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Fanwork: Made From Something Different

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Watching *Deep Space Nine* was an exercise in peering around corners and being unable to get a straight-on view of what I knew to be just beyond my field of vision. Not necessarily in terms of the greater world of the Star Trek universe – that I could see much more easily, as DS9 is still the only Star Trek series that took the time to consider what day-to-day life would be like in the greater world of the show outside of Federation starships thanks to it being set on a space station, boldly parking instead of going – but very specifically, in regards to Julian Bashir. The show’s primary medical character, a bright young doctor straight out of Starfleet Academy, who quickly learns there’s more to his mission than he thought while never losing any of his dedication or kindness.

I’ve read about Alexander Siddig’s portrayal of Bashir, of his work turning him from someone deliberately unlikable into one of Star Trek’s beloved characters. I’m familiar with Bashir’s backstory and growth, his canonical developmental disorder and his transformation from fresh-faced graduate to hardened, mature officer. And throughout it all, I’ve always wondered, *did they mean for him to sound like me?*

Julian Bashir may have undergone genetic modification treatments at six years old to raise his intelligence and perfect his coordination and reflexes in order to be shaped into the child his parents wished him to be, but he remains disabled in ways that can’t be hidden, no matter how elegantly crafted his public face may be. There’s no acting involved in his inability to comprehend social cues and interpret behaviors, his precise echolalia, his horror of beets, his fidgeting and perseveration and that as an adult he still holds onto his beloved childhood teddy bear. It’s simply who he is. There’s no use of the word *autistic* anywhere in the text, but if I peer around the corner, I can see it written on the wall. I can hear myself when he talks: someone trying not to seem disabled, trying to seem like a normal, everyday person, who simply can’t be one but keeps trying to be what’s expected of them and so often hitting just slightly off the mark.

While the genetic engineering reveal opened up numerous storytelling possibilities, I still feel that something was taken away from the show when it was introduced, and that the producers committed to a sort of denial about who Julian Bashir was as a character. Almost as though they were saying he didn’t come by anything of his honestly, and I knew that wasn’t true. I wanted to steal him back from them and claim him for myself.

In light of that, I set out to write a story that would address what day-to-day life in the Federation might be like for disabled citizens, and what that might be like in non-Federation cultures – where and how those would and wouldn’t intersect.

Much has been said about the need to see yourself reflected in your fiction, and the shivering delight of recognizing something of yourself where you hadn’t expected to find a mirror. But eventually, even monsters and metaphors grow tiring. I could just about make out a shadow in

Deep Space Nine, but I still wanted to see myself overtly in the text. The only way I knew how was to put myself there. So I did.

[This story is a small excerpt from a larger work, *Stubborn Mouths: Humans in Translation*, with minor edits to serve it as a standalone piece.]

Made From Something Different

Four years after the end of the Cardassian Occupation, Bajor was starting to come to terms with never being able to return to life as it had once been before fifty years of colonialization. It wasn't a matter of rebuilding only; it was figuring out how to build everything new. Farms and cities were easy enough, and temples could be re-consecrated. But things took longer when it came to the immaterial practicalities that made up civilization, especially when Bajorans spent so much time arguing between themselves and against the new Starfleet aide services. Deep Space Nine, the Cardassians' terrifying jewel of a space station, now Starfleet's command post between the Alpha and Gamma quadrants, had somehow wound up as the ideal neutral ground for those arguments. Kira Nerys, its first officer and official Bajoran governmental liaison, found herself almost wishing she could get back to approving duty rosters, instead of sitting in on yet another round of endless debates. But she had to admit it wasn't entirely a waste of her time, not when there were a few scattered friends in all those arguing faces.

Kira always found it a pleasure to see Mikaro. The morning's trade agreements regarding oceanic sailing routes had gone smoothly enough; there was time for them to take an early lunch and simply enjoy each other's company. She hadn't seen either Mikaro or Danole in almost eight months, not since Antos' funeral. She wasn't surprised when they ended up talking about people who'd left them. That was just what happened when you saw your old friends, post-Cardassian Occupation.

