A Fish Out of Water

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by PerseShow

Summary

Set sometime after "Chimera," during the seventh season. Odo reflects on his life up until now and the things that matter to him.

Notes

This was my first ever posted fic, written waaaaay back in 2016.

My style has changed, as has my interpretation of Odo's character, but I thought I'd put it up here all the same!

When describing my situation, a humanoid might use the phrase “a fish out of water.”

It’s a remarkably appropriate phrase, considering that in my natural form, I’m nothing but a gelatinous liquid, meant to reside within the depths of the Changeling ocean known as the Great Link. And I have to admit, I do agree with that assessment to some degree. After all, these past few years of living at odds with the powerful force known as the Dominion have, on the surface, been nothing but torture for me. It’s a wonder I haven’t given up on my humanoid life and returned to the place where I originated—where, the female Founder would say, I belong. But on a deeper level, I’d say that phrase doesn’t quite do me justice. I have lived alongside humanoids long enough for their diverse cultures to leave an impression on me that I can’t deny. I… “grew up,” for lack of a better term, among Bajorans, during a time when Bajoran nationalism was at its fiercest, due in large part to their valiant resistance against the occupation of their world by alien force.

Alien? If you think about it, “alien” isn’t really a concept for me. Oh, I see the anatomical differences between various humanoids—a shapeshifter notices that sort of thing—but as Laas once remarked, they’re all fundamentally the same. They all have four limbs attached to a torso and they all have a head—at least, *most* of them do. There are some I’ve dealt with in my line of work that didn’t seem to at all, bureaucrats in most cases. They all have the basic senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch (only a few of which I’ve managed to develop myself)—though a few of them have extrasensory capabilities (case in point, Lwaxana Troi, my…ex-wife?). And fundamentally, they are all carbon-based life forms, many of them capable of having offspring with one another.

Despite my overwhelmingly alien nature, the course of my life hasn’t allowed for me to develop more than a basic appreciation of humanoids’ similarities. I was “raised,” if you will, in a Bajoran research center. For most of my early years, I was a curiosity, a specimen, and later, an object of ridicule. Thus, I learned to identify with Bajoran culture, as alien as it seemed to be. Every head tilt, every emphatic arm gesture, I had to carefully learn through months of painstaking observation. I suppose that’s what makes me so good at my job—I was trained from an early age to be a passive observer, learning what I could from the mannerisms that surrounded me and then occasionally seizing upon the opportunity to offer my misguided acquaintances advice I hoped was situation-accurate. For the most part, I kept quiet. I was offered precious little in the way of opportunities to express myself, a happenstance that I have never really minded. I’m aware, of course, that a lack of expressive opportunities would distress a humanoid, but it’s one characteristic of humanoids that I prefer not to mimic, mostly for privacy purposes.

I was raised as a Bajoran. That means I was raised to despise the Cardassians, Gul Dukat in particular. Hate, an emotion often expressed by the Bajorans, isn’t one that sits easily with me, lover of justice that I am—but I like to think that after so many years of service with the Bajorans, not only has their antipathy rubbed off on me, but that my views as an outsider have made some kind of impact on these people. After all, the Bajorans, often especially given to loud and angry debates, could use the influence of an objective perspective, and I—much as I hate to admit it—would feel more like one of them if I were truly unified with them against some opposing force. It’s the dream of every sentient laboratory subject, not that

I'm under any illusions that there are others besides me, to be considered part of those who discovered it. And the Bajorans, I regret to say, would not be the Bajorans they are today without their long-standing dispute with the Cardassians.

So call me a biased fool. No one can accuse me of being too like the Founders of the Dominion, much as Starfleet would love to. No one can accuse me of sympathizing with the Dominion. And I've made absolutely certain that no one can accuse me of caring about what happens to my people.

It's quite possibly the greatest—the only—lie I've ever told.

Though Nerys has tried her best to understand me and to love me as deeply as I love her, I know that no explanation of my feelings for my people can bridge the gap that separates us. I am an unexplored concept for her, an alien, an uncertain question in her otherwise carefully sealed universe. I am the one who questions her beliefs and brings her pain. I am the one who cannot give her what she desires—a man who can nurture her as no other man has. I try my best, but what can one expect of someone named "odo'ital"?

