiting for him and as both men came into a view of each other a wash of relief flooded through them both as they embraced pounding once on each other’s backs, much to the surprise of some of the other passengers who were not used to seeing such an exuberant reaction from a Vulcan.

“You are distressed and uncertain.” The Vulcan mused with a concerned air, briefly touch his fingers to either side of Gaven’s chin and turning his face one from side to side as if to examine him.

“Yes. And you are worried and worn down.” Gaven parroted back at him. “Is it all my doing or has something happened?”

Cheval shook his head slowly. “Your mind calls out to me constantly as of late as if you are drowning and trying to grasp hold of something. Come. We will...get to the bottom of this. It will be all right.”

Ten minutes later, Cheval and Gaven were hold up in Cheval’s apartment. Gaven was sitting huddled at the table while Cheval stood at the kitchen counter unpacking his travel bag. “Here, this is for you. I acquired it while working along the marshes of the Kal river. It is supposed to be a Bajoran symbol of inner serenity and it only grows in specific regions.”

From his bag, Cheval produced a large clear square box. Inside was a perfectly preserved white water lily nearly eight inches in diameter.

Gaven took it and set it down before him so that he could admired its beauty. “It’s wonderful. Thank you.”

Cheval nodded. “I have one of my own as well. I could not resist.”

Cheval eventually finished what he was doing and stepped around the counter to sit beside his beloved friend. He could sense that Gaven was at odds with himself over something and the more he tried to reach out and touch it with his own mind the more he sensed Gaven resist revealing its nature not just to Cheval but to himself.

“You are so afraid to share with yourself? Let me grasp it for you so that you may face it and find your peace.” Cheval reached out then and placed the butt of his hand against Gaven’s brow opening between them a small psychic link that they normally avoided utilizing.
The intensity of what Gaven felt was unnerving to Cheval even though he’d only opened enough of a channel to catch a glimpse of the man’s inner workings. Cheval strained to absorb the strike and was rapidly caught up into it until Gaven finally spared them both and firmly pulled his palm away catching Cheval before he almost fell out of his chair acutely overwhelmed. Cheval recovered however and caught Gaven at the shoulders until he could steady himself. When he finally meet Gaven’s gaze again his eyes were open very wide and glistening with pooling tears that had yet to break from their ocular prison.

“Cheval...I’m sorry. I never meant for it to come to this.” Gaven began to apologize.

“No. Doctor Bashir...Does not know how fortunate he is to have so completely captured your heart. Why are you keeping this from him? Why will you not allow yourself to embrace what you feel and so badly want?” Cheval pressed, as he desperately tried to put a cap on his own tremulous feels churning through his body so that he could focus on Gaven.

“The blade cuts both ways.” Gaven whispered referencing an ancient Oum saying about the duality of pleasure and suffering. “I have nothing to offer him, but what I feel. I have no home, I have no people; and the thing I know he won’t be able to understand the most is why I just can’t live in his world with him.”

“What will you do then?” Cheval asked gently.

Gaven groaned. “The inoculation trial will end sometime before we leave for Vulcan. The Captain has already agreed to let me hand off the project at that point which means my present obligation to the Federation will have been fulfilled and I won’t be under any further obligation to come immediately back to the station if I dont want to. I have made arrangements with Mr. Worf on your behalf and with your permission he is willing to train with you in preparation for our return to Vulcan should the worst happen when we go back. I promised you I would help you through this upcoming ordeal and that’s exactly what I intend to do. Whatever my other feelings...Your wellbeing is my primary priority for the foreseeable future. Of anyone I’ve met off world, you are my best friend and my closest confidant. You know me better than anyone else possibly anywhere.”

Cheval tilted his head and the depth of Gaven’s regard for him and as he did so an echo of T’Yell’s accusation pressed at the back of his awareness.

“I may indeed still be you’re ashelik...Darling, beloved. But I now begin to question if you are my true and rightful T’hy’la...” T’hy’la, the vulcan word for friend, brother, soulmate, and lover.

T’Yell had implied that Gaven had usurped her in this role and that he was a truer representation of the title in Cheval’s heart. Friends they were. There was no reason to deny it. Gaven was also the most dedicated person in Cheval’s life besides T’Yell and his mother. He believed logically that Gaven saw him as an essential figure in Cheval’s life besides T’Yell and his mother. He believed logically that Gaven saw him as an essential figure in his own life as well. But soulmates? The question caused Cheval to have to consider what a soulmate really was. What were the requirements? Like T’yell, Gaven was inadvertently linked to him. Had Gaven allowed it they may have had the benefit of the same encompassing psychic bond that he had long enjoyed with T’yell. By Vulcan standards it was very possible Gaven could be considered a soulmate because they shared this link. On the other hand their bond had not come out of free choice for either of them. It had been an accident and one they were both trying to actively undo because they believed it was what the other one wanted.

It was true that Cheval had originally sought Gaven out again to break they’re psychic bond. He had come because he had wanted to clear a path for he and T’yell and remove any doubts that had the power to tear them apart. He had come to find Gaven with the best of intentions for all involved, but now Cheval questioned his own motivations. If Gaven had wanted to take him as a partner, would Cheval have accepted and sought to end his dynamic with T’yell instead? In the end the answer was
mute. However complex Gaven’s feelings were involving Cheval, there was no denying that Gaven’s feeling for Doctor Bashir eclipsed them.

“I do know you.” Cheval agreed at length. “I know that your contemplating going to Vulcan and never coming back here.”

“Possibly. Do you disapprove?” Gaven asked seriously.

“No, Doctor. You are a free man. As such you are entitled to go where you will. It is clear that your feelings for Doctor Bashir confuse and overwhelm you. For that reason distance may be the best course. You could also, by contrast, choose to face what you feel and allow Doctor Bashir to have his say in the matter as well. You seem to believe he may harbor feelings for you. If that is true then it is possible he is just as conflicted about them as you are.” Cheval reasoned supportively, even though the irony of his advice left an unhappy taste in his mouth.

Gaven sighed.

“It’s all going to come to a head eventually, my friend. Everything always does sooner or later. Right now I just want to not have to think about it for awhile. I’m glad your back and I’m grateful that you are here with me. Now come and sit awhile and tell me about Bajor and everything that happened.” Gaven invited him as he wrapped his arms around Chival’s present almost like a child with his favorite toy.

As always, Cheval’s eyes were soft and ever so slightly sad as he came around the table slowly and sat down. In these, kind of moments Cheval found it difficult to face Gaven because he felt he had to conceal so much of his true feelings for him as well as contend with the ever constant fear he was somehow betraying T’Yell at every turn.

Yes, the vulcan thought. The knife cuts both ways.

~@~

In another part of the station that day, Gaven and Cheval weren’t the only people finding themselves walking a delicate knife edge between right and wrong and necessity over indulgence. Quark’s shady partnership with his cousin Gaila and the notorious humanoid arms dealer Hagath had finally escalated to the point where Odo was ready to throw the book at him, this time for good.

“None of these charges are going to stick. I haven’t broken any laws. I have a license to run holosuites.” Quark insisted as he sat being detained and questioned in Odo’s office.

Naturally Odo had been investigating the situation since the moment Gaila and his associates had come to the station. While Quark was no stranger to skirting the law, Odo was amazed at how blatant and brazen his current scheme was. It was a sign that the Ferengi bar owner was beyond desperate to get out of his financial troubles with his debts and the Ferangi Commerce Authority who had recently stripped Quark of his ability to do business with other Ferengi.

“But you don’t have a license to sell weapons, do you?” Odo rebutted as he leaned into the side of his office chair like a coiled viper biding his time.

“I defy you to prove that I brought a single weapon onto this station.” Quark challenged reasonably. The truth was always the best course to take whenever possible.

“It’s a mere technicality.” Odo replied forcefully, the power of his voice dominating the room. We both know what your doing. I promise you you’re going to face the consequences.” Odo assured him.
Just as Quark’s mouth was about to drop open in further disarming protest, he and Odo were abruptly interrupted by Kira and the Captain himself. Their posture and serious expressions showed they were there on official business.

“Not today he isn’t.” Benjamin boomed in a tone that rivaled and surpass Odo’s own voice of authority. “Let him go.”

Odo simply stared at the captain. Though Benjamin was peaking with superior authority it was clear he wasn’t happy about having to do so under the circumstances.

“Let him go?!” Odo asked incredulously, coming out of his chair to lean forward on his feet.

“Major! Tell the constable what you told me.” Benjamin commanded in a tone that showed he shared Odo’s sentiment but that there was a legitimate impediment to pursuing the case.

“The Bajoran Government insists that Deep Space 9 not interfere with the lawful transactions of Hagath or his Associates.” Kira recited, starting strong but losing some measure of voice as she finish show too that she thought the entire situation was just as undesirable as the rest of them. “Hagath supplied arms to the resistance. Without him or people like him, we’d all be dead. The Cardassians would still be in power... We owe him.”

“Captain!” Odo protested desperately, but to no avail.

“I don’t like it anymore than you do.” Benjamin insisted with a scowl.

“Hmph. Better luck next time.” Quark said smugly, but before the sentence could even land in the air Benjamin had seized the arm of his chair and spun Quark to face him.

