

OF THE HIGHEST ORDER

This is an AU (alternate universe story).

Chapter One

Julian Bashir struggled against the bonds that held him in the chair. He tried so hard not to look into the eyes of the two Cardassians looming over him. Dukat: eager to introduce the delicate young human to the cruelty of Cardassian torture by diabolically coercing the only one of his kind that the naïve human trusted to be the one to hurt him. Garak: miserable in his awareness that Dukat's sadistic plan would inevitably succeed, and that Garak must eventually give in to the order to torture and terrify his fragile friend. It was the only way to prevent Dukat from far more violently doing it instead, and Garak would do whatever it took to spare his vulnerable friend *that*. But Garak also knew what it would cost *him* to see the human's trusting gaze turned forever into one of fear of him. The terrible irony was that Garak easily had it in him to commit such atrocities. He had tortured many victims in his own long career, and all three of them here knew it. Garak knew that Bashir was fully aware of it, but it was something that they never discussed between them, something about which the human was careful never to ask him, and Garak was under no illusion as to why not: the idealistic young doctor would cringe away in horror to hear about the creative violations that Garak had routinely performed. Cardassian males made it a point to know all of the vulnerabilities for every species known. Even worse, agents of the Obsidian Order were trained to automatically, expertly, and dispassionately analyze, almost within minutes of meeting someone, the most traumatic methods to use on that specific individual for maximum effectiveness, and to systematically retain those conclusions just in case they needed to torture that person at some later time. Garak had always had a particularly eerie talent for that grim evaluation. He had made a conscious effort ever since the end of the Occupation to squelch the ability, at least toward those on DS9 whom he encountered daily, but he knew that he hadn't really succeeded; it was too ingrained. With a sinking heart, he realized that he knew all too well what to do to Bashir to break him, as well as to anyone else on the station.

As if the human could hear his thoughts, Bashir shuddered involuntarily at that moment. Dukat saw the shudder, correctly interpreted it, and laughed softly. His powerful hand snaked under Bashir's chin to roughly force him to meet their eyes, to make him face Dukat's smug sadism and Garak's guilty despair. At the same time, it made Garak face the desperately frightened, panicked expression that Bashir found it impossible to banish.

Throughout all of their easygoing, casually friendly lunches, Garak had done his very best to lull the malleable, tender human into focusing on the cultural achievements that hallmarked the best of Cardassian civilization, and to downplay the vile, uncomfortable truth: that the highlight of most male Cardassians' lives was cruelty and sadism. Uncannily knowing that, as he seemed all too often to know about events on the station, Dukat wanted Bashir's illusions destroyed, wanted him to see the foul reality of the worldly friend that he had chosen.

When Bashir's terrified tears finally came, Dukat allowed him to pull away, to duck his face out of their sight once more.

"Dukat!" Bashir cried raggedly. "Why would you do this to me?! I've done nothing to you!!"

"Oh, how quickly they forget." Dukat was enjoying himself. "Do you remember, not so long ago, how you thwarted my plan to disgrace a political rival by revealing that he'd left his own son behind after the Occupation, in the care of a *Bajoran*?"

Bashir's shoulders sagged, in a graphic, wordless, Uh oh!

Dukat went on, "In fact, it was Garak who uncovered the truth, handed you the clues, and shamelessly manipulated you into exposing me. *He* used you then to punish *me*. I'm using you now to punish *him*. Appropriate, don't you think?"

Garak veritably growled at the monstrous placement of his soft young friend in the middle of their long-term feud, even as he bitterly, inwardly acknowledged that Dukat was right, and that he, Garak, had done so first. The unexpected sound drew Bashir's eyes up to his friend's face, the human's gaze imploring, beseeching.

Dukat cruelly continued, "And do you remember, human, how *boldly* you dared to stand right up close to me, visibly pleased with yourself, recklessly accusing me, in front of all of those people, heedless of the possible consequences?"

To Dukat's immense satisfaction, the desired terror, regret, and realization of his own prior foolishness flowed into the sufferer's face.

The former prefect taunted, "Do you feel so bold *now*, human?"

Bashir forced his eyes to ignore the dangerous predator, and to remain fixed on Garak's face, silently, eloquently begging his friend to find a way to get him out of this.

Noticing his victim's focus, Dukat adapted his tactic accordingly. "Go ahead," he urged. "It's Garak that you want to talk to, not me. It's Garak who's going to hurt you. Tell him how you feel; talk to him of your fear; tell him how terribly afraid of him you are. You won't give away anything that we don't already know. Garak and I both know more about your fears than you can ever imagine."

Bashir flinched at that naked truth, and Garak winced in sympathy. But by now, the human was too terrified to ignore his desperate need to do exactly as Dukat had said. "Garak, please, don't let this happen to me!!! Or if you can't get me out of it, then please go easy on me!! Don't let *him*...!!!"

"Julian." Garak sounded infinitely tired. "If I don't hurt you, and thoroughly, he'll know. He'll *know*, Julian! He's too perceptive, too good at all of this, too, to be fooled. And if I *don't* hurt you, he *will*!" Dreading what he soon had to do, knowing that time was running out, Garak irresistibly poignantly caressed the fragile cheek, bitterly convinced that after today, Bashir would never again willingly let him do so. Bashir leaned into it automatically, desperately needing the comforting, his tormented face cradled in Garak's strong hand.

Dukat chuckled at the sight. "Oh, how touching!" he sneered. He watched for a moment, basking in his power over the pair, and then turned to Garak, and harshly demanded, "Hurt him. Now."

Bashir pulled away from Garak as if burned, and cut loose with a scream that was loud and long, and so wordlessly shrill that both Cardassians were startled by its intensity. But it changed nothing.

Desperately stalling, Garak accused Dukat, “At least ask him questions! What kind of interrogation *is* this?? Give him a chance to surrender!”

“Good idea,” said a voice from behind them.

Dukat looked instantly furious; Garak and Bashir whirled in shock.

“Tain!” Garak could scarcely believe it.

Bashir watched the newcomer with wide, fearful eyes, not at all certain whether this new wrinkle would make the situation better or infinitely worse.

Tain was rueful. “Having fun, Dukat? Are you forgetting that we have a purpose here? And I’m not referring to your petty search for revenge.”

As Dukat simmered, Garak addressed Tain, “What do you want with him?” He indicated the tied human, his eyes a conflicting mixture of deep suspicion and desperate hope.

“I want your little pet human here to tell us everything that he knows about a certain very interesting subject.”

“And if he does? You’ll put a stop to this??”

“If he cooperates? Yes.”

Bashir sank into himself in relief. Barely able to produce a voice, he offered an unconditional surrender, “I will answer. What subject?”

Tain declared, “In a word: Sloan.”

Bashir’s complexion was instantly ghastly white. “Oh...my...god!!! *How in the hell did you...???*”

“I’m asking the questions; you’re answering,” Tain told him flatly.

Alarmed at his friend’s reaction, Garak insisted, “Julian, we’re in a very precarious situation here; if you don’t want your worst nightmares to come true, *TELL HIM!!!*”

But now Tain’s attention was on Garak. “I’m getting the impression, Doctor, that you didn’t even tell Garak about this. It didn’t come up in even *one* of your famous lunches?”

Bashir’s voice was barely above a whisper. “I couldn’t. I *especially* couldn’t tell Garak, not *this*! It’s too ironic, too humiliating, *too* horrible! I’m so ashamed!!”

Coldly businesslike, Tain ordered Garak, “All right, we’ll do it Dukat’s way. *Make* him tell you.”

But before Garak could react, Bashir cried, “No!! Please, sir, you’ve misunderstood me! I’m *not* refusing to answer; I’m just explaining why I haven’t told Garak...until now.”

During the last few moments, Dukat’s expression went from angry to gleeful to disappointed. Garak seemed cautiously, marginally relieved.

Bashir regarded him bleakly. “You’re going to tease me unmercifully about this.”

Garak said tightly, “That’s better than torturing you unmercifully, isn’t it??? Now quit stalling and *TELL US!!!*” He leaned forward and shouted the last part in his friend’s face.

Suddenly, Garak was every bit as terrifying as Dukat and Tain, and Bashir physically jolted in surprise. His shocked response to what the other two Cardassians thought of as Garak’s normal style starkly revealed just how well Garak had concealed from Bashir his grislier talents. The human was staring at Garak in disbelief that he’d

treated him so harshly, and as if he scarcely recognized him. Under less grim circumstances, it would've been comical, and drawn a laugh from the other Cardassians.

After a deep sigh, Bashir said, "All right. After all of my holier-than-thou speeches to you, Garak, about the 'noble' Federation, and its lofty ability to be high-and-mightily true to its ideals...." He turned visibly bitter. "I was wrong. It was all hypocrisy, all a sham. Turns out we're just as evil and corrupt as everyone else. There's a clandestine organization within Starfleet that answers to no one, and that routinely, flagrantly violates every principle for which we stand, all in the name of preserving those same ideals. *Section 31!*" He viciously growled the name. "No, I take it back; we're not just as evil as everybody else, we're *worse* than all of the others, because at least *you're* honest about the existence of your Obsidian Order, and the Romulans admit to the Tal Shiar, and the Klingons don't try to hide Klingon Imperial Intelligence. *We're* the only hypocrites!" On the last sentence, he intended to raise his hands in rage, momentarily forgetting that he was tied, jerked them ineffectually, and yelped, "Ow!"

At this, Dukat did produce a slight smile, at the irony of the as-yet-untouched victim having accidentally hurt *himself* instead.

The human sagged. "May I please be untied?" Bashir humbly asked Tain. "I'm sure that you're aware that I'm laughably incapable of harming any of you."

There might have been a slight crinkle of amusement in Tain's eyes as well, as he told Garak, "Go ahead. Untie him."

Garak was noticeably pleased to do so, even as he was wide-eyed at his friend's stunning revelations. There was also a glimmer of pity in his expression for the obvious way that these grim facts disillusioned and tormented the innocent Bashir. He asked his friend the next question. "How did *you* find out about it?"

"You'll laugh at me."

"Try me."

"They tried to recruit me."

Now all three listeners did laugh, brief barks of disbelief.

"*You???*" demanded Dukat. "They tried to recruit *you???*"

Bashir glanced at him, and then back to Garak. "Do you see, now, all of the reasons why I found it colossally unbearable to face telling *you* all of this?!"

Garak nodded rueful comprehension. "The ironies are staggering."

"Why *you???*" Dukat repeated his demand.

Bashir squirmed in misery. Still looking at Garak, he confessed, "One reason was because of my...holosuite spy programs." He whispered the last three words in shame.

Garak's face was awash with both pity and amusement. He, of course, knew all about those programs, having intruded upon one once.

With one glance at Tain, Bashir blushed like a flare.

No longer bothering to suppress his own humor, Tain said, "*You* pretend to be a spy in holosuite programs???"

Dukat guffawed, and a mortified Bashir dropped his embarrassed face into his newly freed hands, mumbling, "*Not anymore!!!*"

Sympathetically rubbing his friend's back, Garak encouraged, "You implied that there was another reason why they attempted to recruit you." Even in Garak's face, there was more than a hint of *theatre de l'absurde* as he asked the question.

Bashir sighed, more in relief this time. “At least *this* reason is not embarrassing. They felt that my being a doctor could get me into interstellar conferences, where the real agents couldn’t go.”

Tain’s brow ridges rose in grudging respect at that clever approach.

Garak urged gently, “Julian? Are you sure that it wasn’t also because of your genetically-enhanced memorization skills?”

“Yeah, that, too,” he confessed unhappily. “Anyway, *Sloan*...!” Another growled word. “Luther Sloan is the thorn in my side, the cold, nasty sonofabitch agent that keeps popping into my bedroom in the middle of the night! He gives me assignments that he takes for granted that I’ll do, and I always shout back, ‘I don’t work for you, Sloan!’ The most *infuriating* part of it is that he always manages to get his way!” This time, his fists successfully rose impotently, unimpeded, illustrating his frustration. “He knows me too well. Like *you*!” For one second he aimed his anger toward the Cardassians; then he looked momentarily scared that he’d done so, dropped his fists, and went on, subdued, “He manipulates me so that whatever he wants me to do is what I would naturally be inclined to do anyway, on my own.”

“Brilliant!” Tain said in frank admiration.

“And I never see it coming! Even when I think that I’m deliberately crossing him up, he adds yet another layer of complexity to maneuver me even more, and wins yet again.”

