

Balance of Power

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Balance of Power

by [Dark_Sinestra](#)

Summary

Julian Bashir and Elim Garak walk the edges of the line in the sand that Garak drew, each believing himself to be right. In a world of ever shifting alliances and increasingly complicated politics, the two discover that a balance of power is almost impossible to maintain.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Part I

Julian

The Infirmary

The doctor frowned and flinched away as Dax tried to hold him firmly by the chin and take a closer look at his face. "Will you stop squirming, Julian?" she said in frustration. "I'm trying to see if that Jem'Hadar boy cracked your temporal fossa or your zygomatic process when he hit you." She took a scanner from a nearby nurse and ran it close to his cheek and the side of his eye.

"I'm fine," he said yet again. "And he's not really a boy anymore, is he?"

"Not so much, no," she said grimly. She turned off the scanner and handed it back to the nurse. "Thank you," she said to her and turned her attention back to him. "You got off lucky, no fractures. You ought to let them treat you for the contusion, though."

It was on the tip of his tongue to protest, but he knew that level look. It would be more trouble than it was worth. "Fine," he said, beckoning the nurse over to help him. "What I really need is to be able to examine him further and see if I can synthesize that missing enzyme. I'm certain it's contributing to his erratic behavior."

"Probably so. I'm sure Benjamin will want to see us in the wardroom soon. Do you want me to wait for you?"

"No," he said. "You go ahead. I'll catch up." He didn't know how to tell her that her solicitousness since Garak abruptly broke things off with him wasn't always welcome. He wasn't sure she would listen to him anyway. As things were, the only solitude he managed to carve out for himself was during work, when he could legitimately claim that he didn't need the distractions of others, and late at night, when he desperately did but couldn't bring himself to disrupt his friend's sleep. He sat still while the nurse ran the tissue regenerator over his swollen cheek, feeling the throbbing pain ease.

Under normal circumstances, he'd view the chance to observe a growing Jem'Hadar up close as an exciting, once in a lifetime opportunity. To be sure, he was taking copious notes and paying close attention. However, it didn't thrill him. Nothing did. He felt as though he was just going through the motions, and the pain never went far. All he had to do was to look down the Promenade and see Garak's shop or catch a glimpse of him going about his routine, and he was right back to that feeling that he couldn't get enough air and that too much of the light had gone out of his world.

He thanked the nurse and followed in the earlier footsteps of Dax toward the wardroom. The meeting went about as he expected it to go. Of course brass wasn't going to want to pass up the opportunity to study one of the enemy's shock troops up close. Kira's overly enthusiastic support of the idea of turning the young being into a lab experiment irked him. He was pleased to have the opportunity to throw in his support with Odo. He remembered very well how it felt to be a laboratory subject, the pain of all the changes he went through during his

illegal gene therapy treatments. He wasn't certain if he had his complete memories from that time, but he had enough. As he listened to the Constable's impassioned plea on the young warrior's behalf, he wished that he could let the changeling know just how much they had in common. It would be a relief to be able to talk to someone who understood.

Commander Sisko asked to speak to Odo in private, and Julian decided to go check on the boy. It was hard to stop thinking of him in that way, even harder to believe that he had just recently held him in his arms as an infant. When he reached the security office, he found the powerful alien flinging himself against the holding cell shielding, and no amount of explaining on his part would calm him. Only the presence of Odo managed that, so it was fortunate that he joined them shortly and talked him down.

It made the doctor burn with anger to think of a race of beings so carefully bred and manipulated. They were nothing more than genetic slaves to the Founders. If he could help this one, he fully intended to. He also knew how it felt to be designed and engineered, to wonder what parts of oneself were genuine and what parts were put there at the request of others. He wondered if he would every truly and fully be able to forgive his parents for that. He didn't think of it often. In facing the Jem'Hadar, he found the issue brought front and center in a way it hadn't been in years.

Having such a challenging task set before him as synthesizing the complex enzyme missing from the boy's system kept him blessedly distracted for hours. He was disappointed that Miles and Odo managed to find a hidden cache of it before he succeeded. As it was more important that the boy be given some relief, he discovered that the best way to pass it quickly into his body was through the carotid artery. He kept samples aside for study and research and gave the rest to Odo for safe keeping. The two left the infirmary together.

A few hours after that, he heard a hail on the infirmary comm and turned to accept it personally. He had made progress on his analysis of the enzyme and hadn't noticed how much time had passed. He recognized the doctor on the screen as an expert in xenoimmunology whose papers were almost always cropping up in most of the medical journals he kept up with, someone stationed on Starbase 201. He schooled his features to politeness, but he was angry. Starfleet was obviously not willing to let this go. "I see I didn't awaken you, Doctor Bashir," the older man said. "Good. I wanted to extend the professional courtesy of requesting all of your notes and the results of any experiments you've run on that Jem'Hadar of yours personally. You've been making quite a name for yourself lately."

"Thank you, Doctor Ramirez," he said, distantly polite. "I've read many of your papers. Your work on the polymerase chain reaction of the J8B5 virus for safer vaccines along the Tzenkethi Border is particularly brilliant. You've likely saved hundreds of lives."

"That's why we do it, isn't it?" he said, obviously flattered. "Having the chance to study this specimen may save hundreds, if not thousands, more. I must say I envy your position there, right at the cusp of the passage to the Gamma Quadrant."

"It's rarely dull," he replied, impatient with the jocular small talk when a sentient being's life hung in the balance. "I trust you'll treat him well?" he said.

The man blinked. "Who? Oh, you mean the specimen? Well, of course, we'll treat it as well as we can, but as you know, we can't always be as non-invasive as we like."

"Of course," he said, his voice hardening. "Doctor, my apologies, but it's very late here. It will take me some time to collate the data for transmission, as I wasn't expecting to have the situation taken out of my hands this quickly. We told the boy he would be staying here for now."

"Of course," the man said, completely ignoring the not so subtle rebuke. "I eagerly await your findings, Doctor. Ramirez out."

The transmission ended, and Julian slammed the flat of his hand down on the table beside it. "Damn!" he said.

A late shift nurse stuck his head around the corner. "Is everything all right, Doctor?"

"No, but we have work to do. Help me get this data sorted," he said, making room for the nurse. "We'll be sending it off to Starbase 201 in short order."

He left the infirmary very late, affording himself less than four hours of sleep before it was time to get back to work. It wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last time he stretched himself thin. It came with the territory for medical staff. His mood improved somewhat when he heard the next day that the Jem'Hadar had managed to commandeer a runabout and escape and that no one got hurt in the process. *Good for you*, he thought. *Don't ever turn back. You're probably better off with your Founders.*

He didn't like feeling this way, disgusted with his superiors and his government, first over the treatment of Garak, now this. It made him wonder if he hadn't made a mistake in joining Starfleet. He could have made a decent career for himself as a civilian doctor and never faced so many ethical challenges. He could have stayed in Paris and never had his heart crushed. In leaving, had he not done the same to his fiancée? He had justified himself by saying that they were too young to have gotten engaged and that he hadn't thought hard enough about how he had his whole life ahead of him. In hindsight, in light of his broken heart, he realized that his decision was selfish, childish, and cruel. How many women had he dallied with, nearly all of them more serious about him than he was them? How many hearts had he broken? Maybe in some way, he deserved to feel the way he did.

He grumbled at himself for entertaining such bleak thoughts. Connecting what Garak had done to anything in his past was illogical. There wasn't some giant scale in the sky, keeping track of words and deeds and bringing down a hammer to equal the balance. The only relevant part of what he had been thinking was that it was irresponsible to make commitments he didn't know if he could keep at the time he made them. If getting hurt this badly prevented him from breaking other hearts in the future, then something positive came of it. *It's a pity I'm just not that good at lying to myself*, he thought. *I don't feel any better at all.*

Garak

Garak's Clothiers

On early mornings, the Promenade was now deserted. Garak toyed with the idea of opening his shop later, not that it would matter much. Early, late, he had few customers. He counted himself lucky that even when things were going well financially, he had lived frugally and modestly. He was in no danger of losing his roof over his head or his basic necessities. He knew the Ferengi across the way were much more worried and had far more to lose than he.

With Julian out of the picture as his steady lunch companion, he had taken to lunching at times with Rom. It wasn't the same, of course. Rom wasn't much of a reader and knew very little of any alien literature. He did, however, speak at length about his son Nog, his brother, their family life, and the situation at the bar. Garak took a vicarious sort of pleasure in this talk of family. He'd never tell Rom, but there were times he envied him his freedom in having a child and raising him openly. It was a luxury he would never be able to afford, no matter how much money or resources he might accrue.