“You better hope there isn’t a next time, Mister.” Benjamin rapidly threatened, getting right down into Quark’s face and looking him dead in the eyes. “I have cut you a lot of slack in the past. I even looked away once or twice when I could have come down hard on you but those days are over. Now we may not be able to get you for selling weapons but you so much as litter on the Promenade and I will nail you to the wall!”

Pulling away in disgust, Benjamin handed Quark of to Kira who took a similarly threatening stance right in Quark’s face from the other side, a look of sweet pleasure was evident on her face as she soaked in quark’s stunned terror. “Something to look forward to.”

Kira then slowly turned Quark’s chair front again and walked out following Benjamin’s lead leaving a shell shocked Quark in their wake.

A little latter, after recovering a bit with a stiff drink Quark took up with Hagath and his cousin whom he was now doggedly at the beck and call of in Hagath’s quarters.

“I’ll never forget how many people told us we were making a mistake.” Gaila said in a lazy fashion as he poured a drink for Hagath and leaned over the back of the long sofa to pass it along. “Sell weapons to the Bajorans?”

Hagath was lounging like a pasha in it’s center with Quark dangling on the edge to Hagath’s right trying desperately to pretend he wasn’t utterly uncomfortable sitting so close to the snake of man.

Hagath chuckled and took the glass.

“What chance do they have? Invest in a winner. Sell to the Cardassians.” Hagath mused, remembering the old exchanges.
“But why did you sell weapons to the Bajorans? They couldn’t have had any money.” Despite the fact that he was afraid of Hagath, Quark was intrigued by the man’s cunning and did see the benefits of picking his brain.

“My dear Quark not every deal is about making money.” Hagath explained magnanimously. Sometimes you have to look at the big picture. And at times, gaining a friend is more important than making a profit.”

“I admit,” Gaila said in an amused tone as he made and then passed another drink to Quark. “It’s not the Ferangi way but it’s good business nonetheless.”

“Mm. I knew the Cardassian’s would eventually lose. And you know why?” Hagath asked, in a reminiscent fashion.

“Because they were overly confident.” Quark offered like a shy school boy facing his sly professor.

“Exactly!” Hagath agreed excitedly, pleased that Quark had grasped the answer. “They underestimated the Bajoran thirst for freedom. I didn’t.”

Just then the chime on the door sounded pulling all three of them back into a business-like mindset.

“Want me to handle this?” Gaila offered flatly.

“No.” Hagath chirped, it was clear by his tone the aging arms dealer was mildly disappointed to have been pulled out of his revery.

It was Hagath’s way to treat his associates whenever possible like a father treated his children and at times the attitude was tiresome for the man. Especially when it involved matters that require a heavier hand. Hagath really preferred to be pleased and generous with his people. It was one of the perks of being as sly and successful as he’d been in his career. But in the end he was also a ruthless sociopath who had no qualms about straight out killing anyone who disappointed him regardless of how personal a relationship he had with them.

When the door opened two men entered. The first was a petite humanoid man named Farrak. He was middle aged with dark brown hair that was prematurely graying at the temples no doubt in response the the impossible pressures of his job under the watchful eye and thumb of Hagath.

Following him a significant pace behind was a taller man, also humanoid. This one had short feathered brown hair and small though brightly blue eyes and a delicate brow that was just beginning show his age with subtle crows feet that only emphasized his striking gaze. His face was square and angular with a strong chin and a thin feminine mouth. He was dressed in a black trench coat and matching kit gloves.

Where Farrak looked frazzled, small, and weak, this other figure stood straight and proud and promptly side stepped to stand beside the entryway to silently wait as Farrak took his audience.

“Ah, Farrak. How nice of you to join us.” Hagath put down his glass and was once more all enthusiastic genality.

Farrak instantly schooled his expression into a relaxed and soft smile as he stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

“What was so important that you had to see me in person?” Farrak asked smoothly. “I was about to close that deal with the Verillians.”
“Oh really?” Hagath said sharply. “I heard they had no longer any need for our services.”

Farrak laughed nervously, obviously caught at an instant disadvantage because Hagath had information that he did not. “Since when?”

“Since they signed an agreement with Metron Consortium! I also heard that you hadn’t even opened negotiations with the Verillian.” His words were viper fast and no less sharp and poisonous.

“That’s a lie.” Farrak said firmly, managing to fill his voice with a little more strength than he’d arrived with.

“AND THAT instead of doing your job...You were off enjoying yourself on Risa!” Hagath seethed.

“I can explain.” Farrak insisted, weakening just a little.

“I don't want any explanations!” Hagath yelled explosively. “I put my faith in you and you let me down. As from now, our relationship is terminated.”

“Hagath, cant we just talk this over?” Farak said flatley with no emotional inflection. He then chuckled, trying in vain to recover the situation. “I made a mistake.”

“An expensive mistake.” Hagath confirmed lightly. “Good-bye.”

Breathing hard as his eyes began to glisten with the weight of futility that was now bearing down on him, Farak turned like a dead man walking to leave. As he approached the doors with his hands still clasped behind his back he stopped and glanced over at the other man who had accompanied him into the room and quietly addressed him.

“This is your doing, Conrad. You’re going to pay for this. I promise you.” He muttered, though there was little actual threat in his words. Farrak was well aware his days were now numbered, if he had any left to enjoy at all.

As if he thought to make one final appeal for his job and life Farrak half turned just as the entry doors opened and looked back at the others desperately but he could think of nothing more to say.

Gaila simply raised his hand to him in a distant gesture of farewell as Hagath merely looked at the man with utter disinterest. His final slap in the face.

“Are you still there?” Hagath said smugly before Farrak finally turned around and left.

“Now that was a most unpleasant experience.” Hagath muttered instantly relaxing and sounding a chuckle that instantly changed the tone of the room once more to a more frivolous air.

“Quark allow me to take this moment to introduce you to one of my most beloved associates who was courteous enough to bring these unfortunate details to my attention. Conrad won’t you come properly in. Quark this is Conrad Wittle you could say he’s something of a social secretary on retainer of course. He’s an absolute wizard at public relations and we are all very lucky to be the beneficiaries of his services.” Hagath said brightly as he watched the younger man graciously approach.

“Hello, Mr. Quark. Gaila it's nice to see you again as well.” The man nodded and flashed a utterly disarming pearly white smile.

He then approached Hagath and, bending at the waist, spoke something into Hagath’s ear before laying the subtlest of a butterfly kiss upon his cheek bone. He then straigten.
Catching this display which may have seemed subtle, but was actually acutely blatant on Conrad’s part, Gaila’s lip flickered in distaste as he resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Your a good boy, Conrad. I shall leave the business of handling the Consortium in your capable hands. “I have no doubt we will see a sudden return of the Virillian’s interest in record time. You may go and take care of business. I will speak with you later.”

Stepping back now that he was being dismissed, conrad made a point to eye both Gaila and Quark individually. His expression was ice cold and more a clear and present threat in it that both Ferangi recognized on instinct.

“Good evening everyone. Quark, I hope to meet you again.” At that he turned away and practically skipped up the steps and back out of the room.

“Yeah...Not to soon I hope.” Quark muttered trying to shake off the chill he suddenly felt.

“Conrad is a new addition to our happy family.” Gaila said strategically. “Hagath is right. He is very good at what he does.”

The real message Gaila was trying to convey wasn’t remotely lost on Quark.

Conrad Wittle was a master manipulator and an utter sociopath the likes that probably rivaled Hagath himself. That alone made him a deeply dangerous man and one Quark hoped never to have to directly contend with. He had no doubt that whatever had really gone on with, Farrak, Conrad was responsible for it well beyond simply exposing the man’s failures. If Farrak was killed over them, which was almost assured at this point. then It would be Conrad who was responsible for bringing down the ax even if he wasn’t the official executioner.

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Even though the order for Starfleet personal to stay out of Quark’s had quietly come down early, it took awhile for the Ferangi to actually catch on to the fact that he was being officially boycotted. The absence of pretty much any Federation affiliated people made for a dull and quiet day in Quark’s and as he stood behind the bar and cleaned some wine glasses he reflected on just how many of his friends weren’t currently speaking to him. It was a sobering reality.

But then again, Quark wasn’t doing any of this to impress his friends. He was trying to preserve his quality of life and as things stood getting in bed with Hagath and his people was the only way Quark could see to save everything he’s spent his entire life gaining. He told himself none of it was going to last forever. As soon as he payed off his debts and lined his pocket with just a small nest egg to see him through any future hard time, the Ferengi planned to be done with dealing arms. He just hoped by then he still had some friends left to enjoy is future solidity with.

To further complicate matter, a little later his cousin Gaila stopped in to visit him. The news wasn’t good. It seemed Gaila was planning to retire assuming that he could find a worthy replacement to stand at Hagath’s side. Naturally, in light of his recent accomplishments, Gaila had it in mid for Quark to be the one to take his place. On the surface it was a truly golden opportunity that had the power to launch Quark into a realm that was quite beyond his wildest dreams. The idea was indeed more then tempting even for Quark’s whose conscience was well developed but not particularly strong.

But the real boom came when Gaila let it slip that Farrak’s ship had unfortunately exploded shortly after leaving the station. Killing him.
“Warp core breach! That Hagath - What a temper.” Gaila mused, confirming beyond a doubt that the explosion had been a planned retaliatory hit.