Garak, prioritizing differently from Tain, had shrewdly zeroed in on a detail that Tain had ignored. “He pops into your bedroom in the middle of the night???”

“Weird, isn’t it?” Bashir nodded in agreement.

“At least somewhat unconventional. On the other hand, it’s one way to insure getting you alone,” Garak mused.

Bashir stared. “Was that a derogatory comment on my success with women??”

Dukat’s blustery laugh demonstrated his mirth at their byplay.

Bashir looked irritated, but did not dare to aggravate Dukat, so he kept quiet briefly, and then changed the subject. “*Anyhow*! I don’t want you to think that I just took all of this lying down; I went to Sisko! I told Miles O’Brien, too!”

They were unimpressed, but Garak said, “Not Odo? Or Kira?”

Bashir looked uncomfortable again. “We agreed that it was a very private Starfleet problem, and that we especially could *not* let the Bajorans find out about it. They would lose faith in us! When the Provisional Government first asked the Federation in, many of the Bajorans, *including Kira*, were dead set against it! They were afraid that we’d turn out to be another...!” He broke off abruptly, dramatically blushing yet again.

“Another *us*!” Dukat grinned zestfully. Garak and Tain were amused as well.

Bashir sighed, partly from embarrassment, and partly from relief that they were not angry at his latest faux pas. “Anyway, Sisko and Miles and I decided that we would quietly, carefully investigate Section 31 ourselves.”

Until now, the human could never have imagined a guffaw from the calculatedly stoic Tain, but what he next heard very nearly qualified as one, and, wound tighter than a spring as he was, he jumped again in startlement.

“A hopelessly naïve man-child, an Irish hick simpleton, and a rigid Starfleet commander thought that they were going to take on the Federation’s equivalent of the Obsidian Order?” Tain marveled.

Affronted, Bashir nearly yelled, "Simpleton!"

Garak tried to hide from Bashir his amusement that that was the one word, the *only* word, to which Bashir had objected.

"Miles is no simpleton!"

Then Garak's humor emerged, as did Dukat's, even as Tain said placidly, "Well, you knew right away whom I meant, didn't you?"

"Damn it!" Bashir muttered under his breath. Louder, he pointed out, "Well, the 'Irish' part rather gave me a clue! Besides, just because Miles' values are direct and uncluttered, that does not make him a simpleton!"

"I won't argue the point. Proceed." Tain was once again grimly professional.

"Oh. Yeah. Well." Suddenly sheepish, he admitted softly, "We...failed...."

"Now there's a surprise," quipped Dukat.

Still particularly skittish with that one, Bashir fought not to turn and glare at him. "...Because Admiral Ross, in whom Sisko confided, to try to get his help, was *in on it*."

"I'm surprised that you three are still alive," Tain commented.

The human stared. "You're not joking, are you?"

"Not at all," Tain responded flatly. "If you three were citizens of our Empire, instead of the Federation, you *wouldn't* be."

Bashir gulped, but then rallied. "Miles and I have just begun to discuss a new idea that we haven't even told Sisko yet."

Garak eloquently advised against *whatever* it was with a single grunt and a slow, emphatic shaking of his head.

"It might work!" Bashir insisted defensively. "We're thinking of trying to trap Sloan in a forcefield."

Tain was blunt. "You two *little boys* think that you can beat the professionals at their own game?"

More and more irked, Bashir barreled on, "Sloan makes *one stupid mistake* every time that he pops into my bedroom, that'll make it easy to aim a forcefield, and we plan to use it against him! He's too consistent: he's *always* sitting in *the same chair*!"

Sardonically, Garak reminded him, "Julian, your bedroom only *has* one chair."

Tain stared at his former agent. "When were *you* ever in *his* bedroom???"

Watching nonplussed for Dukat's inevitable reaction, Garak admitted, "When I fetched Julian in the middle of the night to go to Bajor, to search for Rugle's adoption records."

Predictably, Dukat's eyes narrowed. Garak rolled his.

"You see?" Dukat challenged viciously. "It was just as I said: *you* instigated that conspiracy against me! And you used this human to do it! He would *never* have come up with any evidence against me on his own!"

"With his genetically-enhanced intellect? Don't be so sure!" Garak retorted.

"You didn't even *know* about that then! You were leading him by the nose! He wouldn't've even *thought* to accuse me of anything without your prompting!"

"Whether I knew about his enhancements then or not is not the issue; he still could have used the abilities!"

"However much he might have investigated Rugle's background, he would never have aimed his suspicions in my direction without your accusations!"

“Hey!” Bashir protested, absurdly annoyed at being ignored. “I thought you guys were supposed to be interrogating me!”

At the three amusedly-raised pairs of brow ridges, the human said in a smaller voice, “Well, you know, it actually helps me to be able to talk about this. I think that it’s therapeutic, really.”

“I’m glad that we’re able to improve your mental health,” said Tain, with an almost-straight face. “You’re doing something for me, as well: this is the first interrogation of which I’ve ever heard, that’s turned into a comedy. That’s not supposed to happen. Congratulations.”

But by this time, Bashir’s eyes were steadily widening in revelation. “Wait one minute! *You* can help us! You can help to rid the Federation of Section 31!” He almost grabbed Tain in his excitement, and stopped himself just in time.

“What?” Tain’s flat tone belied his expression of incredulity.

“It’ll help *you*, *too*! It’s to *your* advantage as well to dispose of that dangerous blight! They’re *your enemy*! Miles and I’ll catch Sloan in a forcefield, and you’ll come get him! You can get all that you need about his covert organization from Sloan, and *shut down Section 31!!*” Only then did it hit Bashir what he was saying, what he was advocating. He was asking three exceedingly dangerous, often-cruel Cardassians to capture a human, one of his own kind, torture him without mercy, and use the resulting information to assassinate hundreds or thousands of other Federation citizens. The doctor made a strangled noise and went white as a Breen icicle.

The three Cardassians were smiling grimly, easily able to read his agonizing thought processes in his expression, and beginning to suspect that the idea might indeed have merit.

Fully aware that he was past the point of no return, Bashir closed his eyes and mumbled to himself, “*It has* to be done! For the good of the Federation! Those misguided renegades could destroy the peace of the Quadrant! Killing hundreds could save billions! ‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few!’”

“Vulcan,” Tain remarked.

“Yes, sir,” whispered a ghastly pale, completely subdued Bashir. After a long silence, broken only by one human’s very unsteady breathing, Bashir went on flatly, looking at Tain, “If you’ll give me a way to quickly contact you, so that you can come as soon as we have him....”

Garak silenced him abruptly with a firm hand on his shoulder. “*I’ll* handle that. You just call *me*.”

Frightened of Tain’s potential anger at his inadvertent presumption, Bashir told Tain meekly, “I’m sorry, sir, if I overstepped....”

“Don’t worry about it.” Tain wasn’t letting it bother him. “All right.” He addressed Garak and Bashir, “We’ll return you two to the station.”

Against his will, Bashir’s eyes slid uncertainly to Dukat. The human dreaded facing days or weeks of living in fear of Dukat’s possible return to complete his unfinished business with Garak and him.

Thus reminded, Tain smiled in satisfaction at Dukat. “Well done,” he said smoothly. “You did a superb job of preparing the human to answer my questions. So fine a job that I’ll excuse your opportunistic use of this mission for your own personal vendetta. By the way, *don’t* do it again.”

After a short, unworried nod of acknowledgment, Dukat turned to Garak and Bashir. "You've earned your reprieve. Garak, I know better than to tell you not to interfere with me again; I'd be wasting my time."

Garak smiled a polite affirmative.

"*But*, if you don't want your little playmate to ever suffer like this anymore, *don't ever again use him against me*. Because next time, Tain might not happen to walk in at just the right moment to save him. Now I've given you fair warning."

This time, Garak's nod was a solemn vow. His eyes made a wordless promise to Bashir as well, to protectively leave him out of their feud in the future.

Dukat looked at Bashir. "Run along now. You don't have to be unduly fearful of me. *Just don't cross me*."

"No, sir, I won't." It was just a whisper, but everyone heard.

Chapter Two

Their conspiracy went surprisingly smoothly. Bashir tried to feel satisfaction as he stood beside Garak, Dukat, and Tain, and looked into their brig at Sloan.

The prisoner was doing an uncommon job of concealing fear from his expression, but he made no attempt to hide the loathing that he felt for Bashir. "You can be incredibly glad that I probably can't find some way to get away from them!"

Bashir looked at his three unlikely allies, shook his head, and said unworriedly, "You won't." His tone was slightly melancholy; a part of him irrationally regretted how much his nemesis was going to suffer.

Sloan's jaw moved, and Bashir thought that he intended to say something else, but instead, the spy's eyes slowly grew wide in mute alarm.

Con conversationally, Tain said, "Can't find your suicide pill? Don't trouble yourself searching; we removed it, of course. Don't look so surprised; all covert agencies use them; they're routine."

Now the fear showed. But Sloan forced it out as rage. "Bashir!!" he positively roared. "*You...young...fool!! Do you have any idea what you've...?!?*" With supreme effort, he stifled his condemnation, undoubtedly because he did not wish for the aliens to witness this display. He willfully closed his eyes, and told the Cardassians expressionlessly, "I will tell you nothing. No matter what." He stood motionless.

When Garak glanced toward Bashir, the doctor somehow couldn't stop himself from asking, "Have you already figured out what...?"

Garak's gaze was tender for the human's fragile feelings, but Dukat answered bluntly, "What torture will work best on him? Oh, yes. We have, indeed." He was clearly relishing the prospect.

Garak spoke gently, "You don't want to know."

Bashir shook his head spasmodically in agreement. He was shivering. Meekly, he asked the Cardassians, "May...I...leave...now???"

Tain regarded him dispassionately. "Sure. We'll beam you right back into your own room."

Relief washed over him; part of Bashir had genuinely feared that some perversity would make the Cardassians, especially Dukat, want to force him to watch the gruesome process.

Sloan's eyes opened and speared his fellow human. "What's the matter, traitor?! Coward! Are you too afraid to even *watch*??!"

"Yes!!!" Bashir whispered, so overwrought that all three Cardassians turned to stare at him. The doctor was the one fighting tears: tears of sympathetic terror and remorse. "Sloan, I'm...!" He just couldn't quite say "sorry," so he gave up and blurted, "...leaving!" He instantly turned and fled the room.

It took hours. Bashir lay on his bed and shook. Fully apprised, Sisko had relieved him of all duty for the duration, as much for the crew's benefit as for Bashir's. No one needed to see the doctor like this; he was utterly incapable of hiding his condition; and Sisko, O'Brien, and Bashir still needed to guard their secret.

Finally, Garak and Dukat beamed surreptitiously, directly into his quarters. Bashir rose very slowly from the bed. Seemingly endlessly, he stared at them, trying not to see them as monsters; and they watched him tremble uncontrollably. No one seemed willing to speak first.

Eventually, Bashir forced out, "Is...he...???"

"Dead, yes." Garak's tone was compassionate.

"You...executed him...already...right after...?"

Predictably, Dukat was blunt. "He died during the torture. Not unplanned. It's more efficient to just go ahead and finish torturing the victim to death, once we have the information that we need."

"*Stop it!!!*" Bashir startled even himself with his passion. He covered his face with his hands and fought for control. Even more strained, he asked, "Will...you...be...able...to...eliminate...Section 31???"

"Oh, yes," Garak confidently assured him. "No doubt of that at all."

Bashir nodded vacantly, and dropped back down to sit on the edge of his bed.

Still feeling a bit nasty toward Bashir, possibly because of Rugle, or because of the doctor's outburst at him just then, Dukat offered, "Do you want us to tell you how we...?"

"*NO!!!*" The human steeled himself, gritted his teeth, and forced his volume lower. "No, I don't."

By this time, just having fun at Bashir's expense, Dukat taunted, "But surely you want to know what Garak and I were going to do to *you* that day, if Tain hadn't walked in at just the right moment???"

Garak actually hissed at him for that, but it was Bashir who astonishingly managed to get through to Dukat. The former prefect had never before heard such a pleadingly desperate, "*Please don't!! Oh, please don't ever tell me!!!*"

No matter how hard Dukat tried to appear unmoved, gazing into the human's eyes visibly affected him. Garak and Bashir both saw it. They knew that he would never admit it later, but for the moment, he clearly knew that they saw his softer side. So, he quietly promised, "All right. We'll spare you that." He pulled out his communicator, and called for his and Garak's transport from the room, and left Bashir in relative peace.