He thought as little of Julian as he could, something he knew that most of the doctor's friends would judge as typical and misconstrue as a lack of care. They were so closed minded. Any Cardassian would understand his reasoning easily. Closed doors wouldn't stay that way if one were constantly opening them and peering at the contents they were meant to shut away. He had good, sound reasons for cutting things off when he did. It was unfortunate that in the process both of them were hurt. They would have been hurt much worse if things continued to progress along the course he saw, and it could have cost the young officer his entire promising career. No matter what the doctor thought in his love blindness, Garak knew that a relationship with him wasn't worth that price. He had nothing that valuable to give to the dear man in return, not even the ability to say, *I love you*, and mean it without ambivalence.

He bustled about and tidied the already immaculate place as he did every morning, lifting his head and straightening when Lieutenant Dax strode through his doors looking like a woman on a mission. He had been expecting this, either from her or one of the others. "Good morning," he said pleasantly. "Have you been enjoying your new dress?"

"I haven't had the chance to wear it yet," she confessed. "I haven't been able to do much socializing lately. Have you?"

He arched an eye ridge. "My dear Lieutenant, if you look around you, you may notice that we have a...lack...of civilians of late. Alas, I have more than enough time on my hands but few potential companions to choose from."

"I wanted to know if you'd like to have lunch with me today," she offered.

It wasn't exactly what he had been expecting. Now he simply expected that conversation to occur at a later date. "I regret that I have a lunch date already."

She looked surprised. To her credit, she hid it quickly. "Well, how about dinner, then?"

"Do we have enough to discuss for a dinner?" he asked her, favoring her with a somewhat pointed look.

"We don't have to talk about Julian at all," she said. "I'm sorry if I gave you that impression."

So, are you interested?"

"My dear, I'm positively intrigued," he replied. Perhaps they wouldn't have that expected conversation at all, if she was to be believed.

"I'll come by after work to pick you up, then," she said. "I'd wear the dress, but I don't want to give anyone the wrong impression."

He smiled, delighted at how deftly she made it clear that she had no interest in him without ever really saying such a thing at all. It was unnecessary, the lack of interest mutual; however, he knew that she received more than her fair share of romantic offers. Rebuffing them before they came was probably second nature by now. "No," he agreed. "We can't have that. I shall see you then?"

"Yes," she said, nodding and leaving for Ops.

He worked through the morning, enjoyed his lunch with Rom, and caught up with some reading on a seat behind his counter during the afternoon. As evening approached, he began to think of the coming dinner plans and wonder what Dax might want with him, if not to discuss Julian. The computer's voice coming from his counter console had his head jerking up in surprise, keen gaze flashing to focus on the terminal. "Warning...worker revolt in progress in Ore Processing Unit Five...security countermeasures initiated."

"No," he said, jumping up from his seat. "What have those fools gotten into now?" Before he could key in a query, Gul Dukat's face popped up on screen to relate a pre-recorded message that he recognized all too well. He sighed deeply and pressed his lips together in irritation. The beginnings of a headache announced themselves behind his eye ridges and along the top of his skull. He had much bigger things to worry about than a migraine, such as the fact that he seemed to have now been shut out of his own computer terminal. "Oh, you pompous windbag," he growled under his breath. "You think you're so clever!"

He immediately left the shop, locking it down and heading toward Security. He reached the office only to find Odo and Quark inside. "Excuse me, Constable," he said, "but I seem to have been locked out of my computer. I was wondering if perhaps I could use yours?"

Odo glanced up at him impatiently. "Not now, Garak," he grated. "I can't even use it. I don't have high enough clearance."

"I've been telling him I can give him Level Seven," Quark said, rolling his eyes, "but does he listen to me?"

"Be quiet, Quark," Odo and Garak said at the same time.

They glanced sharply at one another. Before Garak could ask for access a second time, the computer's voice said, "Warning. Workers have escaped from Ore Processing Unit Five. Initiating station-wide counterinsurgency program."

"Oh, damn," Garak said mildly, turning and rushing down the Promenade just in time to

avoid the force field that sprang to life, sealing Odo and Quark inside. He didn't have time to argue anymore. Perhaps they'd listen to him in Ops. He hoped they would, or things were about to get much more dead than they had been of late. He had a moment of anxiety when he hit the first force field in front of the turbolift, but his access code worked. He hurried as fast as he possibly could, having to stop again and again to deactivate more fields. He noticed they sprang back to life as soon as he passed. Dukat's ostentatious voice droned on and on. "He always did love the sound of his own words," he muttered.

When he reached one of the hallway terminals, he tried to shut down the program with his access codes. Nothing happened. He then tried to quick and dirty a few subroutines to no avail. "Of course, it's not going to be that easy," he said in frustration.

By the time he reached Ops, he had heard the threat about the habitat rings being flooded with neurocine gas. *Well, Elim, he thought dryly, you always worried you'd die on this station. It may happen much sooner than you anticipated.* He saw Major Kira, Dax, Julian, and some personnel he didn't know in Ops behind the force field. At least they had managed to pry open the door. They seemed more than a little surprised to see him. *No one will ever believe I'm just a tailor now, he thought. Oh, well, better to have the chance to worry about how to get out of that later than die for the perfection of a lie.*

Julian

Ops

As ridiculous as it made him feel on one level, Julian was extremely glad to see Garak just then. It didn't make their situation any less grim, and he wasn't certain they'd manage to get out of the trouble they were in alive, but at least if he did die, it would be with someone he loved. He shouldn't have been surprised that the canny Cardassian had a plan. It didn't work out the way any of them expected, instead triggering yet another level of the counterinsurgency measures. Despite the setback, Garak forged ahead with another plan, one endorsed and improved upon by Dax. When he was sure that Dax's burned hands were as all right as they could be under the circumstances, he stood off to the side and watched the tailor trying to forge Gul Dukat's codes in order to shut down the system. He couldn't help but to smile and tease him. It might be the last chance he ever got to do it. He had never been more proud of him than in that moment.

Garak inadvertently tripped a fail-safe before Dax had a chance with Kira's help to disable internal sensors. The wall replicator sprang to life, and in the flash of an eye, a man was dead. Shocked, the doctor dove for cover and watched the rest of them do the same as energy beams blasted from the now deadly machine. Every move they tried to make earned them more blasts. He narrowly avoided losing an arm trying to reach Major Kira's phaser. He could just see Garak under Dax's console as they all shouted back and forth to one another, doing their best to formulate a plan under fire.

My poor Elim, he thought sadly. Every time you try to do the right thing by any of us, things just get worse for you. He knew the tailor wouldn't be in any danger at all had Commander Sisko, Miles, and Jake not been poking around in the deserted guts of the ore refinery. He wished that he could apologize to him on Starfleet's behalf, but now wasn't the time or place for that.

Gul Dukat's sudden appearance, for real this time, in Ops cut off all further thought in that direction. He watched him very closely, not nearly as intimidated in his presence as he had been three years before. He waited for an opening as the gul spoke to them, and when the arrogant gul disabled the blaster in the replicator to make himself some tea, he almost had it. Surging to his feet, he had no choice but to dive right back down again, the diabolical lens reappearing as soon as Dukat stepped out of the way. *That was too close*, he thought.

Dukat approached Garak, and he tensed again. He wouldn't let him hurt him, no matter the cost. He felt his fists ball as the man taunted the tailor. To his horror, Garak seemed to be rising to the bait, swiftly standing from his cover. He couldn't stop himself from crying out, "Garak!"

"Easy, Doctor... it would seem that the computer is only targeting non-Cardassians after all," Garak said with his eyes locked to Dukat's.

He felt his limbs flooded with the weakness of relief. *Thank God*, he thought. He listened in uneasy fascination to the calmly delivered but hostile exchange between the two. *Old friends indeed*, he thought dryly, recalling what Dukat had said of Garak the first time he had ever spoken to him. His dislike of the gul intensified to something more visceral as he openly threatened Garak. He was glad that the tailor refused him the satisfaction of getting a rise, for he knew his ex had a temper underneath his blasé facade.

He slowly stood after Dukat deactivated the blaster and retreated with Major Kira into Commander Sisko's office. "What do you think he wants?" he asked the others in a low voice.

"He obviously wants the station," Dax said grimly, glancing at Garak. "Do you think this will fly with your government?"

Julian watched Garak's face as he considered his answer. "If he has enough support in the military, it might," he said. "I wish I could tell you for certain, Lieutenant, but I'm no longer familiar enough with the political climate on Cardassia to provide an educated opinion."

He wanted so badly to have a moment alone with the tailor. Their eyes met briefly, and it hurt him to see cool assessment instead of any warmth. It was Elim in the infirmary all over again, vulnerable and yet stubbornly refusing to yield a centimeter. He was angry with himself for expecting anything different and dropped the eye contact first.

"Garak," Dax said, "since it's looking like we might not have that dinner date after all, I want to tell you the main thrust of what I had to say to you. I'm only sorry I'll have to be much briefer than I intended."

Julian looked between the two of them, irrational hurt flaring and then subsiding again. Of course it wasn't a date date. Dax would never do that to him. If she had, she certainly wouldn't be bringing it up in front of him now. "I can't give you any real privacy, but if I step to the far wall and you speak quietly, I won't hear you," he offered.

