

## Do Solids Dream of Electric Toothbrushes?

By Dan Levitt

Chief O'Brien stood outside the open doors of cargo bay 147 and spoke to engineers Muniz and Zimbalist. All three men carried tool kits, and wore the plain gold utility coveralls used for jobs that were labor intensive or dirty. Each of them also wore a Starfleet-issue survival jacket.

"All right, gentlemen, here it is," O'Brien said. "This cargo bay got shot to hell when the Klingons attacked the station last year. The hull was peppered with breaches and all the air vented into space. The EPS lines were fried, and the compartment was totally cut off from power and life support."

Zimbalist gave a low whistle. O'Brien chuckled a thumb over his shoulder. "The outer hull was patched by a shuttle crew right after the battle. So the bay is secure, but it's sat untouched for months and there's still not a damned thing working in there. I've had these doors open all night to let oxygen from the corridors fill the room, but there's no heat, so keep those coats on."

O'Brien activated his wrist lamp and stepped into the darkness. His men followed. "You two check the environmental systems," he said. "I'm going to find the EPS relay."

Muniz and Zimbalist headed across the bay, the beams from their wrist lamps throwing shadows about the wrecked compartment. O'Brien heard a muffled curse as one of them stumbled over some debris. He himself had just managed to spot a fallen support girder before walking into it face first. "Take it nice and slow," he called over his shoulder. "This bay was in bad shape even before it took a pounding."

O'Brien ducked under some low hanging cables and pushed aside an empty cargo container. He flashed his lamp on the wall and spotted the hatch he'd been looking for. He recognized enough of the Cardassian labeling to know it was the access conduit to the EPS relay.

O'Brien got down on his knees to get at eye level with the hatch. He disconnected the latches and pulled it away from the wall.

A burnt grey hand fell outward, its dried flesh grazing O'Brien's cheek.

He cried out in shock. He launched himself backward and his heel caught some debris, bringing him crashing down onto his back. He could hear his men scrambling across the bay to come to his aid.

"Chief!" Muniz called.

#

Just as Odo began to place his order at the promenade's replimat, Kira's voice interrupted him from behind.

“Sorry I’m late.”

He turned, noting that her hands rested lightly on her rounded belly. Kira had told him yesterday that she’d just entered her second trimester, which meant her constant sneezing would finally begin to taper off.

“Good afternoon, Major.”

She nodded to the replicator and smiled. “Did you decide already?”

“Yes,” Odo said, turning back to face the food dispenser. With annoyance, he added, “I *am* capable of making these types of decisions.” Truth be told, this would only be the fifth lunch he’d ever ordered. But he had quite enjoyed that earth entrée Chief O’Brien picked for him to the other day.

Pulling himself fully upright, Odo spoke in his deliberate, graveled voice. “Pork chops. Boneless. A side portion of...” His eyes narrowed as he searched for the word. “Applesauce.”

Kira cleared her throat. Odo looked back at her and she raised her eyebrows. He was about to ask, but then his face darkened as he took her meaning.

“I don’t think you want to finish your meal in the infirmary again,” she said.

Odo rolled his eyes and turned around one last time. He took glances to the left and right before speaking in a much-lowered voice. “Pre-cut portions for a child.”

His plate materialized with perfect one-centimeter cubes of meat. O’Brien had made the discreet suggestion to take this approach—while Dr. Bashir was busy running a dermal regenerator over Odo’s hand. During their last lunch together at Quark’s, the constable had gotten a bit overzealous in his food cutting. The blade had skipped over the surface of the meat and sliced across the top of his left hand.

As a former changeling, he’d never experienced that variety of pain before, and had certainly never bled before. The combined experience had overwhelmed him and he’d bolted up out of his seat, knocking over his chair and letting out a startled cry that brought the exuberant bar to instant silence. Odo vividly recalled cradling his hand as every patron stared in shock. The clicking of the dabo wheel was the only sound to be heard, until it too wound down to a stop.

Kira stifled a laugh before ordering her *hasperat* and joining Odo at the table. “How’s work been treating you?”

Odo answered in his typical, blunt tone. “Fine. Although...”

Kira stopped chewing. “What?”

He exhaled and set his utensils down. “I don’t know how you deal with all this.”

“I thought you were starting to like eating.”

“Eating is fine. Eating takes all of ten minutes, and I can think, or talk, or read criminal activity reports while I do it.”

“So?”

He leaned forward. “It’s the sleeping I can’t stand.”

She swallowed her sip of tea and frowned. “But you always had to regenerate.”

“But while I was regenerating I was always fully conscious. I was aware of the passage of time. I could go over my investigations in my mind, I could replay the events, the evidence, to see if there was anything I’d missed. But now...” Odo shook his head to himself as he struggled to find the words.

“It’s a totally different experience,” Kira finished.

“I’m *consumed* by it. Not even a blackness. It’s an utter void. As if a piece of my life is carved out of my consciousness every night. And these dreams you people have are—

A beep from Odo’s combadge interrupted him. “Muniz to Odo. We need security in cargo bay 147 right away!”

#

Within twenty minutes, bay 147 was a hive of activity. What started with Odo’s four-person security squad had grown with Bashir’s medical forensics examiners, as well as a second engineering team to install stand-mounted flood lights in the corners of the bay. Naturally, Captain Sisko had been summoned as well.

“Have you identified the victim?” Sisko asked. His words brought a cloud of steam to the cold air.

“Not yet,” Odo said. “Most of the body has been severely burned, possibly by the hits taken during the Klingon attack.” He glanced at O’Brien. He didn’t know if it was a trick of the light, but he couldn’t recall the Chief ever looking so pale.

Doctor Bashir made his way over to them, stepping carefully around the debris littering the room. “For right now, I can tell you two things for certain: the victim was a Cardassian woman and the damage to the body was caused by an energy discharge. The rest will have to be determined after I get the body to the infirmary for full forensic analysis.” Bashir turned to Odo, who nodded in reply, signaling to the doctor that Security had what they needed and he could now remove the body from the scene.

As Bashir moved back towards the hatchway and his medical team, Sisko turned back to Odo. “What do you make of this, Constable?”