Mere days later, Sisko called Bashir, O'Brien, and Garak to his office. The doctor and the engineer stopped short at the sight of Dukat standing beside their commander. Sisko's expression was carefully neutral, whereas Dukat's was unbearably smug.

The visitor had an announcement to make. “We’re here to celebrate the dissolution of Section 31!” With a flourish, he pulled out a bottle, which, with a sinking feeling, Bashir knew had to be *kanar*. Dukat began to pour into glasses.

Sisko said carefully, “We’ll celebrate with you, but if you don’t mind, some of us will choose brandy.” He revealed his own bottle, and made similar use of it.

Bashir and O’Brien were visibly relieved, but the former asked, “Already??? You were able to eliminate Section 31 *that fast*???”

“Of course! We had to move quickly and go after all of the agents at once before we could lose the element of surprise. Any agents tipped off would have gone even farther undercover.” Dukat handed a glass to Garak.

Pale, and with perspiration beginning to bead on his forehead, Bashir said faintly, “Congratulations.”

“Oh come now, Doctor. You’re not *still* feeling guilty? You considered Section 31 a scourge on the Federation, did you not? And surely, all of its agents had committed ruthless acts routinely.”

“I keep telling myself that, yes. It helps a little.”

O’Brien spoke up for him, “But you must understand that this sort of thing is inevitably going to cause internal conflict for a doctor, whose mission in life is to heal, not to hurt, no matter *how* much he disapproved of Section 31.”

Dukat shrugged it off callously, but Garak graciously acknowledged for his human friend’s benefit, “Well, Julian, at least it’s over, and now *you* can heal and move on to other issues.”

“Eventually.” Bashir forced a feeble smile.

“Enough of this remorse,” said Dukat impatiently, raising his glass. “To the destruction of Section 31!” he toasted.

All joined in on the salute, some more enthusiastically than others. Although Bashir’s face held almost visible pain upon seeing that his trusted friend, Garak, now looking at Dukat, appeared nearly as smugly pleased and haughtily proud as the latter.

The next morning, Bashir happened to arrive early for his shift in the infirmary, and saw Dr. Garani poring intently over a report on the screen on the opposite side of the room. Even at that distance, Bashir’s genetically-enhanced vision allowed him to see that it was an autopsy report. Bewildered, because the station had had no recent deaths, Bashir ventured closer in an attempt to identify the subject. But before he could do so, suddenly aware of his approach, Dr. Garani scrambled frantically to hide it from Bashir, and actually deleted the file.

Affronted, professionally outraged, Bashir challenged his colleague, “You *deleted* an autopsy report???”

“Orders!” Garani returned, flustered. “Well, since you’re here, I’m off-shift; see you later!” He scurried for the door, pretending not to hear Bashir’s demand, “*Whose* orders?!!”

Hours later, Bashir went to meet Garak for lunch. As he approached, the human was making every effort to project a completely relaxed, normal smile, which his seated Cardassian friend noticed, appreciated, and mirrored. That is, until Bashir saw that Miles

O'Brien was nearby as well. Suddenly reminded of his perplexing mystery, he remained standing, frowned slightly, and beckoned his other dear friend over to them.

"Miles, I wonder if you'd have time today to do me a favor."

O'Brien shrugged. "Probably. What can I do for you?"

"You've proven yourself an expert at retrieving deleted files, and I need for you to do so. Dr. Garani did the damndest thing this morning: he deleted a file to keep me from seeing it, claiming that he had orders, but he wouldn't even tell me *whose* orders."

Instantly, O'Brien's expression became guarded. "Do you know what kind of file it was?"

"Yes, and that's what's even more peculiar; it was simply an autopsy report. But no one on the station has died lately, and.... What's wrong?"

O'Brien had paled noticeably, and now was bafflingly delivering a speechless, helpless look of mute appeal to Garak, of all people.

Bashir turned quickly to look at Garak, but immediately saw that he was as puzzled as Bashir.

In a useless attempted dodge, a miserable O'Brien said, "Go ask Sisko!", and tried to leave.

Bashir whirled and grabbed his arm, and said with a hurt tone, "Hey, this is *me*, remember? Miles, you never shut me out like this!"

Unsurprisingly, Garak supported his friend. "He's right, Chief; this is quite out of character for you. That, and your inexplicable apparent desire for my assistance just now have raised my curiosity as well. Now what is going on here?"

"Some help you are!" O'Brien snapped at the Cardassian, bewildering both confused men even further, because his behavior continued to suggest that the tailor should somehow understand his unknown plight, and want to assist his non-friend against the human who *was* his friend.

Clearly torn with guilt and worry, but also aggravated and seeing no other solution, O'Brien retorted, "Look! The Obsidian Order finally granted the Federation's request to return Sloan to his widow for burial in the family plot. Since DS9 is the nearest Starfleet base to their empire, the Cardassians delivered the body here. You know as well as I do that regulations require a formal autopsy in these cases, immediately upon receipt of the corpse. Knowing that for a whole host of reasons you couldn't possibly be objective about this, Sisko wanted to spare you, and assigned the grisly task to Garani. There'll be a backup for that file; he certainly didn't really delete it totally, just off of your infirmary access. Listen, Julian, Sisko and I talked about this, and decided that that was the best way to handle it. You have *no* reason to feel guilty about Sloan, but we know that you still *do*, so we didn't want to make it any worse, and we certainly didn't want to subject you to the details of...of...of...the...." He trailed off in misery; he'd been looking back and forth between his two listeners, but his eyes happened to fall on Garak as he was finishing, and with the alien's regard upon him, he found himself incapable of completing the sentence whose ending he was sure that they both knew as well as he.

Deathly pale, Bashir turned stricken eyes to meet Garak's desolate gaze, and the former said faintly, "Will you excuse me, please, Garak; suddenly I don't feel at all hungry, or even very well."

"Of course, Julian." The latter's voice was hushed as well. He watched his tormented friend scurry off as if pursued.

Miserably, unthinkingly, O'Brien dropped into what would have been Bashir's chair, even though it seated him with Garak, something that the engineer didn't ordinarily intend to do. He leaned on the table and cushioned his head on one hand with a groan.

Quietly, perhaps a bit contritely, Garak inquired, "Did *you* see the autopsy report, Chief?"

"No!" O'Brien huffed bluntly, even angrily, almost as if he were being accused of some peculiar form of voyeurism. "Garani warned Sisko and me that we'd better *not* see it!" Now reminded of Garak's presence, the engineer rose and stalked away from the Replimat.

That evening, O'Brien spied Garak in Quark's, and approached hesitantly. "Look, I'm sorry that I barked at you; I was in an uncomfortable spot, but you're not responsible for these latest developments."

"Sit down, Chief," the Cardassian invited. As O'Brien complied, Garak went on, "For what it's worth, I wish that I *had* known what was bothering you; I surely would've supported you in your effort to spare Julian."

"Thanks." He watched Garak askance. "Can I ask you a question? Just a 'yes' or 'no' question, now, no gruesome details!"

With a nearly melancholy smile, laced with a touch of bland humor, the other nodded tolerantly.

"*Whatever* you guys did to Sloan, was it the same thing that you almost did to Julian?"

"Oh no, not even similar in the least! With Julian, Dukat's intentions were only to frighten and hurt him moderately in order to teach him a lesson. With Sloan, our goal was to maim him and terrorize him into talking, and ultimately to kill him."

O'Brien was clearly uneasy at the wording, but glad that the answer was no. Then he appeared hesitant again.

Trying to suppress slight amusement, Garak encouraged him.

"Julian told me, and you just confirmed, that you...tortured Sloan to death once you had the information that you wanted. Assuming that he knew that you were going to kill him that way anyway, and I suspect that he did, what incentive did he have to answer your questions, if it wasn't going to change anything?"

Garak studied the human for a moment, clearly wondering if he were truly ready for the answer, and saw that his intense regard made the other shudder slightly. He responded carefully, "At a certain point, agony and panic take over, and rationality is lost in the face of desperation."

A stronger tremor resulted.

More reassuringly, Garak went on, "Besides, to a limited extent, the victim *can* bargain for somewhat kinder treatment." That additional fact seemed to ease a least a bit of O'Brien's tension, making it easier for him to ask his next question.

"And did he? I mean, did you? Treat him more kindly, that is?"

Garak nodded. "By *stopping* the part that Sloan found most unbearable."

Sagging miserably, his companion had clearly had enough of that precise line of inquiry, and hastily proceeded to a slightly different topic.

"I'm curious: did Tain actually get involved, get his own hands dirty, or was it just you and Dukat?"

“No...and no. Two guards worked with us.”

O’Brien’s gaze grew distant and he shivered.

“What?” prompted Garak.

Slightly sheepishly, O’Brien confessed, “I just got a little carried away imagining what Sloan went through, seeing you and Dukat and two guards all coming at him.”

Now, Garak regarded O’Brien curiously. “You humans certainly have vivid imaginations, and you seem to employ them even to your own detriment.”

“Yeah, I guess we do, at that.” He smiled slightly in admission of such evident human folly. He hesitated once more, and then said, “One thing that I have to be sure to tell you, and there’s no easy way to say this: Dr. Garani would like to avoid you for a while, unless there’s some emergency of course. He asked me to convey to you his request that you cooperate with that plan as much as possible.”

Unsurprised, Garak nodded solemnly.

“Doesn’t it ever bother you, Garak? Doing...that kind of thing?”

“I was raised to do it. Trained to it.”

“But...you don’t...like it...do you?”

“I used to, years ago.” At O’Brien’s look of consternation, Garak added, “Not anymore. But when I’m with Dukat and Tain, it’s better to pretend that I still do.”

“Because they do.” It was a statement, and yet somehow also a question.

Garak’s emphatic expression revealed a definite wordless “yes.” The human made a face.

Aloud, Garak said, “Although at Tain’s age, he prefers simply to watch. You must understand, Chief, that it’s one of our greatest talents, and therefore a source of pride.”

O’Brien looked revolted. “And...Dukat wanted you to...torture Julian...simply because he was angry with him? He thought that that was sufficient excuse?”

“With his ego? Of course.”

“Remind me never to make him mad,” he muttered bitterly.

Garak wore a wan smile. Carefully watching O’Brien’s expressions evolve, he said gently, “Go ahead. Ask your next question.”

Startled, the human asked, “How did you know...?” Then he realized, and gave up any pretense of denial, but the extreme reluctance in his face showed just how much harder this question was to ask, even, than the others.

So, Garak urged again, “Chief, what’s *really* troubling you?”

The human closed his eyes to make it easier to bear, rather than face his sometimes-adversary while he discussed something so uncomfortable. He sighed heavily, and then blurted nervously, “Despite your working *with* us many times, and despite your friendship with Julian, so far you’ve still managed to torture Sloan, Odo, and almost Julian; and I guess that Nog and I were lucky at Empok Nor that you didn’t do any more to us than you *did*...”

“You’re scared, is that it?” In spite of the blunt wording, there was no trace of taunting; Garak’s tone was gentle.

Even so, O’Brien defensively snapped, “How could I *not* be after all this??? I mean, how’s a guy supposed to *defend* himself against this kind of constant threat???”

“I’m afraid that I have no answer for that. I’m sorry.”

Increasingly tormented by helplessness, he demanded, “Is it true that you-all automatically figure out how best to terrify each individual, almost as soon as you meet him??!”

“It’s true,” he admitted solemnly.

“Christ A’mighty!”

“And you’re wondering what we’ve figured out about *you*?”

“No! Yes.... No!” The first “no” was reflexive, affronted, righteous denial; the “yes” was miserable admission of agonizing worry; and the second “no” was an alarmed plea for Garak not to tell him the grisly details. O’Brien’s face and vocal tone could not have been more revealing at each stage.

Garak struggled not to be amused at his companion’s adorable apparent indecisiveness.

For one moment, it looked as if O’Brien genuinely wanted to ask, but then he lost his nerve, rose abruptly, said, “G’night!”, and fled, almost colliding with a newly-arrived Dukat. The human flinched exaggeratedly out of the reptilian’s way and exited Quark’s.

Dukat looked in mild annoyance from O’Brien to Garak, and asked the latter, “Is he being a problem?”

“No. He’s *having* a problem.”