The offer by Gaila was also a warning about the dangers of stepping out of turn. Now that Quark was in with Hagath and his people it was quite possible that there would be no easy escape if he wanted to part ways.

Meanwhile, in another part of the station Julian was quickly wrapping up a long shift of working on the inoculation experiment. He’s offered to take the earlier shift so that Gaven could meet up with Cheval and have some time with him before he come in to start his own shift. Though Julian intently wanted the chance to be with Gaven again so that they could get back to where they’d left off, he knew that he was just going to have to suck everything up and wait this time.

Frustrated and out of sorts because he was hungry and couldn’t just conveniently stop over at Quark’s for his lunch, Julian stormed the Promenade in search of his sustenance and spotting a little Bistro across the way that he hadn’t been to for some time, he made a beeline for it slipping easily through the mid day crowd. The bistro was quite popular and a small disorganized line was already forming filled with those planning to order carry away. As Julian moved in to take position at the back of the line he nearly tripped when a very hippy Fuagi dancing woman had turned abruptly behind him to chat with her friend as they got in line. For lack of a better option Julian briefly seized the arm of the person in front of him to avoid tripping in full and knocking the other person down with him. Luckily the figure grabbed him firmly by the arm turning into him to hold him steady with the brunt of his body until Julian got his feet planted properly.

“Guh. Thank you. So sorry. You know how those Fuagi dancers are. All hip and very little spacial awareness.” He quipped lightly hoping the other man hadn’t taken offense.

“That’s alright. No harm done.” The other man said in a even low tone not letting go of Julian’s arm.

The man’s voice struck a nerve in the small of Julian’s back that his brain didn’t immediately process and when he realized the man in black was still holding onto him he finally took the time to look at him in the face. What he saw shocked him to his very core. “Oh my God…”

Conrad Wittle flashed his thin pearly smile at Julian and tightened his grip ever so subtly on his upper arm. “Hello Julian. Nice to see you again.”

As quickly as the man said his pleasantries he promptly let go of Julian who was cautiously backing away from the line.

Conrad tilted his head to the side and raised the paper bag in his other hand that had just been handed to him by the cashier.

“Hungry? Why don’t we have some lunch.” It wasn’t really an offer as much as it was a declaration that Conrad had already decided for them.

A few moments later Julian was planted at a nearby with his hands practically cemented to either side of the table rim.

“Conrad what are you doing here on Deep Space Nine?” He demanded in a low hiss.

For the other man’s part Conrad was all relaxation as he lounged casually with one leg crossed over the other. A thick pastrami sandwich in one hand and a bottle of spicy mustard poised in the other so that he could add a new dollop to ever bite.

“I’m here on business of course. What else? I’m doing some public relations work for a certain Mr.
Hagath. It’s all very regular but, what can I say, I like to slum now and again.” Conrad said coolly giving an indifferent shrug.

“So your working for that despicable murdering arms dealer now. I should have known. Lord knows he’s the only type that would have anything to do with you at this point.” Julian hissed.

“Tut, tut. Don’t be bitter. As you can imagine I’m actually quite sought after in the region and in these delicate times I pretty much have my pick of who I want to assist. Hagath may be a murdering sociopath but he’s also a very sensitive man with exacting high standards. Standards that I happen to be very good at living up to. So few people really have the vision for true exceptionalism and excellence anymore.” Conrad said smoothly.

“Oh GOD. You’re in bed with him too, aren’t you?” The idea was utterly perverse and meant Conrad wasn’t just working with Hagath, he was all out manipulating him for his own sick amusement.

“You really are a slimy, despicable, manipulative, son of a…” Julian began to lay into him.

“Why can’t you give me any credit for this?” Conrad said unmoved. “Has it ever occurred to you that I’ve grown? Developed myself? I really think I’m making Hagath a better person.”

“How?” Julian demanded disbelievingly.

“Since taking up with me he’s killed 35% less of his subordinates who disappoint him, tripled his profit margin in non-lethal deterrent technologies, and he’s in the best shape of his life. If all goes well, I’ll have him out of the arms business in less than two years. Think of the multitudes I’ll save from his uncouth ways. Not to mention all the fun still to be had while I do it. You remember how much fun things could be, don’t you Juli dear?” Conrad asked.

Julian cringed at the old endearment and felt like he might throw up. “... You’re delusional. Just...I have to go. Right now.”

“That’s a pity. We’ll have to run into each other again. It’s been such an unexpected surprise to see you, Julian. I’d very much like to do this again.”

Feeling entirely like he had been slipped some kind of psychogenic drug, Julian murmured something and pushed himself away from the table.

“Stay away from me, Conrad. I’ll only warn you once.” Gaven threatened viciously before he turned and quickly stalked away.

“Mm. Dear, Juli. Your warnings are like a sweet sweet love song to my ears.” Conrad said wistfully to himself, before he smiled happily and took another enormous bite of his sandwich.
“I want him off the station! I don’t care how you do it, but it needs to be done.” Julian protested passionately as he walked back in forth in Benjamin’s office practically hysterical.

Julian had started off with just Odo but had made such a commotion that it forced both Kira and Odo to escort him into the captain’s office to plead his case.

“Doctor, get a hold of yourself.” Benjamin ordered in near the same tone he’d used in reprimanding Quark. “Now what exactly is the problem here?”

“What’s the problem? My let me count them for you, Captain. We’ve got Quark running about the station like a lap dog treating it as his own personal wholesale lot for some of the most despicable weapons of mass murder out there. There’s a well known arms dealer that’s practically moved in and who is bringing the most depraved tyrants, dictators, and sycophants this side of the Milky Way here like it’s a vacation destination. And NOW we have Conrad Witttle. One of if not the most well known con artists, criminals, and sociopathic Don Juans in recent memory to ever come across a Federation’s ethics board. I know there’s nothing we can do about Quark and his new boss Hagath thanks to the Bajoran governments poorly placed sympathies -No offense, Major-, but damn it! Conrad Witttle is a freelancer. Surely we can do something about him?” Julian ranted.

“Julian, why don’t you just sit down for a second.” Kira murmured as she tried to get a hold of his shoulders and guide him to a chair.

Reluctantly, Julian sat down.

“Sorry for being ignorant about this but who the Hell are we talking about here?” Kira asked, trying to understand the situation as she righted herself and stepped back to look first at Odo and then at Benjamin.

“Mm. I looked up his file. His full name is Conrad Algernon Witttle the Tenth. Apparently a rather precarious character.” Odo muttered, unhelpfully.

“Conrad Witttle was a multigenerational Ambassador for the North American Embassy for Intergalactic Relations. A prodigy and an expert in his field. He was later unceremoniously ousted when it was discovered that he allegedly was selling Federation secrets as well as the identities and locations of several of Starfleet's assets in sensitive quadrants.” Benjamin explained.

Odo blinked a few times and shook his head. “Yet he was never arrested and charged? How is that possible?”

“They couldn’t unequivocally pin anything on him. While they could prove he had access to the information and the people for whom the information fell into the hands of, they couldn’t prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he was the leak.” Benjamin supplied.

“Not to mention about a dozen worlds across the quadrant with non-extradition agreements with the Federation would have gladly harbored him.” Julian murmured darkly.

“Wow. Is he really that good at what he does?” Kira asked in wonder.

“Yes.” Julian replied. “Conrad makes a point to being exceptionally good at everything he does. Considering it’s been a few years now, I’m sure he’s only refined his talents further and acquired many more.
“Just what is your connection to this Wittle person, Doctor?” Odo asked.

“We were close friends at the academy and rivals on the tennis court. He was three years ahead of me. I was in Command school when the boom dropped about Wittle’s nefarious activities. Looking back it’s easy now to see the kind of man he really was, but at the time the truth blindsided me. It blindsided just about everyone. At that point I cut ties. Anyone with any sense cut ties as we all nervously waited for Conrad Wittle to just disappear. One thing to his credit, he always knew precisely when to leave any place, situation, or event and he always made sure he left an impression before he did. Captain if he’s here, there’s going to be trouble. One way or another. I realize we may not have grounds to oust him right now. But it’s only a matter of time.” Julian was beginning to calm down now, and with that calm came a reluctant understanding of the limitations of the situation.

“All we can do is wait this one out.” Benjamin advised. “The real problem is Hagath. If he goes everyone else will follow including, I'm sure, our Mr. Wittle. In the meantime I can only encourage you Doctor to steer clear of the man. He obviously brings out irrational passions in you and I cannot have my CMO compromised like that. Do I make myself clear?”


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“Mr. Quark. You’re not listening to me. I’m telling you that there’s nothing medically wrong with you.” Gaven repeated again calmly.

“No. You’re not listening to me. There is definitely something wrong. I don’t sleep well, eating brings me no satisfaction these days...And you see this?” Quark began to turn his head to the side only to wince in pain as something pinched in the side of his neck.

Gaven pressed his lips as he listened to the flustered Ferangi’s complaints.

“Let me ask you something. Is Dax still not speaking to you? Is any of your Starfleet friends making any contact?” Gaven inquired.

“No. The bar has been completely blacklisted. But never you mind about the ingratitude of people. I’ve been doing just fine without all of them.” Quark muttered defiantly.