"We need to keep looking ahead of us," she told Kira, just as she'd told her at the wake. "You can't move forward if you aren't looking at what's coming."

"I know, but that's not what I'm trying to say. I guess what I want is to be able to – to stop, sometimes. Not fall backwards, not move forwards. Just let myself be where I am for a while."

Mikaro took a moment to get her thoughts together, careful with her words. "I know what you mean. But that's a luxury for us, in these times." She smiled, and really put her hands into saying, "As long as you're running, you know exactly how fast you're going."

Kira smiled back. "The day I believe that is the day –"

"Major?" All three of them turned to look at Doctor Bashir, keeping a respectful distance, body held stiff and still. "I'm sorry for the intrusion, but Captain Sisko said I ought to get the new infirmary shift schedules to you right away for your approval." He placed the padd on the table instead of offering it to her, and even though he was Human, Kira knew he'd seen Bajoran men hand things to Bajoran women instead of just putting them down for them to pick up. Four years ought to be enough time to learn what a rude imposition that gesture was. Other Humans

managed fast enough, like O'Brien, who'd figured that out in three weeks of moving to Deep Space Nine. She couldn't parse what made Bashir so slow to learn such simple things when she knew it wasn't just him being Human.

"Thank you," she nodded as she took the padd. Bashir hesitated, glancing at the three of them.

"And you might be...?" he asked Danole.

Kira held herself back from rolling her eyes; she ought to know by now that there wasn't any reason he wouldn't introduce himself to everyone in a situation like this, not even if they were short on time before the rest of the afternoon's talks started.

"Mikaro, Danole, this is Doctor Julian Bashir, CMO of the station. Bashir, this is Minister Chalan Mikaro of the Ministry of Commerce, and her interpreter, Akorem Danole." Mikaro dipped her head and Danole offered a hand to shake.

"A pleasure, both of you. Now, if you'll excuse me –"

"No, please stay." Mikaro gestured at the empty seat beside her. "It's good to meet friends of Nerys'."

"I wouldn't call us friends, exactly," he said, smiling at Mikaro, "But if she doesn't object, I can spare a few minutes."

Kira pressed her lips together. "It's all right."

"I'll just get a drink?"

"Sure," Mikaro said, and when he came back from the replicator it was with a mug of redleaf tea, oblivious to how distasteful it was to drink a Cardassian beverage in front of a Bajoran government official. But Mikaro proved herself a true politician and said nothing. Kira would have in her place. Bashir didn't seem to notice and just sat down, smiling and unaware of the face Danole made and the one Mikaro held politely, and took a drink before asking Mikaro what she was doing on the station.

"Less than I want. Trying to get everyone to agree with everyone else. We need to work with the fishermen who were there before the Occupation, and they're as bad as the crabs, but we have the rest of the conference to get everything organized, so it should be all right." While she signed, Bashir kept his eyes on her face, sipping his tea while her hands shot words into the air. He steadfastly ignored Danole's presence aside from her voice, never looking her way.

"Where did you meet each other?"

"I knew about Nerys through a friend from the underground. We met about two years ago, when she was on Bajor as a liaison for the military, at a conference." She didn't smile with her eyes,

and her hands were a little stiff when she told him, “I was already working with Danole then, if you’re wondering.”

His face was as blankly cheerful as ever. “I wasn’t, but thank you.”

That seemed to put Mikaro at ease, because she smiled like she meant it. She asked, “Do you go to Bajor much?”

“Not too often.”

Bashir looked at Kira whenever he had something to ask her, but he only looked at Danole twice: once when she laughed and said he’d have to slow down to let her spell out some of the words, and once when it was time for Mikaro to leave for the next round of talks and they both said good-bye.

“That was pleasant,” he said to no one in particular as they left.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” Kira said.