"No, Julian, it's all right," she said. "I don't mind if you hear this." She shot a questioning look at Garak to see if he did.

"I'm fine with that, Lieutenant," he said.

"Good. I wanted to thank you for helping us save Nerys," she said.

"It's not as though I had a choice," Garak responded, a touch of steel beneath his polite tone.

"I meant before that," she said, unphased. "When you did."

The doctor felt a surge of gratitude for the Trill that he tried to convey with his eyes alone. He didn't want to butt in, and he wanted Garak to have a chance to respond. It meant more to him that she would make that gesture than he could express. The fact that she had intended to do it in private made it mean that much more, for he knew that it truly was for Garak and not for him that she said it.

Garak waited a few beats to respond. "My only regret is that I won't have the chance to see how you intended to stretch that out for the length of an entire meal," he said with an incline of his head.

Both doctor and science officer chuckled, their levity fading quickly when yet another announcement came from the computer regarding Dukat's cowardly attempt to escape the station and his failure to maintain order. As the self destruct sequence was announced, only Garak laughed. It had a very dry, ironic sound to Julian's ears.

"I don't see what's so funny," Dax murmured.

Garak simply indicated Kira and Dukat coming out of the Commander's office with a tip of his chin. Dukat's expression was thunderous. Despite the desperation of the situation, Julian felt tempted to laugh as well. There was nothing quite so gratifying as seeing a blowhard hoisted upon his own petard.

They all gathered around Dukat at the central table and watched him try to disable the security measures. Garak laughed again at the man's failure, and Julian found himself privately grateful that their breakup hadn't been acrimonious. He had no doubt that otherwise, he might have found himself on the receiving end of the tailor's extraordinarily pointed barbs. It seemed that for those who earned his true dislike, his malice knew no limits. As entertaining as it was to see Dukat repeatedly put in his place, particularly when it came to his misguided hitting on Major Kira, it wasn't helping matters. He finally spoke up and told Garak such, hoping that he'd direct his attention back to finding a way out of the deadly situation.

In the end, it was Dax and Dukat who came up with their best chance for success. Unfortunately, it relied on the Commander and Miles being able to reach a critical area of the station and disable the laser fusion initiator to prevent an overload of the main reactor core. They all waited together in tense silence with less than ten minutes left to discover their fates, life, or a quick, fiery death that would leave them nothing more than vaporized particles adrift in space.

Julian positioned himself in front of Garak and drew in a breath, determined to tell him how much he meant to him and that he didn't hold it against him for the decision he made. The tailor cut him a very sharp warning look and flicked his glance quickly to the side to indicate Dukat not so very far away. It was too late. Dukat had already noticed that he was about to speak to Garak, and his pale blue eyes were focused on Julian with intense interest. "It may be bad timing," the doctor said, "but I was just wondering if you ever managed to hem those pants I brought to you last week."

"I can't believe you," Kira said. "We could be space dust any minute, and you're worried about a pair of pants?"

"They're very nice pants, Major," Garak said mildly. "As a matter of fact, they're ready to be picked up. I intended to tell you this evening, Doctor, but I got a little distracted."

Dukat looked away from all of them in disgust, and Julian took the opportunity to offer Garak a very small smile. Affection surged in his breast as he realized that even now, Garak was behaving and thinking as though they would survive the situation. For as much as the Cardassian liked to claim that he was a cynic and a pessimist, he kept Julian from revealing a potential weakness in front of a dangerous enemy in case they all lived to face another day. Garak didn't return the smile, but Julian noticed a slight softening of his gaze. It was enough.

"Let's get people moving," Dax said. "We might have time to get at least some of the people off the station before it blows."

There was no more time for good-byes. They all got to work, doing what they could. After a few minutes more, it became clear that the crisis had been averted. Dukat beamed away before any of them could stop him. They had worse problems to deal with, such as the fact that life support had been destroyed, and they had but twelve hours to get it back online and operational. Julian retreated to the infirmary, expecting and receiving several cases of people who had been overwhelmed with panic. There were even a few heart attacks during and after the crisis. He had no idea where Garak went or what he had done after they parted company in Ops, but he knew he'd see him again. Perhaps he'd be willing to talk then without Dukat in the way.

Garak Private Quarters

He hated those pills Julian gave him for his migraines, as they affected him strangely and usually made him have nightmares. The pain was too great this time to combat with kanar alone. The strain of the past several hours combined with having to endure Dukat's company in close quarters insured a headache to rival all headaches. As soon as he had managed to reach his quarters, no easy task without the turbolifts functioning, he took a handful of the wretched things, killed the lights, and lay down on his couch with a cool, wet cloth draped over his forehead and eyes.

He was starting to drift into nightmare, the faces of many of his former victims floating into his view like dead, bloated things on the surface of dark water, when his door chime dragged him back to the waking world. He sat up, disoriented and still in pain. The almost dry cloth fluttered from his face and startled him when it landed on his hands. "Computer," he said

thickly, “lights, ten percent, and who is at the blasted door?”

“Rephrase the question,” the computer said as dim light flooded his sitting room.

They could program it to do so many things, and yet recognizing slang seemed beyond it. “Who is at my door?” he asked, exasperated.

“Major Kira Nerys.”

He quirked an eye ridge and immediately regretted it. Steeling himself for whatever was about to happen, he wished his phaser wasn't all the way in his bedroom. “Enter,” he said quietly.

The door slid open, and Kira stood beyond the threshold. She seemed reluctant to step into the dim room, her fists clenching and unclenching at her sides. Tucking her head down slightly, she pressed her lips thin and stepped across the threshold. Her shoulders twitched when the door shut behind her. “Why is it so dark in here?” she demanded.

“Major,” Garak said, wincing, “please, keep your voice down. I...have a headache.” He didn't like to admit even that much weakness to her. If he didn't, he knew that she would continue barking things at him, and her voice would pierce straight to the center of his brain.

“Oh,” she said, blessedly more quietly. “I'm...sorry to bother you.” She stood just before his door, looking awkward and uncertain.

He wondered if he should wait her out or just ask what she wanted. She was so volatile, it was hard to judge moment to moment the best way to handle her. Pain was very much a factor in his asking, “Is there something I can do for you, Major? You'll have to forgive me for my limited hospitality at the moment. I was asleep.”

“Maybe I should come back another time,” she said, sounding relieved.

That relief changed things. His eyes narrowed very slightly. “No, not at all,” he said more brightly, forcing himself to sit up straighter. He gestured her over to the chair opposite his sofa. “You came all this way with the turbolifts offline. It must be important.”

“I prefer to stand,” she said. She made some concession to him, however, by stepping closer so that she could speak more quietly. “I...wanted to...thank you,” she said, speaking with difficulty, “for getting Dukat to back off. I...you know, I wasn't even aware that he was...” she paused and shuddered, “that he was hitting on me until you said something and he reacted the way he did.”

Garak inclined his head, surprised that she was thanking him, but even more surprised that she hadn't been aware of what was so blatant that it was offensive to him. “You were a bit distracted,” he said.

She snorted softly. “Still...was he really? Isn't it just as likely he was trying to goad me? He's such a complete ass, it wouldn't surprise me.”

“With all due respect, Major, perhaps you don't read Cardassians as well as you think you do,” he said. “I can assure you that he was very aggressively trying to impress you to a degree that I felt was unhealthy, particularly in light of his family situation.”

She scowled. “That's so disgusting. Why? Why me of all people?”

He had several theories, none of which he was inclined to share with her. No matter how much he hated Dukat, he was not going to give a Bajoran insight into the Cardassian psyche willingly. “That's something I'm afraid I can't answer,” he said. “You'd have to ask Dukat, not that I recommend it.”

“I think I'll pass on that,” she agreed. “Why did you tell Julian about my abduction?” she asked abruptly.

He graced her with an ironic half smile. “Are you going to believe anything I say in answer to that?”

She pressed her lips together again. “Probably not,” she replied.

“Then I'll just let you draw your own conclusions,” he said tiredly. “It takes less energy, and it's what you'll do anyway.”

She regarded him in silence, her black eyes reflecting the low light in twin gleams like the surface of a mirror. “I am grateful,” she said at last, “but it doesn't change anything. I think you're a snake who'd sell all of us out the first chance you got.”

“It's always good to know where one stands,” he answered, not that he needed her to tell him any of that. He knew it all too well.

She folded her arms. “Do you know how many Bajorans died during the occupation, Garak?”

“If you want to know the truth of it, I never gave it much thought,” he said in an offhand way. He wanted her to leave now, and he knew that goading her would be the quickest way to get his way.

“Why does that not surprise me?” she asked. “Ten million. Ten million men, women, and children who never did anything to your people to deserve what you did to them, to us. I don't know what your role was in the occupation, but I promise you if I ever find out that you were responsible for even one of those ten million, I'll do everything in my power to see that you pay for it.”