Very timidly, O’Brien ventured into Garak’s shop the next day, glancing nervously to be sure that there were no customers on the premises at the moment. “Um, I wanted to apologize for running out on you like that last night. I seem to be making a habit of that lately.” He smiled faintly.

“That’s all right,” Garak said evenly. “I knew that you were upset.”

“It’s just that it’s so hard to balance between curiosity and dread. Also, I suddenly realized that if you *were* to tell me, and if I had a panicky reaction, which I probably would, an establishment as public as Quark’s would hardly be the place for such a scene.”

Garak nodded in solemn agreement.

“I guess this entire awkward situation has all of us on edge. Sisko, too. You should’ve heard him snap at Kira yesterday. He’s got her wondering,” he feebly, transparently digressed, randomly saying *anything* to avoid the real topic.

Garak watched him silently as he rambled.

Visibly losing his nerve, if indeed he’d ever had it, O’Brien said lamely, “So, anyway, I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry.” He began to turn away, toward the door.

“Wait, Chief O’Brien.”

The human turned back, but in graphic fright, clearly wondering if the Cardassian was going to say what he thought that he might say, what he truly *feared* that he might say.

Delicately, Garak pointed out to him, “We’re not in a public place now.”

O’Brien cringed hard.

“I can even lock the door if you’d like.”

“Trapped?? No!!”

Garak spoke evenly, soothingly, “Not to trap you. To protect your privacy. You can react freely, as dramatically as you wish. You’ll have no witnesses, and this conversation will be our secret.”

"I'm...not...ready...!"

"Very well. But I think that you're starting to realize that this unknown is going to torment you until you resolve it."

"I know; I thought of that! But if I...let you see...my horrified reaction to...*whatever* it is, ...I'm weakening my own position with you, if in the future you ever...!!"

"It won't matter. We already know that it will horrify you. And as for now, I can even comfort you, if you wish." His second sentence brought a renewed spasm of terror from the human.

Miserably, O'Brien said, "I must be out of my mind to ask you this! Why would I want to ask such a hideous thing?!"

"Not at all. Everyone is different, Chief. Julian copes best by being spared the details, trying to avoid the issue altogether, hoping that it will all just go away and never come up again. You, on the other hand, feel a need to be prepared; you don't want to be taken by surprise; and you are undoubtedly trying to see if you can steel yourself against it. Fear of the unknown drives you; you need to make it the known, rather than a nameless terror."

His uncanny ability to read others, so cruelly useful in a torture chamber, could also be used as kind insight by which to console those same others. His understanding and compassion had the desired effect. But unfortunately, they both forgot the precaution of locking the door. Which is why, minutes later, a shocked Julian Bashir stood in the doorway staring at the impossible sight of an anguished O'Brien burying his face into Garak's shoulder, with Garak's arm consolingly around the human.

"No!!!" O'Brien cried raggedly.

Until now unseen by either friend, Bashir demanded in alarm, "Miles! What's the matter?? What happened???"

Instantly, the engineer was even more distraught. "Oh, Julian!!! Garak, let me go! You tell him! After I'm out of here!"

Garak restrained him, and spoke very gently, even employing his first name to demonstrate concern. "Miles, you cannot go running out on the Promenade in this condition; you can't be seen like this. Now, I'm sorry, but you'll have to remain until you calm down a bit. Julian, I'll tell you...part of it at least, but first, please do what we should've done, and lock the door for privacy."

Face ashen, Bashir complied.

Using very delicate general terms, Garak explained why O'Brien's need to know was just as legitimate as Bashir's need *not* to know.

"And...you...told him???"

"In regard to him, yes. Not in regard to you."

"I don't...want to know either one! His or mine!"

"I understand that, and I'm sure that he does, too."

Bashir approached gingerly. "Miles, are you all right??"

"You mean aside from an overwhelming urge to transfer to the other end of the Quadrant?? Just peachy!" He turned uneasily back to Garak. "And you're sure that Dukat has this all figured out, too???"

"Unquestionably."

“Christ! Garak, if I ever *do* get into trouble with you guys, just kill me, okay? Do it some way that’s nice and quick!”

Bashir was losing color by the second. “*That* bad??!”

“Worse!!!”

The Cardassian was becoming annoyed. “Chief, please, you’re upsetting Julian. And I remind you that you *wanted* me to tell you, but that he didn’t.”

“Sorry.” Uncharacteristically, O’Brien was completely intimidated by Garak. He shrank away, and the Cardassian looked rueful.

Julian stammered, “I...just came to apologize, Garak, for running out on you yesterday at lunch.”

Rubbing his face with both hands, O’Brien muttered, “Seems there’s a lot of that going on around here lately.”

Dukat entered Quark’s that evening, saw Garak, Bashir, and O’Brien together, and joined them without invitation. All conversation stopped awkwardly as he did so, and he watched in enormous satisfaction as the two humans paled in fright at the sight of him.

“Don’t stop on my account. Go on with what you were discussing.” He smirked.

Garak gave him a black look.

Mind evidently blanked by the sudden adrenaline rush, Bashir said distractedly, “Actually, I don’t even remember what we were saying.”

O’Brien, clearly even more spooked, said nothing, but just kept his eyes on the table.

After Dukat had enjoyed their discomfort for a while, he leaned forward, and said conversationally, “So, Chief O’Brien. You would really rather be killed than have Garak and me torture you?”

Blanching, and beginning to hyperventilate, the Irishman just stared at him.

“Garak!” Bashir accused in disbelief.

“I didn’t say a word.” But the tailor was staring venomously at his fellow Cardassian. He spoke severely. “You even have a tap *in my shop*???!?”

“A tap???” Bashir asked faintly.

Still glaring at Dukat, Garak responded, “We bugged most of the station before we left, at the end of the Occupation. But when I realized that I was staying, I thought that I had thoroughly eliminated the listening devices from my area.”

Unfazed, Dukat remarked, “Yes, and you did an excellent job, too. So, we had to plant more later.”

“When did you have the opportunity to do *that*?!”

“Miles! My god!” Bashir moved quickly to catch his human friend, who was slipping soundlessly from his chair. Hastily supporting him, and obviously none too steady himself, Bashir slapped his commbadge, and said into it quietly, “Bashir to infirmary! Two to beam immediately from these coordinates!”

As they dematerialized, Dukat told Garak, “How rude; they’ve run out on you yet *again*.”

Chapter Three

Bashir looked up in terror and in dread at the heartless Dukat who loomed over him, and who had just ordered Garak to torture the human or he, Dukat, would do so, far more brutally. Garak sat down across from Bashir in misery, regret etched into his expression, and took his human friend by the hand. Grateful and relieved at any reprieve, no matter how brief, Bashir let his fingers caress and envelope and affectionately squeeze those of his Cardassian friend. Dukat laughed softly. Bashir's eyes rose to his tormentor's in bewilderment.

"You think that he's just holding your hand, being 'sweet' to you?" Dukat said derisively, sarcastically. "Comforting you before hurting?"

The human's wide innocent eyes shifted back to those of Garak, who was now staring thoughtfully, dispassionately at the human fingers that he held, with an expression that seemed to reflect that he was preparing himself for something, or accepting an imminent inevitability, even while his gray, Cardassian fingers were exploring, perhaps slightly fondling, but purposefully, nonrandomly.

"Garak?" The human sounded extremely tentative. "What're you...?"

"Try to take back your hand," Dukat coaxed cruelly.

Frowning, beginning to take a serious dislike to the foreboding that was creeping over him, Bashir gave an experimental tug. Without seeming to move, Garak's fingers clamped, vise-like, effortlessly restraining him.

"Garak!" He spoke a bit louder. "Please, let me go." He yanked harder. This time, Garak's restraint on his fingers *hurt*. "Ouch! Hey!" he yelled in protest.

Garak's eyes rose abruptly to his, and in them, Bashir saw an alien: not his friend, not his pleasant intellectual companion, but the alien that Garak *used* to be. Bashir saw The Torturer. The human gasped loudly in panicked alarm. "What're you *doing*?? Please, let go of me!!" He yanked with all that he had. The restraining grip was almost crushing, making him hiss in pain, and the reptilian's eyes pierced him. Garak's expression was incomprehensibly menacing, and Bashir cried out at the sight of it. Inexorably, Garak's thumb planted firmly against the tip of the nail on Bashir's smallest finger.

Bashir's demeanor and tone lost the confident aggressiveness of the previous complaints. "What are you going to *do* to me?!!" came out in a whimper.

Dukat laughed again. "You never did ask us what part of you would be the focus of our torture."

Garak sounded cold, nearly trancelike. "You didn't want us to tell you. But now you know."

Although the doctor kept his nails short, typical for his profession, as well as for his gender, Garak's thumb was delivering relentless pressure, successfully dislodging the nail from its fleshy mooring, about to break it off at the root, prying it up agonizingly, tearing extraordinarily-delicate pristinely-protected skin, causing blood to blossom over the entire area where the nail had been.

The human screamed in terror and agony and anguish....

And sat up in bed, panting.

The computer voice addressed him, "Dr. Bashir, do you require medical assistance?"

"No! It was just another damned nightmare!" he said disgustedly. But then he had an idea. "Computer, is Garak awake?"

"Negative."

"What about Chief O'Brien?"

"Affirmative."

"Put me through to him. Miles?"

"What can I do for you, Julian?"

"Am I disturbing you?"

"Not at all! Your call is a relief! I'm just pacing in here, trying to figure out the latest problem with the power couplings. And getting nowhere, I might add! What do you need?"

"I just had another one of those damned nightmares!"

"Want me to come there?"

"Yes, thanks! Computer, beam him directly."

O'Brien materialized. "Tell me about it."

Bashir did so. His friend's nose wrinkled in slight squeamishness at the details.

"Whew! Getting worse! This is the most graphic one yet."

"And Garak's getting nastier, colder each time. Miles, am I making a mistake? *You* asked Garak what he and Dukat would do if they tortured you, he told you, and you've gotten *on* with your life. *I* begged Dukat not to tell me when he was eager to, declined Garak's offer to tell me gently, and here I am *stuck*! Stuck in a rut of misery, and I can't seem to climb out of it! Should *I* ask Garak, too? Would I be better off if I knew, and able to put it behind me, like you did?"

His friend was extremely reluctant. "Julian, I don't know. I think that only *you* can make that determination. Like Garak said, everybody's different, and one person's need to know is just as legitimate as another's need *not* to know."

"Well, some of the things that my subconscious concocted for Garak and Dukat to say in my nightmare seemed to indicate that I have a fear of *not* knowing, and of being taken by very unpleasant surprise."

"Yeah. But on the other hand, even if you knew what to expect, I doubt if you'd have much success at keeping your hand out of Garak's grip if he wanted it badly enough. Or whatever. I mean, I doubt if you could dodge the torture." He looked rueful, apologetic at the grim sentiment. "*Whatever* it may be. Remember, he said that yours wouldn't be the same as mine. It's all geared to the individual." He shivered at his own private grisly thoughts that his statement inspired.

"Well, I guess that what I really need to hear from you is this: are you glad that you asked him? Are you glad that he told you, or sorry?"

O'Brien thought for a moment. "I guess that I'm better off knowing. But that doesn't guarantee that *you* would be. For me, 'fear of the unknown' is a particularly nasty business. I had *one* nightmare, just one, right after he told me. But none since. Whereas you...."

"Whereas I *keep* having them, nearly every night." He sighed deeply.

"Doctor Bashir," said the computer.

"What is it?"

"The Cardassian Garak is now awake."

Bashir looked straight into O'Brien's eyes. "Should I call him?"

"That's up to you."

"Would *you* if you were *me*???" Bashir insisted in exaggerated patience.

“Well.... Yeah. I think that I would. At least, see what he thinks about this. That still doesn’t have to mean that you’re committing to asking him The Question.”

Bashir called, and Garak was willingly beamed to him as well.

“I should leave you two alone,” O’Brien said hesitantly.

“No, no, stay!” Bashir was emphatic that the other need not be excluded from any part of this. His human friend was noticeably pleased.

“What’s wrong, Julian?” asked a concerned Garak.

“I need to tell you of a dreadful nightmare that I just had,” Bashir said carefully.

“And it won’t be easy for me to tell, especially to *you*, or easy for you to *hear*.”

Garak sat down caringly and receptively on the bed with them.

By the time that Bashir had finished the telling, he was shivering uncontrollably, and Garak was brimming with compassion. The Cardassian wordlessly enfolded the shaking human into his embrace.