“During the Occupation, it was not unheard of for Cardassians to go missing aboard the station. Members of the resistance might find an opportunity to kill a guard or station official. Sometimes they allowed the body to be found easily in order to send a message. Other times, the body would be hidden or destroyed.”

Sisko briskly rubbed his hands together and then shoved them into the pockets of his survival jacket. “So you’re saying this body could have been hidden in here for years before we got here, only to be further damaged by the Klingon attack.”

“Hell,” the Chief said, “if the station hadn’t gotten so busy, we might never have repaired this bay. And never have found the body.” By his expression, Odo suspected the Chief may well have preferred that outcome.

Sisko said, “Doctor Bashir should have a report for us within the next six hours. I want a security report by that time as well. We’ll meet in the ward room at—

The captain stopped speaking and frowned at Odo. That was when the constable realized his entire body was shaking. All of his muscles were tense and when he opened his mouth to speak, his teeth chattered. His eyes widened. He stammered out, “What’s happening to me?”

“Odo, why aren’t you wearing a survival coat? It’s less than five degrees C in here. Didn’t you see the advisory?”

Odo hugged his chest. “I wanted to get here... as soon as I could... before the scene... was compromised. And I—

“And you’re used to ignoring advisories on climate conditions,” Sisko finished. He smiled. “Making today another new experience for you.” He clapped Odo on the shoulder. “Get a coat on, Constable. Finish up here and we’ll see you at nineteen-hundred.” He looked at O’Brien and tipped his head back towards the entrance. “You’re with me, Chief.”

Odo was about to order one of his deputies to fetch him a coat when he realized that a molecular displacement scan might help resolve a major question—such as whether the energy discharge that ravaged the corpse came through the bulk head or had originated from inside the bay. The coat already forgotten, he moved back towards the conduit, already keying the parameters of the scan into his tricorder as he walked.

Then the flood lights snapped off and the tricorder went dead. Everything was black.

#

*When Odo’s sight returned, he found he’d been inexplicably transported to the ward room. He was standing at the foot of the long conference table, watching as the rest of the senior staff sat in a close group at the head. They were all leaning forward, speaking in a huddle with voices so low that Odo couldn’t discern the words. For some reason, his legs refused to carry him to the other end of the table to join them.*

*“Captain?” Odo said. “Major?” But there was no response from any of them. Commanders Worf and Dax actually turned their chairs inward, showing Odo their backs.*

*He became angry. “Would somebody please explain what’s going on?”*

Odo vaulted upright and a light blanket fell from his chest into his lap. His head whipped around at different angles as he fought to get his bearings.

*I was dreaming*, he realized. But he was not in his quarters. He had been laying on a flat surface, inclined slightly forward. The room was dimly lit, with muted overhead lighting and the data from wall monitors providing the only illumination.

*I'm in the infirmary.*

“Odo, good,” Bashir said from across the room. “Welcome back.”

“What happened?” Odo demanded. He tossed the blanket off and swung his legs over the edge of the bio-bed. That’s when he became dizzy and clutched the sides of the bed to avoid falling.

Bashir rushed over. “Easy, Constable. Let’s take things very slowly.” He took Odo by the shoulders and eased him back onto the bed. Bashir stepped away for a moment and Odo heard the whisper of the replicator. Then Bashir gently pushed a glass of water into his hand.

“Drink that. I promise I’ll explain everything.”

Odo took one sip and then immediately fixed him with an intense stare. “What happened to me, Doctor?”

“You suffered a concussion. Do you remember being in the cargo bay?”

“Of course.” Odo’s ire was rising. “O’Brien found a corpse hidden in the wall.”

Bashir nodded. “Then there’s no short-term memory loss. Good.”

*“Doctor.”*

“You apparently walked into a fallen support beam, and the blow knocked you unconscious. It’s lucky one of the engineers saw it happen. At those temperatures, without warmer clothing you might have suffered hypothermia before you were found.”

Odo grunted as he stared at the ceiling. “Yes. Lucky me.”

Bashir gave a soft chuckle. “Well, rest there for another twenty minutes or so and then we’ll get you on your feet—slowly this time. The captain postponed the meeting on our mystery Cardassian, but he wanted to have it as soon as you regained consciousness.”

Odo turned to face Bashir, whose face had become serious.

“There have been some developments,” Bashir said.

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A half hour later, the senior staff assembled in the ward room.

“At the time we discovered the body,” Sisko said, “the general assumption was that the Cardassian woman had died on the station several years ago, during the occupation. Doctor Bashir’s analysis tells us a different story.”

Bashir tapped a key on his PADD and his data appeared on the Master Systems Display behind Sisko. “Our forensic analysis determined the time of death to be within the last eighteen to twenty-four months.”

This brought Odo forward in his seat. “But that means this woman would have gone missing during *our* tenure on the station.”

“There’s more,” Bashir said. “Despite the damage to the body from the Klingon attack, I was able to determine her cause of death.” He tapped another series of keys and the MSD image was replaced by a close-up of a Cardassian upper spinal column. “Given the trajectory of this fracture, it’s clear that the head was turned sharply to the right, breaking the neck above the third vertebrae and killing her almost instantly.”

“She was murdered,” Sisko said. He turned his chair to face Odo.

“I need to establish a motive,” Odo said, “and that would be a great deal easier if we could identify the body.”

“I’ve already forwarded Doctor Bashir’s reports,” Sisko said, “as well as a DNA sample to the new civilian government on Cardassia. They said they would look into it, but I had the definite sense that it didn’t rate as a high priority.”

“From what I can understand,” Kira said, “the whole Cardassian infrastructure is near collapse. Their territory is besieged by Klingons, disease is rampant, their economy has gone to pieces...”

“So for the time being,” Sisko said, “we can’t count on much help from their end. We’ll have to find a way to ID the body ourselves.”

O’Brien said, “One thing I noticed—from what was left of her—was that she wasn’t wearing a military uniform.”

Odo nodded. “That narrows the ways in which she would have found herself here. I’ll start reviewing all female Cardassian civilians arriving on the station starting two years ago.” He turned to Bashir. “Is there any way to tighten the window on her time of death?”