“Minister Chalan is a very charming woman. I hope her talks go –”

“Is that all?”

“I believe so, why?”

“Well, aren’t you supposed to tell her what a pity it is she can’t hear? That you have a magnificent Federation device you’ll pop into her ear and this time tomorrow she’ll be enjoying a symphony?”

“No. For one, they’re implanted inside the skull, and for another, why would I say a horrible thing like that? Just because she can’t hear? That’s no reason for me to impose anything onto her.”

“Huh.” Kira leaned back in her chair and looked at him not looking at her. “I’d think most Federation doctors would.”

“I think you’d be correct there. And trust me, if she wanted such a device, I’d do whatever I could to make sure she had access to one. But she never made any mention of it herself, so then why would I mention anything?” He drained the last of his tea. “I hardly blame you, though. I know people who would’ve mentioned that the moment they met her, saying things like there’s no need to worry about the prime directive since we made first contact. To be quite honest, I find that horribly distasteful.”

“How very noble of you.”

“It’s not noble to have common decency for people’s basic autonomy. It’s a lesson I’ve managed to learn.” There was a flash across his face she didn’t see much, some part of himself feeling upset or angry enough to make itself known to the rest of him, and then it was gone again. “Did you know no one on Earth speaks – talks – well, communicates, with sign language?”

“No, I can’t say I did.”

“No one reads Braille anymore, either. There’s a colony out in the Vega system that uses their own sign language, but no one on Earth – it’s a shame Humans decided to get rid of it, it’s such a lovely way to communicate.”

Kira knew Bashir was just being Bashir when he called it lovely, wasn’t willing to cut him any slack for just being himself when he still ought to know better. She had to ignore that for the moment so she that could ask him, “Got rid of it?”

“More or less entirely. You’ve read about the Eugenics Wars?”

“A little bit, yeah.” Nearly four centuries earlier, Humans unlocked sciences Bajoran hadn’t conceived of pursuing, giving birth to powerful and perfect children that almost lead their world to ruin before they were stopped, at the cost of any more Humans like them ever existing.

“Well, before they happened, there was a rush to perfect Humans as much as we could. The governments enacted massive social programs, similar to the eradications of smallpox and polio in the early 20th century. Except, instead of viruses, the focus was on anything that could be mapped in the genome – GM2 gangliosidosis, Huntington’s, mucoviscidosis, most types of cancer. Gene therapies were given to people that didn’t want to pass on their illnesses to future generations. Congenital deafness was one of them.”

“Mikaro wasn’t born deaf.”

“And you were just telling me about all the wonderful Federation implants she could receive to fix the condition which happened later in her life. Nowadays if someone doesn’t want such an implant, they move to the Vega system. Back then, there wasn’t a Vega system to move to, so you can imagine the pressure. Parents would opt for in-utero treatments, or send in their babies, young children – oh, there were a few holdouts, but for the most part, anything that could be removed to improve the species’ overall health was taken out of the collective genome. As you can imagine, nobody’s bothered to put any of it back in.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Of course, there are always some things you can’t predict, that can’t quite be treated. Accidents, random genetic happenstance.” He smiled and chuckled, and Kira had no idea what was funny, but Bashir always laughed at things nobody else thought was funny. Then he stopped smiling but kept his face pressed up into a tight smile, so tight she couldn’t even see his lips. “Well, anyway, what I mean to say is that’s why Humans rarely use sign languages to communicate, and for whatever reason Minister Chalan is Deaf, it’s none of my bloody business, and I’d be a terrible

person to impose onto her when she's clearly fine with how her life is at present. Thank you for the tea and conversation, Major, and I'll see you at the next staff briefing tomorrow."

"Certainly." That was more than what she'd expected of him. It wasn't enough, by any means, but it was something.

There was a half-mug's worth of deka tea left, and she let the replicator reclaim it instead of trying to force it down before she got back to the business of the day.