“I can’t stop trembling!” His voice was badly strained.

“Rest assured that I would never be that callous, that coldly brutal with you.”

Bashir managed to force a thankful smile, and Garak saw it as he looked down at the human face against his chest. “I believe you, and I’m sure that you would not. The dream turned you into...someone else, not you at all.”

“Well, ...I used to *be* that someone else. You must have subconsciously sensed it on some level, in order for it to be a part of your dream.” Garak raised Bashir’s chin gently in his hand, and turned the other’s gaze to meet his. “But I could never be that someone else with *you*.” The tormentor now looked as tormented as his potential victim. “I would at least try to steel you, to prepare you, for what was to come.”

Bashir’s eyes shone gratefully through unshed tears. But after a moment, he sagged again. “You can promise not to treat me cruelly, but you *can’t* promise not to hurt me horribly, as long as sadistic maniacs like Dukat are around to compel you.”

Garak turned grim, wrenched from his gentle melancholy. “Julian, I used to *be* one of those sadistic maniacs – yes, even that, *too*: gleeful in my depraved violations – until I got to know you and your Starfleet friends. And you’re right; Dukat and his ilk will always outnumber ones like I’ve *become*, as long as Cardassians remain Cardassians.”

Very hesitantly, O’Brien spoke up for the first time in a while. “Garak, you once told me that you pretend that you still *do* enjoy it, when you’re around ones like Dukat and Tain, because you don’t want to draw their attention to how much you’ve changed. Are you certain that it’s all feigned? Are you sure that you *don’t* still enjoy it also, even a little?”

Bashir cast O’Brien an uneasy glance, which pulled him free of Garak’s caring hand.

Garak kept his expression stoic, and admitted, “A little, yes, now and then, especially depending upon the identity of the victim. For instance, when we tortured Sloan....”

Bashir’s eyes flicked away uncomfortably from both of his friends.

Garak again carefully caught his chin, along with his gaze. “Julian, I’m not trying to upset you, honestly I’m not, but I easily allowed myself to enjoy our torture of Sloan, by reminding myself that *he* had tormented *you*.”

Bashir's bittersweet appreciation for Garak's protectiveness and loyalty was poignantly overlaid with graphic guilt over having been, in so many ways, the cause of Sloan's suffering. He asked dismally, "Do you think that...*he* knew that???"

"Oh, most assuredly!" Garak's eyes bore no doubt. They revealed something vastly more unsettling as well: an unmistakable glimmer of sinister delight even now, in just thinking about what they'd done to the human agent. "Sloan definitely saw genuine sadism in me, ...in Dukat, ...in Tain who watched...." He trailed off as he saw the dire effect of his admission on his sensitive friend. "Oh, Julian, I'm sorry!"

The human's shuddering had returned. "For one moment just now, you became *him*: the vile monster in my nightmare!"

"I'm so sorry. I didn't intend to frighten you. But as you sensed, I *am* still that monster, on occasion."

Bashir's face crumpled in desolation. "I don't *like* being afraid of you! I shouldn't *have* to be! Dukat shouldn't be able to *do* this to us!"

Garak cradled the anguished face in his hand, just as he'd done on Dukat's ship, during their close call with that diabolical gul. "And I don't *want* you to be afraid of me. It's ironic: I've made a career of garnering the fear of others, but I've never wanted *yours*."

"What're we going to *do*???" The human eyes begged Garak for a solution.

He sighed heavily. "Even if I were to do something drastic and kill Dukat, as I said, there will always be ones like him. Tain, to name just *one*."

"But Dukat's the immediate problem. I'm not suggesting such a rash move as murdering him, but couldn't we make some sort of bargain with Dukat, offer him *anything*, to extract a promise from him...??" Bashir pleaded.

Garak chuckled wryly. "Not a chance."

O'Brien reluctantly agreed, "It would probably only egg him on, make him even more likely to go through with it. In fact, given as sadistic as Garak says that Dukat is, the more that you let him know that that's the worst thing that he could possibly do to you, the more determined he'll probably be to *do* it, so any begging or bargaining would only increase the likelihood. Besides, I hate to say it, but I've felt that it's almost inevitable ever since Dukat got such a kick out of teasing us both about it that evening in Quark's."

"Because he would enjoy it so much if it *did* happen," Bashir concluded bitterly.

Seeing how crestfallen his sensitive friend had become, O'Brien clearly regretted his prophecy of doom. He feebly tried to reassure him. "Well, he...", the blond said slowly, lamely. "You two said that he vowed not to, as long as Julian doesn't interfere with him again."

Garak snorted. "The word of *Dukat*!"

Bashir agreed sadly, "Besides, who knows what he'll consider 'interference,' or what trumped-up, tiny excuse he'll arbitrarily decide is sufficient provocation to do what he's unbearably eager to do anyway." He looked up at Garak gravely. "It's probably only a matter of time, isn't it?"

Garak's regard was so expressively tragic that a verbal response was unnecessary. After a moment, the Cardassian asked reluctantly, "Well, if it ever *does* come to that, Julian, *would* you prefer to have *me* be the one to torture you, rather than *him*?"

A tremor vibrated through the brunette, but it didn't prevent him from agreeing firmly, "Yes. I trust you to lessen the damage as much as possible."

His alien friend nodded his solemn vow.

Bashir added wistfully, "And maybe even give me a kind pat or two, or a gentle word, or even just a caring glance."

Garak nodded again. "Of course I would, as much as I thought that I could get away with, without Dukat pushing me aside for being too 'soft' on you, and taking over more sadistically. And I'm pleased at your faith in me to perform the task as kindly as possible. I suspected that I would be your preference; that was the way that it seemed on the ship, but I just thought that I'd better check, while we were on the subject, and had privacy."

Bashir said, "The one thing that makes me hesitant about having *you* do it, is that I'm concerned over what it might do to *us*."

"We won't *let* it," countered Garak automatically, but then he, too, hesitated. "Although, that's more up to *you* than it is up to *me*, actually. After that sort of traumatic event, you may not be able to stand the sight of me." He watched the human sideways, clearly hoping for reassurance.

Bashir gladly gave it. "I can't imagine rejecting you that way, as long as you didn't treat me callously like you did in that nightmare."

"Never."

O'Brien reluctantly reminded them, "So now that just leaves the other issue: do you want to know the details in advance, Julian?"

Bashir, who had just been giving Garak a glowing smile in response to his heartfelt assurance, now seemed to fold in on himself, and his gaze dropped desolately to his lap. He gave a sigh that seemed to come from the depth of his being. "I don't know. I didn't want to know when I thought that the danger was only in the past. But now that I believe that it's in the future, too...."

"It *may* not be," Garak said ever so gently, trying to reassure Bashir, but even Garak didn't look or sound very convinced.

"I appreciate your effort to soothe me, but avoidance is probably hopeless. And if I keep putting it off, we might lose the chance for you to prepare me in advance. We don't know how much time we have until the dreaded day." He faced Garak with a look almost of trepidation. "But just with Miles raising the question again of what exactly you'd do, my heart rate's up dramatically; I can feel it." His hand went to his chest in near awe. "I think that I'm afraid of even just hearing you *say* it, and of facing you while you *do*."

Garak's expression was rife with sympathy.

"And just as Miles was, I find that I'm inhibited about having you see my reaction. Oh, not for the same reason that Miles gave: I'm not concerned that it'll weaken my position with you during the ordeal, but rather I'm worried at just how uncomfortable it'll make both of us, by simply discussing the details and reacting together."

Garak nodded complete understanding and compassion. "And, in fact, I am similarly upset: guilt-ridden, even embarrassed, at having to admit to such an idealistic young man as you – and a doctor yet, whose mission in life is healing – the creative atrocities that my people routinely employ, in order to accomplish precisely the opposite."

Impulsively, Bashir cried, "Hold me!", and Garak did. The human blubbered, "I've never thought of myself as a coward. But in regard to this, I think that I *am*. Partly because it's deliberate, planned, and should be so preventable, unlike accidental injuries, or even those incurred in battle." He felt Garak nod in understanding, and that gave him the impetus to go to the heart of the matter. "I'm afraid of how much it'll hurt!!!" This last part came out as confessional, as if he were baring his soul, admitting to the part that he was most ashamed of, most embarrassed to reveal. He confirmed that impression by adding, "I sound like such a child!" He sobbed.

"No. No, you don't," Garak said softly as he patted him. "That's how you're *supposed* to feel, how *most* people feel. *Everyone* becomes childish when pain is bad enough. That's why torture *works*."

Momentarily overcome, the human begged in anguish, "Oh, *don't*!! Oh, find some way *not* to, *please*!!" Bashir was instantly remorseful. "I'm sorry. That wasn't fair. I know that you'd prevent it if you could."

Garak nodded tolerantly, but replied, "I don't blame you for wanting me to find a way out of it. I wish that I could be optimistic regarding the chances."

Bashir sniffled, nodding. "I find that I also dread the thought of looking into your eyes when you're going to, when the moment is actually upon us."

"Then don't!" Garak urged automatically, fervently. "Close your eyes if the time ever comes; it might help." He added ruefully, "Frankly, I wish that you *would*; I don't relish the prospect of looking into *your* eyes, if I'm about to have to hurt you."

Bashir nodded slower this time, mentally adding that to the list of ways in which he could help both of them cope with the unbearable. Then, he sighed once again from his very depths, raised his head from Garak's shoulder, and looked uncertainly over his own shoulder at O'Brien. "*Should* I ask him what he'd do to me??"

O'Brien visibly squirmed. "I just *knew* that you were going to put me on the spot and ask me that again." He waved away the apology that he could see that the other human was about to make. "I don't blame you for seeking another opinion. And I'm flattered that you value mine. But like Garak said before, we're different, and that makes it almost irresponsible for me to advise you. But, I'll tell you what, Julian: one thing that I *can* say with confidence is that, if you're *ever* going to ask Garak, now would probably be the best possible time. We're both here to console you; we're unlikely to be interrupted at this hour; Dukat is not on the station to spook you worse, in case you go around looking haunted for the next day or two like *I* did; and Garak just performed that sweep again of all of our quarters, so you know that Dukat can't be listening."

Bashir was slowly nodding throughout, but sinking steadily lower where he sat, and with the bleakest expression that either friend had ever seen, as if he were realizing that he'd run out of excuses to put this off any longer, and as though he were feeling backed into an inescapable corner.

Obviously suffering miserable guilt at figuratively backing him there, O'Brien commented, "Jeez, Julian, you look like you're going to a funeral!"

Bashir slowly nodded once more. "My own."

"It's not *that* bad," Garak assured him emphatically. "You may be building this up *too* far."

"Oh, I desperately hope so!" Bashir spoke fervently. But then his tone became foreboding. "But remember, I saw Miles' reaction to his...revelation." He shuddered at

the memory. Then, with effort, he turned practical. "Let's do it *this* way: was my nightmare accurate?" He glanced down uneasily at his nails. "Is that...*it*?" He seemed to almost duck slightly, symbolically dodging even the threat of violence, as he awaited Garak's answer.

"No." But Bashir noticed that Garak had hesitated just a millisecond or two too long before responding. He could see that O'Brien was aware of it, too, as the blond straightened slightly where he sat.

Garak eyed Bashir with an intensity that the latter found unnerving. "Though, I'm surprised how close to accurate your dream was."

Bashir swallowed hard, and his heart rate jumped like a startled deer.

O'Brien intuited helpfully, "You mean, his subconscious zeroed in on the correct part of his body?"

"Precisely."

Bashir glanced down at his hands as if he didn't know quite what to do with them, and then he self-consciously shoved them behind his back. Garak worked to suppress a smile at the charming but useless – and for the moment unnecessary – gesture. He regarded the brunette tolerantly.

"Shall I go on and tell you the rest?" the Cardassian asked.

All that Bashir could manage was a stiff nod.

"I wouldn't break your *nails*..." Garak deliberately trailed off, silently coaxing either one of the humans to complete the thought.

O'Brien did. "You'd break his fingers."

Garak's raised brow ridges confirmed the supposition.

Now Bashir shifted abruptly, and in one swift motion thrust both hands under his posterior and sat on them. This time, Garak didn't even try to conceal his amusement, and openly grinned at him, at least partly in comic relief, as well as in affection for Bashir's precious, naïve, and hopeless attempt at a defensive maneuver.