“I’ll check with Starfleet Medical,” Bashir said. “Find out if their forensics experts can make any suggestions. But I’m not optimistic.”

“One thing that works to our advantage,” Sisko said, “is that we don’t receive many Cardassian visitors here. And it certainly wouldn’t hurt to run the list past our resident expert.”

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“Honestly, Constable,” Garak said from inside his holding cell. “I realize I’m a convicted felon at present, but I must say making me your prime suspect is lazy police work at best.”

Garak was currently one week into a six month sentence for his recent conduct in the Gamma Quadrant—nothing less than an attempt to seize control of the *Defiant's* weapon systems and commit genocide against the Founders.

Odo stood on the other side of the force field with his arms crossed. He and Garak had covered a lot of ground together in the past two years, and while Odo had come to value the former spy's company, he was also very much aware of what the Cardassian was capable of. One major upside to their shared experiences was that he no longer needed to suffer through Garak's protestations of being a 'simple tailor.'

"You're the only Cardassian living on this station. Given your previous career, I suspect your list of enemies could stretch the full length of the promenade."

Garak's eyes shone with his smile. "And then some. But despite my current state of exile, I am a loyal Cardassian and a patriot. I don't kill my own people."

"Really?" Odo struck a few keys on his PADD. "I seem to recall you vaporizing a former colleague named Entek last year. There was also the gul who went missing during Professor Lang's visit on stardate—

"Constable, you know full well that I will always take action when an innocent life is on the line."

"And one can only imagine what you'd be capable of if your own life was on the line. Was the dead Cardassian woman an Obsidian Order agent? Was she sent to kill you?"

Odo deactivated the force field and tossed the PADD to Garak before immediately reactivating it. Garak took a look at the image and grimaced. "Ghastly. I wouldn't have known this was a woman or a Cardassian if you hadn't told me so." He looked back at Odo. "What else have you uncovered?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

Garak made an exasperated sound. "Well as long as you're reaching for low hanging fruit, I hope you've considered all the other motivated parties."

"And who would they be?"

"Well let's think a moment, shall we? This station houses hot-tempered former resistance fighters, bitter veterans of the Federation-Cardassian War, and former lovers of Cardassian fugitives. And those are just the people in your inner circle. Imagine what you might find if you launched a proper investigation."

Odo gave a sardonic smile. "I'll give those 'leads' their due consideration. In the meantime, the list of Cardassian visitors is on that PADD. Let me know if you recognize any of them." Odo's eyes narrowed as an idea occurred him. He immediately turned to leave.

Garak called after him. "Why not bring in something for us from the replimat tomorrow morning? We can review the case."

“My apologies,” Odo said, “but I don’t dine with prisoners.”

“An ironic shame,” Garak said. “That you should finally begin to eat just in time for me to be locked away and miss our breakfasts together.”

Odo walked out without further comment. The truth was he actually did miss their breakfasts together, but he was already pushing aside those thoughts—because Garak’s comments on his inner circle may have been a good deal more astute than he realized.

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“Eddington.” Sisko said.

Odo stood in front of Sisko’s desk. “Based on his reasons for leaving us, we know he had strong feelings against Cardassians. His role as Starfleet security chief gave him all the access he’d need to commit this crime without detection, hide the body, and remove any record of the woman’s presence on the station.”

Sisko picked up his baseball from its holder and fingered the red stitching. “As a Maquis traitor, Eddington is the obvious choice for a lead suspect. I just wonder if he’s too obvious.”

“In my experience, obvious choices are often the right choices. Despite what your peoples’ mystery novels would have us believe.”

“Oh, I’m not discouraging you from investigating him, Odo.” His eyes hardened. “And heaven knows I’d love to add to the list of charges against him. But I still have trouble seeing him as a murderer.”

“And if he was,” Odo added, “he was much too thorough to leave behind a body for us to find.” Odo clasped his hands behind his back. “But I’ll look into it all the same.”

Sisko smiled. “I’d expect nothing less.”

Odo nodded and turned to leave.

“Constable,” Sisko said, bringing Odo to a stop. “There was something else I wanted to discuss with you.” He gestured for Odo to have a seat. “How do you like your sonic shower?”

Odo frowned as he sat down. “Sir?”

“What do you think of the experience? I’m sure it’s not something you tried when you were a changeling.”

Odo blinked. “I haven’t tried it yet.”

Sisko set his baseball back in its holder. Odo got the distinct impression Sisko was becoming uncomfortable, although he couldn’t fathom why.

The captain steepled his fingers. “You’ve been a humanoid for nearly a week now.”

Odo was still confused. “Correct.”

“This is not an easy topic... but as a humanoid, it is essential for you to maintain... certain habits.”

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Odo’s voice thundered through Kira’s room. “He spoke to me as if I were a child.”

Kira tried to get a word in. “Odo, you have to understand—

“I accept that I am a solid now, but that doesn’t mean I have to enslave myself to every pointless social ritual you people fill your time with.”

Kira’s eyes flicked to the door, where little Molly O’Brien may well have been playing on the other side. She had only been living with the Chief’s family for a few weeks and she didn’t want to have any issues so early on. “Can we try to keep this calm?”

His tirade lost no momentum. “And now Sisko wants me to have a daily session with Counselor Telnorri.” His face twisted with disgust. “So we can discuss my current ‘challenges’ and he can put me on an ‘assisted daily living’ plan.

“You have to know things are going to be different now—

“I am a law enforcement professional. I spend my time solving crimes, not strolling the promenade looking for the perfect accessory for my clothing or seeking out the ultimate bottled scent to attract a mate. My life is about order, and I won’t—

“*Order?* Odo, have you looked in a mirror lately?”

His face contorted with exasperation. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Answer the question,” she demanded.

“I don’t *own* a damned mirror,” he shot back.

She hauled her pregnant self from the edge of her bed and took the constable none-too-gently by the shoulders. “Then allow me.” She pushed him over to the mirror mounted on top of her bureau.

Odo was about to launch into another tirade when he caught a look at himself. His hair, normally set back neatly against his scalp, was an unkempt mess.