He didn't want to think about it, and his mind rejected the figure outright. What did she expect him to do about it? What did she expect any Cardassian who had a hand in that to do? Did she honestly think the state had any more compassion for disobedient servants than it did for those it occupied? He knew from first hand experience, being one of the tools for discovering dissidents, that it did not, and she should have known after seeing the recording by Kell regarding Dukat's supposed cowardice in trying to abandon the station during the

“revolt”. He felt a flare of anger for this woman whose life he had saved at great personal risk having the temerity to come into his quarters and harangue him about something over which he had no control. “If you ever do find such a thing,” he said lightly, “I’ll be happy to indulge you then. Until then, as far as I’m concerned, the subject is closed.”

“You’re as arrogant as Dukat,” she spat, clenching her fists.

“No, dear Major,” he said. “Dukat merely thinks he is the best at what he does. I know I am. That’s not arrogance. It’s confidence. Was there anything else you needed? Your uniform let out a bit, perhaps?” The glare she shot him was hot enough to melt steel. Without another word, she whirled on her heel and stalked from his room. All in all, he had handled that somewhat more ham-fisted than was his wont, but she did catch him at a bad time. The things that came out of his mouth during his migraines sometimes surprised even him.

After re-wetting his cloth, he resettled on his couch, the bedroom too daunting a trek in his state. “Computer,” he said, “lights out, and disable the door chime. I don’t want to be disturbed again tonight unless the station is in danger.” The nightmares returned in force, but he slept so deeply that by the time he awoke close to lunchtime, he remembered nothing more than vague, disturbing impressions that seemed connected to things that Major Kira had said. Why had he ever let her in his quarters to begin with? He knew it could only end badly. *Live and learn, Elim*, he thought dryly. *Live and learn.*

Part II

Julian

USS Defiant Infirmary

Gamma Quadrant

Dax’s life signs finally stabilized, and the doctor breathed a sigh of relief. It had been bad enough believing that he would lose contact with her for sixty years so that she could stay on Meridian with her new lover. It was much worse seeing her dying for making that decision. He double checked the readings and quietly settled at a console not so far away so that he could continue to monitor her while he updated his medical files and logs.

Her loss hit him doubly hard thanks to his own situation. After the station crisis, he had hoped that Garak would be receptive at least to talking again. Every attempt he made was met with perfectly polite stonewalling. He could get the tailor to comment on business, the lack of quality food at the Replimat, and any number of inane and unimportant topics. The instant Julian tried to deepen the conversation, Garak would have something to do, and he would find himself ushered out of his company. After just a few days of that, he stopped going to the shop. It was too painful to get rejected like that over and over.

He worked until he heard her stirring. Standing quickly, he hurried to her side and took her hand. “Jadzia,” he said gently, “can you hear me?”

She twisted her head and opened her eyes, blinking and trying to focus. “Julian?” she said, her brows furrowing together. “Where’s Deral?”

"I'm sorry," he said, hurting for her. "The planet shifted. Something went wrong. You weren't going with it. We had to beam you out of there, or you would have died and everything else would have been destroyed."

She turned her face away from him, tears sliding from the corners of her eyes. He allowed her to disentangle her hand. "I want to be alone now," she said. "Can I return to my quarters?"

"Not yet," he said regretfully. "I want to make sure you truly are stable first. Just rest for now. Jadzia, I'm so sorry," he squeezed her shoulder. "I know what it's like."

"No, you don't," she shrugged him off. "I won't even be able to see Deral for another sixty years. You see Garak every day!"

He understood that she was lashing out at him only because she was hurt. It still stung. "Not that it matters," he said. "He barely even talks to me. You know that."

"If I loved someone as much as you say you love him, I wouldn't be so quick to take no for an answer," she said harshly. "The one thing I never thought you were is a quitter. You're upsetting me. I don't want to talk about this anymore!"

He retreated from the bedside and sat back at his console. The only thing that prevented the exchange from devolving into a full blown argument was the fact that she was currently his patient and in a fragile physical state. How many times had she pushed her company on him the past few weeks when he said he wanted to be alone? *Your problem is you're not forceful enough*, he thought in irritation. *You just go along with it rather than rock the boat, because too much boat rocking leads to too many uncomfortable questions.*

Maybe it was time to stop being so pliant, and maybe she was right. Maybe he had been too quick to accept Garak's pulling away. Of course the Cardassian had the right to set limits and boundaries. He had the right to get out of a relationship if he wanted out. However, if his honest reason was to protect Julian and not for himself, well, that was bollocks, wasn't it? Garak didn't have the right to make that decision on his behalf. For all of his dry commentary about their "democracy of two", in the end the decision was anything but democratic. Garak was acting like the Cardassian State. The trouble with that was that Julian wasn't his subject. Maybe it was high time he reminded the tailor of that.

Garak *The Promenade*

The only good thing Garak had to say about the Gratitude Festival's being celebrated on the station was that he saw an enormous jump in business in the weeks leading up to it. Bajorans, Starfleeters, and even some of the other resident aliens aboard the station wanted the chance to look their best. He didn't have to lie to the persistent doctor about not having time to talk to him. He didn't even have time for lunches with Rom. He worked all day every day on the orders, often well into the night, and there came a time he simply had to stop accepting any more. He had to push himself hard to finish the ones he already had.

As he walked along the promenade the day of the festival, he looked on with quiet pride at

how many people he saw sporting his designs. He had no use for the symbolic purging of past difficulties. The Cardassian mind didn't work that way. Difficulties and pleasures were as intertwined as the fine weave of Deltan silk. To discard one in favor of clinging more tightly to the other was completely illogical. *Don't these people realize they are who they are precisely because of their so-called problems, not in spite of them?*

He noticed something else besides the bright clothing and decorations. Quite a few people were, well, for lack of a better term, *in flagrante delicto* right there on the Promenade, taking it far further than the dictates of polite society allowed in public. He had never seen such sexual demonstrativeness from Bajorans before, but it wasn't just Bajorans. Also, some of them he knew for a fact to be married to others than the ones with whom they were so shamefully engaged. He readily admitted that he didn't fully understand Bajoran spirituality or celebrations, but all of this seemed oddly out of character.

He wondered if he should seek Julian out to let him know that something might be wrong. *Right, Elim*, the dry thought came instantly on the heels of his impulse, *your desire to see the doctor is purely altruistic and has nothing to do with all of these amorous displays. Besides, he's the doctor, not you. He'll know if something isn't right much better than you would.* He decided that the best thing he could do would be to mind his own business and just stay out of trouble.

Julian
The Infirmary

The doctor was in a mood, having seen so many people enjoying themselves at the festival in ways he never would have expected from such a reserved people as the Bajorans. *It's really not fair*, he thought. Why did it seem that after a break up, the entire world was happier than the one who was dumped? It was bad enough that his efforts to confront Garak had gone nowhere. Now, he had to see all of this? He leaped on the distraction offered by Commander Sisko to meet him in the Infirmary. Now that he was there examining Dax, he considered mentioning something about the inappropriate behavior in the crowd. *Nobody likes a whinger*, he told himself.

All of the scans came up negative. Dax laughed at both men, seemingly very self-satisfied at having played such a good practical joke on the Commander. Rolling his eyes and shaking his head, he sent the two of them on their way. At least somebody around there was able to retain a sense of humor. He rejoined the celebration and tried to enjoy the music and acrobats. He wondered if Garak was somewhere around or had retreated to the solitude of his quarters. He couldn't imagine any Cardassian feeling comfortable surrounded by that many Bajorans. He was glad he had a party to look forward to later. Maybe spending time in the company of all of his friends would chase away his blues.

He caught up to Odo and Ambassador Troi on their way to Commander Sisko's party. "Having a good time?" he asked.

"It's simply marvelous, Doctor," the ambassador gushed. "The music, the dancing, the food, and I never knew the Bajorans to be such open, demonstrative people. It's very refreshing to see that at least some races don't have unhealthy hang-ups about intimacy." She squeezed

Odo's arm with both of her own and graced him with a brilliant smile.

Julian hid his smile at Odo's expression of long-suffering. "I have to confess, it's all a little shocking to me," he said. "Of course, this is the first time I've actually attended a Gratitude Festival, so I didn't know what to expect."

They saw Major Kira approaching them from the opposite direction, looking anything but happy. She flatly informed them that she had no intention of going to the party, because Bareil might be there and that he had been hitting on Dax all evening. A little concerned now, Julian told them about the supposed practical joke and decided he had best have another look at Dax's results. Just then, a sharp twinge of a headache lanced through his temples. It didn't last long, fortunately. Kira decided to join him, and they parted company with Odo and the ambassador.

While they walked and spoke of others who had been behaving strangely, he noticed something he had never noticed before. Kira smelled good, not just good, but wonderful. He wondered how he had never noticed that before and thought that maybe it was just something she was wearing for the festival. When he glanced at her, he saw a small dimple just above her left eyebrow. He had seen it before. It was always there when she was perplexed or disturbed about something. It was cute. He smiled to himself, and when she glanced at him, he widened the smile.