Garak remarked in humor, "You *know* that that wouldn't do you any good."

Bashir looked mostly though reluctantly convinced, but appeared to be still desperately wishing to place hope in the feeble effort at self-defense.

Seeing that he would have to show him, Garak very carefully grasped the nearer wrist and gave a quick twist, easily liberating that hand from under Bashir's hastily tilted body, and demonstratively possessing it.

"Ow!" The human at first looked simply nonplussed, but then his expression clouded desolately, and he emitted a tormented, "Nooo!"

Garak wisely realized of course that the second, fearful response was aimed, not at the Cardassian's possession of the human hand *now*, but at the ease of his future possession of it at a potentially far more dire occasion. "I'm sorry, Julian. But I know my...profession. I'm afraid that I'm rather skilled at it."

Bashir closed his eyes, and forced an atypically "sour grapes," tight-lipped nonchalance, murmuring bitterly, "It's just as well. Both hands were starting to go to sleep anyway." He pulled the other one free from under him carelessly, almost roughly, trying but failing to conceal his resentment at his own vulnerability.

Garak smiled tenderly, worriedly at his fragile friend's hopeless expression.

O'Brien sought clarification, "You'd break his fingers...: *all ten*?"

Bashir's eyes snapped open in alarm, to see Garak's now unsmiling nod.

“Jeez!” the Irishman said again, and made a face.

Bashir, struggling to remain calm, demanded even more bitterly, “All right, why? I don’t mean why all ten; that’s obvious: for maximum cruelty! I mean why *this*??” The hand that Garak still retained squirmed slightly in his own.

Garak sighed. “Because it is ruinous of your ability to function in your career, as well as in your favorite leisure activities: throwing darts, playing tennis or racquetball.... That makes it the ideal torture for *you*.”

“Wait a minute.” O’Brien appeared uneasy at his upcoming question, but with an irresistible need to ask it anyway. “Not that I’m trying to give you any ideas here, Garak, but...why wasn’t that my...uh, ideal..., too?? My career also depends on the use of my hands, and I have the same leisure pursuits that Julian has.”

Garak looked impressed with O’Brien’s reasoning. “All true. But of even *greater* import to *you*, Chief, is your need to be able to function as a husband and a father.”

O’Brien sagged in admission.

Bashir’s eyes widened in shock. “Now I *know* that I’m not going to ask what Miles’ revelation was!” Still clearly fighting not to give in to panic, Bashir pointed out rationally, “Well, back to my, er, ordeal: as a doctor, I must point out that the infirmary’s bone-knitting lasers would easily repair my....” He broke off, as both listeners were shaking their heads.

O’Brien said, “But *you’re* the doctor, Julian; you can’t doctor *yourself*. Garani and those other assistant doctors aren’t nearly as good as you; yeah, they could heal you *almost* like new, but would you still be as fine-tuned in *every* finger to be the superbly gifted surgeon that you are *now*?”

“Besides,” Garak added. “You’re assuming that you would be *near* DS9 and your own infirmary, or able to get there fast, and there’s certainly no reason at all to assume that. In fact, I remind you that when it almost happened before, we were on Dukat’s ship. Do you really envision that, following torture, he would’ve had you rushed to his ship’s infirmary, let alone to your own? No, he would’ve played around with your injuries and tormented you further.”

Bashir shuddered in despair at both gloomy but now obvious points. He tried desperately, “Well, as a doctor, I can assure you that I wouldn’t be awake to suffer more than the first one or two breaks; I or *anyone* would surely pass out from them.”

Garak was shaking his head grimly, dashing even that last-ditch hope. “No, you wouldn’t. We routinely inject a stimulant before beginning a torture, in order to prevent that very inconvenience. You would remain fully conscious.”

Horror now rising uncontrollably, Bashir lashed out, “You damned barbarians!” Then, he immediately choked, “I’m sorry!”

O’Brien’s wide eyes revealed his consternation over how the other might react to such an insult, but surprisingly, Garak was unruffled, remaining focused only on his concern for his terrified friend.

Garak said simply, “I realize that it’s difficult to be pragmatic about this, but think how impractical it would be to have to keep waiting for the victim to wake up again. And no one would torture an unconscious victim; it would be useless.”

“Yeah, I s’pose,” Bashir muttered vacantly, his brief fury already exhausted in the face of his overwhelming terror.

Poignantly, gently, Garak fondled the human hand that he still held, and said, “Believe me. I don’t want to hurt you. I hope as desperately as you do that it will never happen.”

Chapter Four

It was, in fact, over a year before the unthinkable happened, and while none of the three friends ever forgot about the potential danger, it was no longer at the forefront of their thoughts, and thereby took all three by disastrous surprise.

It was during the Dominion War, and a furious Dukat was outraged that Bashir, O’Brien, and Garak had unknowingly, randomly, shot down *his* shuttle, conveniently ignoring of course that he and Damar had shot down *theirs* as well.

Bashir and Garak, preoccupied with the unconscious, concussion-stricken O’Brien, were totally unaware of the other ship’s occupants’ identities, condition, or position. Dukat and Damar found it incredibly easy to circle around the three, and to take them at disruptor-point. From where they knelt on either side of O’Brien’s prone form, Garak’s and Bashir’s eyes rose to each other in simultaneous horror at the realization of the possible dire consequences of this event, and then just as quickly dropped back to O’Brien. The two struggled mightily against the almost irresistible urge to continue horrified eye contact, so as not to telegraph any specific fears that Dukat might intercept and correctly interpret, thus causing the very disaster that they desperately sought to avoid.

An impatient Damar insisted, “Did you hear me? I said that you three are now prisoners of the Dominion.”

Heart thundering, Bashir glanced up in forced bravado, and acknowledged coolly, “Yes, we’re aware that you have the advantage at the moment, but we’re a bit distracted; Miles has a serious concussion.” He was careful not to give either captor a longer look than he gave the other, and to display no more fear of Dukat than he showed toward Damar. Then, his eyes returned promptly to his patient. “I’m afraid that we’re rather busy. Also worrisome is the fact that it’s getting darker and colder *fast*. Cold won’t be good for my patient, or for *any* of us; we’ll need shelter and *soon*. I hope that the two of you might even be willing to help us with O’Brien.” At that, he allowed uncertainty and hesitation to show, but only the proper amount for the circumstances. Mentally, cautiously, Bashir congratulated himself for explaining away in advance any fear that he might be unable to conceal, as merely practical worries and appropriate concern for his patient.

Garak smoothly supported his efforts, “Our runabout is too badly damaged to provide even meager shelter. What about yours?”

“Hopeless.” Dukat shook his head, so far ostensibly distracted by their apparent concerns.

“I was afraid of that.” Bashir intentionally matched Dukat’s grim look, cleverly trying to feign unity of purpose. “Caves?” he suggested. “Did anyone see any possibilities on the way down to the surface?” He was careful to include Garak in his questioning glance, in order to lend further credibility to his assumed role. In actual fact, he and Garak had already discussed their failure to spot any caves, before the arrival of the other two.

“Yes,” Damar surprised everyone. “I did. That way.” He pointed.

“Wonderful!” Bashir forced a glowing smile and a sigh of relief, inwardly aware that joy was the hardest feeling for him to fake. “We need to keep O’Brien warm, if there’s to be any chance.” At that, he could once again allow his face to do what came naturally. Actually, he was drastically overstating O’Brien’s condition, and Garak knew that, again from their prior, private conversations, but Bashir was frantic to present understandable reasons for any anxiety that he might inadvertently exhibit: *anything* to keep from advertising that he was terribly frightened of Dukat.

“Do we *dare* move him?” Garak demanded solemnly, clearly sensing Bashir’s emotional needs, and the reason for them, and helping to lend credence to the act.

“We have no choice,” Bashir responded just as grimly, even as he realized that, under other circumstances, he would be laughing at their melodramatic performance. That in turn led to the disquieting concern that he must not succumb to giddy giggles as an involuntary outlet for his severe stress. He bit his lower lip and forced away the disconcerting thought.

Garak gathered up the still insensate O’Brien, while Bashir struggled not to envy the other human’s peaceful oblivion, and then he followed after the emburdened Garak while trying not to see the two disruptors still pointed relentlessly at their backs all along the route.

When at last the uncomfortably quiet group entered the cave, Bashir let himself collapse in what he hoped and believed was easily comprehensible relief, and diligently hovered over his patient, while the Cardassians gathered nearby combustibles for a fire, two of the three unfortunately but predictably watching warily for treachery by any of their captives.

The fire was barely exhibiting its initial roar when O’Brien inconveniently began to show signs of awakening. Bashir fought down his rapidly rising panic with difficulty; he simply *could not* allow his friend to regain consciousness. O’Brien would be far too likely in his disoriented state to react to Dukat with disproportionate fear, and thus remind the sadistic gul of what the two humans were desperately afraid of, perhaps bringing it on in the process. Plus, an awake O’Brien would probably be viewed by Dukat as a legitimate target for his sadism, whereas an unconscious one was off limits and therefore safe. Additionally, Bashir would be proven a liar for exaggerating the extent of O’Brien’s injury, earning instant suspicion from both Dukat and Damar, who would surely interrogate Bashir as to his reasons for the odd deception, and Bashir honestly doubted his ability to bluff his way past Cardassian discerning shrewdness, especially in his own exhausted, nerve-wracked state. And finally, Bashir would lose his best excuse for his grim demeanor, and as draining as all of this day had been, he did not think that he could fake any positive feelings for more than a brief moment now and then. In truth, he felt close to collapse. Thinking quickly, he seized his hypo and restored O’Brien’s comforting stillness. Bracing himself for the startled, possibly accusational looks that he was sure that he would face, he still managed to feign surprise as if he had *not* been anticipating any doubts at his actions.

“What? What’s wrong?” Bashir asked blankly.

“He was recovering his senses; isn’t that a *good* sign?” Dukat demanded, eyes narrowed.

Hoping fervently that the Cardassians knew little or nothing about human medicine, Bashir forced a confident smile and lied brazenly, “Oh no! He’s delirious again. It happened before, just after the crash. He needs as much quiet and rest as he can possibly get.” In actual fact, of course, Dukat was right: a patient with a concussion should be kept awake and even talking, but Bashir knew that his friend’s injury was truly mild, and that keeping him sedated would do no real harm. The prospective trauma of Cardassian torture would be infinitely worse for O’Brien. The doctor assuaged his minor guilt by reminding himself that he was protecting his friend in the best way that he could, the *only* way that he could, in reality.

Producing a yawn that was only slightly fraudulent, Bashir said, “Pardon me, but I must sleep as well. I’m completely worn out by this eventful day.” He stretched out beside O’Brien, promptly rolling onto his side, carefully turning his back to the Cardassians. In actuality, his nerves were so shivery that he feared that the reptilians might see him trembling, and he bleakly faced an interminably dreary night of panicky, staring wakefulness. But at least he no longer had to govern his features against their all-too-vigilant watchfulness. His arms gathered themselves up tightly against his chest, and were therefore out of the aliens’ sight as well. Absently, his unseen thumbs began to nervously rub his as yet unbroken fingers, and as soon as he became consciously aware of the restless movement, as well as the subconscious reason for it, he nearly sobbed in fright, catching himself just in time, and turning the slight sound into a cough. Mentally chastising himself, Bashir firmly clamped his jaw shut against any further tiny outbursts, but his fingers obstinately continued the subtle motions, as if they had fear-filled minds of their own. Intellectually, he knew that they were just working off his excess nervous energy, which was helping to keep him from jumping out of his skin. But emotionally, he appreciated and treasured their easy, smooth movements, and bitterly wondered how long that ability would last.

The next thing that gradually began to work on Bashir’s nerves was the utter silence of his cave-mates. Why weren’t the Cardassians talking, even in low tones? He wasn’t for a moment under the illusion that they were being considerate so that he could sleep. And for that matter, why weren’t *they* trying to sleep? Stranger still, why weren’t they even shifting in place, or making any of the little noises that living beings made? Irrationally, he actually began to entertain the notion that they were gone, that they’d sneaked out and he’d missed it somehow. His heart pounded as he resisted the dangerous urge to roll over and check on them; he knew that he dared not.

When at last Garak spoke into the profound silence, Bashir almost shouted in surprise, and caught himself just in time.

His Cardassian friend said blandly, “I’m tired, too.”

Bashir heard him shift to lie down in his place near the cavern wall.