“Even so, it must be pretty hard for you these days. I mean...The only people you seem to have left to turn to are your family and these new colleagues of yours. If you want a diagnosis I would suggest your suffering from acute stress induced discomfort.” Gaven offered.

“Is that a nice way to say it’s all in my head? You’re alot of help. You know that?” Quark muttered.

Gaven shrugged. “Cognitive dissonance can be very disgruntling. In any case there’s nothing I can do for you besides give you a dose of acetaminophen and encourage you to try and relax. Beyond that I might suggest you find someone you trust and talk through your conflicting thoughts and feelings with them.”

“You don’t know much about we Ferangi, do you?” Quark asked, eyeing the doctor.

Gaven leaned into the examine table and smiled thinly. “No. But it’s on my to do list. I would like to know more, but I’ve been finding it hard to locate a complete copy of the Rules of Acquisitions.”

“Yeah? The fully unabridged and annotated version includes forty-seven commentaries, nine hundred major and minor judgments, and no less than ten thousand considered opinions. It's no light
reading. Not even I've read through all of it and I'm about as Ferengi as they get.” Quark muttered.

Gaven shrugged. “I'm told there's a rule for just about any imaginable situation and if I could acquire
a copy, I'd of course throw in a generous finders fee. Although I'd needed it in the cheapest binding
possible.”

Quark's mouth dropped open slightly. Investing in the cheapest binding possible for the book was
actually the most Ferengi way of acquiring it. Binding the book in anything better was considered
culgar by Farangi standards.

“You know, the more I think about it the more I marval over how anyone could possibly mistaken
you for a human.” Quark muttered, wincing once more.

“Compliment accepted.” Gaven replied. “Hold still.”

A few seconds later Gaven administered a Ferengi appropriate dose of acetaminophen.

“There. That should help.” Gaven said. “Rest there for a few minutes and then you can go. I
sincerely hope you find the balance between what is profitable and what you can live with, Mr.
Quark. Let me see, Rules of Acquisition #125. You can't make a deal if your dead. Recall that stress
is a stealthy killer. But a conflict of conscience is a bloody assassin.”

At that, Gaven patted him on the shoulder and limped farther into the infirmary to see to the next
patient.

Quark felt a wave of anxiety wash over him. Though he was trying hard to pretend like his business
arrangement with Gaila and his associates didn’t bother him, that he was a purist Ferangi just
following the most logical path to profit; the truth was the whole business did bother Quark. It
bothered him immensely. Over the years Quark had done alot of shady, immoral, unethical deals.
But they were always schemes of his own design and when he had gone along with others who were
less trustworthy Quark had always made sure he had an viable exit strategy that would get him home
safe and free. As much as he lived by the precepts of Ferengi profit, his sense of self preservation
was his greatest vice eclipsing everything else. This time though there seemed to be no easy escape
and now that his cousin Gaila was planning to retire and stick Quark with his job, Quark knew that
something had to be done if he wanted to actually enjoy the rest of his life, short as it might turn out
to be. While the bar wasn’t much it was wholly Quark’s and he liked his life the way it was. Being a
mass murder by association simply was too heavy a burden for him to carry the rest of his life and it
chilled him to think his cousin Gaila had made a life long career of it.

“Rules of Acquisition #261: A wealthy man can afford anything except a conscience.” Quark
muttered under his breath as the pain in his neck began to slowly subside.

It was hard to know if the pain relief was because of Gaven’s ministration or because Quark had
come to a decision he could finally live with.

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Conrad Whittle was excellent at many things.

While he was most famous for his complex skills of communications, negotiation, coercion, and his
ever astute attention to the artistry of details; Canrad’s favorite accomplishments involved the
simplest of things. Whistling for example, Conrad was a natural whistler. In another time and life he
might have made a significant career simply on the tails of this single talent. In this time and place
though it was only a pleasant pastime and an indicator of his magnanimous mood. Conrad loved
being generous and forgiving especially to those who were clearly lesser than himself. Kindness was the easiest luxury in the world to bestow and consideration was the best currency.

When Conrad Wittle had come across his most recent mark and lover their mutual understanding of magnanimity had been the primary attractant between them. Val Hagath was a longtooth psychopath, hiding behind the guise of an accomplished sociopath. That was why Conrad was so interested in him. On the surface they seemed the same. Both were sharply intelligent men of vast experience and social prowess. Both utterly lacked empathy, Hagath because he was incapable of it and Conrad because he intentionally chose never to develop that aspect of himself. While he was technically capable of seeing through the perspective of another and putting himself in their shoes, Conrad saw no reason to actually do so when his own perspective was much more interesting and brilliant and his shoes far more polished. Conrad didn’t just think he was magnificent, he knew he was; and his outer reality regularly reinforced this belief. More importantly, Val Hagath adored him.

The man was truly smitten with his new toy because he understood it was a toy that would always look and feel shiny and new no matter what happened. For Hagath that was the rarest of things and Conrad had every intention of exploiting his rarity, though he knew in the end it would never protect him if Hagath decided he was a liability. Val Hagath was, of course, incapable of holding real love for any person or thing. The arms dealer’s motivation in life was to simply remain entertained. Everything he had built was centered around this motivation. The only motivation a man like Hagath could have when he’d already attained everything else. Conrad on the other hand was motivated by something else. Conrad needed to maintain the echo chamber of his own excellence. While perfection was appealing, he was smart enough to understand that perfection in the grand scheme was unobtainable. But excellence was a matter of comparisons and that was something he could attain regularly and with razor precision.

For this reason Hagath was amusing enough. Hagath easily fed into Conrad’s vanity and his exacting standards and fickle moods were delightful to Conrad who breezed through the challenges of working with Hagath like they were child’s play. Nevertheless, Hagath was still a stone cold mass murderer on a planetary scale and for that reason he needed to be rendered benign. Destruction was too simple and far too good for the man. Figurative castration, on the other hand, was perfect.

The only reason Conrad Wittle was on the station at that time was because Hagath was there and even then he spent as little time in the man’s presence publically as possible. Until now he had no other interest for being in the area. Conrad was generally a one project at a time kind of fellow and since he wasn’t a typical kind of associate of Hagath, he was operating in his present capacity purely as a temporary freelancer which afforded him a unique freedom of thought and movement that were not afforded to anyone else in Hagath’s orbit. Conrad was also a professional whose service fees matches his impeccable results helping to keep him in his preferred lifestyle no matter where he happened to be. It was a lifestyle of extravagant comfort and ample privacy, Although Hagath was pleased to pay for his work on specific jobs the arms dealer understood that it was not economical even for someone like him to employ Conrad as a permanent agent.

All in all, Hagath’s time on the station was amounting to a boring drawn out expansion that Conrad saw little to no value in. Knowing the Federation as he did, it was only a matter of time before Hagath annoyed the stations occupants enough for them to move against his presence. Once that happened there were a few likely end games and none of them were going to be particularly amusing. Conrad would have been pleased to leave and forget all about the dreary setting of affairs if it hadn’t been for one unexpected event.

Running into Julian Bashir of all people by chance on the station had been a true and utterly unexpected surprise for Conrad. A delightfully delicious beautiful surprise. Since it was relatively easy to carry out Hagath’s desires and the man was usually all business when setting up a new
foothold for his enterprise that the station was quickly becoming, this left Conrad with a great deal of unchecked free time. Hagath didn’t care a wit about what Conrad did when they weren’t together as long has he did his jobs to perfection and Conrad always pleased him. But as of now there were no specialty tasks to be had. Conrad had successfully dealt with Farrak and his blunders and brought all the desired players back into Hagath’s fold. With his hefty fees secured and Hagath thoroughly distracted with other business Conrad was free to do as he liked.

Focusing on Julian Bashir, his old friend and partner was just the ticket. Good dear Juli. The one that got away.

In truth, once Conrad had been exposed at the American Embassy he’d had no choice but to make a hasty disappearance. For Conrad the exposure itself had been of no consequence. He’d of course orchestrated everything himself. Every aspect had been designed by him. His first grand project to better the universe while elevating himself. The exposure had done exactly what he had intended it to do. Help establish a wide ranging network of clients and develop his notoriety in the quadrant so that when it was time to leave Earth for new parts unknown, he could transition into his new career with flawless fluidity. The transition had been everything he’d wanted it to be and more.

Never once had he considered the impact his actions would have on those who thought they knew him best. Conrad had still been involved with Julian when it had all come to head even though their relationship was strained by that point. Julian Bashir had always been a smart person. In his academy days he’d been a bright if shy sort. Cooperative but not overly social. Enthusiastic about his projects and studies but wary of anyone getting too close to him on a personal level. Conrad had always suspected Julian of keeping secrets and holding himself back and it was this fascinating self deprecating restraint that had originally attracted Conrad to him once he’d gotten to know the man better.

Despite Julian being an accomplished prodigal student, Conrad had actually met him first on the tennis court. It was the one avenue where he believed Julian absolutely had never held back. On the tennis court Julian Bashir was a fierce, organized, and calculated competitor. Perfection mattered to him and Julian measured himself not against his wins and loses but against the flawlessness of his conduct and technique during the match. For himself, Conrad was well above par as an athlete but he relied heavily on his popularity and charming intimidation to win his matches. With Julian none of that pageantry worked. When up against him on the tennis court Conrad had been forced to actually try and better himself if he wanted to win.