They reached the infirmary in fairly short order and stepped into the surgery room. He had every intention of going to the monitors and pulling up the results. Instead, he turned to Kira and drew her into his arms. Alarms klaxoned in every rational part of his mind. *What are you doing?! This is insane!* Insane or not, he kissed her heatedly, expecting to get slapped across the room at any moment. Instead, she returned it with wild abandon, the two of them stumbling about the room until she came to rest against a console with him leaned against her.

He felt embarrassed. This wasn't like him, and it wasn't like her. Why couldn't he control himself? As she pushed her wiry frame tightly against him, his body responded. He ground against her and moaned. She was so beautiful, completely irresistible, and this was all so very, very wrong!

Garak *The Promenade*

Garak had wandered about for hours, occasionally lighting in Quark's Bar, occasionally sitting in the Replimat, and the rest of the time walking freely through the crowd. Even not being part of the festivities, it felt good to be surrounded by a press of happy people for a change. Some of them deigned to greet him with the traditional greeting, "Peldor joi," to which he responded in kind out of politeness. He enjoyed the fresh food and the music. He tried to ignore those who insisted on going beyond all bounds of propriety with their public displays, and he noticed that many of the Bajorans in the crowd looked upon these couples with extreme distaste and disapproval. If the couples believed their behavior was within the bounds of what was expected at the festival, obviously many of their fellows heartily disagreed.

He turned a corner just in time to see one of his customers get punched squarely in the nose by a man who then turned back to kissing the customer's wife with shameless abandon. Their two children cried, hugging each other off to the side and looking on in horror. Stunned, Garak hurried forward and knelt beside his downed customer. "Let me see your face," he said, pulling his bloodied hands away. "I think your nose is broken. We should get you to the infirmary."

"Not before I kill him!" the Bajoran roared and tried to use Garak to pull himself up.

Garak pushed him back with a firm hand to his chest and leaned in very close to hiss, "Your children are watching and terrified, Konil. Whatever wrong you may feel you need to redress shouldn't be done in front of them."

That got his attention, as he had hoped it would. Konil nodded, his anger crumpling inward to confused sorrow. "I just don't understand," he said. "Jeldon is my friend. How could they betray me this way?"

"Hopefully, you can get to the bottom of it later," the tailor said, offering him a hand up. He turned to beckon to the children. "Come on, now," he said to them gently. "Come help your father while we take him to see the doctor."

They hesitated but scampered over when their father also beckoned. "I'm all right," he told them. "I know it looks bad, but Daddy is all right."

Garak carefully guided the man through the crowd, making sure that the little ones didn't get lost in the press. He continued to jolly them along, telling them how brave they were being and that they were almost there. The little girl of the pair latched a hand onto his tunic hem and gripped it tightly. He could see her struggling to fight her tears, and he lightly caressed her hair. "You're a very good girl," he said. "There's nothing to be scared of now."

There was no one to be seen in the front of the infirmary. "If you'll wait here just a moment," Garak told the bleeding man and the children, "I'll see if there is anyone here to help you. If not, I'll make sure to call for someone." The man and the boy nodded, but the little girl insisted on coming with him. Garak glanced at Konil who gave silent assent. "All right, then, you can help me," he said. He raised his voice. "Hello? Is anyone back here?"

They walked into the surgery area, and he froze in disbelief at the sight that greeted him, Julian and Major Kira locked in the same sort of passionate exchange he had been seeing all over the festival. The little girl tugged on his tunic. "That man is doing the same thing Mister Tull was doing to my Mommy!" she exclaimed.

"I see that," Garak said, keeping his alarm out of his voice. "Would you please do me a favor and go make sure your father is still all right? I'll be right behind you after I talk with this nice man and woman."

She hesitated, then nodded and trotted back the way they came. "I hate to...interrupt...but a gentleman needs your help with a broken nose," Garak said. Neither of them reacted to him.

“Julian?” he said sharply.

“Later!” the doctor snapped, looking irritated and going right back to kissing Kira the moment he got the word out.

Unsure of exactly what might be causing the situation, Garak backed away. If it was some sort of infection, he didn't want to contract it. If it was a drug, perhaps something in the food, he might already have it in his system, or perhaps it didn't affect Cardassians. Either way, he knew he'd get no help from the doctor in that state, and it was too upsetting to see him with Kira like that, in control of himself or not.

“Change of plans,” he told the trio as he returned to them. “We're going to my shop. I have a med-kit there, and I know a bit about first aid.” He allowed the man to throw his free arm about his shoulders for support. “You hold on tight to your father's tunic,” he told the little boy, “and you hold to mine,” the little girl. “Don't let go.”

As they stepped back out into the crowd, Garak leaned close to the Bajoran once more and said, “For what it's worth, I don't think that your wife and your friend are in control of themselves. Something is affecting people badly, either a disease or a drug of some sort. I found two people kissing in the surgery room that I am quite certain would never normally do that with one another.” He was glad to see the relief the news brought the man. Considering how painful what he had just seen had been to him, he knew it was worse for Konil with his wife.

He took the three to the back of his shop, making sure they were all safely locked inside just in case. “You know what?” he said to the children, “I'm not completely sure my doors locked out there. Would you both please run check for me? You'll have to pull on each door. They're old, and the locking mechanism is a little rusty.” They trotted toward the front, no longer hesitant to do his bidding. As soon as they were gone, he turned back to his customer. “This is going to hurt, I'm afraid. I need to pop the bone back into place. You'll want to have a real doctor look at it before it fully heals, or it will heal crooked.”

Before he could do it, Konil grasped his hand. “Thank you,” he said, his words congested and distorted, “not just for helping me, but for being so kind to my children.”

Garak smiled faintly. “Cardassians like children, too, Konil,” he said. He swiftly popped the bone, feeling the Bajoran tense sharply under his hands and then relax in relief. He gave two sprays from a small canister in the med-kit into each nostril to stop the bleeding. He was done with the worst of the ministrations by the time the children returned to tell him they couldn't budge the doors. “Good,” he said. “Thank you for helping me with that.”

He straightened and replicated each of them a bowl of pudding and got them to sit out of the way on the floor to eat it. “I'm going to help your father get cleaned up,” he said, “and find him a new tunic. Can you two be very good and stay put?”

They nodded earnestly. He smiled and crossed back to the replicator to obtain a bowl of warm water for the blood that had begun to cake and dry. By the time he sent the trio on their way with a warning to the father to return to their quarters and to stay away from his wife and

his friend at least for the time being, he had Konil looking presentable and the kids calm, if not happy. He decided he'd do well to stay put in the shop. Every exposure to others increased the chance of his being affected by whatever strange affliction it was. He didn't want to find himself clenched in an embrace with a married Bajoran or worse one of the Starfleeters.

Julian

Ops

The doctor knew that Major Kira usually arrived very early for her shift, often before the rest of the officers. In fact, he was counting on it. Despite knowing that most of the drama that happened at the festival centered around Ambassador Troi's infection with Zanthi fever and her displaced amorous intentions with Odo, he felt lingering awkwardness. He could tell that many people did, and he thought that if they talked about it, it might clear the air a little. He nodded a greeting to the two ensigns going about their business and turned to face Kira when she entered from the turbolift.

She hesitated a beat before striding over to him. "Julian?" she said, looking up at him expectantly.

He cleared his throat. "I was wondering if...if perhaps you wanted to talk about what happened at the festival."

She smiled brightly, a hard gleam in her black eyes. "Ab-so-lutely not," she said.

"Um, me neither," he mumbled, feeling his cheeks color. "So we're all right?"

"Mmhmm," she said, nodding vigorously.

"OK, then, I should be reporting to the infirmary in a while. I just wanted to...make sure, because I value your friendship," he said.

Her look softened slightly for that. "I value yours, too," she said. "It's awkward to think about it, so I'm just not. Can we both just not?"

"I can do that," he said, feeling immensely better. "Thank you, Nerys." He walked past her to enter the turbolift. There was one other person he had to see before his shift started, and he wasn't looking forward to it. He burned with shame when he thought of how dismissive of Garak he had been. It didn't matter that he wasn't in control of himself. He recalled exactly what he had said and how he had said it. More than that, he recalled the look on Garak's face. The Cardassian could deny it all he liked. He hadn't set aside his feelings.

He stopped by his own quarters first. The tailor had rejected him so many times over the past several weeks that it was getting harder to work up the courage even to try. He had been meaning to throw away the data rod upon which Garak had recorded his embarrassingly gushy letter in bad Kardassi. Something had always stopped him. Now he was glad of it, for he hoped to get some inspiration for what to say in reading it again. He inserted the rod into his terminal and watched Kardassi script blossom onto the screen. He peered more

closely. *This isn't what I wrote*, he realized with a start.

