The Hatchling

by apolesen

Summary

Having met a Cardassian infant for the first time, Bashir discusses medicine and customs with Parmak.

Notes

This fic contains discussion of alien customs and policies surrounding sex assignment, customs surrounding pronouns and a brief mention of potential medical intervention in intersex conditions. There is also a few mentions of the Fire on Cardassia and the type of destruction that happens then.

Cardassia after the Fire was a landscape of greys and reds. The dust from the destruction had settled on everything and was still thrown into the air by the winds, scattering over anyone outdoors. When Julian Bashir stepped into the vestibule of the medical centre, he combed through his hair with his fingers even before taking his mask off. Really, they should have proper decontamination units at the entrances, but there were no resources for such things. Once he had got the worst of the dust out of his hair, he took off his outdoor clothes, washed his hands and put his head under the tap. He longed for a proper sonic shower, but the requisition had not gone through yet.

The medical centre did not really live up to its name. It was really just a hastily erected structure of a few rooms: two wards, a make-shift operating theatre and two large rooms where triage and treatment took place. Bashir found Parmak in one of the triage rooms, for once empty of patients. He had his back to him and his head bowed.
‘Good morning, Parmak.’

He looked over his shoulder.

‘Ah, Doctor Bashir. Good morning. Come and meet our newest patient.’

Parmak turned around. There was a bundle in the crook of his arm. A small, grey tail stuck out from between the folds.

Bashir crossed the room quickly. He had never seen a Cardassian baby before.

‘May I?’

‘By all means,’ Parmak said and moved the bundle into his bent arm.

‘Hello, little one.’ The baby squirmed and lapped its tongue out. Its eyes were closed, almost like a kitten’s. What struck Bashir most was how small the baby was, barely twenty centimetres in length and very thin. He looked up at Parmak.

‘How premature?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Parmak said, looking confused.

‘The baby,’ Bashir said. ‘How premature is it?’

‘Not at all.’

He looked down at the baby, who was licking at its own hand now.

‘But it’s so tiny!’

‘Cardassian hatchlings are,’ Parmak said. ‘Surely you’ve seen eggs.’

‘Only crushed ones,’ Bashir admitted. Parmak sighed. A few months ago, they had helped with the rescue efforts at the ruins of a hatchery. There had not been a single intact egg. Garak had sat down in the ruins and wept openly at the realisation. Bashir looked down at the baby in his arms. It soothed the pain from the memory.

‘It makes sense, I suppose,’ he said. ‘Eggs don’t grow after they are laid, and they have to be able to pass through a Cardassian pelvis…’ He did some calculations in his head. Even if the Cardassian pelvis was a little broader than the human, it was no more than two centimetres. Assuming that the relation between pelvis and egg was the same as between pelvis and baby’s head, that would mean that the average egg would have a circumference of 40.8 centimetres. He imagined that the baby would just about the able to curl up within an oval with that circumference.

‘It was left at the back-door in a rations carton sometime during the night,’ Parmak explained. ‘It seems just to have hatched. When we found it, it was still covered in some of the membranes. It’s perfectly healthy, though.’

‘That’s a relief,’ Bashir said. He stroked the baby’s palm with his finger. ‘Cardassian babies don’t have a grasp reflex, do they?’

‘What is a grasp reflex?’

‘It’s a common primitive reflex in mammalian humanoids. Humans have it, Vulcans, Romulans, Betazoids, Bajorans. Look here.’ He put his finger against the baby’s hand. ‘An infant of those
species would grip my finger. It seems to be from when we lived in trees.’

‘Cardassians never lived in trees, Doctor,’ Parmak said with a smile.

‘Yes. That I know. What about a step reflex?’

‘You mean the dancing reflex?’ Parmak said. ‘Triggered when the feet are placed on a flat surface?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Yes, hatchlings do have that.’

Bashir was about to ask something else, but instead he said, ‘oh!’ The baby had grabbed hold of his finger, pulled it towards its mouth and licked at it.

‘It’s looking for water,’ Parmak explained. He went over to the sink and returned with a cup and a pipette. ‘Here.’ He handed the pipette to Bashir and let him suck up the water with it. ‘Drip it on your finger.’ Bashir did. The hatchling lapped up every drop.

‘I suppose hatchlings don’t have root or suck reflexes,’ he said, ‘not being mammalian.’

‘Exactly.’

‘But the licking is for water?’

‘Yes,’ Parmak said. ‘Usually, hatchlings will lick water from their parents’ chular. Nowadays one will pour it on, of course, but the chula evolved its shape to trap rain water when a Cardassian lay on their back. It is not enough water to sustain an adult, but just the right amount for a hatchling.’