Julian had always managed to convince Conrad to improve himself because he was the only person who had ever managed to point out his inadequacies. That was the element that had ignited the passion between them off the court. Their relationship had lasted nearly seven years. Though it was hard to imagine a man like Conrad Wittle genuinely loving anyone outside of himself, any capacity he actually had to love had been completely centered on Julian. It was for this reason that Julian’s ultimate rejection of him and complete expulsion from his life had actually hurt Conrad Wittle’s limited feelings.

There had been no discourse between them. No grand explaining. On the day the truth had been discovered Conrad had sought Julian out to say his final goodbyes. In that time there had been no thought of denying guilt or convincing Julian of anything. Conrad had only wanted to see his lover one last time so that when he left he could carry the image with him always.

But Julian had denied him the luxury. For once Conrad Wittle had found himself beaten to the punch and when he’d gone to find Julian in all his usual places he discovered the man had completely vanished with no indication of where he was. Conrad had delayed his departure for three days in pursuit of him. But his search and even his wide network of informants who were still speaking to
him could shed no light on Julian’s whereabouts. Conrad left Earth without achieving his final aim, having no other choice given that delaying any longer would have seriously jeopardized his ability to get off planet. After that he’d never looked back and in reality he’d rarely thought about Julian Bashir or anything about his life back on earth since.

Now though with Julian fresh in his thoughts all those memories and feelings flooded back into him as if it had all been only yesterday. With of course an emphasis on the emotions that had pressed upon Conrad the most. Julian had hurt Conrad’s feelings. As it had been before, the wound had reopened itself with exquisite sharpness and now bled just as surely as if it had just been inflicted.

The pain was spectacularly revitalizing.

God bless, Juli.

As always he managed to broaden Conrad’s horizon’s just by being himself.

Using the public computer directory, Conrad inquired as to where Julian’s quarters were located on the station and smiled flashing his white teeth indulgently. Standing away from the computer terminal he tossed a small brightly wrapped and extravagantly tied box in the air catching it expertly and began to whistle an ancient earth nursery rhyme that had been handed down through the generations. The pitch and tone was absolutely flawless.

All around the mulberry bush
The monkey chased the weasel.
The monkey thought ’twas all in fun
Pop! goes the weasel.

A penny for a spool of thread
A penny for a needle
That's the way the money goes
Pop! goes the weasel.

Half a pound of tuppenny rice
Half a pound of treacle
Mix it up and make it nice
Pop! goes the weasel.

I've no time to wait and sigh,
No patience to wait 'til by and by.
Kiss me quick, I'm off, goodbye!
Pop! goes the weasel.

~@~

After his outburst in Benjamin’s office, Julian was advised to call in sick for the day and to take it easy. Still unnerved by the entire situation Julian had taken the Captain up on his suggestion and gone promptly home where he had gone straight to bed hoping to get some distance between himself and this new living nightmare.

His relationship with Conrad Wittle was the final secret of Julian’s past. It was somewhat disturbing how everything had blown up around him lately. The truth of his augment status, the reality of the
relationship between he and his parents, and now Wittle appearing on freak chance out of nowhere. At least, of all his secrets his relationship with Conrad had been genuine if painful. Through its entirety Conrad had kept his nefarious deeds to himself and not dragged anyone else but his subjects into the business. Hopefully with any luck the others would find a reason to peacefully kick Hagath and his cronies off the station. Surely once they did Conrad would go with them as he would have no other reason to stay.

After a few hours of dreamless sleeping, Julian eventually woke up feeling entirely stronger and more secure. A little distance from any problem usually did wonders on a person's constitution and after a brisk shower Julian felt optimistic enough to maybe try and pop over to the infirmary to check on Gaven who was never very far from his thoughts and see if he wanted to come over for dinner. The prospect warmed his spirit and filled Julian with a romantic dreamy energy.

His good feelings of warmth and security were immediately dashed however when Julian went to leave his quarters only to discover a small brightly wrapped gift box waiting for him just outside the door with no one in sight to indicate where it had come from. Seeing it, Julian instantly scanned the passageway superstitiously but found no one lurking that he could detect. His eyes fell back onto the box.

Julian wasn't sure what to do. But a icy lick up his spine told him that Conrad was behind the strange brightly colored package. After a full minute of staring at it, Julian reluctantly picked it up and backed up into his quarters. The box was certainly Conrad's doing and had Julian not been the type to burn with curiosity in spite of his better judgement, he might have chucked the damn thing directly into the nearest incinerator. That would have likely been the wisest course, but then again for as intelligent as Julian was he was not always emotionally smart and in this case his morbid curiosity at exactly what kind of game Conrad Wittle was playing at got the better of him.

Only mildly concerned that the box was a bomb or perhaps filled with Andorian sand fleas, Julian gripped the end of the multi-looped bow and pulled releasing the perfectly symmetrical folds of the top of the box’s multi-colored paper wrapping. Had it come from anyone else, anyone at all Julian might have kept it for its beauty, the way the paper almost bloomed open like a rose. The image brought back undesirable memories of past sentiments between he and Conrad that were now forever tainted.

When Julian finally peeked inside, he groaned.

The box contained a miniature treacle tart. Immaculately prepared. Julian didn’t actually like treacle tarts but Conrad had always enjoyed them and frequently made them to the point of such high execution that he’d once paid for an entire new tennis court by auctioning off one of his homemade versions at a charity event some years ago. The tennis court was still in wide use on Earth and still bore the Wittle family name on it’s bench plaque that had been bought in turn by the local government to commemorate the contribution.

Atop the tart was perched a small paper folded over once. When Julian plucked it out to read it, he saw the short message was handwritten in ink calligraphy. The message contained only one word and a time.

**Dinner. 7:00.**

The note wasn’t an invitation or even a peace offering. It was a statement of command. How like Conrad to come at him that presumptuously. Scowling Julian marched the entire mess over to the trash incinerator and dropped it in with a audible thud.

“Don’t do it. Don’t engage him.” He advised himself out loud as he gripped the edge of the counter
as if it would somehow reinforce his argument.

“He’s just trying to get to me.” Julian reminded himself as he tried to ignore the fact that by even touching the package and taking it inside, it would be viewed by Conrad as an agreement of participation.

No doubt Conrad would know somehow that Julian had taken the bait. If he’d had any sense at all he would have left the box right where it was and refused to answer his door if Conrad came around. He could still do it. He could pretend he’d never found the box and that he wasn’t home. But somehow to take that route now felt cowardly. Like Julian was afraid of Conrad. Ignoring the man at this point would only encourage him more, Julian knew. When Conrad Wittle wanted something he became absolutely relentless. No. The best way out of the situation was to allow a confrontation so that he could figure out what Wittle wanted from him. Perhaps once Julian knew, something could be done to get Wittle to leave him alone if not get him to leave the station.

~@~

At precisely seven o'clock sharp, Conrad Wittle rang Julian Bashir's door.

When it opened, Julian wasn't waiting on the other side to see him and there was absolutely no indication that he'd put anything more than coffee on. Bending at the waist Conrad stuck his head and torso through the threshold. Scanning from left to right in a wide slow sweep.

“Knock. Knock. Tis the wolf, says I. Might I come in?” Conrad asked in a theatrical snarl.

“Not by the hairs of my chinny chin, chin.” Julian replied in a deliberately articulated tone.

“Ah, Julian. You are home.” Conrad took a large single step onto the space so that the entry door could close behind him and shroud them in the privacy he craved just then.

“Thank you for having me for dinner.” Conrad remarked, tugging at his opulently detailed waistcoat made up of cream colored silk and a tan, gold, and silver brocade.

Julian who was sitting in an arm chair along the far side of the room, about as far away from the entry as he could get; narrowed his eyes in a glare at the man. He wasn't amused anymore by Conrad's double entendres nor put at ease by his disarming demeanor and bright smile.

“What do you want, Conrad?” Julian’s voice was commanding and entirely deadly sounding.

“I wanted to see you, of course. What did you think I came here for?” He replied with genuine ease since there was nothing Julian could ever say to effectively intimidate him.

“Harassment, coercion, general dickery and or intentional malicious intent. Take your pick.” Julian muttered. “In any case, Conrad, your not welcome in my home or anywhere near my general orbit. I don't want to chit chat, mince words, or otherwise reminisce with you about anything. Not now or ever. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

Conrad scoffed lightly and stepped to the side with his hands in the air effectively putting the kitchen counter and a table between them in case julian was planning to pull out a phaser or, better yet, try to assault him further with a stream of verbal barbs and lashy glares.

“I see. You don't want to speak to me. All right. Then don't speak. I don't mind dominating the conversation. But Juli, dear. A conversation we are going to have.” Conrad replied in his own forceful way that could have made someone enthusiastic about willingly walking into a firing squad. “Like it or not you and I have unfinished business between us. Once it's settled I promise to go away
and not bother you again. Scouts honor.”

“Honor?! Don’t you dare speak such a thing as if you know what it is or have any. You are a disgrace. You broke sacred trusts that put thousands of lives at risk with the information you sold. And you did it all with the senseless care of a child sweeping away their toys purely on a whim.” Julian fumed, glaring daggers at the other man as he dug his fingers into the cushioned arms of his chair.