Dukat said quietly, “I am also tired. Of these theatrics.”

Bashir managed not to scream.

“Huh?” Garak asked, convincingly nonchalantly.

Instead of answering his fellow Cardassian, Dukat redirected his voice, “Come on, Bashir; you’re not asleep. Sleeping people move, roll over, groan, snore. They don’t imitate corpses. I’ve watched you; you haven’t budged a millimeter this entire time.”

They'd been watching *him* just as keenly as he'd been listening for *them*. That was why they had been so still. They'd been wondering at his quiet at the same time that he'd been wondering at theirs.

Even as part of Bashir's mind irrelevantly congratulated itself on having achieved its desired motionlessness, the rest of it screamed in silent terror at how relentlessly observant the alien men were.

"We've wondered how long you'd continue this charade," Damar remarked almost casually. "At times, I even marveled that you somehow managed not to laugh aloud at your own exaggerated concern for the dire condition of poor O'Brien." He yielded to the temptation to let sarcasm enter his tone at the end.

Garak still tried to tough it out and salvage their situation somehow. "You two are not doctors."

"No, but *he* is," Dukat said pointedly, undoubtedly indicating the still unmoving, by now almost frozen-with-fright, Bashir. "And he *told* you that O'Brien's concussion was minor."

"When??" Garak persisted, admirably sounding genuinely baffled.

Bashir heard Dukat's intensity rise, and easily envisioned him leaning toward Garak, as he said, "When you two dragged the out-cold O'Brien out of your wreckage! We were *there*, Garak! Listening from behind the rocks! And there was no 'delirious' episode from that Cardassian-hating human, either; Bashir fabricated that whole business!"

Disdainfully, Damar put in, "And that absurd nonsense about keeping concussion-victims knocked out; does Bashir really think that we're that *stupid*?? Furthermore, with all of this racket that we're now making, Bashir is either bluffing or he really *is* a corpse, like Dukat said." His tone was audibly directed at Bashir's back, as if daring him to continue to "play 'possum."

By now, it was a very good thing that they could not see Bashir's face, because it was distorted grotesquely in its effort to keep quiet, an effort that Bashir irrationally continued to make, even as he knew how useless it was, simply because his fright-numbed mind couldn't think of anything else to do.

Stalwartly, Garak still tried, "He's exhausted. And you must have misunderstood what we said outside of our ship."

Dukat made an exasperated sound, and growled, "All right, you want more proof? How about the look of complete horror that you and Bashir exchanged the moment that you first saw us? A look of utter doom!"

"You exaggerate. It was consternation. And of *course* we didn't want to be captured."

Dukat sighed like an infinitely patient man somehow still pushed past the breaking point, and then spoke ominously quietly, "Garak. What possible motive could Bashir have for keeping O'Brien sedated, unless he thought that he was protecting his friend from the dire possibilities in the thoughts that passed between you and him in that one moment of obvious stark terror?"

"Oh, so now you're telepathic?" Garak insisted stubbornly. "Well, fine then, Dukat: *you* tell *me*; you're the one weaving this imaginative little fantasy."

His temper now almost lost, Dukat roared, "Fine, I'll spell it out: Bashir was doing everything that he could think of to try to distract me from forcing you at disruptor-point to torture one or both of the humans! And you were helping him!"

Somehow, Garak still impressively feigned shock, "Oh *that*! But why would we even think of that, since you vowed not to, as long as Bashir didn't interfere with you ever again?"

Dukat shouted, "And you don't call *shooting us down* interfering with me??! Bashir!! At this point, you either really *are* dead, of fright perhaps, or you're an obstinate fool who won't admit when he's caught in the act!!"

Still Bashir tried not to move, frantically wondering if he *could* somehow feign death, but then a violent tremor through his entire body betrayed him. Crazily clinging to the forlorn hope that they had missed seeing it, he remained still until Dukat and Damar laughed heartily. Then, he turned and regarded all three Cardassians dismally, all hope gone and all pretense abandoned. He sat up, desolate. Slowly, subtly, and seemingly of their own volition, his hands crept self-consciously behind his back, while his expression remained apparently oblivious to their movements. But relentlessly observant like most of his species, Dukat didn't miss that either.

He laughed in genuine delight. "You told him!" He addressed Garak, "You told him after all!"

Now also giving up all subterfuge, Garak said softly, "Eventually, yes. It seemed the right thing to do."

Even as his friend said that, Bashir realized in spontaneous utter horror that, despite Garak's well-meaning intentions, and despite Bashir's and O'Brien's exhaustive reasoning, learning the gruesome details in advance had been absolutely the *wrong* thing to do. Unlike O'Brien, who could get used to the idea of almost anything with mature acceptance, if given sufficient time, Bashir had way too vivid an imagination which tended to dwell on insidious details and to magnify them all out of proportion, even despite vigilant efforts to curb the tendency. It was a large part of why he had become a doctor: he vehemently despised suffering: of *any* sort, for *anyone*, and he'd devoted his life to eradicating it like foul weeds in an otherwise tidy garden. And now that very character trait had worked against him, as had his thorough knowledge of anatomy and medicine. Imagining all of the grisly hypothetical outcomes of the specific grotesque torture had turned into an unwanted obsession, with possible but improbable minutiae insinuating themselves into way too many of his thoughts, consuming him in detailed cruelty, drowning him in unlikely ghoulish scenarios. This in turn had triggered an exaggerated squeamishness, actually inducing a phobia regarding that particular threat, above and beyond all of the myriad other dangers that could befall a fragile flesh-being. Much earlier, in Dukat's and Tain's presence, Garak had referred to this as Bashir's worst nightmare, and by now it had become precisely that. It had turned into an ominous terror looming larger than life, tormenting the human in the dark of night and by daylight alike. And now, somehow, he was going to have to cope with what had evolved into his greatest fear becoming cruelly, monstrously real.

"No," he whispered barely audibly. "Not *here*, not *now*; we're in the middle of nowhere, with no help, no...." His eyes speared Garak and implored him in stark panic, his composure and rationality visibly deteriorating right before the eyes of all three startled Cardassians. Gasping, barely able to force out the words, he pleaded haltingly,

“Dukat! We...didn’t...know...it was you...in the ship; ...Miles and I...if we’d known...we’d never have...shot you down; we wouldn’t’ve...dared! You *have to* believe me!!”

“I believe you,” Dukat replied evenly, readily.

“Then...don’t...!!”

“But that changes nothing. The results are still the same, whether you intended them or not.”

“Not...fair! We’ve...been...so careful...of you...ever...since...!” He cringed severely and turned away, losing control.

“Really, Doctor, you actually expect life to be fair??” Dukat was amazed. “Are you *that* naïve??”

Bashir dissolved into tears in misery, and cried, “Oh please don’t hurt me!!!”

O’Brien chose that moment to squirm and groan.

Bashir turned to him desolately and moaned, “Nooo!!” He felt as if his world gave way from under him. “Miles, nooo!!!” Suddenly, moving unexpectedly fast, he snatched the hypo and injected his friend, who again immediately subsided. Then, he faced Dukat and willed his voice stronger, with all that he had left of courage. “No, not...*him*!! You *can’t*; you *mustn’t*!! He *is* already injured, even if I *did* exaggerate how badly!!”

Dukat nodded agreeably. “I had already decided to settle for just one of you. If for no other reason than simple curiosity over how the three of you would resolve the awkward problem of whom to choose.” He chose to ignore the hate-filled glare that Garak flashed him in response to that.

It took all of Bashir’s will to murmur, “It *has* to be me. There *is* no choice to make.” His eyes squeezed shut and his head dropped nearly into his lap, so he missed Garak’s graphic look of anguish, as well as Dukat’s ghoulish grin.

The heartless gul’s smile broadened as he said, “On the other hand – no pun intended – I have made another decision.” He was rewarded by Bashir’s shudder and visible disgust at his cruel pun. “I’ve decided that I don’t just want to be a spectator. I also wish to be a participant. Garak may still have one hand, but I will take the other. I know that you’d prefer Garak to do both; he’ll be far less vicious than I.”

Borderline insanity flooded into Bashir’s face, and Garak sagged in abject misery at the imminent tragic outcome of this latest hideous development.

Reveling in the fear and despair that he was creating, Dukat told Damar to keep the prisoners covered with his disruptor, rose, and gleefully announced to Garak, “Now it’s time. Let’s get started having fun with our victim.” He leisurely advanced on his prey.

In wordless eloquent grief, regret, and sympathy in his eyes for Bashir, Garak surrendered to the inevitable, and also rose to approach his terrified, helpless human friend. Bashir met his gaze with indescribable fright, and then shifted his eyes to Dukat: the human’s panic growing at the same alarming rate as Dukat’s stark sadism. With a guttural sound more like an unreasoning trapped animal than a sentient being, Bashir abruptly turned the hypo with which he’d been nervously fiddling, and almost violently injected himself in the gut with it, the action more resembling a stabbing suicide than the temporary escape that it was. Instantly crumpling facedown on top of O’Brien, the brunette joined him in welcome oblivion.

Chapter Five

Seemingly almost immediately, and now flat on his back, Bashir looked up woozily into Garak's bleak expression, as the former Obsidian Order agent sat beside him to his right.

"How long was I out?" Bashir murmured, his head beginning to clear.

"Only minutes." His friend delivered that shocking news grimly. "Dukat injected you with a stimulant." The ominous implication of that was all too clear.

Expression again already crumbling, Bashir followed Garak's gaze to the human's left. Dukat sat there grinning expectantly, even amusedly.

"No!!!" Face contorted with revulsion, Bashir jerked both arms spasmodically in instant panic, only to discover that both hands were already securely held by gray, scaled ones on both sides. Abandoning all attempt at self-restraint, Bashir put everything he had into screaming, as that was the only thing left that he could do. Earsplitting sound had no hope of drowning out the severe pain that had begun and was even now growing alarmingly, but he urgently needed for it to try to compete, and to distract him with its own intensity. For an indeterminate amount of time, he concentrated on screaming ever more loudly, more highly-pitched, even creatively, almost lustily. Awareness growing hazy, details increasingly blurred, he existed only for screaming; shrill, overpowering sound became his sole purpose, his one reason for existence. He focused on it like a lifeline; noise became his life preserver, holding his narrow shred of sanity together. The more they hurt him, the more maniacally he screamed, holding nothing back, trying to match the level of torture that they dealt. He made it nearly into a ghoulish, surrealistic contest, to see if he could outdo, with sound, the lightning strikes of agony that the two Cardassians delivered relentlessly, mercilessly.

Some pain-groggy time later, it came to him that he hadn't even known that he'd been crying every bit as liberally as he'd been screaming; his face was as soggy with tears as his excruciatingly throbbing left hand was with blood. Despite being a doctor, Bashir stared almost uncomprehendingly, in near stupefaction, at the multiple compound fractures that its fingers bore. Then his eyes wandered nearly aimlessly in confusion until they found the simple, cleaner breaks that his right hand had sustained. But at least the Cardassians were no longer torturing him. It was over and they were not in sight. And he didn't even recall seeing them let go and move away, their grisly task completed.

He slipped in and out of consciousness, occasionally catching a glimpse of a seriously-worried Garak bending over him, or a thoroughly-recovered but emotionally-stricken O'Brien sitting by his side, or even a now-serious, no-longer-gloating Dukat looming above him. Typically, Bashir lost focus after only an instant, feeling his eyes roll up into his head as if fleeing their faces. He only managed to try to speak to them once or twice, but he knew that his attempts came out garbled, as unintelligible nonsense, and that their frowns deepened in response. Even at the best of times, Bashir was only dimly aware. So the others seemed to move jerkily, like the effect of an ancient stop-action camera, popping oddly in and out of his view as he drifted into and out of awareness.

After a totally unknown interval, he found himself casting bleary eyes on his hands, both now heavily bandaged, and the left one also splinted. The doctor in him wondered who had managed *that*. The left one also no longer showed evidence of having been bloodied; apparently someone had cleaned it up as well. If Bashir had been clear-

headed enough to feel startlement, he would have marveled that he hadn't felt any of their ministrations. As it was, he objectively, dispassionately, and only distantly noted the concept. But his feelings were either shut off or out of reach; it was as if his very emotions were stuffed with cotton balls, muted. He wondered idly if this were what it felt like to be Vulcan.

Bashir heard someone stir, and abruptly O'Brien leaned over him anxiously.