Kira stood next to him and spoke to his reflection. “I see you’ve noticed the hair.” She pointed to a spot on his chest. “And this stain? That’s applesauce from our lunch *yesterday*.” She swept her hand top to bottom to take in his whole uniform, which was thoroughly wrinkled. “Are you sleeping in this thing, too?”

“No.” His tone had become much more subdued. “Commander Dax gifted me some very comfortable sleepwear.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re enjoying your pajamas, but what about replicating some extra uniforms?”

Odo shrugged. “Garak only made me the one, and the replicated uniforms don’t feel right.”

Kira sighed and made her way back to the bed to sit down. “Odo, you have always been a creature of order, but being orderly as a humanoid means taking care of yourself—your physical self.”

Odo’s gaze fell to the carpet and she knew she’d embarrassed him.

“I’ll tend to it,” he said. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Kira stood and got in his path. “This is so much. I can’t imagine what an adjustment it must be. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but someone has to tell you, and it may as well be your friend.”

He gave a stiff nod.

Kira took his hands in hers. “I know the captain offered you some time when you got back from the Gamma Quadrant. And I know you refused because your work is so important to you—to all of us. But maybe you should reconsider. It’ll be there for you when you’re ready, I promise you.”

Odo met her earnest gaze with a set jaw. “I’m sorry, Major. But there’s been a murder, and it needs to be solved.” He stepped around her and walked out.

#

That evening, Odo slipped into his new pajamas, his skin still tingling from the sonic shower. It had actually been a pleasurable experience, once he found the correct frequency. Now he reached for Doctor Bashir’s ‘welcome to solid life’ gift, which up until now he’d barely looked at. It was a flat rectangular bag with a clasp around the edge. He opened it like a book, and on each side were a host of unfamiliar personal items.

He picked up a toothbrush and pushed the button on the handle. The bristles whirred to life.

“What the hell is this for?” he mumbled to himself. He put it back unused and helped himself to the comb. He carefully ran it back through his hair, working to bring some kind of order to the thick hair his people had seen fit to bless him with.

Ten minutes later he laid back on his new bed. He’d often heard his colleagues complain about the discomfort of the Cardassian beds, but he had no basis for comparison, and it certainly seemed preferable to the floor. “Computer,” he called. “Lights.” The cabin dimmed.

It had been a trying day, and he couldn’t deny his fatigue. He began mentally reviewing the particulars of the murder case, but it wasn’t long before he was losing focus and his thoughts began making less and less sense.

*Here we go again, he thought.*

For the sixth time in his life, sleep consumed him.

#

*Quark's was alive with a frenzied energy the likes of which Odo had never seen—not even on its wildest night. A hoard of Klingons brawled, head-butting and punching one another as their comrades threw back tankards of war nog and roared with laughter. At the bar, Morn arm wrestled a Jem'Hadar. And in the center of the room, a Cardassian dabo girl worked the wheel.*

*Odo sat at the foot of yet another long table while his friends clustered around the head. They were all in costume. Sisko the baseball player. O'Brien and Bashir in their bomber jackets, voices raised in song. Kira and Dax dressed in the gowns of medieval maidens. They all shook with uproarious laughter, all sharing in jokes that Odo couldn't hear over the melee.*

*"What's going on here?" Odo called, but his voice was drowned out and no one paid him any mind. Then there was a voice in his ear.*

*"Dinner is served," Quark said. He placed a covered plate in front of Odo and lifted the top with a flourish. Centered on the golden plate sat a white bar of soap with a parsley garnish.*

*A howling Klingon sailed over their heads from the second level, his arms and legs flailing as he careened into the crowd below. Sisko and company raised their glasses and cried out with joy. "Qapla!"*

*Odo grabbed Quark's lapel and pulled him close. "What's happening?"*

*"If you're uncomfortable at this table, Constable, we do have an opening in the Great Link section." Quark nodded towards a far corner of the room and Odo followed his gaze.*

*In an undisturbed section of the bar was an island of tranquility—in the form of a large, round table. Sitting in every position around it was a Founder, all holding hands in a chain. A single chair was unoccupied.*

*"I can't," Odo said, though he desperately wanted to. So much so, that even as he spoke the words he was already rising to walk over.*

*"I'm certain you'll be welcomed," Quark said.*

*It was the only motivation Odo needed. As he crossed the floor towards the round table, the brawling mob parted for him without prompting. He was only a few meters away from the empty chair when a Klingon in a black cloak stepped into his path. His eyes were wild, almost bursting out of his head.*

*Odo met his stare with confusion. "Gowron?"*

*The Klingon Supreme Chancellor bared his teeth. "You will never join us again."*

*Odo tried to move around him, but Gowron reached to his hip sheath. His fist came up, but instead of clutching a d'k tahg blade, he held out a toothbrush, the bristled heads spinning with an electric whine.*

*“Do not test us,” Gowron said. “You are not a changeling.” He smiled. “And it is now permitted for us to kill you.” The Klingon put away the toothbrush and turned his back on Odo. He took the empty seat at the table, taking the hands of the Founders to his left and right. He closed his eyes and joined in their tranquility.*

*“No,” Odo pleaded. It was all he could do not to break down. The crowds of drunken brawlers now washed against him from all sides and he was buffeted about, straining to see over their heads. Across the room, his friends continued to enjoy themselves, oblivious to his plight. Odo turned to look elsewhere, desperate to find Quark or anyone else who could help him.*

*That’s when he spotted Michael Eddington, dressed in his gold Starfleet uniform as though he were not a man wanted for treason. He had his arm affectionately hooked around the neck of a woman and was walking her out of the bar. Her back was to Odo, but just as they exited she turned.*

*It was the Cardassian dabo girl. Her white smile gleamed against the backdrop of her scorched and blackened face.*

Odo’s eyes snapped open and he rolled sharply in his bed. “Lights!” he called. He looked around his quarters and let out a long breath. *Blasted dreams.* “Computer, time?”

The monotone female voice replied, *“The time is oh-three-hundred hours, forty minutes.”*

Odo grunted. That was just perfect. Too early to get the day started but too late to fall back asleep. But so far, the best advantage he’d found in being a humanoid was that he didn’t *have* to regenerate for exactly eight hours each day. If he woke up early and it suited him, he could simply go to work.