“I don't know what honor is? Hmmm. And what about you Julian. You know your not exactly in a position to lecture me about such topics. I may indeed be a kind of monster. I won't deny it. Why should I? I'm about as immoral, and manipulative as they come. And I've successfully made a lifelong career out of it. What can I say? I'm very happy. What have you done lately? Besides prove what a big fat phony you are? I may be manipulative, ridiculously wealthy for all the wrong reasons, and a well connected bastard of a rogue with a panache for exploitation but you can't ever say I haven't been true to myself.” Conrad lectured at a rattling pace.

“Been doing some light reading, Conrad?” Julian challenged, realizing that by now Starfleet had probably updated his official service record to reflect his augment status and that it likely outlined vaguely the case associated with it which was at least somewhat accessible to people who bothered to look through such records with any legitimate interest.

“It hurts me, Julian to know you never told me that you’d been augmented. Seven years together and you lied all that time to me about who and what you were.” Though it might have been hard to believe, there was the ever so slightest of quivers in Conrad’s voice that indicated he was genuinely disclosing the truth of how someone else had made him feel. Truth was, after all, the best policy in diplomacy when all else failed.

“You would have just exploited the information if you’d known. I might have loved you once but even for all my blind naivety I had enough sense to know I couldn’t trust you with the truth.” Julian remark in a low growly voice. “Lie to me and tell me I’m wrong.”

“No. You’re right. I totally would have exploited your augment status.” Conrad agreed resting his arms on the counter to prop himself up as a self indulgent dreamy smile came over his face while he briefly imagine the possibilities of what could have been had he known the truth and been able to convince Julian to join forces with him.

It could have been magnificent. But the moment was now long gone and Conrad wasn’t the type to have regrets. He was however the type to hold a grudge.

“You know, I looked for you before I left Earth. I was legitimately frantic. But you disappeared on me.” The hurt was there again sharp and jagged but restrained as he pushed off the counter and skirted around the other side still keeping a respectable distance from Julian but inching slowly closer like a slow moving octopi.

Murderous intent was for the patient.

Julian wasn’t deeply concerned about Conrad’s intentions at least while in the confines of his private space. If he was going to move against him it would be out in public where the brilliance of his vengeance could be observed by a wider audience.

“Yes. Well I didn’t really want to speak to you. Or see you. Or have anything to do with you. You’re a bad person Conrad. Not a gray person. A bad person. I had my entire career going for me. I was building a life for myself that didn’t have any room for your kind of bad press. Associating with you once you crossed the line and embraced your criminality was not something I was interested
“in.” Julian said cuttingly leaning forward slightly.

Conrad narrowed his eyes at him and his easy expression melted into something harder and more dangerous. “I never would have hurt you, Juli. You were much too valuable to me.”

“Valuable? You mean weak. In your eyes I wasn’t worth your time or your efforts to dismantle or destroy. Though I highly doubt you still feel that way now. What’s wrong Connie, dear? Feeling a little cheated all of a sudden?” Julian tilted his head at him expectantly.

Conrad leaned back in the dining chair he’d taken possession of parting his knees to grip the seat of the chair as he considered this strange and exotic version of his former partner. It was very nearly transfixing.

“I do actually. Yes. And I admit, I underestimated you all those years ago. A mistake that I can promise will never be made again. But in fairness to me, you were intentionally being deceptive. Always the quiet steady one all that time. The kindness to my cruelty. The shadow to my radiance. There was a time when I might have imagined us to be perfectly sympatico. But I see now that you’ve become a completely different person than I thought you were. A better person in fact.” Conrad conceded.

“Jealous?” Julian asked.

“Un-for-givably.” Conrad replied, once again he was all languid ease and charm.

“Well, shall we come to it then?” Julian was growing tired of this cat and mouse game of theirs.

“Hm. Contrary to probable belief I didn't come all the way over here to fight with you, love. I came over here to apologize and to offer up a boon of good will between us.” Conrad explained expansively.

“There’s nothing you could possibly offer me that I’d want, Conrad. Except for maybe your permanent departure.” Julian said cuttingly.

“Oh. You want me off the station? Nevermind. Of course you do. Unfortunately, Juli I have business here I have to attend to. You being here is a marvelous surprise and wasn’t something I planned for, but let’s just say that I’m willing to stay out of your business if you stay out of mine. How about that?” Conrad asked.

“How generous of you.” Julian dead panned. “But I’m not going to promise you that. There is nothing you could do here that would be anything other than nefarious in nature. This is my house, Conrad. Shit in it at your own risk.”

A thrill of pleasure ran up Conrad’s spine. As much as he had always enjoyed the man’s sensitivity and gentility, sensing the threat in his words and manner added for a delicious new layer of Julian that Conrad found dangerously appealing. At this point he knew they would never be on the same side of anything, but now more then ever Conrad wanted to know what it could feel like to face off opposite each other one on one. Would it feel as thrilling as it always had? Or could it possibly be even better? He burned to know.

“Alright. Fine. I never was able to say no to you. That face. Mm. Tell you what. I would be willing to conduct the remainder of my business off the station if you’d be willing to do me one teeny tiny little nostalgic favor. Play a match with me, Julian. A public one. I won’t even set stakes about who wins.” Conrad implored him.

Julian stared at him for a long time. The man was truly confounding to him. “You’ll leave if I play
“Yup. A public one. Agree and I’ll start packing my bags today. It’s very simple.” Conrad pressed.

“Even if I were willing, Conrad. I doubt the Captain would allow it. This is a fully operational space station, not a convention center.” Julian protested.

“Nevertheless, Juli. Those are my terms. Take them or leave them. It really doesn’t matter to me one way or another.” Conrad lied.

Now that he’d spoken the idea into existence his mind was already reeling to formulate a complex plan of action. One that included a series of desires he hadn’t had until the inspiration for them had struck him. Now there was no putting the monkey back under the mulberry bush. Conrad needed to face off with Julian. He needed to know he was still better than him at something and now that the truth of Julian’s identity had been discovered Conrad realized to his greatest dismay that the truth absolutely nullified every victory he’d ever won over Julian both on and off the court. The possibility of Conrad having to face his own fallibility where he had once been so assured he was completely infallible, was a crack in the perfect veneer of Conrad’s private world and twisted psyche that he could not allow to exist. There was something more to it though. Failure could not be tolerated in Conrad’s mind. Conrad either needed to win or Julian needed to die. There was no two ways about it.

“Alright, Conrad.” Julian suddenly agreed. “If you can convince the Captain to host the match and ensure it’s safe and fair. I’ll agree to play you.”

Julian knew he was walking head long into a trap, but he also knew that the first step of avoiding one was knowing of its existence.

“You’re a absolute treasure, Julian. Whatever was I thinking in letting you slip through my fingers.” Conrad mused out loud, shaking his head in both wonder and insincerity.

“That’s easy, Conrad. You weren’t thinking of me. Not at all.” Julian muttered knowingly as he slowly settled back into the chair.

Julian knew he was playing a very dangerous kind of game with Conrad. But old habits die hard and Julian, in this moment, couldn’t help himself.
Setting the Stage

One thing that made Conrad Wittle so good at winning others over was that he always did the things he said he would do. That was Conrad’s nature. If he said it no matter how unlikely it was, Conrad would make it so. Had he been less a sociopath and more a compassionate empathetic being, this trait would have elevated him to near Godhood. Instead, Conrad Wittle always seemed to fall just short of such glorification because, although he had many likable qualities and could at one point have developed himself in quite a different way in utilizing them, it was his belief in his own egocentric exceptionalism coupled with being a person of birth born privilege that had sealed his fate and condemned him to a extraordinary life of self serving impulsivity and unparalleled extravagance in all things.

With all that said, whenever possible Conrad liked to lace his narcissism with magnanimous gestures. Perhaps it was his way of justifying the rest of his behavior. Conrad also, like every Wittle man that had come before him tracing back through the most obscure echelons of time, was a devout practitioner of the Carnighie method. So ingrained where the twentieth-century philosopher’s, ideas that the Wittles, by this point in history, more or less believed themselves to be the modern-day originators of his sociological tenets. They were tenets that the Wittles had learned over time to universally apply no matter who they were trying to influence and win over.

Case in point, While Conrad was plotting the murder of the one person he’d ever genuinely loved outside of himself, he had also taken it upon himself by association to arrange the liberation of an adjacent player in the clockworks of his plan.

His target for the moment, for no other reason outside of the fact that Conrad wanted something simple from him and wanted it quickly and easily, was Quark. Under any other circumstances, Conrad would have ignored the Ferengi’s very existence. He cared absolutely nothing about Quark’s business ties to Hagath and his minions, nor Hagath’s interest in him as a replacement for Gaila who was starting to show his age along with his dull conscience. If Gaila had any self-respect at all he would have simply killed himself. Instead, he was taking the cowards route and trying to casually shrug the weight of his existence off on someone else through the guise of retirement. Had Quark been the type to truly enjoy the work, Conrad might have approved of the arraignment. But Quark only liked the profit involved and it was obvious that soon if left to his own devices, the other Ferengi would crack. Quark, after all, was a person driven by his self-preservation first and last. Conrad had understood that about him on sight.