Swallowing in a suddenly dry mouth, he drew his chair closer to the screen. *"My dear Doctor,"* it began, *"I'm counting on the human tendency toward excessive sentiment to prevent you from discarding this supposed relic of our failed relationship and to ensure that you will return to it in time, either out of nostalgia or regret."*

He snorted very softly. Leave it to Garak not to spare him even in a letter. The fact that he wrote one at all had him completely off kilter. He couldn't read it very quickly, because it was in the same archaic Kardassi script as Preloc. He did the best he could and resisted the impulse to plug it into the UT. It might miss some subtleties.

"At some point in time, I have no doubt that you will realize that even though I have left you, my affection for you has not abated. You are exceptionally perceptive for a human, and I am weaker than I care to be when it comes to you." Julian felt his breath catching in his throat. He had wanted to hear this so badly. It took everything he had to sit and continue reading, when all he wanted to do was to leap up and run straight to Garak's quarters.

"You say that you love me with all of your heart. Coming from anyone else, I would count this as hyperbole. Coming from you, it pains me more than you can know. The young never want to hear this from those older and more experienced than they, but in being so free with your devotion, you are making a mistake. I am not a noble, misunderstood creature who just needs love to reform."

"I would do unspeakable things to you if told to do so by those for whom I once worked. I would gladly sacrifice you if it meant going home. I told you of Major Kira's whereabouts not because of sentiment or personal loyalty to you, but because I was told to do so. I do not know why I was given such instructions, and I do not question orders. I never expected to be forced back to Cardassia, and I am surprised that I survived. Rest assured the only reason I did is because someone powerful must want me alive; to what end I cannot say."

"You will never be to me what I am to you. You may currently believe that it doesn't matter, and you may be content to accept such little affection as I have to give. As you grow older, wiser, I can assure you that this will change. If I allowed it, you would one day come to realize what a very poor bargain you had made with your love and loyalty, and your open, generous nature would give over to bitterness."

"Don't delude yourself into thinking that this is just another of my fabrications. In my weakness, it would be all too easy to fill your head with pretty words and pleasure you enough to pacify any doubts. In this one way, you have managed to do something no one else ever has. You have inspired me to think more of another than I think of myself. If you love me as much as you say you do, you will respect how very difficult that was for me, and you will not make it harder by tempting me to reconsider. I have rarely asked anything of another in my life in the way that I am asking this of you."

Elim"

"You magnificently manipulative bastard," he breathed softly, his shoulders slumping. It was

as though he knew exactly what to say to pierce the heart of his intentions and kill them unfulfilled. *"If you love me...you will respect..."* Of course he did, and of course he would. What other choice did he have? Still, just because they were going to admit that a relationship wouldn't work between them, did that mean he had to sacrifice the friendship, too? He tightened his jaw. No, it didn't mean that. He ejected the data rod and slipped it into his pocket, heading for Garak's quarters with a different intention than his original one but no less determination.

He was relieved that Garak didn't make him hail him twice. After the first door chime, he heard a fairly cheerful, "Enter."

He did so, spotting the Cardassian at his dining table eating breakfast. The sight sent a pang through him. He missed their breakfasts, stinky food and all. "Please," he said, "don't get up," as he saw the man about to rise. "May I?" he asked, gesturing at the chair opposite.

"Of course," Garak said, inclining his head. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit?"

He didn't answer him immediately, taking the data rod from his pocket and setting it lightly on the table between them. He took his seat and laced both hands together on the tabletop. "I'm sure you recognize that," he said, surprised at how calm he sounded.

Garak hesitated a beat as though considering what to say. He then nodded. "I do. I was wondering when you'd get around to reading it."

"It would've been too much for me to expect that you'd just tell me you had written me a letter back," the doctor said with faint amusement. "That's a statement, by the way, not a question. I accept what you said. All of it. I believe you when you say you don't and can't feel the way I feel. I know that where Cardassia is concerned, I come in a distant second."

"I'm glad to hear you sounding so sensible," Garak said, eying him warily. "Why do I hear a 'but' just dying to follow?"

He smiled faintly. "You don't. Well, not entirely. I miss the friendship, Garak. I think it's positively ridiculous for us to take the stance that if we can't be lovers, we can't be friends. We were friends first, after all, and it was rewarding and fulfilling for both of us."

Garak took a sip of his rokassa juice, his expression thoughtful. "I confess I miss the mental stimulation of your company at lunch. Rom is a dear man and intelligent in his own way, but he and I share very few interests. I warn you, Julian, if you're seeking to put a foot in the door with this, I'll see right through it, and I won't be happy with you."

"I know that," he said, still feeling heavy, but resigned to the reality of the situation. "I'm not entirely happy with this. You know what I'd prefer, but I know that pushing for my preference would just drive a wedge between us altogether. If I didn't think that I would be capable of respecting this boundary, I wouldn't be asking you for it."

The tailor favored him with a long, searching look. He seemed satisfied with whatever he

saw, for he nodded and visibly relaxed. "I'm grateful, Doctor," he said. "It's something I've been wanting to ask you for, myself, but I felt that it would be cruel of me. I know that were situations reversed, I would not appreciate being asked to just be friends if I wasn't ready to take that step. Shall we resume our reading schedules, then?"

"Yes, let's," Julian replied. He felt a small sense of accomplishment, for he hadn't expected to achieve even that degree of success. "Would you mind if I had breakfast with you? I had to get out early this morning, and I haven't had a chance to eat."

"Help yourself to the replicator," Garak said, gesturing. "I'm glad of the company."

As he ordered his breakfast, the doctor decided against bringing up the issue of what Garak had seen the day of the festival. The tailor wasn't acting strange or strained. He would have heard along with the rest of the station inhabitants that the odd behavior was caused by a virus. Perhaps it was best just to let that one lie. As he sat across from him with his toast and eggs, he asked, "So, read anything interesting lately?"

Part III

*Garak
Replimat Café*

He liked the return to routine. It wasn't without its awkward moments, discomforts, and even occasional near misses when one or the other of them wavered a bit in their commitment to their decision. To believe that things would be exactly as before would be complete folly. They couldn't pretend they had no history. In many ways, it made the friendship an easier one than before, for they had verbal and nonverbal shorthand for so many things that Garak had previously found difficult to convey across the cultural divide. They resumed their sparring over their tastes in literature, and he delighted in the fact that the doctor was much more capable of holding his own than he had been a year before. He didn't completely abandon Rom in the new arrangement. True friends were hard to come by and not to be discarded just because a more attractive option presented itself.

He had seen the doctor off for the Annual Starfleet Symposium on Earth almost a week ago and hoped that he was enjoying himself back home. He didn't try to pretend that he wasn't envious of the experience, the ability to return home and contribute something useful. It didn't stop him from being gracious about it. He expected them all back within an hour or two and had decided to make himself visible and available to be regaled with tales of what it was like. Julian had been more excited about the trip than he had seen him about anything in a very long time.

He divided his attention among his food, one of his favorite Enigma Tales, and the small crowd passing by and doing business on the Promenade. At close to the two hour mark, he noticed the doctor approaching from the direction of the docking ring. His slight smile shifted to a frown. The man walked with a hitch to his gait, as though he had been injured, and he looked gaunter than usual and tired. *If you keep coming back from these joint excursions looking as though you've been passed through a wringer, I may have to get very testy with that Commander of yours*, he thought. He stood and offered a palm to press. They did so, and

both took their seats. "You look dreadful," he said without preamble.

"I don't doubt it," the doctor said, rubbing tiredly at his face. "I'm going to my quarters soon to sleep for about a week or so." He stifled a yawn behind a hand.

"I was under the impression that Starfleet actually fed and housed their people at these symposiums. Perhaps you do things differently than we do on Cardassia," he said lightly.

Julian quirked a half smile. "You're not funny, you know," he said fondly. "Things didn't go quite as planned. I don't want to talk about it, at least not yet. I did want to find you and let you know I was fine in case you heard any rumors otherwise."

"Your definition of fine and my definition of fine apparently differ," he said tartly. At the doctor's warning look he held up a hand. "Far be it from me to pry. As you can see, I am simply sitting here having a conversation." He wondered if the man would tell him if he weren't fine, and he realized with a sigh that he didn't have much of a right to expect the truth. He couldn't automatically offer comfort the way he once had. Just as Julian had accepted his imposed limits, he had to accept Julian's. "When, or if, you want to talk about it, you know how to find me. I don't mind being awakened."

"I appreciate the offer," the man said in a way that made Garak believe he had no intention of accepting it. "As much as I'd like the chance to catch up, I really need some rest."

"Of course," Garak said, standing when he did. "I've taken a long lunch, so it would be in my best interest to return to the shop. I'm not going to run the risk of awakening you over the next few days. If you want company, do let me know."

He tried not to take it too personally that the doctor didn't take advantage of his offer. As Julian regained strength, returned to his proper weight, and took enough rest, the haunted look faded from his eyes. The tailor resigned himself to the fact that he would probably never know what ordeal the doctor suffered on Earth. The only person who might have relented and told him anything, Dax, was also keeping the details very close to the vest.