And after a moment’s thought, he decided it suited him perfectly.

#

“I’m surprised to find you awake,” Odo said.

Garak sat up from the holding cell’s padded bench. “I might say the same to you, Constable. I’m afraid spending weeks in a room without company or a window or any schedule at all has been quite disruptive to my sleep cycle.”

“A pity. Have you reviewed the list of Cardassians?”

“I did. But it also occurred to me that I should trade my council for an accommodation. Such as my immediate release.”

Odo scoffed. “If you hand me the victim *and* the murderer on a platter, I might be able to cut your sentence in half. Can you?”

Garak sighed. “I’m afraid not. But, I can eliminate one name from your list.” He smiled. “And it will only cost you breakfast for two.”

Odo nodded. “Done. What do you have?”

Garak scrolled through the PADD and then turned it around. “This woman.”

Odo stepped up to force field and peered at the image and the name. “Veriss Kantek. Associate Director of Finance on Cardassia Four. She attended the sector trade conference here almost two years ago.”

“Indeed. Only that’s not her real name, or her real job. Her name was Korinas, and she was a highly placed member of the Obsidian Order.”

“Was?”

Garak shook his head. “That’s the disappointing part. She played a major role in the failed attack on the Founders’ home world in the Omarian Nebula.” He smiled. “Perhaps you recall the incident.”

“And you’re certain she was at the battle?”

“She was commanding one of the ships. Enabran Tain took a call from her in my presence.” Garak’s eyes dimmed as he recalled the words of the Founder that sparked his attempt to destroy them all: *There were no Cardassian survivors. They’re dead. You’re dead. Cardassia is dead.*

“Korinas was there,” Garak said. “And she was a Cardassian. So she died. Very far from here.”

#

As morning rolled around and foot traffic was just picking up on the promenade, Odo sat at his desk in the security office. Across the way, he was a bit surprised to see Quark’s Bar was still open, although the Ferengi host was never one to kick out his customers, provided their latinum continued to flow into his pockets.

He looked down at his computer monitor to review the established facts. In the past two years, fifty-four Cardassian females had been registered passengers on transports arriving at the station. The data also showed, however, that the same fifty-four Cardassian females had also been registered on ships departing the station.

Normally, he could review a victim’s known associates, establish possible motives, and investigate suspects. But since they had no idea who the victim was, and since the time of death couldn’t be precisely established, he was left searching for a needle in a haystack.

At least he could eliminate Garak’s old colleague from the list. And despite his dream, he had decided that the crime didn’t fit Eddington’s profile at all.

The best option left to him now was to study the security footage of each woman arriving and departing the station. Perhaps he'd get lucky and one of the arrivals wouldn't physically match the departure. Or perhaps there would be no departure at all, and the passenger registry would be shown to be falsified.

Or else the victim never arrived as a registered passenger, and this would all prove to be fruitless.

Odo's computer chimed, and was immediately followed by Quark's panicked voice. "Quark to security! I've got a crazy Nausican tearing my place apart."

"On my way," Odo said. He struck another key on his console. "Odo to all deputies near the promenade—disturbance at Quark's. Suspect is Nausican."

And with that, Odo charged out of his office. He crossed the short distance to Quark's in a matter of seconds and found the Ferengi taking refuge behind the bar. He could hear a ruckus from the back section of the room.

"They've been playing cards all night," Quark said. "Then the Nausican called someone a cheat and all hell broke loose." There was a crash and Quark grimaced. "Oh, for—that was a chair. I've got to switch over to plastic to save on breakage." He tapped the projected expense into his ledger.

"Just stay there," Odo ordered. He hugged the wall and moved quickly and quietly towards the commotion. As he came around a pillar, he could see the Nausican pounding on a Bolian who was pinned to the top of the table. Two other men lay prone on the ground, surrounded by pieces of broken furniture.

The Nausican threw his last punch, and then changed tactics, throttling the near-unconscious Bolian with both hands.

Upon seeing that, it all became instinct for Odo. He closed the distance between them and grabbed the Nausican by his shoulder, spinning him around. Then Odo threw his hardest punch straight into the alien's face. It was the first punch he'd thrown as a solid. He'd never expected it to hurt so much.

He'd also never expected the Nausican to smile at him.

Everything that happened next was a blur.

A very short blur.

#

When Odo woke up this time, he could not recall anything beyond the fast-approaching fist of the Nausican. He hoped it would end up having been a dream.

It wasn't.

Bashir put the glass of water in his left hand this time. He had broken his right hand and although the doctor had repaired it, it was still tender. His instinct was to sit up, but he remembered how that went the last time, and instead simply asked a question. “How bad?”

Bashir looked down at him with sympathy. “Another concussion. Your hand, as you know. And three broken ribs. Contusions throughout, all of which we’ve addressed. But you’ll be our guest for a couple of days, I’m afraid.”

Odo closed his eyes and exhaled through his nose, but he didn’t argue. “I’ll need a PADD tied into the security files. I’ll lie here for a day or two if I have to, but there’s still work to be done.” When he opened his eyes he realized Bashir looked troubled.

“Captain Sisko and Major Kira are here to see you. If you’re up to it.”

“Of course.”

Bashir nodded and moved off. Odo closed his eyes again and a few moments later he heard two sets of footfalls stop at the right side of his bed.

“Constable,” Sisko said.

“Did you arrest the Nausican?”

“We did,” Sisko said. “Only not soon enough.”

Odo’s bruised face contracted with apprehension. “What happened?”

Sisko nodded to another bio bed and Odo followed his glance. A middle-aged Bajoran woman lay unconscious with two cortical stimulators on her forehead. Another apparatus was positioned across her chest.

“The Nausican fled onto the promenade just ahead of your deputies,” Sisko said. “When they pursued him, he took a hostage. He held a knife to her throat and demanded a ship.”

Odo shook his head. “Why didn’t they just stun them both? Minimize the damage.”

“They did,” Kira said. “But she had a heart defect. Julian said it’s the kind that doesn’t show up on a routine physical. The stun blast put her into cardiac arrest. She needs surgery, but he expects there to be complications.”