There was no greater time to solicit the bar owner than right now. Convenient luck of timing given that, unbeknownst to anyone, Quark was orchestrating a plan of his own to get out from under his Cousin and Hagath’s thumbs and restore the station’s limited faith in him. No matter what Quark told people, losing all his Federation and Bajoran affiliated friends were weighing heavily on him. Quark liked his life on Deep Space 9. He cared about the people who had come to occupy the station and even though he sometimes felt like a failure in terms of his ingrained Ferengi expectations, the people of Deep Space 9 made Quark feel important and involved in the goings on of the Galaxy in a way that nothing else in his history and past experiences had. Though he hated to admit it, Quark knew deep down that there was more than one definition for being a rich man and if he was going to live a life that was cash poor he was at least going to do so in the company of those who gave a damn about him and whom he actually liked.

The only question now was how to do it.

Pro. If Quark crossed Hagath the worst thing that would happen was that Hagath would kill him if
he found out. Since Quark knew the man liked efficiency his death would at likely be quick. Con. Quark liked living and didn’t want to die under any circumstance quick or otherwise.

Pro. Whether he lived or died standing up to Hagath would likely save twenty-eight million lives and Quark could die knowing he was a hero. Con. Even if he defied Hagath and ruined the most recent deal, Hagath would just find someone else to do business with who was eager to kill a planet worth of people and then no one important would have any idea Quark had valiantly sacrificed himself. What was so good about dying a hero if he was the only one who knew about it?

Whatever he did, Quark needed to make sure there would be at least a small chance of living through the ordeal or else he might as well have just jumped out an airlock on his own and let everyone else clean up his mess.

Having just woken up from a horrific dream in which he’d gotten all his friends killed, a disturbed Quark headed for his nearly empty bar to clean his glassware and think about what he was going to do. Quark always found repetitive tasks to be helpful when his nerves were fraying out of control and sure enough as he stood there wiping down shot glasses and beer mugs he felt his agitated mind begin to blissfully drift.

The feeling didn’t last long thanks to the arrival of an entirely unexpected guest.

“Ah. Mr. Quark. Just the man I wanted to see.” Conrad Wittle said as a appeared through the back entrance looking like a prince out of some whitewashed human fairytale.

“I’m sorry but due to low numbers, the bar is closed until later this evening. If you’re here for a drink you’ll have to come back or go elsewhere.” Quark lied, hoping to the prophets the frightening man would leave.

“Don’t worry. I never drink this early in the daytime anyway.” Wittle remarked brightly.

“Oh yeah? Then what do you want?” Quark growled. As afraid as he was of Conrad, there was no way things could get any worse than they already were and so he risked insulting the man by showing his open disdain for him.

“I want to save your life. Unless of course you really want to work with Val Hagath and throw everything you’ve built here away? If that’s the case I can go find someone else to do a good deed for.” Conrad muttered with startling bluntness and a warm expression that really did seem authentic.

Quark grunted. What the Hell? He was game to play.

“Well if you have some kind of proposition I wouldn’t be much of a businessman if I didn’t at least hear you out. Consider it a professional courtesy from one scoundrel to another. Come on back and lets step into my office.” Quark muttered slyly.

A few minutes later they were sitting in Quark’s secure back room. Not the main one but the secret one that only he and Rom were allowed into.

“Well? I’m listening.” Quark muttered diplomatically as he stood along the back wall and clasped his hands together in front of him.

“I have to tell you first that I owe you an apology. You see, as you probably know I’m not a regular kind of associate of Val Hagath’s and he’s hired me in a more freelance capacity. As such he’s not technically my only client and seeing as this is a rather small universe professional conflicts between adjacent business matters do occur.” Conrad began.
“Ah huh. And, huh, what business conflict between whom are we talking about here?” Quark asked, refusing to panic before he knew the details.

“It’s your mutagenic retrovirus supplier. You see before I took up with Hagath I was representing the Minnobian’s in their peace discussions with the Vek but it eventually came to my attention that against my advisement the Minnobians decided to go a different way in regards to handling their disagreements. Obviously, since I prefer to deal in peace and not war whenever possible, I had no choice but to discontinue my services with them...As a parting goodwill gesture however I did recommend that they might redirect their investments towards your supplier whom I thought would better suit their interests. Purely coincidental. Recently, I happened to notice that the Minnobians made good on my recommendation and put in a bid for the current supply of the retrovirus you’ve also been trying to procure. It seems that as of this morning their bid beat out yours. Bad timing, I’m afraid.” Conrad clapped his hands together and shrugged.

Quark gasped a little bit but miraculously held his composure. “How courteous of you to warn me.”

“Yes. Though it wasn’t my doing, I admit I felt bad about the circumstances. Hagath is a very unforgiving type when it comes to those who disappoint him and he seems to think very highly of you. Now that you know, I have every confidence you’ll be able to recover yourself; but I thought to sort of help things along, since I feel partially responsible for your situation, that I’d grease the way a bit for you and help myself along the way in the process.” Conrad said.

His manner of speaking was a perfect storm, of sincerity and hopefulness.

“You want to help me because you need me to help you with something. What...could I possibly do for you?” Quark nervously chuckled shaking his head in wonder.

“Well, the way I see it you need to buy yourself some time to find an alternative supplier and product to appease your clientele and I happen to need a venue for a very unique sporting event. The Reagent, I’ve heard, is very fond of betting on alien competitive sports and as it happens I need a venue space for an unprecedented tennis match up that might just interest and distract him for a day or two. I would, of course, finance the entire event and pay any additional fees associated with utilizing the venue space…” Conrad was watching Quark with rapt attention.

“Any fees?” Quark swallowed.

“This event is very important to me, Mr. Quark. Money is no object.” Conrad said softly, knowing his intended message was already taking root.

Quark, of course, knew perfectly well how much Conrad Whittle was reported to be worth. Hagath himself once admitted the man was too costly to keep on his payroll permanently even with his vast resources. Not to mention that Conrad was a legend in the sector in his own right, at least among certain circles of people. Conrad ran a sophisticated kind of racket that was too smooth and highbrow for someone like Quark to bother trying to compete with. He’d also heard that Conrad’s core signature of everything he did was to keep his word. If he said it, then it was so.

Money is no object.

The sentence was the most seductive thing Quark had ever heard come dripping from the lips of a human.

More importantly, he saw the opportunity in it. Conrad was offering him a lifeline. If Quark could find a way to double-cross Gaila and Hagath and get them out of the picture without getting himself killed, he could use the exorbitant profit that Conrad promised to clear his remaining debts, get
control of his bar back, and maybe even have enough left over to feel like a proper Ferengi businessman again.

In Quark’s mind there really wasn't a downside to any of it. Even if he failed, in at least one way, he’d still win. Furthermore, the loss of the mutagenic retrovirus wasn't such a big deal. Quark already had a backup option in mind. One that at least wasn't nearly as deadly. Not that it was going to matter since Quark didn't plan for things to get that far. A wormy plan was forming as he and Conrad talked.

“I think something suitable for everyone involved can be arranged. But, huh, these Starfleet wet blankets may prove problematic. I’m good, but even I have my limits.” Quark warned, hoping Conrad already had that part of the equation well in hand.

“Don’t worry about securing the proper permits. Consider it part of my responsibilities. I have every reason to believe the papers will be in your hands by the end of the day.” Conrad assured him.

It was close enough to a promise that Quark had no reason to believe it wouldn't occur. Conrad Wittle was indeed terrifying. What possible leverage could he have on the station to convince Captain Sisko to relent? Quark didn't know and he didn't want to know. All that mattered was that if everything went right all the station’s more recent problems would take care of themselves.

~@~

“Exactly what part of my advice did you not understand, Doctor?” Benjamin said sternly late in the morning upon calling Julian into his office.

“You have a lot of explaining to do so get talking mister,” Benjamin grumbled as he slid the datapad containing the details of Conrad Wittle’s permit requests and outline for a cooperative publically open tennis match between him and Julian Bashir.

“I'm sorry, Captain. But I had no choice. Now that Wittle knows I'm here, he's become determined to engage me.” Julian muttered swiftly.

“I'm sorry, Doctor but I find that mentality to be unacceptable. If you thought he was fixating on you why didn't you go to Odo or the Major about it?” Benjamin questioned.

“Your right. I should have. I see that now.” Julian conceded, not actually feeling that remorseful over his rash impulses where Wittle was concerned. “But with that said I think we are looking at a golden opportunity that may never come again.”

“A golden opportunity? Alright, fine. Let me ask you this. What exactly do you expect me to do about this? You do recall there's an active ban on Quark's. If I consent to allow one of my officers to participate in a unsanctioned sporting event that features you and a man who's on the Federation's watch list, how do you think that's going to look for everyone concerned?” Benjamin rationalized.

“Well, that depends, Sir.” Julian had been prepared for Benjamin's resistance.

“On what? Do enlighten me.” Benjamin said sardonically as he curled himself into his office chair.

“On whether we catch Wittle in the act of committing a crime. Sir, the Federation has been after him for years. Wittle's own family wants him prosecuted and grounded for tarnishing their otherwise immaculate family name. Everyone knows he's a criminal and a dangerous sociopath, but up until now, no one has been able to reel him in or catch him in an incriminating act. I propose that we should treat the match like a sting operation. I know him. He’s not just trying to settle a friendly score. Conrad is angry with me. I don't know how he'll strike back, but I do know this match
proposal of his is his way of setting the stage for his retaliation. He'll want to do whatever he plans
to do, bluntly with an audience because that's the kind of bastard he is.” Julian explained.