Early one morning in the shop a couple of weeks after their return, the prompt that Garak always eagerly anticipated flashed upon his monitor. He decrypted the message, blinking in surprise. A treaty between Bajor and Cardassia on the horizon? Was such a thing even possible? He was told not to interfere but to observe what he could and report any difficulties. Not for the first time, he wondered who his contact in the Obsidian Order was and just where his or her political loyalties lay.

Two days later, he saw Odo, Chief O'Brien, and several security officers run past his shop, followed moments later by Doctor Bashir and several of his staff members. He knew not to get in the way. However, he positioned himself toward the front of his shop for the best view. Almost fifteen minutes later, they came running back again, carrying wounded individuals in their arms. He wondered why they didn't transport them instead. When he saw Kai Winn sweep past, he felt a twinge of worry. If the incident revolved around the upcoming treaty negotiations, this didn't bode well for success. Either Cardassians or Bajorans could be involved. There were factions on both sides who almost surely did not want to see such a

thing succeed.

He kept close watch on the situation and tapped the few resources he had at his disposal to learn all that he could of the accident. His clandestine investigation took him most of the day. He intended to contact Julian to let him know he would have to cancel their dinner plans only to discover that he was still tied up with one of the patients. Seeing Major Kira seated in the infirmary waiting room with a haunted, worried look, he didn't have to ask who that patient was, Vedek Bareil. He included all of this in his report, shut the shop for the night, and retired to his quarters.

His door chime drew him out of sleep. "Computer, what time is it, and who is at my door?" he asked.

"The time is 0116. Doctor Julian Bashir is at the door."

"Enter," he said through the comm. "Lights at twenty percent in the sitting room." He rolled out of bed, stuffed his feet into the slippers Julian had given him some time ago, and hurried out of the bedroom. "You look dead on your feet," he said as soon as he saw him. "You shouldn't be here. You should be in bed."

"I know," Julian replied, sounding as drained as he looked. "I intend to try to sleep in a while. I'm just too keyed up right now, and I wanted to apologize to you personally for standing you up for dinner. I didn't have time to get word to you."

"I know about the accident. I saw the lot of you running past my shop this morning. I saw Kai Winn, too," he said. Heading over to his replicator, he said, "One Tarkalean tea." He passed the mug to the grateful doctor. "One red leaf tea," he ordered for himself. "How is the Vedek?"

"You know I can't tell you that," he said, moving to sink to a seat in one corner of Garak's sofa. "I will say he's alive, at least."

"What implications do you think this will have for the treaty?" he asked casually, taking his seat at the other side of the sofa.

Julian gave a small start and sighed a soft sound of exasperation. "Is there anything that happens around here that you don't know about?"

"Let's just say I am a very curious individual, and I have a wide range of interests," he said. "I'm not asking for official Starfleet intelligence. I'm asking your personal opinion."

"I really don't know," he said, taking a sip of the tea. "Do I think that the Kai can pull this off on her own? I don't," he said heavily. "You've seen her in action. She's overly condescending, and if she strikes that tone in the negotiations..."

"Legate Turrel will have her for breakfast," Garak finished for him. He sipped his tea. "I don't have to tell you how important this is," he said softly. "For the entire quadrant."

“No, you don't,” the doctor said, closing his eyes and resting his head back. “I'm going to do everything in my power to keep Vedek Bareil functional for his task, but I'm a doctor. I have to consider his health. I can't allow Winn or anyone else to manipulate him into pushing himself beyond his ability to recover.”

“You may not have a choice,” the tailor said, eying him levelly. “This isn't a Starfleet matter. It's a Bajoran one. They are the ones who will decide what you must or mustn't do.” He knew what it would cost his dear doctor if they forced him to push the Vedek to an early grave, and his heart hurt for him. However, there was nothing he could do, and he had to admit that such a treaty was worth a life if it came to it.

“I know,” Julian whispered. He set his tea mug on the floor and uncurled from his seat. “I ought to get to bed,” he said. “I could be called back to the infirmary at any moment, and I have to be able to function. Thank you for putting up with my coming by so late. I know I awakened you.”

“My dear, for such times as these, I am always at your disposal,” he said sincerely. He remained awake long after the man had left, sipping his tea and wondering how things would turn out. Everything was so up in the air with this Dominion threat. Cardassia and every government in the Alpha Quadrant would need all the allies they could get in the coming days.

Julian *The Infirmary*

He had known that in the end it would come to this. He took only small consolation in the fact that the treaty had been signed. It had happened at the cost of the life of a very good man. As he watched Nerys standing over the Vedek and looking down at him, he took a PADD from his nurse and scanned over it. The other half of Bareil's brain was dying. He hated having to tell Nerys, and he hated Winn even more for being there and supporting his position that they should let the man go.

When she left them, he had the heartbreaking task of convincing an obviously desperate woman that she had to accept her lover's death as inevitable and that he couldn't replace the rest of his brain without destroying his last spark of personality, of life. How he managed to do it without breaking down, he credited only to his sense of professionalism. After she asked for some time alone, he gladly gave it to her. He didn't know how much longer he could stand to look into those anguished dark eyes without allowing a crack in his professional facade.

He knew where he wanted to go, where he had to go, the moment he left the infirmary, and as he walked, he knew something else, too. No matter how right he sounded, Garak was wrong about them. His position wasn't common sense. It was cowardice. It was refusal to accept joy today for fear of pain tomorrow. It was his biggest, grandest lie yet, and he was no longer content to go along with it, not for a single moment more.

Despite the late hour, Garak answered his first hail with an immediate, “Enter.” He strode into the quarters and saw the Cardassian seated on his sofa, wrapped in a robe, sipping tea, and reading. He realized that if he saw that sight every night of his life for the rest of his life,

he would never tire of it. Garak must have sensed something amiss, because he set both tea and PADD aside and stood. "Doctor?" he asked, tipping his head slightly.

"Bareil is dying," he said.

"Oh, my dear, I'm sorry," the tailor said, taking a hesitant step toward him and stopping there.

"I'm sorry, too, but it's not why I'm here," he said. "Or rather, it is why I'm here, in a way."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Garak said.

"There's a lot I don't understand, myself. Such as how a man as intelligent as you are could be willing to live his life dictated by what-ifs."

"I beg your pardon?" the Cardassian's voice came a bit sharper.

"You pushed me away because you were afraid of what would happen if we stayed together. Because you're so damned persuasive, I listened to you, and I agreed that it made sense, when the simple fact is that it doesn't. A flaming asteroid could bear down on this entire station tomorrow and obliterate every single one of us," he said heatedly.

"I highly doubt your Commander would allow such a thing without employing station defenses," Garak retorted. "Besides, asteroids don't typically flame on their own. There's nothing to burn in space."

"Elim? Shut up. I'm talking now. I've listened and listened to you for months. Now you're going to listen to me. You know good and well that's not the point. A bulkhead could collapse and crush my skull. You could trip on the stairs at Quark's and fall to your death. Yes, an assassin could be sent here straight from Tain to poison my Tarkalean tea, or I could wake up years from now and decide I've wasted more of my life trying to get through to you than I should have. There are literally millions of ways to die, and there are unlimited things that can go wrong in relationships. If we live every waking moment in that context, then we're not living at all."

"You said you wouldn't do this," Garak protested.

"Fine. I lied," he said simply, fixing him with a hard glare. "I don't care about assassins and regrets. I don't care that you think you aren't good enough for me. I don't even care if you're right. Right at this moment, Nerys is in the infirmary telling an unconscious man all the things she never got to say to him because both of them were too busy with their duties to devote the time to each other that they wanted. You and I don't have that problem. We do have the time, and I am sick to death of your excuses for why we shouldn't make good on it." He strode right up to him, invading his space fearlessly. "Of all of the things that I've thought of you over the years, I've never thought you were a coward," he said. "Are you?"

Garak's eyes flashed. "You think it's that simple? That you'll just give me a pretty speech and goad me, and I'll change my mind?"

"I think that if you want me to leave instead of stay here and make love to you tonight, then you're going to have to kick me out, and you're going to have to convince me that it's what you'd actually prefer and not what you're doing because you're worried about me, my heart, or my career. I told you before I won't be your excuse. It's my fault I didn't follow through on that. I won't be making that same mistake twice," he said, eyes blazing.

"You're insufferable!" Garak said, turning away from him and putting distance between them. "I can't believe I let you convince me you could be my friend. I should have known better. You're far too sentimental and idealistic, too immature just to let things lie as they ought to be."

"As they ought to be," Julian mocked, closing the distance again. He'd chase him all the way around the room if he had to. "You mean as you think they ought to be. In case you've forgotten, you're only half of this equation, and age doesn't automatically qualify you as always right."

"I'm right more often than I like to be," Garak retorted. "Would you stop standing right on me like that? You're starting to make me angry."

"You're not right about this. If you want me to step back, then make me."