Odo felt something strange in his throat—a constriction, but it didn’t prevent him from breathing. “I wish,” he managed before needing to swallow. “I wish I’d been able to get the Nausican.”

“That’s just one symptom of the bigger issue,” Sisko said. “We’ve tried to respect your wishes, Odo, and we’ve tried to be patient. Whether you want to admit it or not, you’re struggling with being a humanoid. As your friends, we tried to help with the social aspects, but you pushed us off. But now there’s a civilian who may die from injuries she should never have suffered. Even as a changeling you shouldn’t have gone in alone—but as a man? Unarmed?”

That Nausican could've torn you limb from limb. You should have waited for backup and controlled the situation."

Odo could no longer speak, and had to settle for a nod of agreement.

"I don't want to kick you when you're down," Sisko said, "but I have to consider the security of the station and I don't see any other choice. I'm placing you on mandatory medical leave. You will report to Councilor Telnorri for daily sessions for as long as he deems it necessary. You will work with a rehabilitation specialist to master tasks of daily living. When all of that has been completed, your job will be waiting for you. But like it or not, you've undergone a massive change. And until you've faced that, and integrated those changes into the way you think, you're in danger. And you'll be a danger to others."

A tear ran down Odo's temple onto the pillow. "Why don't you just ask for my resignation?"

"I don't want your resignation, Odo. I want you to adapt. I know what I've said sounds harsh. But Major Kira already spoke to you as a friend."

Kira tried to give Odo a reassuring smile but couldn't quite pull it off.

"Now I have to tell it to you straight," Sisko said. "As your commanding officer."

Odo rolled his head away from them. "I understand. I'd like to be alone now, please."

#

Telnorri had come to see Odo in the infirmary, and it had been decided that he should stay clear of the Security Office, so that he could focus on 'caring for himself' without distraction. This meant that even if Odo had wanted Garak's company, as a prisoner he was now off limits to him. He couldn't quite stomach the idea of seeing any of his colleagues at the moment, so if he wanted a bit of conversation, that left only one person.

"Constable!" Quark greeted him. "Up and around I see. You don't need a statement, do you? Because I already gave one to that other fellow, that ah..."

"Senior Deputy Yndar?" Odo said, over-pronouncing each syllable. Odo had met him briefly when he was obliged to turn over all his materials on the Cardassian murder victim. The Bajoran Militia had sent him along to be the acting security chief, and he would stay on as second-in-charge when Odo was ready to return (the 'and if' went unspoken). Yndar was a tall Bajoran with dark skin and a winning smile. He had a natural charm and an easy confidence. Smooth as Andorian silk, one might say—and a climber, no doubt.

"That's him," Quark confirmed. "Friendly man. Which is unusual for a policeman. No offense."

Odo grunted. "I'm sure you'll prefer having all your legal entanglements handled by him."

Quark dried a glass and shrugged. “Maybe. But one should also consider the forty-eighth rule: the bigger the smile, the sharper the knife.”

“Better the devil you know, eh?”

“I hear he’s investigating your mystery Cardassian lady. Dax and Worf were in here last night talking about it. Seems Yndar likes that duplicate Riker character as a suspect.”

“*Thomas Riker?*” Odo scoffed. “He was misguided, but he’s no murderer. If those are the types of leads he’s following, I really might get to solve this crime when I return.”

Quark leaned over the bar. “So you are staying, then?”

“I could never leave this station in good conscience. Not with you walking free.”

Quark gave a grin full of sharp teeth. “Then you’ll be around for quite some time.” He slid a menu across the bar. “What can I get you, Private Citizen Odo? I know you’re still new to dining so I’d be happy to make a recommendation.”

Odo began looking at the menu and muttered, “Just no more damned tube grubs.”

“Live and learn,” Quark said. “So what are you in the mood for, then?”

“Something warm and pleasant.”

Quark looked over Odo’s head at the dabo wheel. “Etheria! Come over here.”

“To *eat*, Quark.”

The dabo girl draped herself over the bar and flashed a smile. “Everything’s negotiable,” Quark said. When Odo’s stony glare held out, Quark waved her away. “You know,” he said, “if you really want to take your mind off your troubles, you might consider something in a liquid state, if you’ll pardon the turn of phrase.”

Odo looked up again from the menu. “If you mean alcohol, forget it. The humanoid willingness to dilute one’s intelligence and judgment—and to pay for the privilege—has never ceased to baffle me.”

Quark took out a bottle and a glass. “Well as I understand it, you’re supposed to be learning how to be a more successful humanoid.” Quark poured a tumbler of ruby liquid and slid it across the bar. “You might start by finding out what all the fuss is about.”

#

The doors to Odo’s quarters slid open and Quark hustled him inside, his arm draped around the Ferengi’s narrow shoulders. “Okay, here we go—remember what I said.”

Odo’s gorge rose.

“Make for the bowl!” Quark cried as he shuffled him towards the commode.

#

*Sometime later, Odo opened his eyes. The cool tile against his face was his greatest comfort in the galaxy.*

*Next to the sonic shower enclosure was a large bathtub. He'd only started using his bathroom recently, but he was fairly positive it had never contained a tub. Perhaps this was the surprise gift the Chief kept hinting about.*

*He could hear the soothing sounds of water sloshing about. That's when he realized he wasn't alone.*

*He hoped Quark hadn't dragged poor Etheria up here.*

*Fighting the dizziness and nausea, he dragged himself to the edge of the tub and looked in.*

*The tub stretched out and back considerably. So much so that it held all of the Founders he'd seen at Quark's the other night. They all sat serenely in their loose flowing robes.*

*One of them spoke. "Welcome home."*

*Relief washed over Odo. He managed to throw a leg over the edge of the tub and hauled himself into the water with a splash. When he righted himself, the Founders looked on him, perplexed.*

*The same one addressed him again. "We were not speaking to you." Then the Founder's gaze shifted to someone behind Odo. He turned around to look.*