“So you expect me to go along with this and agree to use you as bait?” Benjamin remarked.
“Suppose he does come after you somehow, are you really prepared to risk your life over it? Wittle is
by no means stupid. His past indiscretions show he's a master at arranging things in such a way
where he never takes a direct fall. I don't expect this time would be any different.” Benjamin argued.

“Remember how you said that Wittle inspires irrational passions in me? Well, I assure you that I
inspire the same in him. If he's going to make a mistake it's going to be here and now. Conrad is
intelligent. But he's also impulsive. As long as I hold his attention he will skirt recklessness.” Julian
explained.

“Skirt recklessness? I see. So this is about more than just a soured friendship between the two of
you.” Benjamin pointed out perceptively.

Julian didn't respond.
The look on his face said everything Benjamin had already guessed.

“Nevermind. We have to approach this thing with all due caution. This one time I'm going to relent.
But doctor, don't ever put me in a position like this again. You're still on thin ice with Starfleet and if
this thing blows up in our faces it could end careers if not lives. I need some time to make
arrangements but for now, Wittle will get his way. In the meantime. I'm giving you a direct order to
stay the Hell away from him.” Benjamin commanded.

~@~

Things moved very quickly after Julian and Benjamin’s exchange. After waiting a believable amount
of time and after briefing his senior staff about the business, plans were put in place to approve the
permit requests. With them came strict restrictions that Benjamin was sure would not be questioned.
Namely that although Doctor Bashir was technically a Starfleet Officer he was not currently on duty
and had the right to participate in what he wished during is personal time but that Starfleet personnel
in general were still banned from any attendance of the match with the exception of Odo and his
security team who would be overseeing the safety of the event in conjunction with Doctor Ore who
was technically not a Starfleet member and thus free to assist Odo, Quark, Julian and Conrad in the
preparations of the event as he saw fit.

Word of the unusual tennis match spread quickly through the station and then beyond it since several
Klingon ships were still holding ground nearby. There were also many new shady characters on the
station as well as many of Quark’s alien civilian patrons who Quark could rely on to generate buzz
and fill seats. Wagers would ultimately be set in more than one betting circle. As usual, Quark made
sure to drop key information designed to entice and attract attention to the specialness of the event
ensuring all the proper name dropping led to the right kind of controversy that would catch the
interest of those around him.

Conrad Wittle’s reputation preceded itself even among the Klingons so there was no difficulty there.
Julian Bashir was a little harder to generate excitement over until people were reminded that he was
an augment and that this match was about proving once and for all the superiority of the natural born
human spirit over the evils of human augmentation. The angle was of course particularly disparaging
to Julian who normally would have balked and protested over inflaming the stigma of augmentation
and the fear that those who were augmented thought themselves better than those who were not.

Meanwhile, Odo, Kira, Dax, and Benjamin formulated their sting operation.
“You all realize this is insane right? Just what the hell are we hoping to accomplish here?” Kira protested once more as they all sat in Benjamin's conference room discussing the business.

“As I’ve already explained Dr. Bashir is convinced Conrad Wittle plans to strike at him and that this whole damn tennis event is simply a stage in which to do so on. It’s going to be up to us to make sure he doesn’t succeed if he tries something.” Benjamin muttered.

“It’s a tennis match. Just how much damage can two men do lobbing a ball between them?” Odo questioned.

“I dunno. Both Julian and Wittle were professional players in their academy years. On record Julian’s fastest serve was 75mph. The average is between 55-65mph. Wittle’s best on record was on the high end of the average.” Dax explained. “No matter how you cut it, that’s fast enough to injure or kill someone. Not to mention Julian admitted that while he always sought to play honestly and competitively, it was likely that on a subconscious level he regularly held back for fear his skill would draw suspicion about the source of his talent.”

“If something does go down there is no way to predict how it’ll come about. What we do know from Wittle’s MO is that he rarely appears directly at fault so if he does target the Doctor it may come from something outside of him.” Benjamin suggested.

“Great so we have to worry about assassins and interlopers and not just Wittle himself,” Kira grumbled. “This feels ridiculously complicated.”

“Look, the way I see it is this. Conrad can strike him directly with say a fast serve or return, or with faulty equipment like a tainted ball. He could also hire out. Plenty of people plan to bet on this event. It would be easy for Wittle to leverage that fact and set something up indirectly to influence things. A hit or other outside tampering of some kind is just one possibility.” Dax said.

As they null these thoughts over, Miles finally appeared. He’d been late getting off shift and likewise had been late dropping Kirayoshi off with Gaven.

“Sorry. Sorry.” Miles muttered settling into his chair.

“You know what I don’t get? Why is any of this even happening? Why is it our job to trap Wittle at all? What is this all really about?” Dax muttered in frustration.

“You want to know what it’s about? What is it always about with these kinds of things?” Miles rattled irritably.

“Revenge.” Kira supplied.

“Or money.” Dax offered.

Miles scoffed. “Not bloody likely. Whatever this is, it’s far more personal than that.”

“Mm. Did you have some insight you wanted to share on the subject that we don’t already know, Chief?” Benjamin inquired.

Miles pressed his lips. “No. I just think...I mean, this is Julian we’re talking about. Besides his augment status what’s he ever lied to anyone about or leveraged against anyone? I can tell you one thing, this isn’t about money or revenge exactly.”

“It’s about settling something between them.” The captain affirmed. “Why don’t we get something out in the open right now. Having spoken to Doctor Bashir I’m under the impression that this
business between him and Conrad Wittle is of an intimately personal nature.”

“Well isn’t that cryptically worded. What are you saying?” Kira questioned.

“Huh, I think I know what he’s saying.” Dax blurted opening her eyes wide for a moment as she looked down at her datapad.

“Guh. Are you all daft or something? What is this? Primary school? What the captain is trying to say is that Julian and Wittle are having some long belated lovers tiff. Yeah, that’s right. At the risk of violating Julian’s privacy let me just state that those two were a serious item back in their school days. Till Julian jilted Conrad after he turned out to be a damned menace. That is what this is about. Conrad is settling a score. He’s a jilted lover out for payback.” Miles declared, crossing his arms over his chest and grinding his teeth as he turned a ruddy color. “Furthermore, Julian is playing right into his hands. If we’re going to get him lets get him before somebody gets killed or court-martialed.”

“Personal motives aside the real challenge here is that we have to control as many factors as possible without looking like we are. We have to appear hands off with this.” Dad pointed out.

“it clear we're going to need help.” Muttered Odo. “Believe it or not Quark might be a legitimate ally. I have reason to believe he greatly dislikes Wittle and he loves his bar too much to let any significant harm come to it over a trifle. if I can bring Quarks staff into the fold I believe we’ll have home advantage. From is nearly as technically capable as a standard officer. He can secure both the equipment and the field of play. Leeta can help survey the crowd. While she's not much a waitress, I've come to find she's quite an accomplished sociologist for a layman. Finally, Dr. Ore should be able to cover the medical side of things.” Odo explained.

The bulk of the sting operation had largely been dumped into his lap.

“Speaking of Gaven, shouldn't he be here with us?” Kira asked. “I know he's just an asset but…” Kira remarked.

“For the time being, I've chosen to exclude Dr. Ore from knowledge of our operation,” Benjamin remarked.

At this casual remark, everyone seemed surprised.

“Is there a particular reason we’re excluding him, captain?” Odo managed to mumble.

“Dr. Ore is a Federation asset and doesn't deserve or need to get caught up in a covert operation such as this.” Benjamin stoically said.

The reasoning was a convenient enough excuse but it was clear from the pressed looks on everyone else faces that they suspected that wasn't the only reason the captain saw fit to keep the doctor out of the situation.

“Right. It's settled then. Everyone knows their jobs. If there are absolutely any problems they are to be brought directly to me. Dismissed.” Benjamin said.

Everyone took their sweet time shuffling out of the conference room for once except the captain who departed almost immediately to handle other business.

“Just to be clear, ” Dax pronounced once Benjamin was gone. “We all agree why we're really not including Gaven in this right?”

“I don't know that he'd agree to go along with it. Not if it put Dr. Bashir at undue risk.” Odo
“Risk? Gaven would have a bloody conniption, more like. And frankly, I can think of a few choice words regarding this fiasco waiting to happen I could say for myself.” Miles said as he ground his teeth. “Julian might just have gone too far this time.”

“Well if anything does happen to Julian or anyone else for that matter there’s going to be Hell to pay. I think Doctor Ore has a wonderful temperament but…” Kira said shaking her head and not finishing her thought.

“I don’t know. Maybe this will turn out to be a good thing. Those two have been dancing around each other for months. I mean, everyone sees it right?” Dax questioned.

“It's certainly been the slowest born I've ever seen,” Kira remarked.

“I think they're afraid. Of what it's hard to say.” Odo said. “In any case, I've never seen Dr. Ore legitimately angry about anything on the station. If Dr. Bashir is injured again over something as frivolous as this we may just see a side of Dr. Ore we haven't seen before.”

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