"Julian! Are you really awake this time? Can you understand me??"

He managed a lazy nod.

"Look, we think..." The blond corrected himself in disgust. "*They* think...! They think that you *might* have suffered a *slight* stroke during your ordeal." He was clearly emphasizing the words that would minimize the bad news and hopefully help to keep Bashir calm. "Of course, *you're* the only expert here at reading a medical tricorder, so maybe it's nothing at all." He offered an encouraging smile, still trying to spare Bashir any additional fear.

But the patient regarded him blandly. "You don't have to protect me, Miles." He slurred a bit, but was at least finally comprehensible. "I have no feelings left. I'm empty."

O'Brien said cautiously, "Well, they've kept you pretty doped-up for days now."

Bashir blinked. Somehow that didn't sound right, not for Cardassians. But his mind was still too fogged to continue the odd thought that the reptilians were now blocking the suffering that they'd deliberately inflicted, that they'd *wanted* him to feel. He mumbled, "Not only has all of my fear drained away, I don't even feel pain anymore. Did I wear out fear and pain, spend them all in one giant burst?"

"No. They've pumped you full of so many painkillers that you could be crushed by a falling turbolift, and never even feel it."

Suddenly, Bashir's blank stare was replaced by an expression of greater coherence, allowing him to make an astute comment, "Now I *know* that *that* isn't right. Not for *them*. They hurt me intentionally; why would they take away the pain now?"

"Well, you...scared them, Julian." He was instantly sheepish at his own peculiar choice of words.

Sure enough, Bashir stared skeptically.

More seriously, O'Brien admitted, "They were afraid that they'd *killed* you. And even Dukat didn't want *that*."

"Well, a person *can* die of fright."

The blond nodded. "That's what they feared that they'd caused."

Bashir struggled to think back through the haze of days. "Miles, ...I seem to have a vague recollection, ...or maybe I dreamt it..."

"Of what?"

"Of you fighting with the Cardassians: shouting, verbal fighting, I mean."

O'Brien gave him a wry, half-smile. "It's true."

"Tell me."

"Well, once I regained my senses, I was...pretty bitter over what they'd done to you. I shouted at them, 'Didn't we have *enough* trouble, being marooned here, without you two pulling an unspeakable act like *this*?! Now how are we supposed to get Julian the help that he needs?!' Dukat was moody, and tried to silence me with a look. But I was on a roll, and I yelled at Garak, '*You* should've known better than this, as well as *you* know him! Why didn't you try harder to get this stopped? You know that Julian is an obsessive-

compulsive perfectionist, and if he no longer functions as well in his profession, you two will have *destroyed* him!” Abruptly, O’Brien looked sheepish. “Sorry about that label I put on you.”

“That’s all right.” Bashir shrugged, clearly still somewhat emotionally disconnected. “It’s accurate. Go on, then what?”

“Well, Garak looked like he wanted to hit me, and Dukat grabbed me from behind, hard.” His right hand went to massage his upper left arm. “I still have quite a bruise; I can tell you!” O’Brien wore a wan smile.

“I think that I saw that part. You pulled loose savagely, and just stalked away from him.” At O’Brien’s nod, Bashir commented, “That was dangerous, Miles! I’d hoped that I’d only hallucinated it!”

“Well, they were pretty despondent about you. They basically just wanted me to shut up, and when I did, they left me alone.”

Emotions slowly returning, Bashir was awed. “You took that risk over *me*? And you weren’t even afraid that they might retaliate, and do *your* worst nightmare to *you*?”

O’Brien looked quickly around and over his shoulder. “Well, I...didn’t say that I wasn’t afraid....” He gave his friend a wry look.

Now Bashir, too, was visually searching the cave. “Where *are* they, by the way?” “Out hunting. Strutting like big-deal macho hunters. I swear, Cardassians can’t do anything without swaggering!” But then, O’Brien looked pained, wracked by guilt. “But, Julian, I know what *you* did, how you heroically kept me knocked out, to keep me out of it. You sacrificed yourself to protect me! And now if your poor hands *are* ruined...!”

Bashir shook his head. “Unlikely. Some fingers might have to be rebroken, and then reknitted by laser – perhaps even more than once if a less-skilled doctor gets to me first, as you feared – once we get back to civilization, but I should eventually recover fully, one way or another. It’s only while we’re stuck *here* that I’m crippled.” He saw O’Brien wince at the word “rebroken,” and insisted, once again in awe, “You lashed out at them over me, risked all of the unthinkable things that they might do to you!” Then he shook his head in further amazement. “And then they didn’t really even threaten you; they *must*’ve been demoralized!”

O’Brien’s odd look brought him up short. “I didn’t say that they didn’t *threaten* me.... There was another day.... I may have pushed too far; it was close. But they didn’t – quite – lay a hand on me. Never mind; enough said.”

The brunette gave him a warm smile. “Looks like we’re both pretty loyal friends to each other.”

“Yes, you are,” said Damar from the cave entrance.

O’Brien whirled in alarm and accusation. “How long have *you* been standing there?!”

“Long enough to have heard you tell him about his possible stroke.” When O’Brien sagged in realization that the legate had been eavesdropping the entire time, Damar grinned, and delivered his punch line, “Don’t worry; you didn’t make *any* of us angry with anything that you said.” Dukat and Garak entered beside him.

“Aw, blast it!” O’Brien fumed, his mind obviously reviewing in shame all of the embarrassing things that they’d heard. He clenched his jaw as they grinned at his deep-pink face, and then he muttered his trademark, “Bloody hell!”

But Garak and Dukat in particular stopped short and their grins evaporated when they saw Bashir's absolute panic upon seeing them.

Bashir felt a wave of unreasoning fear at the mere glimpse of his two erstwhile torturers. For the first time, he understood fully Garak's earlier expressed concern that the victim might not be able to endure the sight of them, after he'd been tortured. Naïvely, Bashir had reassured Garak that he wouldn't allow it to come between them, due to Garak's being compelled by Dukat against his will. But now he felt the total revulsion that Garak had predicted.

Recognizing that well known reaction in the human's eyes, Garak hastened forward compassionately. "Julian!"

Unable to stop himself, Bashir recoiled from him with a strangled whimper.

"Stay there!" With a raised hand, O'Brien warded off any further approach by the distraught Garak, and then the Irishman clasped the now writhing, anguished invalid by the upper arms. "Calm down, Julian! Calm down; it's all right! It's all over; you're safe! Listen to me; they're not going to hurt you anymore! It's okay; you're okay!"

Unthinking in his panicky need, the patient tried to reach for O'Brien, and the slightest touch sent searing pain into his brutalized fingers, even through the protective bandaging. "Ow!!!" he shrieked, and his hands fell back onto his chest in misery. "No!!!" His face contorted in agony, and turned away from all of them, toward the wall.

"Oh god, Julian!" O'Brien gripped his friend's arms lower, but well above the wrists, both to give the needed comfort, and to prevent a repeat of that unfortunate occurrence. Then he glanced back and glimpsed Garak's anguished remorse, and pleaded, "Julian, you've *got* to believe me: Garak's so sorry; even Dukat's regretful! For days, I've seen how much *emotional* pain Garak's suffered because he had to hurt you! He just couldn't see any way out of it! I know, I told you that I railed at him for hurting you, but I was wrong! He tried as hard as he could to prevent it! You *know* that this is true; the three of us had discussed it! And trust me, Dukat knows that he went too far, and that they nearly killed you; he didn't mean for that to happen! He won't do it again; I'm *sure* of it! Julian!!" O'Brien sounded so desperate and insistent that his frightened friend looked back up into his eyes again. Encouraged, the engineer urged, "You *know* that I wouldn't say these things if I weren't *absolutely sure*!! They won't hurt you! Let them come close, Julian. They've taken such good care of you ever since."

Bashir eyed him, shivering fearfully, but clearly believing him, and trying to steel himself to face his former tormentors. Finally, with the smallest possible nod, he gave his consent.

Garak saw it, too, as well as O'Brien's magnified version toward the Cardassians, but even so, he approached gingerly, ever so slowly, and obviously thought better of kneeling beside the patient as he otherwise might have done. Dukat advanced slowly, too, but not as closely as Garak, apparently using the other's judgment as his own benchmark.

Bashir managed to meet their eyes, at least furtively, but was graphically almost too afraid to do even that. Subtle whimpers accompanied every restless movement, even the nervous eye motions.

"I am truly so sorry, Julian!" Garak's hushed tone conveyed his deep feelings. It drew the human's brown eyes up to meet his blue ones a bit more lingeringly, but the victim remained thoroughly intimidated. "I don't want you to fear me!" Garak whispered.

To his obvious dismay, Bashir cringed violently at that, but managed to force the words, "You've...made me...feel so...helpless...vulnerable...!"

"I didn't want to, honestly!"

"I know." Tremors vibrated through the human, and he continued to flinch spasmodically. He said haltingly, "When you first...had hold of me...before you started hurting...somehow I couldn't believe that I couldn't get you to let go!"

Garak's expression was one of eloquent misery.

"It was too much like my nightmare! And you'd never...restrained me before in reality. So, that was when I truly realized...that you were really going to *do* it!"

Garak's eyes were downcast in searing guilt at the glaring way that he'd genuinely traumatized his dearest human friend. He seemed so miserable that Bashir's heart suddenly went out to him, and he relented slightly, understanding that he and Garak *both* needed comforting.

"Hold me. Please. Gently. Like you did before, after I had the nightmare."

Garak was infinitely careful as he knelt beside the delicate, injured human. It took elaborate effort by him, O'Brien, and Bashir to orchestrate getting the Cardassian's arms cautiously around the doctor-patient without bumping the fragile hands in the process. Dukat and Damar struggled mightily not to look touched by the poignant display. After quite some time of togetherness and re-bonding, Garak eased Bashir back down to lie on his back again, and it was clear to all that the friendship had taken a successful first step toward mending.

Improving the prickly relationship between Dukat and Bashir proved trickier. Bashir began by timidly asking to see the tricorder readings that hinted at a possible mild stroke during the trauma. Dukat complied, and held it for him to see.

Bashir easily interpreted the data. "I did have a very minor stroke. But I've already recovered from it."

All of the others, to varying degrees, wore conflicted expressions due to the mixed news.

Predictably, Dukat covered his discomfort at the heavy awkwardness with a feeble joke, "I guess that all of that screaming burst something in your brain." This earned him a glare from everyone else. Everyone, that is, except for the patient himself.

Bashir displayed no offense, and answered thoughtfully instead, "I realized that I...*had* to scream like that...to distract..."

Garak automatically winced sympathetically.

But Dukat responded dispassionately, "From the pain? But you began screaming even *before* we started hurting you."

The former victim managed a nod. "And also to distract from the...manic terror. This had become a genuine phobia, my ultimate horror."

Garak once more looked heartbroken that they'd done this to his tender friend.

Eager to prevent any further future event of this nature, Bashir pleaded with Dukat, "Now that you've thoroughly punished me for my perceived past transgressions against you, please stop hating me!"

"Oh, but I never *did* hate you. Hate had nothing to do with it."

Bashir blinked, having no idea at all of what to say to that.

Surprisingly gently, Dukat mused, “In my...zeal...to punish you, I briefly forgot that we Cardassians have to take everything easier on you fragile humans; we can’t be as rough as we’d be on our own kind.”

“Thanks a lot,” Bashir said dryly.

Dukat frowned in perplexity. “I assumed that you’d be pleased at the kinder, well-meaning sentiment,” protested the gul.

The brunette sighed. “I’m trying to be, but we humans hear the same thing from the Vulcans, from the Romulans, from the Klingons, and I guess we just get tired of hearing it. It sounds so belittling. It seems like everyone’s making humans out to be the weaklings of the quadrant.”

“I meant no offense,” said Dukat evenly.

“None taken,” Bashir countered diplomatically.

“In any case, Julian,” Garak declared fervently. “We promise that we will never do a thing like this to you, ever again! Right, Dukat?” He looked up at the gul standing over them, challenging him warningly, even threateningly with his eyes, if he should dare to dispute that vow.

But Dukat genuinely agreed, clearly uncoerced and sincere.

Bashir said to him wryly, “I thought that you were the one who truly enjoyed hurting me.”

Dukat eyed him thoughtfully, and said solemnly, “I did.”

The human’s eyes flicked up at the past tense.

Dukat finished, “But I did *enough*.”