*Gowron, head of the Klingon Empire, was standing in Odo's bathroom. He wore a plush terry bathrobe. A towel was draped over one arm. He held a white bar of soap in his hand. Odo was horrified as the warrior untied his cloth belt and let the robe pool at his feet, but underneath Gowron wore the peach-colored frock of the Founders. He stepped into the tub and settled in next to Odo.*

*Gowron turned to him. His dark mane and beard had vanished, and his face was now that of a changeling. Only the same wild eyes remained. "You have been told. You will never rejoin us. You arrived as a changeling, but you left as something else. And you will die that way."*

*And with that, Gowron plunged Odo's head into the water to drown him.*

#

*Odo's head was yanked out of the water by the back of his hair. He gasped for air before his face was thrust back into the bucket.*

*"I gotta tell you," Quark gritted. "You're the last customer I expected to be providing this service for."*

*Odo flailed about with his arms and got some leverage, pulling his head out of the bucket under his own power. "Stop it!" he sputtered.*

Odo fell back onto his haunches. He took note that they were still in his bathroom, but it was once again without a bathtub. The room was still spinning, but he saw that Quark had helped himself to his old regeneration bucket and filled it with cold water, which was now sprinkled generously about the room. Odo's hair was a sodden mop, and the whole top of his torso was drenched. The dizziness was becoming so powerful that he once again laid his head down on the tile.

"I'm sorry about the hydrotherapy," Quark said. "I was afraid you had alcohol poisoning and I couldn't have you dying on me."

Odo could barely move his lips, but managed to say, "That's... touching."

"Don't kid yourself. A dozen witnesses must have seen me pouring your drinks and I have to consider my liability." Quark put the bucket in the sink and began refilling it. "I just also know what kind of man you are. I didn't think you'd want Bashir handling this in sickbay, and word getting back to Sisko and the rest."

Quark set the bucket down and sat cross-legged next to Odo on the floor. Odo's breathing slowed and Quark was convinced he was falling asleep again. Then the constable spoke.

"Did Rom ever... fix your phaser?"

"Yeah." He gave Odo a strange look. "It's in my quarters. Why?"

"I want you to... go get it. And shoot me."

Quark's jaw fell. He struggled to form an answer. "Odo, I know things are bad right now, but if you just give it some time—

"On second thought," Odo said, "just stun me...so I don't have to feel like I'm spinning... in a centrifuge. Then leave the phaser... and when I wake up... I'll shoot you for doing this to me."

"I gave you the first round on the house," Quark said. "You're the one who kept wanting to try every drink under the sun after that." He started ticking them off on his fingers. "The black hole. The Samarian sunset. The core breach. The tranya. The—

Odo lunged for the bowl head first.

#

Two days later, Odo sat with Kira at the replimat.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "I should probably be bothering Telnorri with this—it's his job after all. But somehow... I just feel better telling you."

Kira reached across and squeezed his forearm. “We’re friends. There doesn’t need to be any other reason.”

“I’ve been a fool. As an investigator, I can always read everyone around me like a book, but as soon as I have my own problem I become a walking cliché.”

Kira frowned. “I don’t think that’s true.”

“It’s classic denial, Nerys. Oh, I knew I wasn’t a changeling anymore. I knew I had to ingest food and sleep in a bed. But I thought I could draw the line there. That I could be some kind of mono-form changeling—eschewing all the trappings of humanoid life.”

Kira gave a soft smile. “Little more to it than that.”

“That first moment I cut my hand with a dinner knife and everyone gawked at me, I knew I was in trouble. But just like every humanoid I’ve observed in my life and judged, I denied it and pretended nothing had changed. I didn’t bathe, I ignored my environment.” He swallowed. “I even took on a Nausican without a phaser because that’s what the ‘old me’ would’ve done.”

“Oh,” Kira straightened in her seat. “I should’ve told you straight off. Helna, the woman with the heart condition—came through her surgery just fine, thank the prophets.”

He closed his eyes with relief. “That’s excellent news.”

“Odo,” she said, “these realizations you’re having are such an important step. You’ve accepted the problems, you know where you’ve gone wrong. It’s going to make everything so much easier to work on.”

“Thank you. You’ve been very kind through all this.” He cleared his throat and looked around to make sure no one was listening. “If I may impose on you a bit more...”

She raised her eyebrows. “You want to hear about the case.”

He shrugged expansively. “I can’t deny what I am.”

She leaned in and lowered her voice. “All right—but just the broad strokes. Yndar already eliminated Eddington and Tom Riker as suspects.” She caught Odo’s smirk and nodded. “I know—Riker was never a possibility. But last I heard they were reviewing the security footage of every one of the Cardassian women on the station—every movement in a public space to see who they spoke to, if anyone had an altercation...”

“And?”

“Nothing yet. Supposedly they were almost done with the list.” She shook her head. “I don’t know if we’re going to solve this one. Without an ID on the body, we just don’t have enough to go on.”

Odo nodded. “Perhaps the Cardassian government will run the DNA sample at some point in the future.”

Kira looked skeptical. “Maybe.” She eased back in her chair. “Okay, I told you something, now you tell me something.” She smiled. “What are these crazy dreams you were starting to talk about the other day?”

Odo looked down at his lap, and if Kira didn’t know better, she would’ve sworn he was blushing. “I don’t know if this is typical for humanoids,” he said. “But in your dreams, have you ever encountered a Klingon warrior in a bathrobe?”

Kira laughed hysterically. She put a hand over her chest, which bobbed uncontrollably with laughter. “I’m sorry,” she managed. Odo couldn’t help but chuckle a bit himself. She leaned forward. “Was it Worf?”

Odo barked a short laugh. “No, it was Gowron.” His smile faded. “The changeling impostor.” Kira sobered quickly. Then he told her the rest—about the Founders and their refusal to accept him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You know me, I don’t mince words—I hate them for what they’ve done to you. But I know a part of you will always wish you could go home.”

“In the dream,” Odo said, “Gowron told me I came into this world a changeling, but I’d leave it as something else. That I would die a—

Odo froze, and his eyes became wide as perfect spheres.

“What?” Kira asked. “Odo, what’s wrong?”

He stood. “I know. I know what happened to that Cardassian woman.” He charged across the promenade towards the security office.