‘Fascinating,’ Bashir said. He smiled at the sensation of the baby’s soft tongue flicking over his finger. ‘How come the eyes are closed?’

‘It will open them in two or three weeks. They’re not entirely developed yet.’

‘Like cats, then.’ At Parmak’s blank look, he added: ‘An Earth species of felines.’

‘I see.’

Bashir handed back the pipette and wiped his hand on his trousers. The baby squeaked. Bashir looked at Parmak for confirmation, and saw that he was smiling. It was clearly the kind of sound the baby was supposed to make. Parmak reached out and put his finger on the hatchling’s chufa.

‘It’s a bit warm. Loosen the blanket a little.’

Bashir unwrapped the blanket around the baby. It kicked him on the wrist, surprisingly hard. He laughed.

‘She’s a lively little thing, isn’t she?’

‘“It”,’ Parmak said, correcting him. Bashir frowned.

‘Why “it”? That felt quite rude.

‘Because there’s no guarantee that this is a girl.’

‘But…’
Parmak smiled.

‘Sex is virtually impossible to ascertain with any accuracy in newly hatched Cardassians without the use of scanners,’ he said. ‘Legal assignment is not done until eight months after the hatching.’

‘But surely you must have noticed the reproductive organs when you examined h– the hatchling?’ Bashir asked, narrowly avoiding saying “her”.

‘I did,’ Parmak said.

‘So why not apply that knowledge?’

Parmak shrugged.

‘It is seen by most as bordering on unethical.’

Bashir tried to figure this out.

‘Why?’

Parmak considered it.

‘What is the general position in the Federation on discerning the sex of unborn children?’

Bashir puffed up his cheeks; there was not just one position.

‘Most humans want to know as soon as it’s possible to check. Among Vulcans, it’s taboo to find out before the birth. Tellarites always have multiple births, so the number of children in the litter is often far more interesting than the sex of the individuals.’

‘I see,’ Parmak said. ‘Think of Cardassian customs as the Vulcan position. For most of history, it was impossible to tell male and female hatchlings from one another with certainty. As a result, hatchlings are referred to with the neuter until around eight months. It sounds far harsher in Standard than in Cardassian, I think. In Cardassian, it is a far less depersonalising grammatical category.’

‘But we have good imaging technology now,’ Bashir said. ‘Hasn’t that changed things?’

‘It almost did,’ Parmak said. ‘Four-hundred years ago, when the crudest forms of imaging were invented, there was an uproar. Some felt that even finding out the sex of a hatchling was a huge overstepping of boundaries. Others pushed for a change, to move the assignment of sex forward to the hatching. The compromise that was eventually settled upon was that doctors do not go out of their way to find out the sex of a hatchling, and if they do learn it, they keep it to themselves. Unless there is a medical problem, it is not even registered in the medical files. Nowadays, it is difficult not to notice, with the scanners we use, but the rule is still followed, unless parents expressly ask.’

‘Huh. What about names?’ Bashir asked. ‘You can’t call it “the hatchling” for eight months, can you?’

‘No, we don’t do that,’ Parmak said, clearly enjoying this new odd perspective on Cardassian customs. ‘Families often have two or three infant names that get used of all hatchlings. In my family, hatchlings are called Ret or Esa. I was a Ret. It is usually the mother’s responsibility to pick the infant name. It is never used outside in any official contexts - births are registered without it. Eight months after the hatching, the sex of the child is determined, the infant name is shed and a permanent first name is picked by the father.’
‘That’s very interesting.’ Bashir looked down at the hatchling in his arms. It had managed to get hold of its tail and was playing with it. ‘What if you can’t tell at eight months?’

‘You put it off another two months. After that, if it’s not evident, you make an educated guess.’

‘And if that’s the case, do you leave it? Or is the norm surgical intervention?’

‘The latter, all too often,’ Parmak said. ‘Perhaps that can change now. This is, after all, a new world.’

‘Yes. I hope so.’ Bashir shifted his grip around the hatchling. ‘It should get better.’

‘It must get better.’

‘Then we make it better.’

They smiled at each other. The baby’s squirming made Bashir look at it again.

‘So what will happen to it?’

‘An orphanage, probably,’ Parmak said. ‘But not at once. It’s too young.’

‘Well, if it’s going to be around for a while, we should find something to call it,’ Bashir said. ‘What was the infant name in your family, the one that wasn’t Ret?’

Parmak smiled broadly.

‘Esa.’

‘Well then.’ Bashir turned to the hatchling and said: ‘Hello, Esa.’

He caught Parmak’s eye. He reached out his arms and accepted the bundle. The hatchling squeaked and waved its tail. Parmak laughed, an unbridled laugh that was uncommon in this place. There were tears in his eyes.

‘Welcome to the world, Esa.’

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!