That Nerys has accepted me is nothing short of a miracle. That she has never given me the look of revulsion I've come to expect from humanoids is a testament to her loyalty and character. It seems to me that I've loved her for as long as I can remember—but I can still clearly recall the moment when I first realized it, ironically when she confessed her love for another man. A dead man. A vedek who could have become kai, so loved was he by the Bajoran people. I would have supported his election in a heartbeat, regardless of my own agnosticism. He was a monument for the Bajoran people and a stark contrast to the one who took his place in the race for kai—so much so that Nerys's love for him did not bother me as it should have. Perhaps because I was so determined to deny my feelings until I absolutely couldn't anymore.

I can't pinpoint the exact moment when I began to fall in love with her. My love for Nerys is embedded in my very being. She has validated my existence ever since I met her during the Vaatrik case, but I never knew a word for how I felt until she spoke it—of her feelings for Bareil. It was then that I knew. And it was then that I resolved to never let her know. My love would only prove an impediment to the friendship we shared—the friendship that, as Laas pointed out, was for some time my only reason for remaining on the station. I do pride myself on my ability to do my job, and I do immensely enjoy keeping justice in my world of chaos, but it is Nerys who makes every day count. Perhaps I'm more humanoid than I realize—what other explanation is there for the years I spent torturing myself with her presence? Encouraging the friendship we shared, but all the while balancing on the thin line between friendship and full disclosure? A Changeling would have abandoned her and sought refuge somewhere else in the universe, somewhere where he could control his own fate. But then, I'm far more Bajoran than I am Changeling.

I am not an expressive man by nature. My face has proved a major impediment to my self-expression, but I consider it more an unfortunate coincidence than a blockage. Any negative thoughts I may have expressed on it at one time or another arise solely from its rather distinguishing nature. It's hard to blend into the crowd you grew up in when you look so drastically different from the people around you. I suppose my inability to form a proper face

is what led me to wonder about my origins in the first place. It's been sorely tempting to forget where I came from and mold myself entirely to Bajoran society, but the face I saw in the mirror every day prevented me from ever truly becoming one of them. It's why my people's intentions were so easy to deduce when they cursed me with it upon revoking my Changeling status. It would have been easy, then, to come to enjoy my humanoid existence, even if I did miss being a shapeshifter. But of course, the face didn't just remind me of where I'd come from. It came to represent what I'd lost. And I hated myself for it, hated that I'd never managed to become a better shapeshifter in the time that I had.

"Shapeshifter." Such an adequate, yet insulting, word. To this day, I'm uncertain how I came to take offense just from hearing it and how I came to take pride in being a Changeling. I suppose it's because "shapeshifter" is a term I've heard all my life from the mouths of the prejudiced. It's a name I've been called on multiple occasions. It's a word I've called myself many times, back when it was the only word I knew for what I was. It's a word I abandoned when I learned of my people's plight at the hands of the Solids. They suffered just as I did, and I suppose from then on I felt an unbreakable connection to them. They thrived in their self-made isolation, far out of reach of prospecting humanoids. They had developed their own communal society. They gave me everything I'd ever dreamed of—isolation, belonging, contentment. I fully expected myself to join them during that fateful mission to the Gamma Quadrant. That Nerys—then known to me as Major Kira—was present only added to my sense of belonging. It was as if she'd come to see me off, as if those Prophets of hers and sent her to accompany me on one last mission before I left my rather miserable life behind and joined the people I was meant, since my formation, to be with. And so I can't even begin to describe the feeling of betrayal that filled me when I learned of what they'd done to the Solids. These were my *friends* they had played with like marionettes—my coworkers, my companions. And even if I have never reached the level of self-expression typical among humanoids, I have formed a bond with these people. Such bonds, I believe, are important to the culture of the Great Link, even though the idea of sharing them with Solids has been forgotten over the centuries. And so it was easy at first to renounce them.

It has never been easy since.

And so I suppose the phrase "a fish out of water" really does apply to me. If the "water" referred to is the Bajoran culture, I am just as displaced from my home environment as I am if the "water" is that of my people. No matter where I go, it seems, I am fated to be an outsider. It's a perspective I've learned to value; such is the nature of my existence. I've been instrumental in the resolving of some disputes for that reason. But I can't escape the sense of loneliness that is my constant companion. I suppose Quark is right; I really do have a "Dark Cloud" hovering over my head. It's a curse I've learned to live with. A cynic learns to find joy in the nuances of life and in correcting others' shortcomings. I've found it's also necessary to have at least some sense of humor, though mine is rather pathetic. My life has given me precious little to be grateful for. Nerys, however, is the lamplight I see by, my lantern in the darkness. If it weren't for her, I don't know where I'd be.

Probably a fish, back in water. Prophets know I've leaned that way on far too many occasions.

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