#

The doors to Security parted as Odo burst in, out of breath. Captain Sisko was standing behind the desk, looking at the monitor with Deputy Yndar.

“Sir,” Odo panted, “I think I know who killed the Cardassian. The reason she was never missing,” he stopped to take a breath, “was because she arrived as a Cardassian, but she didn’t leave as one. She left as a changeling.”

Sisko looked at him for a moment, then turned to look down at Yndar. The captain raised his eyebrows in a wordless question.

Yndar said, “Sir, I haven’t provided the constable with any reporting as per your instructions.” He looked at Odo and nodded. “No disrespect intended, sir.”

Sisko studied Odo for a moment. “You came to this realization on your own, without using any security resources?”

Odo nodded, then bent over and rested his hands on his thighs as he continued to fight for air.

Sisko gave an odd smile. “Well done, Constable. Deputy Yndar and his team just came to the same conclusion twenty minutes ago.” He gestured for Odo to join them behind the desk. Odo coughed into his fist and then made his way over.

“Computer,” Sisko said, “replay security footage from section sixty-one baker, same stardate.”

The monitor showed the closed doors to a set of crew quarters, no different than the thousands of others around the station. Then the doors opened, but instead of a person walking through, a long, low cargo container slowly rolled out under its own power and nestled itself against the wall before stopping.

Odo stated the obvious. “There’s no one pushing that container.”

“Computer,” Sisko said, “increase playback to ten times speed.” The computer chirped in acknowledgement. Then Odo watched as the container moved on its own at a painfully slow pace along the wall.

“The container is a changeling,” Odo breathed. He turned to Sisko. “The victim’s body is hidden inside.”

Sisko nodded. “That’s our theory. The footage shows it move to cargo bay 147— incrementally, over several hours—avoiding attention. The cameras in the bay were disabled— maybe by the changeling, or maybe because that section was in disrepair. So we never actually see the body being disposed of. But we do have the smoking gun.” He nodded to Yndar who tapped a few keys, changing the image on the monitor yet again.

Now the container rested outside of cargo bay 147, directly under the door buttons. Then Odo watched as a gelatinous tendril snaked up from the container and struck the button, opening the doors. The container rolled into the darkened bay and the doors slid shut behind it. Then the image terminated.

“I’m curious, Constable,” Sisko said. “Do you know whose quarters that changeling came out of?”

“Yes. The one woman we were certain we could eliminate from our list: Korinas.”

Yndar stared at Odo. “How did you know?”

“Garak said that Korinas was instrumental in planning the attack on the Founders,” Odo said. “The attack that destroyed the Obsidian Order and the Romulan Tal Shiar. Once I realized only a changeling could have killed this woman and left the station in her place, the rest became clear. Korinas was killed so that the changeling could assume her position in the Obsidian Order. To help ensure the attack on the Founders went forward.”

“I don’t understand,” Yndar said. “Why would they want to be attacked?”

“The Founders learned of the plot to destroy their home world,” Sisko said. “Making sure both the Cardassians and the Romulans committed their forces made it possible to eliminate the threat in a single engagement.”

Sisko struck a key and an image of Korinas’ face filled the monitor. Her information ran down the margin of the screen, still listing her under the alias of Veriss Kantek, Associate Finance Director. “I recognize her now,” Sisko said. “When Thomas Riker stole the *Defiant*, I went with Dukat to Cardassia to help them track it down.”

“I remember,” Odo said.

“Dukat brought me to their command center, where I met Korinas. She was the ‘observer’ from the Obsidian Order.” On the monitor, Korinas grinned at the camera. There was something about her that Odo found unsettling. Predatory.

“When we realized the Order was moving to destroy the *Defiant*,” Sisko said, “using military vessels they were not authorized to have, Dukat confronted her. She gave us that same grin.” He shook his head. “It’s that viper’s smile that I remember most about her.” He turned to Odo. “It’s clear in hindsight that she was protecting the attack fleet the Order built to destroy the Founders.”

Odo thought for a moment. “The footage you showed me—the container. What was the date?”

Sisko cocked an eyebrow. “Two months before I went to Cardassia to find the *Defiant*.”

“Then when you met Korinas on Cardassia,” Odo said, “she was a Founder. And when Garak saw her commanding a ship at the battle, she was that same Founder—making sure the Cardassians carried out their attack.”

Sisko turned to Yndar. “Deputy, would you excuse us?”

Yndar nodded and walked out of the office.

Odo watched him leave. “You knew all this before I came into the room,” he said. “It seems you’ve found a good investigator.”

“Yndar is a fine officer,” Sisko said. “He solved a difficult case. But it took his entire team four days working double shifts to do it. He only checked up on Korinas because he’d exhausted the rest of the list. But you figured it out on your own, without any of those resources.” Sisko sat on the edge of the desk and sighed. “Odo, if you can’t come to terms with your new life, or if you just feel you need a change, I’m certain Yndar could run security. But I think we both know that no one can replace you, Constable.” Sisko crossed his arms. “But you still need to work with the counselor. I want you to take the time you need. Figure things out. And then let’s get you back to work.”

#

Odo found Kira still at the replimat, finishing her tea. He looked at the chronometer above the replicator kiosk. For all that had happened, he'd only been gone for ten minutes.

"Sorry I didn't chase after you," she said, patting her belly. "I'm not exactly built for speed these days."

Odo filled her in on the details—Korinas of the Obsidian Order through Korinas the Founder.

"Amazing," Kira said. She studied Odo's face. "This must be a relief. You've proved to everyone—most of all yourself—that you can still do your job as a humanoid."

Odo hesitated before answering. "I'm relieved to still be an effective investigator. But now that I'm a solid, I've lost so much of my physical ability. I don't think I'll ever be more than average in a hand-to-hand fight. And I've never even handled a weapon." He shook his head. "I don't know that I'll ever be a fully capable security officer again. I suppose time will tell."

"You'll just have to work with what you've got," Kira said. "Same as the rest of us."

"Perhaps." Odo then realized he was late for his daily session with Counselor Telnorri. "Now if you'll excuse me, Major," he said, pushing back his chair to stand, "I need to see a man about a toothbrush."