"Don't think I won't," he said coldly, a warning look flaring in the blue depths of his deep set eyes.

Julian spread his arms as though to dare him. Instead, the Cardassian shouldered past him to head toward the door. "Computer," he said. Before he could get the rest of it out, the doctor seized him by his robe and forcefully turned him back, twisting both fists in the robe lapels and pulling him into a searing kiss. Garak jerked his head back and did something with his hands that Julian couldn't quite follow. The next thing he knew, he was flat on his back on the floor with the wind knocked out of him; Garak had a knee on his chest and most of his considerable weight pressed on that knee. "You'd dare?" he hissed.

He coughed and wheezed, unable to get any words out. Instead he nodded and pressed at Garak's leg. Eventually, he felt the pressure ease, but only just. "I would," he choked out. "I did, and I'm not sorry for it."

Garak suddenly shifted and stood. He yanked him to his feet by the front of his uniform with such pitiful ease that for the first time, the doctor realized he truly had no idea how strong Garak really was. Before he could get his bearings, he found himself being turned and shoved toward the door. "Out!" the Cardassian insisted. "Out right now!"

Beneath the outrage, he heard something else. "You're turned on," he said, turning as soon as he could and stopping his momentum. He absorbed the next shove with his hips and knees and seized both of the man's thick wrists.

"It doesn't make me want you out of here any less," Garak snarled.

"No, I'm sure it makes you that much more desperate to get me to leave. Like I said, Elim, convince me you don't want this for your sake. That's all you have to do."

There was a confused moment of feeling pulled and shoved almost simultaneously, and the next he knew, the tailor was kissing him so hard their teeth clacked together. He groaned, maddened by this sudden shift, and ripped the thick robe down from the man's shoulders so he could reach those exquisite neck ridges. He squeezed and kneaded mercilessly, knowing that the rough treatment would push the Cardassian past the point of control, all the while thrusting and twining his tongue deep within the other man's mouth.

He felt powerful hands gripping the front of his uniform and heard the fabric ripping. He couldn't bring himself to worry about it, shrugging his shoulders and pulling his arms free of the sleeves as Garak jerked the jacket off of him and gave similar treatment to his trousers. He was flung to his knees in front of the couch, skidding over the carpet and wincing from the burn. Garak forced him forward, pressed him tightly to the sofa seat to the point that until he managed to squirm his head to the side, he couldn't breathe.

No matter how impassioned they had been in the past, he had never been taken this way, never been made to recognize that if the compactly built alien wanted to manhandle him and force him to anything he wished, he could. He felt slicked fingers parting him abruptly and shuddered, wondering now if this was an act of want and need for Garak or if it was an act of rage. Was he being punished? If so, it was hardly an effective punishment. He had wanted him so badly for so long that he felt he was about to explode without even being touched where his ache was centered most.

He cried out at the first, forceful penetration, welcoming the pain. Garak's natural lubrication wasn't quite adequate for the hard use to which he put the doctor. Julian didn't care. He ground his hips backwards, circling and lifting himself against the belly scales scraping his flesh. Sharp teeth sank into the muscle of his back just above his left shoulder blade. He felt them scraping and something hot and wet running downward, tickling him and mingling with his beading sweat, his own blood, he knew.

He reached back, trying to tug Garak's hand around him to no avail. Instead, he clamped tighter to his hips, digging his nails in. Unable to stop his hoarse grunts, his breath forced from him on every brutal thrust, he wrapped his hand around his own aching erection and pumped quickly. The tailor reached down and seized his wrist in an implacable grip, tugged his hand away, and twisted his arm at a painful angle behind him. He knew that unless he wanted his other shoulder wrenched, too, he had best keep his hand pressed flat to the couch where it was. The slightly napped fabric scraped his nipples, exquisite torture that shifted gradually from pleasure to pain. He wondered if there would be a spot on him by the time Garak finished that wasn't scraped, abraded, wrenched, or bruised. His hand had long since gone numb from the constrictive grasp on his wrist.

He lost all track of time, measuring the moments in nothing more than movement and endurance. He truly didn't know how much more he could take, sweat soaked and dizzy from strain, his already tired and taxed body and mind driven far beyond what he'd normally

attempt after so many painstaking hours of surgery and worry. He cried out in relief when he felt Garak's punishing member swell and pulse, flooding him with warm wetness that eased protesting, raw tissue. "Oh, God," he gasped. "Oh, thank God..."

He found himself lifted and flipped over, tossed onto the couch like a rag doll, and curled uncomfortably as Garak lifted his legs by the backs of his knees and spread them open. "Elim, please," he panted. "I can't..."

He may as well have been talking to one of the bulkheads. He winced as Garak nipped and bit his way up his thighs, genuinely afraid that the bites wouldn't stop when it came to more sensitive flesh. Perhaps he really had pushed him too far. He tensed and managed to get both fists tangled into the man's hair, fully prepared to pull as hard as he needed to get him away if it came to that.

Instead of the expected teeth, he felt the warm rasp of the man's long tongue, cupping under his balls and lifting in lapping, languid strokes. He gasped, pushing with both hands instead of pulling. Garak stilled altogether until he released the pressure. "Damn you," he moaned, twisting his head against the back of the couch. It was hard to get enough breath curled as he was. No matter how he shifted himself, the tailor managed to maneuver him back to the same discomfort within moments.

Pleasure and discomfort mingled, building a strange sort of tension in his psyche, fight or flight at war with stay put and *enjoy*. Garak laved and sucked his balls, teased his tongue tip over the sensitive skin beneath them, circled and even soothed over his sore, swollen tissue still throbbing from the recent abuse. He heard himself whimper unbidden and tried to bite it back. He should have known better. The diabolical tailor had ways of getting exactly what he wanted out of Julian, and apparently, he enjoyed that whimper very much. More quickly followed.

He felt his legs go to trembling, only the firm pressure at the backs of his knees holding them in place. That trembling radiated outward until his entire body betrayed him with it. "Elim, please," he groaned. "Please...I can't take anymore. Please!"

He learned the difference between what he only thought he could take and the reality of it. By the time the Cardassian decided to allow him his full pleasure, he had no more coherent thoughts at all, no pride, no defenses. That mouth did things to him that should have been illegal, and with a finger and a thumb wrapped about his balls and keeping them held in place, he couldn't even come until Garak was good and ready for it.

He moaned a weak protest when he felt the mouth pulling away and a tightly clasped hand slide downward to take its place. The pressure on his balls eased and lifted. Instantly, he spasmed, crying out until he was hoarse. He felt his own seed splash his face, his hair, his chest. Garak's lips and tongue followed hungrily while his hand milked him dry.

He knew he must have blacked out for a while, because the next time he was aware of himself, he wasn't balled almost double on the couch. He was lying on a firm, Cardassian bed cradled against the side of an even firmer Cardassian. He could barely keep his eyes open, but he lifted his gaze to see if the man was awake or asleep. He met an unreadable look.

Anxiety blossomed in the pit of his stomach. He had hoped that after all of that, he would finally be granted a little warmth.

“You're entirely too stubborn for your own good,” Garak said severely.

“I know,” Julian mumbled.

“You provoked me beyond reason,” he added.

He snorted a soft laugh. “Could tell,” he barely managed to get out, so exhausted that even vocalizing taxed him.

“It's not funny, you idiot. I could've hurt you.”

“Did,” he confirmed.

Garak sighed and bent his head forward to rest his lips on the sweat plastered curls clinging to his forehead. “This is the sort of life you want, having to watch yourself around the one person you should be able to trust above all others? Never knowing when or if you're being lied to, manipulated, and used? Risking abandonment the moment I discover I can return to Cardassia?”

“My risk to take,” he murmured, closing his eyes against the press of those lips and the puffs of breath gently caressing him.

“Don't push me like that again,” Garak said more softly, tightening his arm about him and settling him closer. “I'm not proud of what I did to you tonight, or how I felt while I was doing it.”

“Don't...make me so desperate again that I feel like I have to just to reach you,” he said.

“Oh, my dear,” he said on a long exhale. “All right. You win, if you can call it such. Be quiet now, and get some sleep. You should've gone straight to bed after that vedek of yours passed beyond your ability to help. You have far more stubbornness than you have sense. I'll give you that.”

Julian smiled against his neck and said, “You wouldn't have me any other way.”

End Notes

This story was originally posted on LiveJournal December 16th, 2009. It spans the Deep Space 9 episodes "The Abandoned" through "Life Support." I used a few lines directly from the script of "Civil Defense," namely the computer notifications and one brief exchange between Bashir and Garak in Ops. Although I didn't modify the basic plots of any of the shows I included, I did give a pretty different take on "Fascination." They played it for comic effect, but at its core, the situations set up in that show were pretty disturbing and would be scary for those involved. Plus, it made no sense to me only principal cast members were affected when Lwaxana was all over the Promenade. This story could still qualify as a stand-alone, but with the weight of back story building up, it makes more sense at least in the context of "The Servant of Your Heart".

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